Part 5 - What the Experts Say!

I neither want, nor expect, anyone to just take what I say concerning biblical truth at face value; and definitely not when it concerns something as important, and with such mind-blowing implications, as this stuff about what churches ought to be like. So in order to demonstrate that what I am banging on about in this website isn’t just my own personal opinion about, or understanding of, scripture - indeed, none of this, as I am now going to demonstrate to you, is a matter of varying biblical interpretations at all - let me introduce you to some of the all-time most highly respected experts in the field of biblical studies and scholarship. I personally am an unqualified and self-confessed nobody, but what these guys have to say about these things does indeed carry some weight; so allow me to introduce you to what is, by any possible standard, a most illustrious and formidable panel of experts:

A.M. Renwick: Professor of Church History at the Free Church College in Edinburgh. In 1958 he wrote, ‘The Story of the Church’, an undisputed classic of its kind.


Dr Colin J Hemer: Tyndale House man, Cambridge.

Dr John Drane: lecturer in practical theology at Aberdeen University, adjunct Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, California, and a visiting Professor at Morling College, Sydney.

Dr Henry R Sefton: Lecturer in Church History at the University of Aberdeen.

Canon Leon Morris: Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne.


Donald Guthrie: Vice-Principal of London Bible College.

No one who knows anything at all about biblical scholarship would question that now we are dealing with the big boys, so let’s see their verdict concerning what I have said the New Testament reveals about how churches were established and set up by the apostles.

New Testament churches met in the homes of those in the church:

“The earliest Christians had no special buildings, but met in private houses, as mentioned in several places in the New Testament.” (Used with permission.)

New Testament church gatherings were completely open and participatory with no one leading from the front:


“Worship in the house-church had been of an intimate kind in which all present had taken an active part...(this) changed from being ‘a corporate action of the whole church’ into ‘a service said by the clergy to which the laity listened.’” (Used with permission.)


"In the earliest days...their worship was spontaneous. This seems to have been regarded as the ideal, for when Paul describes how a church meeting should proceed he depicts a Spirit-led participation by many, if not all...There was the fact that anyone had the freedom to participate in such worship. In the ideal situation, when everyone was inspired by the Holy Spirit, this was the perfect expression of Christian freedom.” (Used with permission.)

A M Renwick, "The Story of the Church", Chapter on The Apostolic Age on page 22-23. Published by Inter-Varsity Press, 1959 Reprint:

"The very essence of church organisation and Christian life and worship...was simplicity...Their worship was free and spontaneous under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and had not yet become inflexible through the use of manuals of devotion." (i.e. liturgy and ‘services’ led from the front) (Used with permission.)

When New Testament churches met they partook of the Lord’s Supper as a full meal:


“In the early days the Lord’s Supper took place in the course of a communal meal. All brought what food they could and it was shared together.” (Used with permission.)
Dr John Drane, “The New Lion Encyclopaedia“, Section on the Lord’s Supper on page 173:
“Jesus instituted this common meal at Passover time, at the last supper shared with His
disciples before His death…the Lord’s Supper looks back to the death of Jesus, and it looks
forward to the time when He will come back again. Throughout the New Testament period
the Lord’s Supper was an actual meal shared in the homes of Christians. It was only much
later that the Lord’s Supper was moved to a special building and Christian prayers and praises
that had developed from the synagogue services and other sources were added to create a
grand ceremony.” (Used with permission.)

Canon Leon Morris, Commentary on 1 Corinthians for the Tyndale New Testament
General Editor: R V G Tasker. On page 158:
Ch 11 "...reveals that at Corinth the Holy Communion was not simply a token meal as with us,
but an actual meal. Moreover it seems clear that it was a meal to which each of the
participants brought food." (Used with permission.)

Published by Inter Varsity Press, 2nd Edition, 1972:
“(The Lord’s Supper)...was observed by His disciples, at first as part of a communal meal,
Sunday by Sunday.” (Used with permission.)

Each church practiced non-hierarchical, plural male leadership that had arisen from amongst
the people in the church. These men were known as elders, pastors (or shepherds) and
bishops (or overseers), these being synonymous terms in the New Testament. Decision-
making, however, was on the basis of the consensus of all in the church:

Timothy 3 on page 620
“It was Paul’s practice to appoint several elders (the same thing as bishops) to take charge of
each church.” (Used with permission.)

Inter-Varsity Press.
“The churches were living organisms rather than organizations...When decisions were made,
they were made by the whole company of believers, not simple the officials.” (Used with
permission.)
A M Renwick, “The Story of the Church”. Chapter on The Apostolic Age on page 20-21)

"When we come to consider the permanent officers of the Church we find that in the days of the Apostles elders and deacons were appointed and their duties defined. The office of elder is variously described in the New Testament as bishop, pastor, teacher, preacher, minister and steward. The various terms mentioned referred to the same officer, but each presented a different aspect of their work. Thus 'pastor' indicated their duty to 'shepherd the flock' of Christ. Bishop, a word used to translate the Greek 'episkopos', indicated that as 'overseers' they had to 'feed the Church of God'(Acts 20) That the 'presbuteros' and 'episkopos' (elder and bishop) were the same is shown by many facts...Furthermore, the qualifications for bishop and elder were the same. Scarcely any scholar today would dispute the words of the late Dr J. B. Lightfoot, Bishop of Durham, and an undoubted authority: 'It is a fact now generally recognised by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same Officer in the Church is called indifferently bishop, and elder or presbyter.'" (Lightfoot’s commentary on Philippians, page 93) (Used with permission.)

Dr John Drane, “Introducing the New Testament“. Chapter 22 and the section on The Institutional Church on page 397 Published by Lion. Revised 1999 Edition:

"Instead of the community of the Spirit that it had originally been, the Church came to be seen as a vast organization. Instead of relying on the Spirit's direct guidance it was controlled by an hierarchy or ordained men, following strict rules and regulations which covered every conceivable aspect of belief and behaviour and when the Spirit featured in this scheme it was taken for granted that what the leaders decided was what the Spirit was saying. By the middle of the 2nd Century the change was complete. At the beginning the only qualification for membership of the Church had been a life changed by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, at the start there had been no concept of church 'membership' at all...But by the end of the 1st Century things were rather different. Now the key to membership of the Church not found in inspiration by the Spirit, but in acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma and discipline. And to make sure that all new members had a good grasp of what that meant, baptism itself was no longer the spontaneous expression faith in Jesus as it had originally been. Now it was the culmination of a more or less extended period of formal instruction and teaching about the Christian faith. And in all this we can see how the life of the Spirit was gradually squeezed out of the Body of Christ, to be replaced as the church's driving force by the more predictable if less exciting movement of organized ecclesiastical machinery." (Used with permission.)

On the section on Authority on page 403 he continues:

"It is important to realize that the movement towards a more authoritarian church hierarchy originated in the fight against unacceptable beliefs. At a time when Gnostics were claiming a special authority because of their alleged endowment with the Spirit it was important for the
mainstream church to have its own clear source of power. It was of little practical use for the
church’s leaders to claim - even if it may have been true - that they, rather than their
opponents were truly inspired by the Spirit. They needed something more than that, and they
found it in the apostles. In the earliest period supreme authority had rested with them. So,
they reasoned, anyone with recognized authority in the church must be succeeding to the
position held by the apostles. They were the Apostle’s successors, and could trace their office
back in a clear line of descent from the very earliest times. They stood in an apostolic
succession.” (Used with permission.)

reprint. Published by Marshall, Morgan and Scott. Under heading for Priest, Section 1 (c.).:

"The New Testament knows nothing of a sacerdotal (priestly) class in contrast to the laity."

Under heading for “Bishop (Overseer):”
“Lit: an overseer...” Note: _Presbuteros_, an elder, is another term for the same person as
bishop or overseer.”

Under heading for “Pastor”:
“...this was the service committed to elders (overseers or bishops)...”
(Used with permission.)

And so I rest my case! None of this is merely my own opinion. It isn’t just my own
personal slant on things, or some perverse doctrinal ‘bee in my bonnet’. None of this is just my
own personal private interpretation of the Bible. No! This is something the scholars are fully
agreed on, that the New Testament quite clearly shows us that churches back then were
precisely as I have herein described them. Incredible though it may seem, there is no dispute
among scholars as to how churches were established in New Testament times, or how they
operated and functioned. I could fill books with similar quotes from many other equally
eminent scholars and experts, but there really is no need. I have clearly demonstrated that the
apostles set all churches up to be the same, and that this apostolic blueprint, this shape that
churches in the New Testament took, was uniform. As I have made clear, you don’t have to take
my word on it. Just read the Bible and then check it out with the scholars. (Or rather, read the
scholars and then check them out against the Bible.)

So why aren’t things like this any more? Why is it virtually impossible to find a church like those
we see in the pages of the New Testament? (Though, happily, more and more are now coming
into existence all the time in various places, and we are glad beyond words that we are not
alone as a church in this.) If, when it came to planting churches, the apostles did things a certain way, then why have Christians almost universally done it differently for the last 1800 years? Our next section will answer this crucial question, and I think it will positively amaze you!