

the point is . . .

Though the New Testament stress the need of organisation, it does not provide only one model to follow

applying the Characteristics of the New Testament Church to the Seventh-day Adventist Church Today

body building

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The New Testament portrays a vibrant church. Starting in the upper room, the church developed into a diverse collection of believers throughout the Roman Empire. Great things took place almost daily. Yet underneath the excitement is a developing organisational structure which continues to facilitate ministry.

Church is described in both cosmic and earthly perspectives. The cosmic perspective incorporates all Christ's believers in a heavenly community.[1] The earthly perspectives include at least nine clusters of churches,[2] eighteen different locations,[3] three of which met in somebody's house.[4]

The ideal church is prescribed in Ephesians. Paul integrates the ideas of "temple" and "body" into a theological statement which climaxes in the marriage between Christ and his bride, the church. Roles of several church officers are also prescribed. These officers were to develop ministry by building individuals in the corporate body of Christ. However, specific duties of these officers are not outlined.

Characteristics of the New Testament Church

Looking at perspectives of organisation, the following five characteristics summarise the biblical data.

1. Organism not Object

Objects are identifiable because of their unique components, structures, and reactions. Simple observation would enable an easy categorisation of an object. However, the New Testament church is more than an object or organisation. It is a living organism transforming the components, structures and processes into a spirit-breathing life-transforming entity. The source of this life is not the components, structure, or process. It is the connection with the Godhead which breathes life into the object. Images such as the *people of God* and *the body of Christ* reinforce this life. Yet, even the static object of a temple (Eph. 2 & 1 Pet. 2) as used by Scripture, is described with the language of life.

2. Dynamic not Static

Churches are dynamic, destined to grow and develop. This is the purpose mandated by Jesus in the Great Commission. The evangelistic spread of Christianity beyond Jerusalem to the many cities throughout the empire, the emerging doctrine of the church, the appointment of officers and the establishment of processes to deal with issues as they arose, such as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, all highlight this development.

Dynamic organisms have life cycles. Church life cycles are best demonstrated in the congregational context by the Ephesian church whose birth and infancy are described in Acts 18-20, its growth to maximum potential nurtured by the Epistle to the Ephesians and the challenges of maturation and aging addressed in Revelation 2.

3. Diverse not Identical

Churches have their own individual characteristics and challenges. Each congregation was the product of the Christian message transforming its unique environment of cultural, geographical, political and socio-economic variables. The creative power of these churches, as they interacted with, and adapted to their environment, enabled them to fashion, often with counsel from the apostles, their own structures, offices and processes for congregational life and divine worship. Some congregations adapted the first-century household structure for use as a church structure, while Greek congregations adapted a word from their background for the office of elder which was different from the word Jewish congregations adapted from their background. John's letters to the seven churches highlight the diversity of congregations in a similar geographic region and the way in which they interacted with their environment.

4. Interdependent not Independent

Just as churches are diverse, so are their individual members who comprise each church. These independent Christians choose to connect together interdependently to achieve more than what any member could do on their own. The body image suggests that the Spirit gives life to individuals so that they can work together in a dynamic and diverse way. Ligaments hold the body together. No-one can claim that they do not belong and no-one can be told they are not needed. Everyone has their interdependent part to play in the life and mission of the church.

5. Corporate not Congregational

Like the interdependence of individual church members in the congregation, congregations are also mutually interdependent, creating the corporate church. The New Testament affirms both the corporate and the congregational perspectives, portraying churches ministering in both specific locations and regionally in

a corporate way. Both types have the responsibility to initiate, collaborate and cooperate. The offering for the saints in Jerusalem who were undergoing hardship, the Antiochian church's support for Paul and Barnabas' missionary visits and the corporate recognition and support of various apostles' ministry demonstrate corporate structure.[5]

A synthesis of the New Testament's data presents an emerging doctrine of the church, but does not specify or define the blueprint for church structure. It provides a number of case studies, not a definitive model for identical reproduction. Organisation is implied in Scripture, but the form is only clarified in historical accounts beyond Scripture.

Implications for Seventh-day Adventists Today

Seventh-day Adventist practice needs to be firmly grounded in Seventh-day Adventist belief. Church structures need to emanate from the doctrine of the church, rather than imposed structures being justified by proof texts.

Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have addressed corporate Church structure on two occasions. Both structures, one at the commencement of organisation in 1860, the other at the time of reorganisation in 1901, have centred on practical and pragmatic concerns, not theological foundations. In the 1901 discussion between Daniells and Jones, Daniells was presenting the mission-based corporate position, which de-emphasised the local congregation, while Jones presented the Christ-centred congregational position, which de-emphasised the sociological aspects of church, trying to keep it just as a theological entity in an ideal world. Both positions used a proof-text approach to Scripture, ignoring each other's passages.[6]

As Seventh-day Adventist church structure, both corporate and congregational, continues to be discussed, decisions need to be informed by the Biblical prescriptions. To implement these Biblical prescriptions, Seventh-day Adventists need to encourage the church itself to be a living, dynamic, diverse and interdependent organism in both the congregational and corporate setting. The extremes of congregationalism and hierarchicalism need to be avoided. In whatever context or stage of the life cycle, the church in both its congregational and corporate aspects needs to perceive its God-given identity and life, focus on its divinely-mandated mission, encourage its contextual diversity and choose to work interdependently. Such a church would be filled with vitality enabling the organism to adapt its methods and structures to maximise its mission and ministry in local contexts while collaborating corporately to fulfil the great global commission. ■

Upon this Rock . . .

Leo I, bishop and pope in Rome, did not personally attend the council in Chalcedon in 451. He sent a message. The theological battle had been going on for generations. Leo intented to close the discussion.

He did not, however, accept any discussion of his wordings. He spoke to the Christian churches in the East like an emperor from his Western palace. He spoke with the authority of the apostle Peter, the first bishop in Rome, the rock upon which the church was to be built. Leo presented himself as the pontiff entrusted by Christ himself with the supremacy of the church on earth. The authority of his message did not rest upon its content, but upon his position. Not upon the word, but upon the office.

The reformers took another view of the crucial text in Matt 16:16-19. The foundation of the church is not Peter, but Jesus Christ and the confession expressed by every Christian since then, "You are Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

Whenever this word is truly proclaimed, whenever Jesus is exalted (John 12:32, cf. Matt 28:20 and Mark 16:15-16), the gates of Heaven will be opened for those who believe - and closed for those who reject it. The preaching of the gospel is the key power given to the church. This power does not belong to a select elite, but is entrusted to the church as a body. All members of the church are priests and kings (Rev 1:6, cf. 1Pet 2:9).

In this royal priesthood, every office of responsibility is entrusted by the church as a whole and intended for service. Genuine respect for the church will result in respect for those whom the church has appointed. But their authority does not stem from the office itself.

1 See, for instance, Matt 16:18-19, 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 4:27; and Heb 12:27.

2 Such as all the churches in 2 Cor 11:28; the churches of Antioch & Jerusalem in Acts 15; or the churches in the province of Asia in 1 Cor 16:19 and Rev 1:4.

3 Examples are Antioch in Acts 11:26; 13:1; 15:22; the house church of Apphia & Archippus in Philem 1:2; and Caesarea in Acts 18:22.

4 The house churches of Apphia & Archippus's (Philem 1:2), Nympha (Col 4:15) and Priscilla & Aquila's (Rom 16:4,5).

5 For instance, the offering for the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4) and the Antiochian Church support for Paul's ministery (Acts 13)

6 For this theological evaluation and the history of the reorganisation in 1901, see Barry D.Oliver, *Seventh-day Adventist Organisational Structure: Past, Present and Future,* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), especially pages 5 and 244.

For reflection . . .

- Why do churches need to be interdependent, corporate, and not just congregational? See point 5.
- The writer explains some of the problems in the SDA church's two early attempts to decide on whether its structure should be more corporate or congregational. What would the issues be if we attempted to push this debate now?