

The Biblical Model for Church Organization.

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Note: All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard 1995 Edition of the Bible.

Prologue.

Anyone who has studied the book of Acts and the epistles is probably aware that the modern church bears little resemblance to the first-century church, and it is no secret that the modern church, at least in the Western world, has many problems. We are prone to blame these problems upon our own apathy to spiritual things, to materialism, and to a plethora of other factors.

Yet one factor which is seldom considered is that perhaps we have a mistaken idea of what the church is supposed to be, and how it ought to function. Over the centuries, from the time of the apostles to the present, there have been fundamental changes in the way we think about the church. The church was once a rather informal gathering of believers who viewed one another as a family and who met together to worship the Lord who had redeemed them, to study His Word and for corporate prayer and fellowship.

But over the years, the church has been transformed into an institution which seems much too concerned with promoting itself and boasting of its growth. It seems so overly concerned with budgets, projects, programs and attendance, that it has ceased to function as a family and instead operates like a business. Churches today seem to be in competition with one another, and are often not very supportive of neighboring churches which are little different from themselves. And, why indeed do we see such a proliferation of churches which differ so little from one another? Surely, it is partly due to the fact that seminaries keep pumping out men who have a dream of pastoring a church and making it "great". We seldom question whether such a goal is appropriate, because our concept of the church has been molded by centuries of misguided tradition.

In this study, let us return to the Scriptures to see how the early church was organized. We shall see that the Lord placed many safeguards in the early church which, over the years, we have abandoned in favor of practices which, from a fleshly perspective, seem to have a semblance of wisdom.

Abstract.

The Biblical church was an assembly of believers who shared a common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was much less formal than the church today.

It had multiple part-time pastors who shared the pastorate. The pastors had secular occupations and were not pressured by a fear of losing their livelihood. They could thus proclaim the Word freely, as conscience dictated. These pastors were also known as *elders or overseers*.

Church decisions were typically made by the elders. On common matters, the elders might solicit the views of the congregation. However, spiritual matters, such as choosing a new elder, were left in the hands of those who were spiritually mature.

Today's church operates much like a business, but the Biblical church functioned more as a family. The church did not own property, and was not encumbered by mortgages and full-time salaries. There was no formal membership. If an individual evidenced a genuine faith in Christ, He was freely accepted as a fellow brother in Christ.

The Biblical church was not a venue for entertainment. Singing was not used to entertain listeners; instead, the assembly joined together in corporate singing to worship their beloved Lord. The preaching ministry was not used as an opportunity for telling stories or jokes, nor for soliciting support for some social or political cause; instead, the elders preached God's Word out of heartfelt conviction, a genuine love for the God who had redeemed them with His own blood, and a deep concern for the sheep whom the Great Shepherd had placed in their care.

Pastors.

In Scripture, the leaders of the church are variously called **elders, pastors** (shepherds) and **overseers**. These were not three separate offices in the church, but three names for the very same office.

A church typically had several such elder/pastor/overseers. The pastors were not recruited from a distant seminary, but were comprised of men from the assembly who had demonstrated gifts of sound teaching and leadership, as well as a genuine devotion to Christ. The pastors, having been long-time members of the assembly, knew the other members and were known and respected by them.

When appointed to be a pastor, a man did not give up his secular job. Even so, no one man was overburdened, because the task of pastoring the church was shared among several men. Because he supported himself, a pastor was under no financial pressure to soften his teaching nor avoid some unpopular Biblical doctrine.

Scripture exhorts the church to provide a certain measure of support to a pastor, to compensate him for his time and effort. But the concept of "full-time ministry" is foreign to Scripture, except for an apostle, who had to move often and was frequently the target of

persecution. In our own day, a missionary has similar needs, provided he follows the apostolic pattern of mission work.

The pastors were the leaders of the church. The care of the flock was entrusted to them. Consequently, it was important that these be trustworthy men who were concerned about the members of the church and who were familiar with the Bible. They needed to be men of humility, compassion, honesty and above all, a devotion to God and to His Word. Major decisions were made by these pastor/elders, and not by a popular vote of the church members.

The Bible uses the words *pastor*, *elder* and *overseer* interchangeably to speak of the *same* office in the church.

- When the apostle Paul addressed the ***elders*** of the church at Ephesus Acts 20:17, he told them Acts 20:28 that the Holy Spirit had made them ***overseers*** and that they were to ***shepherd*** the church of God. In the Greek, the word ***shepherd*** is the same word (here in verb form) which is elsewhere translated ***pastor***.
- Peter writes virtually the same thing in his first epistle 1 Peter 5:1-2., addressing the ***elders***, and telling them to ***shepherd*** the flock, and to exercise ***oversight***.
- When Paul wrote to Titus, to appoint ***elders*** in each city, he explained the qualifications for an ***elder*** and called him an ***overseer*** Titus 1:5-7.

Most churches today make a distinction between *pastors* and *elders*. Usually, the pastor is considered to be one of the elders, but the elders are not usually considered to be pastors. Such a distinction represents a departure from the Biblical pattern.

The *plurality* of elders in the churches.

In Scripture, each church had *several* elders. Since every elder was also a pastor and an overseer, this means that the Biblical pattern is for a church to have *several pastors*. While one or two elders in a church may have had more stature than the other elders, there was nevertheless a sense of equality among them.

In Acts 20:17, Paul sent to Ephesus for the ***elders*** (plural) of the church. Acts 15:4 (and other passages) speaks of the "*apostles and elders*" (plural) of the church at Jerusalem. Philippians 1:1 addresses the saints at Philippi, together with the ***overseers*** (plural) and deacons.

Most churches today have departed from the Biblical pattern by having a one-man pastorate. Even when there is a second pastor, the *inequality* between the pastors is underscored by labeling one the "senior pastor" and the other an "assistant pastor".

The elders provided their own support from secular employment.

There is absolutely no evidence of any "full-time" ministries *within* the local church. (However, church-planting ministries, such as those of apostles and missionaries, were fully supported by the churches).

Consider how churches were started in Scripture.. An apostle would enter a city and would preach Christ on several occasions. As people came to Christ, they would assemble regularly to hear the apostle's teaching. Over a period of many months, sometimes years, the apostle would teach them many things about God, salvation, the church, and the glory to come. During this period of time, certain members of the assembly would begin to stand out in their understanding of Scripture, their devotion to Christ, their humility, and their gifts of teaching and leadership. At some point, the apostle would appoint these men as elders, and afterward, he would depart to start another work in another city.

Throughout this process of forming a church, there is no reason to believe that anyone left his secular employment to become a full-time employee of the church. Those who initially followed the apostle would have kept their secular jobs. Those whom the apostle later appointed as elders would likewise keep their secular jobs. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate otherwise.

This does *not* mean, however, that the church provided no support at all for the elders. Since an elder had to take time away from job or family to prepare sermons or lessons, and for other pastoral duties, it was appropriate that the church should compensate him for this sacrifice Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

Part of the confusion concerning full-time ministry no doubt arises from a failure to distinguish between the offices of *apostle* and *pastor*. That these are separate gifts is clear from Ephesians 4:11, which teaches that *apostle, prophet, evangelist* and *teaching pastor* were four distinct gifts to the church.

There are good reasons why apostles often needed to receive their full support from the churches. An apostle was *sent* by Christ to go from town to town, preaching the gospel and establishing churches. A pastor, on the other hand, would typically remain in one city, shepherding a local assembly. It was thus much easier for a pastor to keep a secular job, since he was a permanent resident of the community. The apostle, on the other hand, often moved to a new community (sometimes with little notice), and, being more publicly visible, was more often the target of persecution. The work of an apostle often required such a commitment of time that there was little time left for outside employment. For these reasons, it was appropriate that the churches should fully support the apostles Matthew 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Philippians 4:14-16.

When the apostle speaks of "*those who proclaim the gospel*" in 1 Corinthians 9:14, we need to recognize that this designates *apostles* and *evangelists* rather than pastors. The offices of apostle and evangelist were *planting* ministries, while *prophet* and *pastor-teacher* were *watering* ministries, see 1 Corinthians 3:6. The *apostles* were on the "front lines", proclaiming the gospel in public places to the unsaved. Pastors then, as now, rarely gave a public address outside the church meeting. The pastor's primary duty is to watch over Christ's flock, giving them teaching, exhortation and guidance. The apostles' primary duty was to proclaim Christ to hostile audiences and to establish churches. Hence, 1 Corinthians 9:14 applies to apostles, not pastors.

This is confirmed at the beginning of the chapter, where Paul writes...

1Am I not free? Am I not **an apostle**? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2If to others I am not an **apostle**, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my **apostleship** in the Lord. 3My defense to those who examine me is this: 4Do we not have a right to eat and drink? 5Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the **apostles** and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? 6Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?

1 Corinthians 9:1-6

But it is remarkable that even Paul, who as an apostle had every right to receive his full support from the churches, was willing to relinquish this right of support if it would further the gospel. He would not allow his detractors to claim that he was preaching the gospel just to get rich...

15**But I have used none of these things.** And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one. 16For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. 17For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. 18What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, **I may offer the gospel without charge**, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. 19For though I am free from all men, **I have made myself a slave to all**, so that I may win more.

1 Corinthians 9:15-19

Now if the great apostle could support himself by making tents Acts 18:3, how much more can pastors provide much of their own support?

"*But*", some will argue, "*pastors have no time for secular employment.*" And why not? It is because we have *redefined* the office of pastor... we expect just *one man* to do all the work of

pastoring the church and have placed all the burden upon his shoulders. If we would follow the Scriptural pattern of multiple pastors who share the work of the ministry, then each individual pastor just might be able to hold down a secular job and still have time enough to pastor the church.

Preparation of Pastors.

Another fact is evident from what we have considered so far... the Western church today has set its academic standards for a pastor much too high. Today, if a man does not have at least an undergraduate degree in Bible or theology, we consider him unfit to be a pastor. We often expect him to hold a post-graduate seminary degree.

But Paul preached in Ephesus for 3 years, which produced a church with many elders Acts 20:31. And this appears to have been one of Paul's longer stays. He ministered to the church at Corinth for only a year and a half Acts 18:11.

While it would surely have been blessed to be taught by one of the apostles, Paul did not give his students a formal seminary education. Their qualifications for leading the church were based upon the Spirit's evident work in their lives, rather than upon any academic credentials conferred upon them by some human institution.

Much of what is taught in seminaries today, while useful, should not be regarded as essential qualifications for a pastor. We must maintain a balance of acknowledging the value of seminary instruction without making an idol of it. Some men who have had no formal training may be well qualified to serve as pastors, while others with many degrees and credentials may, for all their education, be unfit to serve as pastors.

The best place for pastors to be trained is in the local church. This is where Paul prepared elders, and his practice serves as the Biblical pattern for our obedience.

When the church sets its academic standards too high, it passes over men in the church who ought to be pastors, assuming that they are unqualified due to their lack of formal training. Instead, a church will look outside the church to find a stranger with formal training. With our modern mindset toward full-time ministry, it would be difficult to attract even one seminary-trained pastor for part-time work. To attract several seminarians to share the pastorate is seldom feasible. Even if a church could attract several "properly trained" outsiders to serve as part-time pastors, this would fall short of the Biblical model of selecting men from *within* the assembly.

Selection of Pastors.

In Scripture, how did a man come to be a pastor? When a church was started by an apostle, the apostle would appoint men from the church to serve as elders of the church Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5.

The choice of who should be an elder was not an arbitrary choice, but was based upon the gifts and qualifications possessed by the men. There are two passages of Scripture which list the qualifications for an overseer.. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The two lists are quite similar, covering matters of reputation, family management, character and teaching. Because these qualifications are wrought by the Holy Spirit, the apostles recognized that it was the Holy Spirit who made a man an overseer ("*the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*") Acts 20:28.

While it is certainly desirable to have elders formally appointed by existing leadership, there may be times and places where there is no existing leadership. This can happen, for example, in times of persecution, when communication with other churches becomes difficult or impossible. It may also occur when the leadership of a church goes bad, in terms of teaching or conduct, and the faithful ones are forced to leave. Such apostasy has happened countless times in church history, and often because the leadership of the church was committed to just one man, or to the popular vote of an unregulated congregation.

In such cases, one or more spiritually gifted individuals may begin a work without official recognition from others. Such a decision should be made carefully, with much prayer. The individuals themselves must meet the scriptural qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. And, of course, every reasonable effort should be made to seek official recognition from an existing body of elders.

Pastoral Leadership.

Each of the terms *pastor*, *elder* and *overseer* carries the idea of *leadership*...

Pastors (shepherds). A flock of sheep having no shepherd Mt. 9:36 may easily wander into the woods where they are easy prey for wolves, or into a gully where they can become trapped. They may even lose their way and not know how to return to the fold. Thus, God has appointed *shepherds* to feed , guide and protect the sheep John 10:12; 21:15-17, and to restore them when they go astray Matthew 12:11; 18:12. A pastor must have great love and concern for the sheep John 10:11.

Elders. The term *elder* was often used in ancient Greek to refer to a civic leader, such as the leader of a city or of a synagogue Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12; 22:5; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15. Often, such a leader was truly an *older* man, having the experience and wisdom which comes with age. An elder of the church is not necessarily old in years 1 Timothy 4:12, but should *have spiritual maturity*. One who has gained wisdom from an enduring walk with the Lord, and faithful study

of the Holy Scriptures, is better equipped to make spiritual decisions which affect the flock than twenty who are mere babes in Christ.

Overseers. The term *overseer* means: one who exercises *oversight*, and this certainly speaks of *leadership*. Oversight means literally to *look from above*. In part, this implies looking from a divine perspective, and not judging by mere human standards. It has in mind keeping one's mind fixed on God and His concerns while keeping watch over the flock to protect and guide them. The pilot of a ship must frequently consult his charts to keep the ship on course. Likewise, the overseer must follow God's Word to keep the flock on course.

It is important that elders have many spiritual qualities...

humility .. for a position of authority can often become an occasion for pride.

discernment .. for the actions of the overseer affect many others, for good or bad.

genuine love for the Lord .. for the pastor is not an autocrat, but a servant of God.

genuine concern for the flock .. the pastor must act for the spiritual good of the sheep.

Sometimes the pastor must take actions which the sheep do not recognize as good or loving, but if they have come to recognize his **humility, discernment, love for the Lord and concern for the sheep**, then they will more readily receive his rebuke with gratitude.

When there are *multiple* elder/pastor/overseers, then there is more support for each one to nurture these qualities, and less opportunity for any individual elder to go astray. We must realize that Christ has appointed *sheep* to be *shepherds*. The greatest earthly pastor is himself a sheep, having the same tendencies to stray and stumble. Like others in the flock, he benefits greatly by having shepherds to watch over his soul. Having multiple pastors also provides confirmation when two or more agree on a difficult or unpopular decision Matthew 18:16.

Is Congregationalism Biblical?

Many churches today have a *congregational* form of government. This means that important issues are decided by a vote of the church members. While this may superficially appear fair and equitable, it means that important decisions are often made by those who are least qualified to make them. If a church has a high proportion of spiritually mature individuals, or if the flock votes for whatever the pastor and elders recommend, then congregationalism can work.

However, these conditions are often not met. Especially so in our day, when churches work hard to swell the church rolls, requiring little evidence of spiritual maturity to become a voting

member of the church. As a consequence, congregations often select pastors who will *tickle their ears* 2 Timothy 4:3, by entertaining them or flattering them, rather than selecting those who faithfully preach *the whole purpose of God* Acts 20:27; 2 Timothy 4:2.

Acts 6:1-5 is often used to justify Congregationalism...

1Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3"Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4"But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Acts 6:1-5

Here, a problem arose in the church at Jerusalem... some of the Greek-speaking Jews complained that their widows were not receiving their share of the daily distribution of food. The apostles told the congregation that *they* should choose seven spiritual men to oversee the distribution of food.

Does this prove that the early church had a congregational form of government? Not at all. When the problem arose, the church did not automatically take a vote to decide what to do. Instead, they appealed to the apostles with their complaint. It was the *decision of the apostles* that seven men should be chosen to oversee the task, and that the task of choosing these men should be *delegated* to the congregation. Why did they let the congregation choose the men? Plainly, it was to ensure that the men chosen would be acceptable to the plaintiffs.

Notice that nothing is said here about the congregation taking a vote on who these seven men should be. Nothing definite is said about how they arrived at the choice of the men. However, given the nature of the problem, the seven men would have had to have been acceptable to *all parties* in the church, and especially to the Hellenistic Jews. If the Hellenistic Jews were in the minority, the rest of the church might have chosen seven men who had no intention of giving the Hellenistic widows their fair share of the daily food. So, contrary to popular opinion, democratic rule is not necessarily the best or most equitable form of government. The apostles no doubt made sure that the men chosen were satisfactory to the Hellenistic Jews, *regardless* of what decision might have been reached by a majority vote.

There is also no indication that the apostles meant to give the congregation free reign to make other decisions themselves. This was a unique situation, and, in this unique situation, the apostles felt that it was necessary to allow the congregation to select the men. Sometimes, it is appropriate for the elders to solicit input from the congregation. For example, when scheduling meeting times for the church, it is appropriate to find out what times the members would be available to meet.

However, for matters of right and wrong, or for deciding what constitutes sound doctrine... anything which can be decided on Biblical grounds... it would be wrong for the elders to take a congregational vote, or to be swayed by popular opinion. In such cases, they must follow God's Word *alone... Sola Scriptura!*

Advantages to the Biblical Approach.

There are numerous pitfalls to the single, full-time pastor paradigm..

- The pastor is pressured to keep attendance up in order to ensure his income.
- Since the pastor is, in essence, a full-time employee of the church, he is often expected to do most of the work of the ministry.
- A single "main" pastor can become autocratic and opinionated.
- If the pastor should leave, it causes a disruption in the church until a suitable replacement can be found.
- A pastor is himself a sheep, and needs to sit under the preaching of the Word.

By contrast, the multiple, part-time pastor approach has the following advantages..

- Since each pastor has full-time employment outside the church, he is under no pressure to artificially inflate the attendance.
- Since the pastoral duties are shared among several men, it encourages others in the church to use their gifts also.
- When there are several elders, who maintain a sense of unity and equality, there is less likelihood of a "dictatorial" mindset, and two or more elders can confront an elder who is in error.
- If one elder should leave, the others provide a measure of stability and continuity, and can compensate by modifying their schedules.
- By sharing the pulpit, the elders will have ample opportunity to sit under the ministry of the Word.

Implications.

Most modern churches have a main pastor, and perhaps an "assistant pastor", "youth pastor" or a "minister of music". In addition, they will typically have a "board of elders" who do *not* act as pastors.

Yet the passages cited above teach us that there is no Biblical distinction between pastors and elders. Elders were to act as shepherds and overseers. Moreover, there seems to have been a sense of equality among the Biblical elder/pastors. Rather than one man being pre-eminent over the church, the elders as a group pastored the church.

There is safety in many counselors. There is often danger in setting up one man as the figurehead for the church, for we are all weak and subject to pride and narrow-mindedness, and it is all too easy to stumble into sin or doctrinal error. The pastor himself is but a sheep, and he also needs to be shepherded. When there are multiple pastors who share the pulpit, each of them will have ample opportunity to sit under the teaching of the Word, and this will benefit them immeasurably.

The modern concept of church organization is often a recipe for disaster. While the problem is often aggravated by specific personalities, the *system* itself is prone to serious problems, having abandoned the safeguards which God originally built into His church. Our expectations of the church and of the pastors is patterned after worldly concepts of producing outward "*results*," rather than upon Biblical standards, and those results that are pleasing to God.

Pastors should *not* be put under pressure to increase attendance, just to ensure their livelihood. A church should *not* be under the primary leadership of just one individual. Major decisions in the church, especially those which affect what is taught or how the church conducts its ministries, should not be decided by a popular vote of the church members, but should be left in the hands of those who are spiritually mature in the church.

Membership.

As mentioned earlier, the Biblical church was an assembly of believers having in common their faith in Christ. Scripture never speaks of a ***formal membership*** in the church. Nor does it suggest the possibility of a true believer who is not a church member. Those who had a credible profession of faith in Christ were regarded as brothers in Christ and were warmly received into the assembly of believers.

Is water baptism a Biblical requirement for church membership?

In many churches, water baptism is required for membership into the local church. This is often the case in Southern Baptist churches. In so-called "Landmark" Baptist churches, an individual is generally required to be re-baptized if it was not a recognized Landmark church which baptized

him the first time. But does the Bible teach that water baptism is an entrance requirement into the local church?

On Pentecost, ***it was the Lord who added*** believers to the church...

...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:47

This passage does *not* say that their baptism made them members of the church, but that the Lord added "*those who were being saved*".

But what of the passage, just 6 verses earlier?

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. Acts 2:41

Some brothers conclude from this passage that water baptism was an entrance requirement into the local church. However, this passage does not say that. It says that certain people (1) received his word and (2) were baptized, and that about 3000 souls were added that day.

It was normal in Scripture for a believer to be baptized *immediately* upon exercising faith in Christ Acts 2:38-41; 8:36; 16:14-15, 33. Thus, all the passage really proves is that these people believed in Christ and, as was normal for a new convert, were baptized. These new believers were welcomed into the church. But the passage gives no necessary cause-effect relationship between their being baptized and their being added to the church.

The problem arises in our day when a person who believes in Christ is not immediately baptized, or is not baptized in a way that is deemed acceptable to certain brothers. What if this person is accepted into a church which does not require baptism, serves the Lord for many years, and later seeks to join a church which requires baptism? Should this person, who has repeatedly manifested the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart by faithfully serving the Lord for many years, be baptized as though he were a new convert? Or should a person be rebaptized just because his new church doesn't agree with certain things taught by the church which originally baptized him?

Whenever a church requires a believer to be rebaptized, it is saying in effect that there are two classes of Christians.. those who have been baptized the "*right*" way are *first-class* Christians.. every other believer is a *second-class* Christian. Yet, this is so contrary to all of Scripture.. those who are in Christ.. *all of them*.. are washed, sanctified and justified by the blood of Christ and by the Spirit of God 1 Corinthians 6:11. All Christians, whether baptized or not, have been *made alive together with Christ, and raised up with Him, and seated in the heavenly places in Him* Ephesians 2:5-6.

The various passages which say that we are all members of His body speak of the union which *all* believers have with their Lord through the faith given to us by the Holy Spirit 1 Corinthians 12:13. Such passages are *not* meant to puff up certain Baptist brothers as though they alone were members of Christ's body, and all other Christians were somehow detached from Christ.

It would seem idolatrous to assert that the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration does *not* make us members of Christ's body, but that water baptism does. It also seems idolatrous for a group of believers to say that a Christian who has already been baptized *unto Christ* needs to be baptized again, *into their local church*. By saying this, they set their local church up as equal with Christ, indeed, *greater* than Christ, insisting that one's former baptism *unto Christ* means nothing, and that what really matters is that we should be baptized *into their church*.

Should you receive their baptism just to appease such brothers? By receiving such a baptism, you are reckoned as part of their church... and you thereby give implicit support to this divisive baptism doctrine. You would be a partner in their sin the next time they require a brother to be baptized or rebaptized.

This baptism doctrine is much like that of the Judaizers, who demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised in order to become first-class Christians Acts 15:1-29. Our Lord cannot be pleased with a doctrine which divides the very church for which He shed His blood!

What is the usual purpose of a formal church membership?

There are three primary reasons why a church might have a policy of formal membership...

1. **Congregationalism** .. In congregational churches, major decisions are decided by a vote of the membership. Becoming a member of such a church grants you the privilege of voting at business meetings. We have already observed that, Biblically, major decisions should be made by the elders, since they are (or should be) more spiritually mature and better equipped to apply Biblical principles in making decisions.
2. **Service** .. In many churches, at least in theory, a person is permitted to serve (e.g. as a Sunday School teacher, choir member, etc.) only after he or she becomes a member. In practice, an individual is rarely required to become a member in order to serve, although people often do submit to formal membership and serve in that capacity.
3. **Discipline** .. In many churches, formal membership provides an opportunity for the individual to affirm his or her willingness to submit to the leadership, and to whatever disciplinary measures they may see fit to impose. Formal membership can also be a privilege which may be revoked if an individual rejects the discipline of the leaders.

While such a system may yield the desired results, it nevertheless has no Biblical support. Certainly, there are times when the leaders must administer discipline. However, a system of formal membership is not needed for this.

None of these represents a Biblical basis for having a formal membership.

What are the pitfalls of formal church membership?

The drawback of having such a formal system is that creates an unbiblical category of Christians... namely, those who are not church members. In the Biblical church, there was no reservation in accepting a Christian as a brother in Christ. We need to remember that the church is *Christ's* church, and that we should accept all whom *He* has accepted. If Christ has sealed someone with His Spirit, who are we to make other demands of him before we will receive him into our assembly? It is to our shame that we often treat Christians as outsiders if they do not belong to our own church. Often, we are so loyal to our own local church that we have little good to say about the church down the street which may be little different from our own. Formal membership can sometimes feed this divisive spirit toward other churches and other believers, because in a subtle way it denies the unity which all believers have by faith in Christ.

The Scriptural pattern of unrestricted acceptance of Christians into membership does not mix well with Congregationalism. The composition of a church can easily change if there are no barriers to membership, and this could affect the outcome of congregational votes. That is one reason why it is important to have elder-rule in churches, and to *not* have important decisions determined by a popular vote of the congregation. On this point at least Presbyterianism is closer to Scripture than Congregationalism.

The single barrier erected by many Baptist churches (i.e. baptism by immersion) does not guarantee that the members will be sound in life or doctrine. It only proves that they endorse the church's stand on water baptism. Since such churches are usually Congregational in government, it is not surprising that many Baptist denominations have, over the years, strayed down the paths of Arminianism and Liberalism.

Service and Gifts.

Scripture teaches us that each Christian has one or more gifts which are to be used for the edification of the church. There are many ways in which the Christian can use his or her gifts to build up other Christians.

Official and unofficial service.

Some of the ways in which Christians serve is through highly visible roles, such as preaching, teaching and leadership. Other types of service may carry with them a smaller measure of spiritual responsibility. Then there is service in which one member may provide individual encouragement or service to another individual in the church.

This demonstrates three distinct levels of responsibility, for which there are three positions in the church. Philippians 1:1 speaks of **saints**, **deacons** and **overseers**. We have already seen that the **overseers** are the *elder/pastors* of the church. *Deacons* were Christians entrusted with authority in everyday concerns, such as distributing food Acts 6:1-3 or delivering an epistle Romans 16:1. Finally, there were **saints**, who were Christians who had been given no official responsibility within the local church, but who nevertheless ministered in informal, personal ways.

It is appropriate to see these levels as building upon one another. Obviously, the deacons and overseers are still saints, even though they have additional responsibilities which other saints do not have. And there may be times when an overseer may need to do the work of a deacon if there is no deacon immediately available to perform a particular task.

In this discussion, we will use the terms **saint** and **deacon** in their more restrictive senses.. **saint** will mean "*a saint who is not a deacon*" and **deacon** will mean "*a deacon who is not an elder*". This seems to be the way Paul used the terms in Philippians 1:1.

Deacons.

The word *deacon* is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonoV*, which means *servant*. This word, in its various forms, occurs frequently in the Greek Scriptures. It is used to speak of household servants (John 2:5, 9), of a king's servants (Matthew 22:13), of those who help an individual (Matthew 20:26; 27:55; Acts 19:22), of those who serve Satan by masquerading as servants of God (2 Corinthians 11:15), and especially of those who serve God or Christ in some capacity (2 Corinthians 6:4; 11:23; Colossians 1:7; etc.).

It is also the word used by our Lord when He said "*...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,*" (Matthew 20:26), and the verb form of this word is used to describe our Lord Himself "*...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*" (Matthew 20:28).

This word has a special use with reference to the church. Some of the brethren are called *servants of the church* (Romans 16:1; Philippians 1:1), and Scripture gives specific qualifications for such a servant (1 Corinthians 3:8-13). We should probably think of *deacons* as *helpers or assistants* in the official duties of the church. It connotes more than simply giving personal assistance to other saints in need, for any Christian can and should do that. But we should not

think of a deacon as a church leader, since that is what the overseers are for, and Scripture is careful to distinguish *overseers* from *deacons* (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1, 8).

A deacon is one who helps or serves as a representative of the church, but not as a leader of the church. The seven men chosen by the church in Acts 6:1-4 to oversee the daily distribution of food illustrate the concept of a deacon. They were helpers to the apostles, freeing them to devote their time and energies to prayer and preaching...

Acts 6:2-4 -- So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ... We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This implies that the duties of a deacon did not involve preaching or teaching the Word... the deacon performed those duties which would otherwise take the leaders away from the ministry of the Word.

At the end of his letter to the church at Rome, Paul wrote:

Romans 16:1 -- I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;

Paul wrote this to introduce Phoebe to the saints in the Roman church. How did Paul know Phoebe would be present at the church, and that she would need to be introduced to the Roman saints? The most likely explanation is that Phoebe *delivered* this epistle to the Roman church. Note that Paul calls her "*a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.*" Thus, Phoebe was a *deacon* (or more properly, a *deaconess*) of the Cenchrean church. We see from this that another way in which a deacon could serve the church was to deliver an epistle to another church.

The qualifications for an overseer clearly require that overseers be men... "*An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,*" (1 Timothy 3:2). Similar language is used with respect to deacons (vs. 12), but verse 11 seems to give qualifications for women who would be deaconesses... "*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.*" The fact that Paul called Phoebe a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea confirms this understanding of the passage.