

The Christian Foundational Structure

by Raymond C. Faircloth

The Christian arrangement is not about joining an organization. Such a thing is not mentioned in the Scriptures. The Christian arrangement is **organic**—Jesus is the head, his followers are the body. Or, Jesus is the true vine, his followers are the branches. However, that does not mean that Christians should not be organized to accomplish Christian goals.

The Structure in Brief

Clearly Jesus has been appointed by God as the head of the Christian congregation and he appointed the **12 apostles**. With time this arrangement broadened so that others were classified as apostles but **in a secondary sense**. The apostles then worked to establish congregations and, under the guidance of Jesus, to set out the arrangement for each congregation. This would consist of a **body of elders** who were also overseers and spiritual shepherds. It was to function for *the teaching, edifying, spiritual protection and care* of the members of each congregation—so it was *a ministry of words*. Then there was to be a separate, subordinate **body of deacons** who were to conduct a *ministry of deeds*. There was *no authoritarian governing body* over all the congregations—yet they would all work together for the common purpose of preaching the gospel and in support of each other.

Jesus Is the Head of the Congregation

❖ “...as Christ is the head of the church...as the church submits to Christ” (*Eph. 5:23 ESV*).

OUR APOSTLE AND HIGH PRIEST

❖ “Therefore holy brothers (and sisters *ftn*), you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, **the apostle and high priest** of our confession” (*Heb. 3:1 ESV*).

OUR OVERSEER AND CHIEF SHEPHERD

❖ “I am the good shepherd” (*John 10:11 ESV*).

❖ “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, **the great shepherd** of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant” (*Heb. 13:20 ESV*).

❖ “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to **the shepherd and overseer** of your souls” (*1 Pet. 2:25 ESV*).

❖ “And when **the chief shepherd** appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (*1 Pet. 5:4 ESV*).

The Twelve Apostles—A Special Apostleship

The original twelve were all personally chosen by Jesus as a foundation of “the Israel of God” and comparable to the 12 sons of Jacob for natural Israel. The additional qualification for this special apostleship was that of having fellowshipped with Jesus. This qualification was explained by Peter when the time came to choose, as an apostle, a replacement for Judas Iscariot:

❖ “So one of the men who have **accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us**, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up...and they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on **Matthias**, and he was **numbered with the eleven apostles**” (*Acts 1:21ff*).

Therefore, Matthias may well have been one of the original seventy sent out by Jesus. There is no scriptural reason to imagine that Matthias did not remain as one of “the Twelve” i.e. as replaced by Paul.

SENT FORTH—COMMISSIONED AS EMISSARIES

The Greek word *apostolos* means “ones sent forth” in the sense of being commissioned as a missionary, delegate or emissary (not merely a messenger). So in their days with Jesus the twelve apostles acted as missionaries, envoys and ambassadors. Soon after Pentecost the “Twelve” seem to have acted primarily as a **centre of teaching** for those *in Jerusalem*; yet sending some of their number out in a missionary capacity:

❖ “Now when **the apostles** at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word, **they sent to them** Peter and John” (*Acts 8:14-17 ESV*).

However, those at Jerusalem did not act as an authoritarian governing body over all congregations. So neither Acts 8 nor Acts 15 give any basis for the subsequent setting up of modern-day governing bodies—such would amount to *apostolic succession* as practiced by the Roman Catholic Church.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES WERE ALL MEN

Not only did Jesus select all men as the twelve apostles but Matthias the replacement for Judas Iscariot was also a divinely selected man.

Apostles in the Wider Sense—Missionaries

Apart from Jesus' specially selected "Twelve" including Matthias (Acts 1:26; 6:2) others were called 'apostles' in the secondary sense that they were ones sent on a mission, and so meaning they were *missionaries* (or sometimes 'emissaries'). Part of the evidence that there were apostles in the wider sense than just the "Twelve" is that:

- ❖ "...he [Jesus] appeared to Cephas, then to **the twelve**...Then he appeared to James, then to **all the apostles**. Last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared to me [Paul]. For I am the least of the apostles..."
(1 Cor. 15:5, 7-8).

Evidently the phrase "all the apostles" means those in addition to **the twelve** original apostles. These additional ones therefore were apostles in a wider sense. These ones included:

James, the half-brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19)
Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14).
Timothy and Silvanus (1 Thess. 2:1, 6).
Andronicus and Junia (*a female missionary* - Rom. 16:7).

SOME TRAINED DIRECTLY BY JESUS

Barnabas and some others may have come from the ranks of the seventy that Jesus had commissioned (Luke 10:1). Others who were neither from the 12 nor from the 70 were also styled apostles - *Paul* and *Timothy* being of these.

PAUL'S APPOINTMENT AS AN APOSTLE

- ❖ "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1).

However, Paul nowhere includes himself among the twelve as if to replace one of the twelve—either for unfaithfulness or through death—even the apostle James (son of Zebedee) was still alive at that time. Furthermore, there is no scriptural reason to think that Matthias had been replaced. Paul was largely a missionary to those outside of Judea as he said: "*I am an apostle to the Gentiles*" (Rom. 11:13). Yet Paul does rate his apostleship as on a par with those of the twelve and all other apostles (1 Cor. 15:10):

- ❖ "Paul an apostle—not from men nor through men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father..." (Gal. 1:1).

TIMOTHY'S WORK AS AN APOSTLE

Timothy was sent by Paul to "*charge certain persons (in Ephesus) not to teach different doctrine...*" (1 Tim. 1:3ff). This is the work of an apostle i.e. an emissary. Also note 1 Thessalonians 2:1, 6.

AS EMISSARIES AND MISSIONARIES OF THE CHURCH

Rather than spearheading the work i.e. the work of an evangelist (see below) an apostle was a **congregation-establishing missionary** who not only preached and taught so as to bring people to Christ but also nurtured them, and provided oversight to establish congregations.

- ❖ "...as for our brothers, they are **apostles of the churches...**" (2 Cor. 8:23 NAB).

Paul and Barnabas were sent by the Antioch congregation:

- ❖ "...the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off...But when **the apostles Barnabas and Paul** heard of it..." (Acts 13:2b-3 and 14:14).

The Foundation Consists of Jesus, the Apostles and the Prophets

THE PURPOSE

- ❖ “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **to equip the saints for the work of ministry**, for the **building up of the body of Christ**, until we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...”
(*Eph. 4:11-13 ESV*).

THE WORK OF AN EVANGELIST

The way the term evangelist is used in modern times as a ‘revivalist’ is very different to its use in biblical times. The biblical description of an **evangelist** is that of a **missionary who spearheads the work in an unreached area** to introduce the good news to people i.e. to be a proclaimer of “the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). This was the case when Philip the evangelizer (Acts 21:8) spearheaded the work in Samaria and then the apostle/s (John and Peter) later followed on to establish the new converts as a congregation (Acts 8). As an example, Timothy was exhorted by Paul to “*do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry*” (2 Tim. 1:4, 5).

MULTIPLE ROLES—A MIX OF OFFICES

Not only did Paul and Barnabas fulfil both roles as apostles and as evangelists, but it is evident that Timothy also fulfilled both roles even though earlier he was ‘under Paul’s wing.’

APOSTLES AS TRAVELLING ELDERS

The apostles were also **travelling elders**, who would oversee and shepherd many congregations as with Peter who said about himself: “I exhort the elders among you, as a **fellow elder**” (*1 Pet. 5:1 ESV*).

THE NEW JERUSALEM

The foundation of the apostles seems to be **primarily** the twelve as representing the twelve tribes of spiritual Israel: “...on the gates the names of **the twelve tribes of Israel** were inscribed...And the wall of the city had twelve foundations and on them were the twelve **names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb**” (*Rev. 21:12*).

A BROAD FOUNDATION

- ❖ “...but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on **the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ himself being the cornerstone**” (*Eph. 2:19, 20 ESV*).

In these verses the term *apostles* seems to be broader than just the twelve because of the inclusion of *prophets* in the foundation. These are **two categories** with the prophets being Christian prophets (see Eph. 3:5 “as it has **now** been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets”) and not those of the Hebrew Scriptures.

THE FOUNDATION IS NOT LAID TWICE - NO APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

This foundation was laid by Jesus and cannot be laid again by the setting up of individuals who view themselves as the modern-day 12 apostles or who refer to themselves as some form of *governing body* over all congregations. With reference to the apostles the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol.1 p. 193 says: “Since no foundation repeats itself, they are irreplaceable in any subsequent generation.” The scriptural record shows that the 12 apostles did **not appoint replacements for themselves**, but appointed elders in the various cities. So today, if anyone places themselves in an authoritarian position over all the churches it would be wrong—even if they didn’t use the term apostle. There was to be no apostolic succession other than the biblical arrangement of missionaries.

THE FOUNDATION TODAY

The governing factor for Christians today consists of Jesus (as holy spirit) and all the apostles and prophets **through their words as recorded in the Christian Scriptures**. We have **the mind** of Jesus and the Apostles right there in the scriptures—our foundation: “I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for *the faith that was once for all delivered* to the saints ... But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the **apostles** of our Lord” (*Jude 3, 17 ESV*).

FALSE SUPER-APOSTLES

- ❖ “I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these **super-apostles**...And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are **false apostles**, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ...”
(*2 Cor. 11:5, 13 ESV*).

- ❖ “...the church in Ephesus ... you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have *tested those* who **call themselves apostles**, and are not, and found them to be **false**” (*Rev. 2:1, 2b ESV*).

The rest of the foundation that the apostles set up concerns the arrangement for a **body of elders** and a **body of deacons** for each of the individual somewhat autonomous congregations. So there are to be **only two offices** operating in each congregation.

Pastoral Eldership for Each Congregation

ELDER = OVERSEER = SHEPHERD

These three terms apply to the **one office**. In other words, each **elder** is also an **overseer** and is also a spiritual **shepherd** charged with caring for the flock:

- ❖ “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him **the elders** of the church...‘Be on guard for yourselves and for all **the flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**...”
(*Acts 20:17, 28 NASB*).
- ❖ “...appoint **elders** in every town...For **an overseer**, as God’s steward, must be above reproach”
(*Titus 1:5, 7 ESV*).

The reason for the **interchangeable terms** was that the word *elder* was the Jewish term that emphasized dignity, maturity and wisdom; whereas *overseer* was the Greek term for the function of superintending.

ONLY MEN WERE APPOINTED

- ❖ “An overseer must be...the **husband** of one wife...able to teach...**He** must manage his own household well...he must not be a recent convert...” (*1Tim. 3:1-7, ESV*).
- ❖ “...appoint elders in every town...**the husband** of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant...” (*Titus 1:5, 6 ESV*).

The requirement that an overseer should be able to teach obviously does not mean that others, both men and women, were not allowed to teach in certain capacities.

THERE WERE MULTIPLE ELDERS IN EACH CONGREGATION

The idea of one man serving as **the** overseer does not fit the scriptural statements. Each congregation was to have a body or council of elders and all elders were to be of equal status. No elder held a superior position over any other elder and likewise with the deacons:

- ❖ “And when they had appointed elders [*plural*] for them in every church [*singular*]...” (*Acts 14:23 NASB*).
- ❖ “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders [*plural*] of the church [*singular*]...”
(*Acts 20:17, 28-31a NASB*).
- ❖ “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders [*plural*] of the church [*singular*]” (*James 5:14 ESV*).

The Ministry of Deeds—The Body of Deacons

This ministry concerns the practical care needs of the individuals in the congregation. A deacon needs a people-serving mentality. Although disputed by some churches this ministry arose because of the situation of the different backgrounds of the disciples in the early days:

- ❖ “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up **preaching the word of God to serve tables**. Therefore, brothers pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to **prayer** and to **the ministry of the word** ... These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them”
(*Acts 6:1-6*).

Now this may or may not mean that the deacons served as cooks and waiters. The phrase *to serve tables* is often used figuratively for finances i.e. a money table. So this daily distribution to the widows may well have been that of money for food. This would also involve the keeping of accounts. The twin purpose of this ministry was to demonstrate care in ensuring fairness and to allow the “Twelve” to be free to devote themselves “to

prayer and to *the ministry of the word.*” So, this arrangement recorded in Acts 6 served as a **prototype** for the more developed office of deacon that was later described in 1 Timothy 3.

However, this body is not subordinate to the body of elders but has a significantly different function to that of the elders, although working harmoniously with them. Also one’s being appointed as a deacon is not a lesser appointment that could be used as a stepping stone to one’s becoming an elder.

Conclusion

We have seen that the foundation for the Christian congregation was that of “the apostles [*the twelve and the secondary ones*] and prophets, *Christ himself being the cornerstone.*” This foundation was laid in the first century and cannot be relayed. However, this same foundation exists for us today; inasmuch as we have all the words of the Christian Scriptures. Nevertheless, the terms apostle in the secondary sense and evangelist are applicable to individuals today as referring to their work as missionaries. However, the arrangement for the orderly running of each individual congregation consists of men in one of the two offices: elder and deacon. These should be formed into either a **body of elders** or a subordinate **body of deacons**. The **function** of each elder/overseer/spiritual shepherd is to *teach, counsel, upbuild, spiritually protect and care* for the members of the congregation – so it is a **ministry of words**. The **function** of each deacon is to conduct a *ministry of deeds*.

One final point: Although there is to be freedom in all the congregations—the congregations would **all work together** for the common purpose of preaching the good news and in support of each other.

NOTE 1 It is evident that an individual male may be all of the following: an apostle as a congregation-establishing missionary, an evangelist as a spear-heading missionary and an elder in a congregation.

NOTE 2 *EACH TOWN WAS TREATED AS HAVING ONE CONGREGATION*

- ❖ “So that you may put what remained in order, and appoint elders in **every town** as I directed you” (*Titus 1:5 ESV*).
- ❖ “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are **at Philippi**, with the overseers and deacons” (*Phil. 1:1 ESV*).

*So that “elders in every town” = “elders in every church.” As in Jerusalem, each town would have many different **house churches** under the one umbrella. Regarding Prisca and Aquila, Paul says in Romans 16:5: “Greet also the church in their house.”*

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