

The Church You Can Read About in the Bible How Do the NT Scriptures Reveal God's Will for the Church?

Intro: This year one of our themes is "The church you can read about in the Bible." And we have been thinking about the question, "What did God intend that the church be and do?" What is its mission or work?

One way to answer that question is to look at the way the church is described in Scripture. It is described as the temple of God, the body/bride of Christ, the kingdom of God, and the household of God. Each of these word pictures tells us something very important about the nature of the church and gives us a concept of what the church is to be and to do; yet it leaves questions unanswered.

How can the temple be the dwelling of God? How can the body know how to act? How can the kingdom know the will of the king? How can the family know the will of the Father?

In our last lesson, we answered that question by showing that the NT Scriptures are the source of God's will for the church; and our lesson today follows naturally and logically from that fact: How do the NT Scriptures reveal God's will for the church?

Since the NT is a revelation it communicates God's will in the same way all intelligent beings communicate. Let me illustrate.

Suppose you own a business and you are hiring a new worker to come onboard. How will he know what you expect of him?

First you may, in the interview itself, make statements about the company--what your business goals are, what your expectations are of employees.

You may have an orientation session where you give specific instructions about tasks that the new worker will do.

As an additional help, you may allow the newly-hired worker to "shadow" someone. He will take what he has been told and watch it being practiced by others who have already become familiar with the tasks. He may even be guided by an experienced worker as he goes through the various tasks.

Beyond that you will expect him after going through these procedures to take what he has learned and reason out what he should do in cases where you have not explicitly told him what to do.

We could simply describe the process as telling, showing, and implying.

We should not be surprised that God would use these same methods to reveal His will for His church.

He tells us what He wants through statements and commands.

He shows us what He wants through Biblical examples.

He sometimes will imply what He wants through the logical use of the first two.

And so we could say that the Scriptures reveal God's will through the process of telling, showing, and implying; but it is important for us to realize more specifically how He goes about that process of communication.

First God's order for a church is not formally set forth in a legal code or compendium of laws like He gave Israel at Mount Sinai, but instead it is displayed in the descriptions of the life of Jesus and the establishment of church itself.

Perhaps one might have expected that God would tell us what He wanted through a comprehensive set of organized laws about the church detailing its various features and functions much like what we find in the book Exodus when God commanded the construction of the tabernacle and its service in ancient Israel. But such is not the case.

What God has done instead is show us what He wants, giving us a narrative that describes the life of Jesus and what he taught His disciples to be (Gospels). Then He gives us a narrative that describes the establishment of the church (Acts). Then He gives us dynamic ad hoc letters that reveal how the gospel applied to the various needs of the first-century church (epistles).

In this case, God instructs us by allowing us to "shadow" the Lord and to hear his teaching; and then to "shadow" his apostles and see what they said to the churches they established.

By carefully observing the apostles we can get a clear sense of what a NT church should be like.

The apostles delivered to each local church the essential teaching to form a gospel church.

Wherever they taught the gospel, local churches came into existence and the founders of the churches immediately went to work establishing the fundamental features of the local church from its beginning. You might say the apostles told them what to do.

We can listen in and see what they told people to do to become disciples.

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

We can see that they organized regular assemblies on the first day of the week for ongoing worship and teaching.

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

They taught fundamental principles of conduct as a disciple and appointed leadership to guide them in their absence (Ac. 14:21-23).

And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:21-23)

The point here is that God's pattern for a local church was handed along to the churches in their founding by passing along the essential information to order the congregation (1 Cor. 11:2).

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

They revealed this pattern to each congregation.

For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Corinthians 4:17)

In addition, the apostles in their letters gave explicit commands that would assist newly-formed churches in "setting in order" the things lacking to become a church according to God's pattern.

Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy seem particularly devoted to establishing local church order in congregations that already existed and where there was the need for further instruction.

Paul urged Titus to remain in Crete that he might "*set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city*" (Tit. 1:5).

Paul's first epistle to Timothy indicates that he had urged him to "*remain on at Ephesus*" (1 Tim. 1:3) in order to continue to address many issues of importance to the local church. His purpose of writing is found in 1 Tim. 3:14-15: *I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15)*

In these letters Paul explores many areas in which the local church needed to be instructed in order to function properly, discussing not only individual responsibilities of disciples in various relationships, but also addressing issues of congregational importance like:

The role of men and women in assembled worship and teaching (1 Tim. 2)

The qualification and treatment of church leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:17-25; Tit. 1:5-9)

The work of benevolence (1 Tim. 5)

The proper response to false teachers (Tit. 1:10-16; 3:9-11)

Consider also that the apostles in their epistles sought to restore NT churches to their founding pattern when they departed from the things handed down to them at their establishment.

We can learn a lot about what NT churches are supposed to do by looking at the corrective information given to them by the apostles. Paul praised the Corinthians for remembering him in everything and holding fast to the traditions he had delivered to them; however there were areas where Paul's original teaching had been either altered or ignored.

For example, Paul in 1 Cor. 11:17-34 discusses the Corinthian abuse of the traditions he had given to them concerning the Lord's Supper with a view of restoring them to the original practice.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

By examining these kinds of passages in the epistles we may discern essential elements in local church order that had come through apostolic teaching in their founding.

By observing the churches established by the apostles we can begin to see the pattern created by the teaching the apostles passed along to the churches.

We know that a church founded by the apostles would possess all the features that God wanted the churches to have.

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. (John 16:13)

Some hermeneutics writers, even some brethren, stress that these examples are interesting, but have no practicality in forming a "pattern" for other churches to follow. In contrast the evidence favors the idea that such examples have been given to us to show us what God had in mind.

In fact, NT congregations were instructed to follow the precedent of other faithful congregations where the truth had been taught:

Paul urged the Corinthians to observe and follow the practices of other congregations established by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33).

Paul commended the Thessalonians for becoming "imitators of the churches of Judea" (1 Thes. 4:14).

If NT churches were encouraged to follow the example of churches established by the apostles, why would we not also need to do that?!

Thus the NT reveals God's will for the church through...

Purpose statements and commands by which God tells us what He wants.

Apostolic examples by which God shows us what He wants.

Necessary Implications by which God implies what we should do.

This is not some human construct imposed upon the Bible; but rather it is the only means by which communication can ultimately take place between intelligent beings. This approach will give us the raw data we need to know what the early church did. Of course, taking this raw data and applying it properly requires careful thought.

Conclusion: We have seen then that there are Biblical resources available to us in order that we might know how to establish a local church according to the will of God. In the lessons that follow, we will rely upon both direct commandment as well as apostolic precedent to identify some of the significant features of the NT church.