

Start a Church  
Elder Matt Jordan

We understand Scripture to teach that Christ established his church while he was here in the world; that he is the chief cornerstone; that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles; that the church will be here in the world when Christ returns; and that there has been a people embracing the doctrine of the early church continuously since the time of Christ. So, why the title? We can't just go out and 'start a church'. We would have to have some authority to do so. The Scriptural authority for establishing a congregation as a local church has been given to the church itself along with the ministry, which acts under the authority of the church. Each local assembly should be able to trace its origin to a sister church. Often, we say that a church 'extends an arm' to a group of believers desiring to establish themselves as an independent congregation. So, what do I mean by the title?

I would like to propose an exercise. I make this proposal out of the great love and concern I have for Primitive Baptists and because of the need we have from time to time to examine ourselves. My proposal is this: Suppose we could erase from our minds everything we've been taught about the church; not the foundational beliefs but what we have been taught regarding its practice. What if we could remove from our minds the things we have been taught regarding the customs and traditions and the activities of the church so that we were basically a blank slate. Then, suppose Christ came along and said to us, 'here is my word, authorized and inspired by the Father; take it and start a church.' What would be our first step? We would need to begin to examine Scripture, especially the New Testament, to learn all we could about the early church. We would want to look for specific practices, especially those recorded with enough detail that we could follow today. But we would also need to look for principles that governed the activities of the early church. Learning all that we could about the early church, and not having any pre-existing biases or influence from outside sources, we could then begin to establish a congregation of believers; we could 'start a church'. What would this congregation look like? If we were to 'start a church' in this manner, how would it compare to the church we have today? I should ask myself, 'would it resemble the church I try to serve?' Would it look like a Primitive Baptist church?

I am pretty certain that what I've described here is not going to happen, but this scenario ought to make us think. In fact, it might serve as a good test – a good test of our claim that Scripture is a thorough furnisher. Does the Bible really tell us all we need to know? If we were literally a blank slate, having no prior knowledge of the practice of the church, would we have all we needed in order to 'start a church'? Would we be missing some vital element of church practice if we didn't have several hundred years of history and 'all' we had was Scripture? I believe we would indeed have all we needed. But we might be greatly surprised how different the final product might look. Such an exercise might reveal some things that have been left off that need to be reclaimed, as well as some things we embrace today that need to be left off. Don't misunderstand... There can be great benefits to knowing church history, recent and ancient. The knowledge of history can help us prevent repeating past mistakes. There are some beneficial traditions that began fairly recently as far as history goes. But if we insist that these practices are absolutely necessary even though they are absent from Scripture, what does that say about our confidence in God's word? Is it possible that we have developed some tendencies that are not so beneficial as a result of knowing a few centuries' worth of church history? So, how much do we truly resemble the early church? Let's begin our search!

The word 'church' simply means "the called out or the called forth" and indicates an assembly. In Matthew 16:18, Christ said he would *build* his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. The common bond throughout all ages among those who are called out to assemble is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Before Jesus returned to heaven, he told the apostles to go out into the world, to teach, to baptize and to teach further those things he had commanded. God's people were to be called out and then

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instructed to become disciples of Christ. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul tells us that the church is *built* upon the foundation of the apostles, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. In Ephesians 4, Paul describes the ministry of the church as being a vital part of the *edifying* of the body of Christ through preaching and teaching. There is a structural design to the church, which indicates that the church has a purpose. So, we have an assembly of people with a common bond established for a purpose. What is that purpose? Based on what we read in Ephesians chapter 3 and a few other passages, it seems to me that ultimately the purpose of the church is to magnify Christ and glorify God. If we understand the purpose of the church, then we should be able to see how the various activities of the church, those things the church is supposed to *do*, contribute to the overall purpose. Here is another good test for us: are we spending time and energy on things that do not contribute to the purpose of the church?

The New Testament is our only inspired history of the church. The book known as the Acts of the Apostles in particular should serve as a good starting point for our church. If we observe what the church was doing in its infancy, we can get a good idea as to how the church fulfilled its purpose. While the church was still in its early stages, during the days of the Apostles, we can make the purest observations possible. Since, in this little exercise, we don't have several centuries to go by, we must rely solely on God's word. But shouldn't that be our mindset anyway? Cultures do change over time and our activities might not be identical so, again, we need to look for principles as well as examples. Why did the church assemble? When did they assemble and how often? What did the church do when they assembled? Did they do anything besides assemble?

In the second chapter of Acts, after the day of Pentecost, we read about the disciples meeting on a daily basis. We read about some of the activities they were engaged in, like breaking bread and prayer. It says they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. They were dedicated to Christ, the *object* of their worship. They were committed to the *assembly* as well as to the *place* where they assembled. Their fellowship was based upon what they believed about Christ and it was strengthened when they physically assembled. They sold their possessions and then shared with those in need. They had joy and unity in doing so. They praised God and had favor with the people and God added to the church on a daily basis.

One thing that immediately catches our attention about the early church is that they met often. Here is a principle we need to emphasize in our church. We need to be together on a regular basis to strengthen our fellowship and devotion. We are not told exactly what the church did each and every time they assembled, so we may have some liberty in this area. We should meet to attend to the doctrine. We should meet for prayer. We should meet for fellowship. We should meet to break bread. Later on, Paul instructed some of the churches regarding singing. Paul taught that there was exhortation, admonition and teaching to be exchanged through singing. So we want to be sure to include singing as part of our practice. It is said that the Apostles "ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ", so we want to look for times that we can enjoy both teaching and preaching. We want to emphasize meeting as often as possible and we should plan to meet for all of these reasons. We read in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter about the disciples in Troas meeting on the first day of the week to break bread. In Corinth, it was evidently the custom of the church to meet on the first day of the week. Based on these observations and since Christ was resurrected on the first day of the week, it seems only natural that we would want to meet on the first day of the week; every Lord's Day at a minimum. In our church, we will want to encourage the people to look for opportunities to assemble together and to avoid making excuses why they can't.

Another characteristic that stands out is the charity of these early saints. Evidently, they were genuinely interested in ministering to those around them. They were willing to sacrifice what they had for

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the sake of someone in greater need and apparently they found great joy in doing so. This heart-felt attitude must have had an impact on the community around them. Here is an observation that needs to be our guide: *they had favor with the people, not because of what they knew, but because of what they did!* So, in our church, we need to emphasize charity, giving and ministering to those in need. We find the church's actions described in similar ways in the latter half of the fourth chapter. This must have become their standard practice. Then, in the sixth chapter, we read about some widows who were being neglected, perhaps overlooked, in a daily ministry meant to supply their physical needs. The solution to this problem was to appoint seven men to oversee this ministry so that the apostles could continue to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Evidently, this type of charitable ministry continued to be taught as the church spread out from Jerusalem. Our church ought to be concerned about ministering to those who are least able to help themselves; not just individually but collectively as well. We see examples of this teaching in Romans, in both epistles to the Corinthians, in Galatians, and in Paul's epistles to Timothy. James defined pure religion as visiting the fatherless and the widows in their afflictions. As we read the characteristics of those who might be considered for the office of deacon, it becomes apparent that ministering to the poor is one of those activities in which our church should be involved and a vital part of the deacons' role in the church. We will certainly want to be sure this type of ministry is carried out through the activities of our church.

What else can we learn? In the face of severe persecution in Acts chapter 8, the church began to be scattered abroad and the disciples went everywhere preaching the word. Those who were scattered and went preaching were not the apostles but others in the church who evidently had been very well established in the gospel. The church must have had disciples among them willing to learn and ready to profess their faith and be a witness to others. The church must have also had leaders among them who could not only preach the gospel but who were capable of teaching others. The leaders we see developing in the early church played a vital role in its growth. We learn some things about these leaders in Acts 11, 13 and 14, and in 1Timothy 3; specifically the leaders who were given the authority to preach and to teach. We learn that they were called elders or bishops. Evidently, it was important to have elders in every city (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). It must have been vital to the spiritual and physical growth of the church that these elders understood their responsibilities. Paul told the elders of Ephesus (chapter 20) that they should take heed unto themselves and unto the flock. They had been made overseers by the Holy Ghost. Paul reminds the elders that the church is a precious thing; so precious in fact that Christ purchased it with his own blood. So, if we are to grow spiritually and physically and fulfill our purpose as a church, we need to be sure that our leaders are indeed taking heed as the Apostle Paul said. Our elder or elders must be *keenly aware* of their responsibilities, of their needs, of their strengths and of their weaknesses. Not only that, they must also be *keenly aware of the flock*: aware of *their* needs, *their* strengths, *their* weaknesses, and their need of being consistently taught what *their* responsibilities are. It becomes apparent that in our church, our elder or elders will need to spend a great deal of time in the midst of the flock; learning more about them and getting to know them on a personal level so that they can teach those things that they stand in need of. They will need to spend a great deal of time in study, in prayer and in ministering the word. This must be some of what "taking heed" means.

A survey of the New Testament provides examples where there were multiple elders in some places and also, it seems, where there may have been one elder considered to be the pastor. We may have some liberty in this area but it is still evident that our church will need to provide the best we can for those who are our overseers because of the demands placed upon them. Moving out of the book of Acts, we find Paul teaching this principle very clearly in 1Corinthians chapter 9. Evidently, Paul was a tent-maker

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and he made tents when he had to but he reserved the right to refrain from working outside his labors in the ministry. We will want to be sure our overseers are willing to provide for themselves and their families to whatever degree necessary, but the best position we can hope to attain is for our pastor to be free from worldly pursuits. Paul teaches this principle to other churches and ministers as well so it must not have been the exception but rather a goal for the church to pursue. For our church to do the best we can in this area, we will need sound, Biblical and practical teaching. Obviously, the church will need to be taught about priorities, giving and sacrifice. The Apostle Paul taught the young minister Timothy to “give thyself wholly to them” with respect to all the things Paul wrote. Regarding those who “labour in the word and doctrine”, Paul used the Scripture, “thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn.” Paul taught the same thing to the churches of Galatia when he said, “let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things.” So, in our church, we need to willingly receive the exhortation that “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” In several epistles, the churches were instructed to support those who labored in the ministry, including those who spent their time spreading the gospel to places where it had not been previously preached. Since God is the source of all the blessings we’ve received, spiritual and natural, our church needs to be taught what it means to give the first of our increase; to give based on how God has prospered us and to do so cheerfully.

As we continue to examine the New Testament (as well as the O.T.), we see a consistent emphasis on family relationships. There doesn’t appear to be any separation among various age groups in the assembly, especially for worship. There are some instructions given that apply specifically to younger people so we will need to keep this in mind whenever our elders are involved in teaching the flock. We don’t see any room whatsoever for any type of worldly entertainment; in fact, nothing at all that resembles any kind of entertainment. It seems that our practice, whenever we assemble, should lead us to look upward and outward; not so much concerned about inward satisfaction. We will need to be keenly aware of any practices that might try to creep in that appeal more to the worldly mind than the spiritual. Based on these principles, the best arrangement for our church assembly will be for entire families to be together – children, parents, grandparents – all as one under the leadership of the elders.

There are so many aspects to consider and we’ve just gotten started! We will always have the need to grow in our knowledge and understanding. But surely God’s word contains all the principles we need to know regarding the church. We have learned something about our purpose, generally speaking, and we have seen several things concerning our practice and the activities we’re to be involved in. There is one more thing that stands out as we read the New Testament. Paul told Timothy that the church of the living God is the pillar and ground of the truth. We know that truth never changes but we realize men do and that we are not perfect. What a great responsibility we will have as a church: the institution that God has entrusted with the perpetuation of His truths! We will want to be diligent in seeking a greater understanding of God’s word. And then be just as diligent to proclaim and share those truths to anyone who will listen. We will want to be faithful in examining ourselves to see that we are continuing in the faith! We will want our children and grandchildren to see the beauty of the church but we will want them to keep Christ as their object of worship. As time goes along, we will want each new generation to look back at the founding principles of the early church and not get caught up in customs, fads and man-made traditions. Customs will come and go as they are needed but some traditions will try to stubbornly hang on. However, only the foundation of the apostles should remain; Christ himself as the Chief Cornerstone. As we seek to fulfill our purpose as a church, may we be found praising God and in favor with those in the community around us! May it be said of our church till Christ returns!