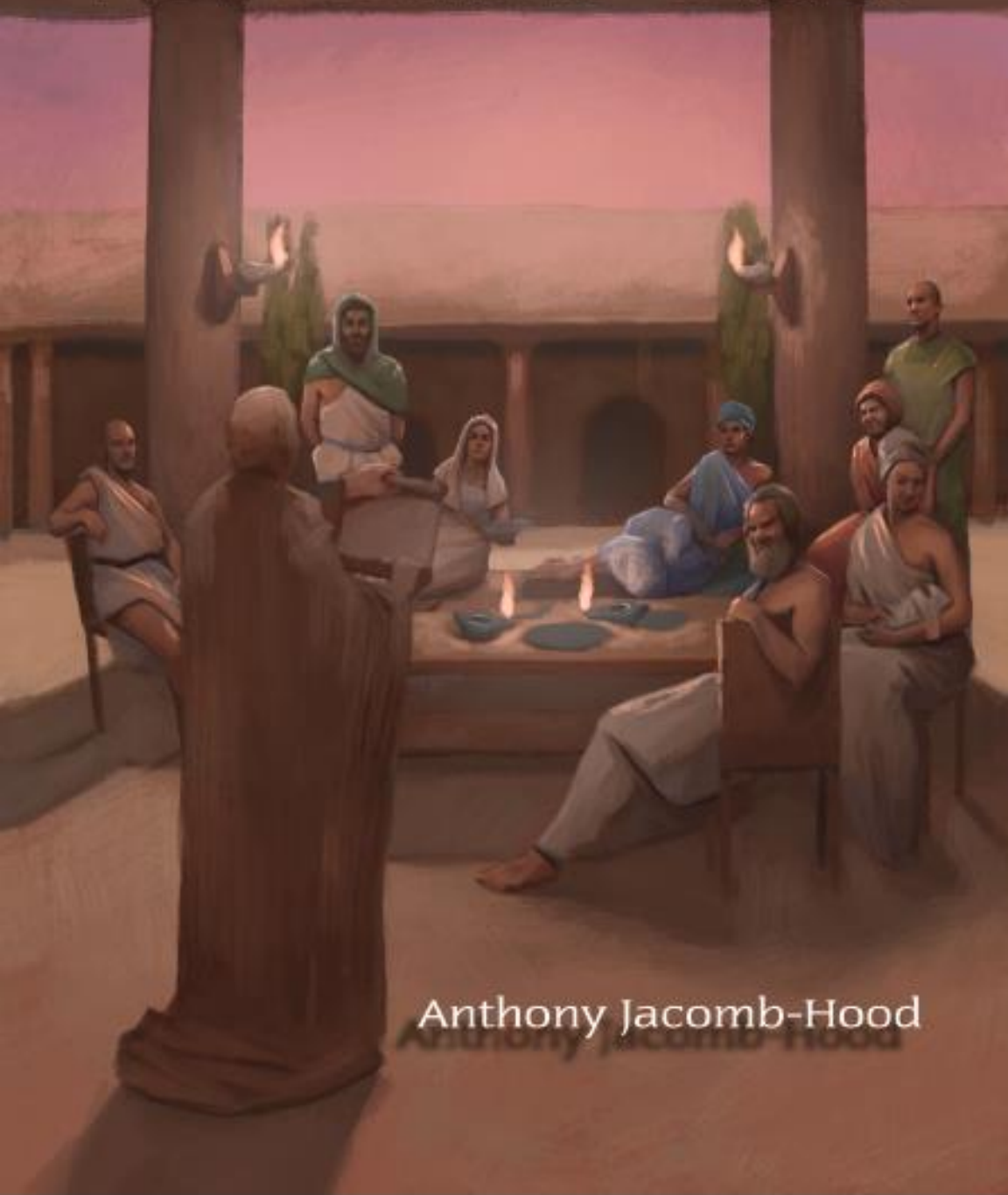


Rediscovering the New Testament Church



Anthony Jacomb-Hood

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This document is an excerpt taken from my book “Rediscovering The New Testament Church”. I have included the Table of Contents, the Preface and the first section of Chapter 7. This section is a summary of the Biblical description of the New Testament church. The rest of the book provides the detailed rationale for each point made in the summary.

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Preface

No single passage of Scripture provides a comprehensive description of a New Testament church and the roles and responsibilities of the participants. This is not surprising, given that the New Testament authors wrote in response to specific situations. They were not attempting to provide a “church manual.” For years I assumed that there was no coherent picture of New Testament church life within the Bible, just some scattered glimpses provided in passages responding to particular topics. Only recently did it occur to me that it might be worth gathering these glimpses together to see if, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, they do form a coherent picture. This book is the result of this study. I had a two-part surprise when I brought all of these pieces together. Firstly, I discovered that they did form a coherent picture. Secondly, I discovered that this picture or pattern of church life appears to be very different from the various patterns of church life, which have been most widely embraced by the Christian community over the last 17 centuries.

In discussing this topic I have discovered that when I use the phrase “pattern of church life” some individuals assume that I am only considering typical church organizational structures (e.g., pastors, priests and bishops, boards of elders, church councils or whatever). In this book I use the phrase “pattern of church life” very broadly. A pattern of church life can mean an organizational pattern with a clearly defined authority structure, but it can also mean something much more flexible and relational. The New Testament often refers to all believers as “brothers” so we should consider the possibility that the pattern or style of church life might be like the pattern of life in a family. Healthy family patterns are all about living relationships. They are not about organizational structures. Similarly, the New Testament describes the church as being like a body, so we should also keep open the possibility that the pattern or style of relating to one another within a church may be like the relationships between the organs within a live body. Part of the point of this book is to discover, which sort of pattern of church life existed in the New Testament church. We can only discover this if we keep an open mind.

Similarly, when I use the term “church” most people assume I am discussing an organization, which holds weekly services led by a pastor or priest. This individual provides teaching and organizes the weekly services. The congregation participates in worship and prayer and listens to the teaching and Bible readings. In many churches it is also assumed that church leaders have the authority to make most decisions about the life of the church. In this book I will often refer to this style of church as a “leader-centric” church, as so much of the life of the church is centered around the human leader of the church. A goal of this book is to discover if church during the period of the New Testament was like this. In this book I often use the phrase “the New Testament church,” and by this phrase I mean church as described in the New Testament.¹ Please keep your mind open to the possibility the New Testament church was radically different from most churches today.

My goal in undertaking this study is to base it on Scripture, especially the New Testament. The New Testament authors wrote their books to be read by the New Testament church. They wrote assuming a certain level of background knowledge and understanding on the part of their readers. In particular, much of the content in several of the epistles is highly specific to the circumstances of the church receiving the epistle. We need to be aware that our experience of church life may be very different from the experience of believers during the period of the New Testament. So we need to be very careful to avoid reading our interpretations into passages. These interpretations may fit our experience of church life, but may be totally different to the experiences of the authors and original recipients of these documents. It is easy to pick out a handful of verses, which seem to support our opinions about the nature of church life. When we do this, there is a risk that we will reach a wrong conclusion, because some detail obvious to the original authors and readers is not obvious to us. Before we assume that our interpretations of particular passages are correct we need to open our minds to the

1. Sometimes I use the word “assembly” instead of the word “church.” “Assembly” is the primary meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is commonly translated “church.” *Ekklesia* always refers to a group of people who have gathered together. It does not refer to a building or an organization. In the New Testament the word *ekklesia* is used in three ways: the universal church, the overall church in a city or region, and the Christian assembly which meets in a particular home. In this book I also use the term house church to describe assemblies associated with a particular home, which follow the pattern of church life described in the New Testament.

possibility that New Testament church life was totally different from our experience of church life. We then need to review the passages in the context of all of the information provided for us in the Bible. We need to be like the Bereans who checked what Paul and Silas were saying from the Scriptures.²

2. Acts 17:11. The Scriptures referred to in this verse are what we now call the Old Testament.

Chapter 7

Relevance of New Testament Church Practices

7.1 Summary of New Testament church practices

The primary elements of the pattern of life of local church assemblies described in the New Testament include:

- New Testament church is a community of believers characterized by their love for God and their love for one another. “One anothering” and mutual submission are core elements of their community life. Each assembly is a community of brothers and sisters in God’s family.
- Everyone contributes to the meetings and to ministry outside of meetings. Church assembly meetings are not about spectators watching the paid professionals do the bulk of the work. Church is about every member participating. The goal is for God to be leading each one to contribute in the manner of His choosing. Examples of potential contributions to New Testament church meetings include: leading the group into worship by initiating the singing of a hymn or worship song; praying or sharing a prayer request; reading a passage of scripture; contributing to a Bible discussion; teaching, exhorting and encouraging; sharing a testimony; asking a question; speaking in tongues, providing an interpretation of a tongue, speaking prophetically, sharing a vision, sharing a word of knowledge or of wisdom.¹

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1. In order to provide an opportunity for every member to contribute it is likely that most contributions to the meeting will be fairly brief. There may be periods of silence between contributions. These periods of silence may be valuable in multiple ways. Firstly, they give an opportunity to meditate on the contribution which has just happened. Secondly, they give an opportunity for each person present to abide with Jesus and listen to Him. Often this will include asking the question: do You want me to make a contribution to the meeting at this time? I find that having to face this question many times during a meeting helps me keep a healthy focus on God. Thirdly, periods of silence may provide the extra time some individuals need to be sure that this is the right moment to make their contribution.

- Both in meetings and outside of meetings everyone is free to minister as they sense God is leading them to minister. As each one obeys Jesus their contributions fit together to form a beautiful whole that achieves what Jesus wants. There is no need to ask a human leader for permission to minister. Elders and other mature believers help less mature believers to love and minister in a healthy manner. No roles in the life of the local church are exclusively reserved to leaders.
- Many of the contributions to New Testament church meetings and outside of meetings flow from the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to believers. The church is a community of gifted individuals, who use their gifts, as led by the Holy Spirit, to serve and edify one another and the community around them. All are important and need to flow together in mutual dependence and submission to form a whole, which is much greater than the sum of the parts. Meetings and ministry outside of meetings are not centered around those with the gifts of pastoring or teaching.
- Potential revelatory words (e.g., prophetic words, words of knowledge and visions) are submitted to the individual or group of individuals to whom they apply so that they can evaluate them. These gifts are not to be used to control or manipulate people, but to serve and edify them. The individual who receives the word or vision needs to discern how and when to share it.
- The primary focus of each believer is on Jesus, not a human leader. New Testament believers did not come to meetings thinking “I wonder what the pastor will preach about this week” or “I wonder if I will be given permission to serve in the Sunday school.” Instead they came to meetings praying, “Come and meet with us today, Lord Jesus, guide and equip each one of us to contribute” and “What do you want me to contribute to today’s meeting?”
- Teaching is a very important part of New Testament church life, taking place both in house church meetings and outside of the main meetings. Everyone is encouraged to contribute to teaching, but it is likely that most teaching was done by those with the gift of teaching.
- Jesus used a wide range of teaching styles. It is likely that a similar wide range of teaching styles were used in New Testament churches. It is likely that extended monologues similar to modern day sermons were rare and that dialog was an important element of New Testament style teaching. Learning by following the example of a mature believer and by personal involvement in ministry is emphasized in the New Testament. New Testament style house churches were a safe place to learn by doing.
- The focus of teaching in the New Testament is on God’s truth being written on our hearts. Knowing sound doctrine is also important. Only God can write on our hearts and develop within us the Mind of Christ.

- Church planting and evangelism are high priorities in the New Testament church.
- Decisions impacting a complete house church are made by consensus of the complete house church. This includes church discipline and decisions related to evaluating revelatory words, which apply to the complete house church. Consensus based decision-making can be really hard and can provide opportunities to grow in humility, mutual submission and love for one another.
- Typically each mature house church has several co-equal elders. New house churches comprising new believers may exist for a while with no elders. The only New Testament reference to a church with a predominant elder is negative.²
- The essence of New Testament local church leadership (elders) is to watch over the community. It is about helping each believer to abide with Jesus. Elders lead by exercising influence and they facilitate the flow of church life. They provide leadership, but not in the sense of being the key decision-makers and organizers.
- Believers are expected to submit to their leaders and to be open to persuasion by their leaders. These leaders have no authority to direct the activities of others. They should be examples of living out the Christian life including walking in mutual submission.
- New Testament churches are generous. This generosity provides for those in financial need and for the support of traveling leaders. In communities where there are several house churches a group of deacons may coordinate the financial provision to those in need. New Testament local church leaders were not paid.
- The maximum size of a New Testament style house church flows from the commitment to strong bonds of “one anothering,” participatory meetings and consensual decision-making. All of these factors combine to place an upper limit on the size of each congregation. This limit is compatible with meeting in homes.
- House churches are complete churches in and of themselves. They engage in the full range of activities mentioned in the Bible concerning church. For example they celebrate the Lord’s supper, baptize new believers and when necessary they apply church discipline.
- House churches are autonomous. No other church, nor any traveling leader, can force them to do something.
- All of the churches in a particular community also form the single church of that community and all believers are part of the single, universal church. Part of being the single church in a community includes individual house churches cooperating with one another and encouraging one another. From time to time the house

2. 3 John 1:9-10

churches in a community may get together for joint meetings or activities. House churches interact with one another as equals working together by consensus and influence.

- In communities where there are several house churches, members of different house churches may work together in various types of ministry. The same leadership principles apply to these ministry teams as apply to house churches.
- Women are free to contribute to all aspects of the life of the church including teaching and leading.
- New Testament church is “organic.” The word “organic” is chosen to emphasize that the church is first and foremost a living being (or organism). All of the parts of the body work together in complementary ways for the common good under the leadership of Jesus.³
- New Testament churches are imperfect. They are a community of humans who are being transformed by God’s grace. In different ways we all fall short and cause our spiritual community to fall short.

It can be seen from the above summary that the pattern or style of church life provided in the New Testament is not about organization or religious activity; rather it is about every believer directly connecting to God and His life. Each believer’s ministry flows out of his connection to God. There is great freedom in the New Testament pattern of church life.

Some of the key elements of New Testament teaching on Christian leadership are as follows:

- The broadest Biblical commands as to how we treat other people (e.g., “love your neighbor as yourself” or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) are the foundations of Christian leadership.
- Christian leadership is not about lording it over others, it is about being a servant of God and His people. Mutual submission includes leaders submitting to individual believers.

3. The church is not an organization. It is a living body or organic community. Organizations are characterized by identified job positions. The essence of leadership in organizations is decision-making and performing specific tasks restricted to the individual who holds that leadership role. In organizations, individuals who do not hold a leadership position, are expected to do what they are told to do or are given permission to do. Individual house churches, networks of house churches within a community and the church universal are all a living, organic body. At none of these levels is New Testament church an organization.

- Christian leadership is not about leading within the context of an organization. It is about being part of a body. Christian leadership is not defined by certain roles and responsibilities that may only be performed by the leader. For example, it is not about organizing meetings and ministry and it is not about deciding who is allowed to participate in certain ministries. Christian leadership is about influencing believers to walk closely with Jesus so that they are available to be used by Him.
- In the Christian community it is not appropriate to grant leaders special positions and titles with special rights. We are all brothers and sisters and Jesus is our only teacher and guide. It is acceptable to acknowledge a pattern of gifting in an individual's life (e.g., teacher or prophet) as long as the focus remains on the Giver of the gift.
- Jesus will deal with the "tares" (or "weeds") in His kingdom at the time of His choosing. Christian leadership is not about pulling up tares and deciding which seeds are good seeds and which are tare seeds. Leaders are expected to protect sound doctrine.
- The New Testament does not teach believers to obey their leaders. It commands believers to be persuaded by their leaders. Being persuaded by someone commonly involves dialog similar to healthy submission. The primary areas where believers are expected to be persuaded by their leaders are sound doctrine and general principles for righteous living. Christians should be looking to Jesus for individual guidance as to the specific ministry contributions He wants them to make.
- Christians should walk in submission to their leaders. This is not an unthinking submission. It will commonly involve dialog, which may result in the leader changing his position. It is a submission that takes place within the broader context of the mutual submission of all believers to one another. This includes the submission of leaders to individuals who are not leaders.
- In the New Testament there are two kinds of Christian leaders: local leaders, who are called elders or overseers; and traveling leaders. Women may serve as local or traveling leaders.
- Traveling leaders start churches in places where there are no churches and support existing churches. In general they stay in a town for a fairly short time, but occasionally stay in one place for a handful of years. In general, full-time traveling leaders interact with a local church assembly like a visitor rather than like a long-term member of the community. Part-time traveling leaders may be a long-term member of one house church and serve that house church as an elder.
- Traveling leaders operate as teams. Within these teams more mature traveling leaders mentor and coach less mature traveling

leaders. New traveling leaders are trained “on the job.” This includes watching the experienced traveling leaders and discussing with them how they serve. It also involves stepping into ministry and learning by doing. Membership of these teams of traveling leaders is fairly fluid. As traveling leaders mature they may leave their first team and start a new team where they are the mentor.

- Teams of traveling leaders may have a clearly defined leader or group of leaders. These leaders may be highly influential in deciding where team members minister. Individual traveling leaders remain directly accountable to Jesus and may sometimes not follow the recommendation of the team leader.
- Traveling leaders are expected to be humble and respectful and to use influence as they seek to provide support and encouragement to local churches. They cannot force a local church to do their will.

The New Testament assumes that no individual or group of individuals is immune from spiritual compromise. This may involve any kind of sinful behavior or doctrinal error. In order to minimize the problems that result from individuals or groups becoming compromised, power is carefully balanced in the New Testament church model. Key features of this balance of power are as follows:

- Within each local church assembly there is a group of co-equal elders whose primary role is to help the believers remain focused on Jesus. They are also expected to protect sound doctrine.
- Decisions that impact the local church are made by consensus of the complete local church. Elders, and other mature believers, may be active in facilitating this process: ensuring that everyone gets a chance to speak; helping to maintain a respectful tone to the dialog; and helping everyone approach the question in a spiritual manner.
- Each local church is in fellowship with other local churches and a group of traveling leaders. Relating to a group of traveling leaders is helpful to a local church because each traveling leader is able to bless the local church in a unique way based on his or her personality and gifting. No single human leader is well suited to address the full range of circumstances that can arise in a local church. Relating to a group of traveling leaders also helps to protect both the church and the traveling leaders from slipping into a mindset that a particular traveling leader is the “Bishop” over a particular church or group of churches.
- Each local church is responsible to exercise discernment concerning the traveling leaders to protect themselves from unhealthy traveling leaders. Being in relationship with multiple traveling leaders makes it easier to spot when one gets into sin or

doctrinal error and makes it easier to draw healthy boundaries when that happens.

- Each traveling leader is responsible to interact wisely with individual congregations and individual believers within those congregations. When problems arise one or more traveling leaders may help to resolve the problems. For the most part this is achieved by influencing people. When the issue is sin or the teaching of false doctrine, it may be appropriate for a traveling leader to rebuke the individual(s). They may also encourage a church to initiate the church discipline process. New Testament traveling leaders had no human power (*e.g.*, the authority to replace local leaders) to force change on congregations that do not want to receive it.
- These features represent the ideal presented in the New Testament. Not all New Testament house churches would have had the benefit of all of these features at all times.

The above points describe the “wineskin” of New Testament church practices. It should never be forgotten that the wineskin only exists to be a container for the wine. What matters most is the wine. Is the local spiritual community (church assembly) full of the love and life of our living and loving God? This is the new wine Jesus came to bring. This wine flows from the place of intimate abiding with Jesus. The wineskin of church life described in the New Testament creates an environment that is particularly well suited to welcoming the love and life of our God. It is well suited to keeping our spiritual lives both as individuals and as a spiritual community fresh and dynamic. It also helps individuals to grow into spiritual maturity and godly character.⁴

One of the reasons I like to use the word wineskin in the context of church practices is that wineskins are flexible. Wine bottles are rigid and inflexible and wine bottles may shatter into many dangerous pieces of glass. The pattern of church life described in the New Testament is flexible like a wineskin. It is not a rigid organizational structure. It includes several important checks and balances that help to protect both individuals and the complete community.

The model of community and leadership presented in Scripture and discussed in this section is extremely hard to implement in groups larger than a house church. This gives each church a choice as it grows. Either it can divide to remain small enough so that it can continue to implement this Biblical model or it can grow and adopt a new model.

4. See section 7.3