

I. Introduction

Good morning! At the close of last week's Bible passage, Paul survived being stoned at Lystra. After that he and Barnabas moved on. **Acts 14:20b** tells us, **"The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe."** Archeologists say that the ruins of Derbe lie under this mound (photo). At one time Derbe was a privileged city in the Roman Empire, but now even the ruins of the city have been buried under centuries of grass and dirt.



At the opening of today's Scripture, Paul and Barnabas are preaching in Derbe. Let's go ahead and read Acts 14:21-28.

II. Scripture Reading

21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. 24 After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, 25 and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. 27 On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

III. Teaching

After winning a large number of disciples to the faith in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas began to journey toward home. They stopped along the way to encourage the believers who had been won by their preaching and also to continue preaching. But eventually they arrived back in the city of Antioch where they had begun. And so, we come to the end of Paul's first missionary journey. **Acts 14:27** tells us, **"On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."**



This was a very successful missionary journey. The Good News of Jesus was preached in Cyprus and throughout the central part of what is now Turkey. Many Jews and gentiles responded to the gospel and placed their faith in Jesus Christ. I am sure that the brothers and sisters of the church in Antioch rejoiced as Paul and Barnabas told them of how the Lord had worked through them in so many places. In addition to passing on the news, I think the report to the church also served to affirm that Paul and Barnabas were accountable to the church.

By the leading of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were selected and set apart for the work of travelling and preaching, and then they were sent out from the church with prayer. **Acts 3:3**, **"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."** Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch, so it was appropriate that they report back to that church concerning their ministry. This pattern continues today. Missionaries are accountable to their sending churches and therefore they go home to report from time to time. The sending church supports the missionaries with prayer and usually with finances as well.



In the course of their ministry, Paul and Barnabas had won many new believers in Jesus in several cities. As they travelled home, Paul and Barnabas visited the believers in each city again and organized the new churches under the leadership of elders. **Acts 14:23**, tells us, **“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”** The wording indicates that several elders were appointed for each church and that full authority was given to these elders to lead the church.

From Acts and from Paul’s letters, it is clear that this was the regular pattern. Wherever people were won to the Lord, churches were formed and elders were appointed and committed to the Lord as the leaders of the new congregations. Since the Jews also had elders as leaders and many of the first Christians were Jews, the appointment of elders for the churches was not at all surprising. Elders are mentioned throughout the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, although there is a difference in the roles and duties of Jewish elders and Christian church elders.

Later on, Paul wrote in his letters to Timothy and Titus about the standards to be used in selecting elders. Let’s take a look at what Paul wrote in **Titus 1:5-9**, **“5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. 6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. 7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. 8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. 9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”**

Paul directed Titus to appoint elders for the new churches that were formed on the island of Crete, and Paul gives a brief overview of the qualifications for elders. This passage and the similar passage in 1 Timothy 3 outline the aspects of character, lifestyle, and spiritual gifts which should be examined in the process of selecting elders.

Another church leadership position which is mentioned quite often in the New Testament is the office of deacon. Deacons need to meet similar standards of character and lifestyle as elders, but may have quite different spiritual gifts. In particular, elders are required to be able to teach the Word and defend sound doctrine against those who are in error. On the other hand, deacons are often seen as more focused on ministries of service and administration. We talked about deacons in some detail in the message on Acts 6:1-7, where the first seven deacons were appointed. That message and other past messages are available on the church website (oicjapan.org) and on the stand in the hallway if you want to refer to it.

Since our passage in Acts today tells us about elders being appointed for the churches, this is a good opportunity for us to talk about church government for a few minutes. The first Christian congregation, the church in Jerusalem, was governed directly by the apostles. But as the church grew, they needed help to deal with all of the issues that came up. In Acts 6, the need for someone to supervise the distribution of food led to the appointment of seven men to take charge of this ministry. These seven are generally regarded as the first deacons of the church. Deacons took responsibility for practical ministries so that the apostles could focus on teaching and preaching.

As the church spread, within a few decades, it became normative for churches to have elders who focused on teaching and preaching and deacons who focused on ministries of service and administration. During the time of the New Testament, the apostles continued to preach and teach, and they also visited the churches in various places and provided some overall supervision.

After the end of the New Testament period and after the apostles passed on, the churches continued to be led in a similar way with various disciples trained by the apostles taking on overall roles of leadership and individual churches mostly governing themselves with elders and deacons. At this point, I think I should mention that there is a difference between ministry roles and church government structures.

Let's take a brief look at **Ephesians 4:11-12**, **"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."** Jesus gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. This is sometimes called, the five-fold ministry. These five roles, or offices, are given for the building of the Body of Christ, that is the church.



However, when we speak of church government and of elders and deacons that is something a little different than the five roles of the five-fold ministry. There is overlap, for example, the same person may be an elder and a pastor. In fact, many would argue that all pastors are elders who simply have a particular role as pastor. On the other hand, most people don't usually think of prophets or evangelists as being part of church government. It is a different kind of role.

Now, let's fast forward to our time. Over the centuries, different styles or structures of church government have developed. There are many variations, but in the modern church, there are three basic styles of church government, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Each of these styles of church government has denominations that use the same word to describe their church, but what I want to focus on is the styles of church government, not the denominations. Let's take a look at each of these.



The Episcopal form of church government is a structure with a strong top-down hierarchy. If we start at the local church, we would see a pastor or priest leading the church. But over a group of churches and pastors, there is a bishop. And, over a group of bishops, there may also be a higher bishop, sometimes called an archbishop. The Catholic Church is structured like this and the levels go all the way up to the pope. So, in the Catholic Church, the pope is in charge of all the churches and has strong authority over every Catholic believer. Other denominations that use some variant of the Episcopalian form of church government include the Orthodox churches, the Coptic churches, the Anglicans, the Methodists, and some of the Lutheran churches.



In contrast, the Presbyterian form of church government does not give strong authority to any one person. The word, Presbyterian, comes from the word, Presbyter, which has basically the same meaning as the word elder. In this form of church government, each local church is ruled by a group of elders. The pastor is an elder with special duties, but he does not have any more authority than the other elders. Groups of local churches are governed by a higher assembly of elders, sometimes called a Presbytery or a Synod. There may also be a General Assembly of representatives from all of the churches in a denomination. The Presbyterian and Reformed church denominations are examples of churches that use this structure.



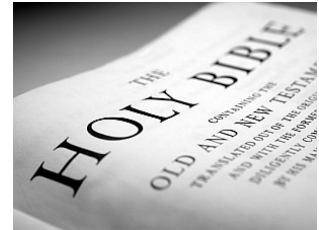
Another common form of church government is the Congregational form. In this form of church government, each local church is independent and self-governing. All church members are equally priests before God. Congregational churches are basically democratic; important decisions are made by a vote of the church members. Pastors and church councils do not have any authority except the authority the congregation gives them when they are elected, usually at an Annual General Meeting (AGM). Congregational churches may group together in voluntary associations or unions with similar churches, but they can also vote to leave such organizations at any time. Examples of Congregational churches include the Congregationalists, Baptists, Church of Christ, and our own church, Osaka International Church.



I should also mention that are independent, pastor-led churches. Here I am

referring to churches where the pastor has complete authority. These churches are basically under one-man rule. This might be considered a lack of church government rather than an additional type of church government. If this situation continues for many years and the pastor is unwilling to share decision-making power with others, there is reason to be concerned about whether that is a healthy church or not. However, if it is a new church that has just been started, often the pastor simply has to make all the decisions until the church can grow and be organized. No denomination endorses this type of structure as normal, but many denominations allow it as a temporary measure for new churches being started.

Proponents of all of these church structure types point to various passages in the Bible as the source of their preferred structure. Episcopalians point to the strong leadership of Moses, Peter, and Paul as evidence for the validity of a top-down structure. Presbyterians point to the passages where elders are appointed for each church. Congregationalists point to the passages that emphasize the priesthood of the individual believer and the equality of all believers. A Biblical case can be made for each structure's validity and advantages. That does not necessarily mean that all of these forms are equally valid when weighed against Scripture. But it does mean that all of the relevant Scriptures have to be considered carefully.



Why am I talking to you about forms of church government? I am taking time to talk about these things because this is a Congregational church where every member of the church is equally part of the church government. At every AGM, the members vote to elect the church council and to approve the church budget. Sometime there are other matters as well. For example, the congregation elects the pastor and considers amendments to the church constitution. That is a privilege and a responsibility.

In today's Scripture, we saw how Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for the churches. Currently, OIC does not appoint elders. We have an elected church council, but the Council members are not designated as elders. Actually, I think our council mostly functions in the role of deacons, rather than as elders. But sometimes the council also takes on tasks appropriate to the role of elders. Is this the best structure for OIC? I don't know for sure. At some point, we may want to think and pray about whether we should make any adjustments to our structure. For example, we could rename the current church council as the board of deacons and then appoint some elders. Then the deacons would focus on service and practical ministries and the elders would focus on spiritual leadership, teaching and prayer.

I am not proposing any changes today, but I may propose some changes in the future. Meanwhile, I want to encourage all of us to pray and think about such things. What structure or ways of doing things would be most pleasing to the Lord? Because this is a Congregational Church, it is every member's privilege and responsibility to think and pray about these things.

IV. Conclusion

OIC does not currently appoint elders. Nonetheless, we certainly have members who serve as elders in the congregation, even if we do not officially call them that. And, our elected council members often fill much of the role of elders as well. Today I would like to ask everyone to pray for the church council and for all of those who do the work of elders in our church.

And, to those who do the work of elders or who may be called to that role in the future, I would like to share the charge which Peter gave to the elders of his time. Let's close with **1 Peter 5:1-4**. **"1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."**

V. Prayer