

The Church In Acts (3)

Introduction:

1. The Book of Acts gives us a picture of the church in its infancy.
2. Already in our study we have seen the community emerge on the scene accompanied by miraculous events in the fulfillment of prophecy. We have begun to see its mission unfold as the disciples began their preaching under the great commission. Their mission involved preaching the kingdom of God with faith, repentance and baptism as the appropriate responses. As a result of these actions they were incorporated into the community.
3. In this study we will give consideration to the organization that characterized this emerging community.
4. We will observe the place and function of the apostles, elders and deacons, each of which involves an administrative function. Prophets and evangelists seem to have played no administrative role in the community, but their focus of communicating the message of God was critical.
5. There is no hierarchy of ecclesiastical officials evident in Acts, nor in any of the rest of the N.T. literature.

Discussion:

- I. Previously in this study, it has become clear that the primitive church did not exist as an institutional entity. It was simply a group or community consisting of believers in Jesus Christ.
 - A. They existed at first as a group within Judaism, although they possessed an identity of their own.
 1. They worshiped at the temple (Acts 2:46) and considered themselves as part of the on-going unfolding of the plan of God associated with Israel (cf. Acts 7).
 2. We would not be surprised to find their organizing themselves in a way influenced by Jewish procedures. Such an influence may be evident in the word "elders."
 - B. The apostles occupy a prominent place in the church.
 1. There can be no doubt about the authority of those whom Jesus had appointed to be apostles (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:19).
 - a. Their authority was NOT personal but delegated from heaven.
 - b. While Peter took a place of leadership among them there is no suggestion that he was placed in authority over the other apostles.
 - c. No hierarchy of officials is evident in the church, nor among the apostles. As a matter of fact leadership was not founded on status but upon service (Matt. 20:20ff). Jesus was very specific about this when some among them asked for the chief places.
 2. Their perception of their qualifications is evident in 1:21-26.
 - a. Involved with them from the baptism of John until the ascension.
 - b. An eyewitness of the resurrection.
 - c. Chosen by the Lord. Verses 24-26 identifies Matthias as chosen by the Lord through the process of casting lots. Cf. Prov. 16:33.

- d. 12 seems to have been the appropriate number. Jesus had selected 12. This corresponded to the 12 tribes of Israel (cf. Lk. 22:30; Matt. 19:28). The 11 seem to think this is the appropriate number and it is validated by the Lord's selection of Matthias.
- 3. It was assumed without dispute that the apostles must possess firsthand knowledge of the historical Jesus as well as knowledge of the risen Christ. The office of apostle was therefore regarded as a guarantee of the connection between the historical Jesus and the ongoing community.
- 4. Others are also classed as apostles (those sent to proclaim the gospel). See Acts 14:4, 14 (Barnabas and Paul); Rom. 16:7 (Andronicus and Junias); Gal. 1:19 (James); cf. also 1 Cor. 15:7; 2 Cor. 8:23.
- C. The next group of administrative individuals are identified in Acts 6:1.
 - 1. Although they are not described specifically as "deacons" the cognate verb "diakonein" is used in 6:2 to describe the work they were to do. While there may not have been an official office of deacon at this time these were at least the precursors to the office.
 - 2. They were to administer in the daily serving of food to the widows. They were put in charge of this task (6:3).
 - 3. They were to be men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom (6:3).
- D. Mention is made of elders in Acts 11:30.
 - 1. These are distinct from the apostles (cf. Acts 15:2, 22; 16:4).
 - 2. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church (14:23).
 - 3. They were to feed the flock among them (20:28). The combination of "elder" and "bishop" (overseer) in this text shows that "bishop" is no more than a function of the "elder." They are to "shepherd" (pastor) the church, identifying another function of the "elders." Cf. Titus 1:5ff.
 - 4. Their administrative function may be seen in 11:30 in the contribution being sent to them for distribution and in 15:22 as they participated with the apostles in the decision relative to the Gentiles' observance of the law of Moses.
- E. All these were administrative functions in the community of believers. There was no hierarchy. All functioned under the direction of Christ, each carrying out the function that they had been given without elevating one role over another. Elders and deacons were confined to function in the congregation that they served.

II. Two other roles are identified, but neither occupies any administrative function.

- A. Prophets.
 - 1. Agabus is an example (11:27-28; 21:10).
 - 2. Philip's daughters are also said to have been prophetesses (21:9).
- B. The term "evangelist" is applied to Philip in 21:8.
 - 1. Probably a reference to his evangelizing work in Samaria (8).
 - 2. Whether there was a separate class of evangelists is not known from Acts, although it is mentioned by Paul (cf. Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5).
 - 3. No real administrative part in the community. Their primary role was preaching and teaching (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2ff). Appointing of elders may be the only administrative function of evangelists other than that of administering the word

(Titus 1:5). This may be less an administrative task and more of a teaching task, their role seems to be confirming that the congregation is appointing elders according to the teaching.

Conclusion:

1. You might notice that I have not tried to list these roles in ascending, nor descending order, but to order them in the way they are mentioned in Acts. This is on purpose. Our tendency is to think “hierarchy.”
2. The roles are not hierarchal, except that Christ is King over all.
3. The roles are functionary. They are not status related so that one servant is exalted over another.
4. There is no place in the kingdom for status seeking, nor lording over (Matt. 18:3-4; 20:20ff; 1 Pet. 5:3).
5. “What is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed” (1 Cor. 3:5ff).
6. Just as the Corinthians were confused about this many today are confused. They think “elders” occupy a position of hierarchal status. They appoint people to honorary positions rather than roles of service.