

The First Century Local Church

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister

Introduction

What was the Christian church of the first century like? How did it function? What were the activities of church members nineteen centuries ago? What might it have been like to pastor a first-century church? For the most part, we can only imagine what a church would have been like in those days. NT writers were not consciously giving a picture of the church—they were interested in the message of the church—so they wrote little about church activities.

The purpose of this study is to draw from the NT a composite picture of the local church functioning in the first century of the Christian Era. Our survey of church activities in NT times shows that the local church was a group of believers, loosely organized for fellowship, service, worship, and outreach. We will examine each of these areas of church life.

Organization

The Jerusalem Council is sometimes called, tongue-in-cheek, the “first General Conference.” At that time, the “brethren” made decisions which affected the whole church (Acts 15). However, most of the NT references to order and organization deal with local, rather than regional or international, church organization.

House Churches

The smallest unit of church organization appears to have been the “house church.” The one that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla is specifically mentioned (Rom 16:5). Philemon was a leader of a church group in his house (Philemon 2). We do not know the size of these home gatherings, nor can we

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tell whether they had deacons and elders. But we do know that Christians met in homes, probably in small groups.

Church Discipline

Church discipline was to be applied, according to Christ's instructions in Matthew 18:15-18: One who did not listen to the church was to be as a "Gentile" (RSV)¹—outside the community. Paul instructs the Corinthian church to "deliver to Satan" the church member living with his father's wife and "remove the wicked man" from among themselves (1 Cor 5:4-5, 13). The apostle likewise advises church members against association with brethren who are not living up to the profession of their faith (1 Cor 5:11). To the Thessalonians Paul writes that they should "keep aloof" from the brother who leads an "unruly life," not according to the Christian tradition (1 Thess 3:6). From these statements we may infer that church members were disciplined for gross and public sins.

Church Leadership

The Acts and Epistles note church leadership positions. The principal ones in the local congregations are the deacons and the elders. Other than the twelve and Paul, "apostles" seem to have been sent messengers (such as Titus, 2 Cor 8:23) or "missionaries" gifted by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:23-29; Eph 4:11).

Deacons. Church leaders appointed deacons, probably in cooperation with the members (Acts 6:3). What their function was is less known than their qualifications (1 Tim 3:8-10, 12-13). If indeed the "seven" were *diakonoi*, which the text does not state specifically (Acts 6), deacons would have been charged with the care of the poor. On the other hand Stephen (Acts 7) and Philip (Acts 8) were preacher-evangelists as well. Spiritual functions of deacons within the church would be totally in line with the characteristics of deacons as set forth by Paul (1 Timothy 3).

Deaconesses. Deaconesses—not called by that name, but women serving the church—also appear in the NT. Phoebe is the only person specifically designated as a "deacon" of a specific church (*diakonos*, Rom 16:1) in the NT. In 1 Timothy 3:11, Paul interrupts his discussion of deacons to speak of "women" who evidently serve the church, either as deacons' wives or women deacons (deaconesses).² Some commentators think that the "widows" of

1 Unless otherwise noted, brief translations are the author's own.

2 "Wives," NIV; Frank Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 1:368; Randolph Yeager, *Renaissance New Testament* (Gretna, LA, 1985), 15:386. "Women deacons": J.N.D. Kelley, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (Peabody, MA, 1960),

1 Timothy 5:9-10 were women especially set apart for service to the congregation.³ An important task of older ladies in the church was the advising and encouraging of other women, especially the younger ones, in the management of Christian homes (Titus 2:3-5).

Elders-bishops. Elders figure prominently in Paul's pastoral letters, whether called *presbuteroi*, "elders" or "old man" (1 Tim 5:1, 17, 19; Titus 1:5), or *episkopoi*, "overseers" or "bishops" (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7).⁴ Paul wrote Titus to appoint them (Titus 1:5). Their task, to have charge of the church (1 Thess 5:12-13), was divinely mandated (Acts 20:28). Church members were to obey them (Heb 13:17) and be subject to them (1 Cor 16:15-17; 1 Pet 5:5).

Pastoral care. The concept of "shepherding" the church appears repeatedly,⁵ beginning with Jesus' instruction to Peter (John 21:16). The figure is evidently based on the idea of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). The word *poimēn*, identical in meaning with the Latin *pastor*, "shepherd," is the basis for the designation "pastor"; however, the NT does not use the term to indicate a person holding a specific office. Rather, the activity, "shepherding" or caring for the flock, seems to be stressed as a task of the elders-bishops (1 Pet 2:25; 5:2).

Laying on of hands. Church leaders laid hands on believers in preparation for certain tasks. The "twelve" laid hands on the "seven" before these began to carry out their ministry to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6:6). The church leaders at Antioch laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, investing them for mission service (Acts 13:3). After due consideration Timothy was instructed to lay hands on individuals who would—so we imagine—serve the church (1 Tim 5:22). Spiritual gifts were at times imparted through the laying on of hands (1 Tim 4:14). According to Acts 8:17 the coming of the Holy Spirit accompanied the laying on of hands. Although the NT does not speak of ordination to a certain office, or of successive ordinations to higher positions, the laying on of hands appears to have been the normal way of commissioning an individual

83. "Deaconesses": Walter Lock, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1924), 40. Undecided: Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, 1972), 58.

3 Pseudo Clement attributes the formation of the widow's office to Peter (*Homily* 11.36.2 [Migne, *Pathologie Graeca*, vol. 1, col. 301]. Gustav Staehlin notes the similar activities of the order of widows—prayer, spiritual and physical care of women and children, hospitality to traveling preachers—and the "real widows" in 1 Timothy (TDNT 9:452-465). S. Solle thinks that this church office simply grew out of the widows' activities as described by Paul (NIDNTT 3:1073-75).

4 Today's usage, with the "bishop" being above the "elder" clouds the historical reality of the NT. The two words seem to be used interchangeably, simply as different names for the same task, as is seen in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7. *Presbuteros* (elder) would emphasize the position and accreditation; *episkopos* (bishop), the responsibility (Herman W. Beyer, "Episkopos," TDNT 2:615-16).

5 Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 9:7; 1 Pet 5:2-3.

for a specific task.

General oversight. Early church leadership and organization seem to have served to coordinate service, as in the case of the seven (Acts 6) or the contribution for the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-28). Elders were to discipline erring members (1 Cor 5:5, 13; 2 Thess 3:14) and correct and reprove those who would listen (2 Tim 2:25; Titus 2:15). Church leaders—elders-bishops, deacons—were also to see that the worship services were orderly and representative of the believers' faith (1 Cor 14:25-40).

On the organization of the early church, Ellen White writes,

As an important factor in the spiritual growth of the new converts the apostles were careful to surround them with the safeguards of gospel order. Churches were duly organized in all places in Lycaonia and Pisidia where there were believers. Officers were appointed in each church, and proper order and system were established for the conduct of all the affairs pertaining to the spiritual welfare of the believers.⁶

This was in harmony with the gospel plan of uniting in one body all believers in Christ, and this plan Paul was careful to follow throughout his ministry. Those who in any place were by his labor led to accept Christ as the Saviour, were, at the proper time, organized into a church.

Church Activities

Shepherded by an organized leadership, the church was able to function. The principal activities carried out among NT Christians, as we noted earlier, were fellowship, service, worship, and mission or outreach. Some of these categories may overlap: breaking bread can be fellowship and also worship. It is not possible to prioritize these categories; all four were vital to church life. The order in which they are considered is arbitrary and unrelated to their importance, either in the NT church or in the church today.

Fellowship

Whether early Christians organized for fellowship or fellowshiped first, organizing later, may be debatable. However, the pervasive element of fellowship must be considered as one of the most important in the first century church.

Christians met together: in homes (Acts 2:46), in the temple (Acts 2:46; 5:12), in the Antioch church (Acts 14:27), by the river in Philippi (Acts 16:13), somewhere in Troas (Acts 20:7), in house churches (Rom 16:5; Philemon 2).

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA, 1911), 185-86.

They ate together, worshiped together, and studied together. Together they gave a testimony to the world. Minucius Felix, Latin apologist writing toward the end of the second century, could put into the mouth of his pagan friend Caecilius the following words: “They [Christians] love each other almost before they are acquainted.”⁷ Jesus had said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, RSV).

Financial sharing and communicating. Sharing of means was an important part of early Christian fellowship. In Jerusalem, members donated funds and properties so that those in need might have the necessities of life (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32). Christians in Antioch, Syria, sent famine relief to believers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). The believers in Asia Minor and Greece on another occasion shared so that the Jerusalem Christians might have enough.⁸ Hebrews 13:16 urges “sharing” as part of a pleasing service to God.

Communication among congregations contributed to the sharing. The news of the death of Ananias and Sapphira was shared (Acts 5:11). Missionary reports were shared (Acts 14:27; Rom 1:8). Messages were sent from church to church (1 Cor 16:19; 1 Pet 5:13). Official delegations, carrying church directives, traveled from Jerusalem to the churches (Acts 15:30). Paul’s letters were shared (Col 4:16). A communication network covered the Eastern Mediterranean Christian world.

Church unity. Unity was an important aspect of early Christian fellowship, both as a historical fact and as an ideal to be reached. The Christians in Jerusalem were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32). Of them Ellen White wrote, “No longer were they a collection of independent units or discordant, conflicting elements.”⁹ Paul urges the Philippians to be “of one spirit, one soul,” “thinking the same” (Phil 1:27; 2:2). The figure of Christians as members of one body, the body of Christ, further suggests unity.¹⁰ Albeit, unity did not mean uniformity: Those who were members of the body were still Jews and Greeks, Barbarians, Scythians, slaves and free, male and female (Col 3:11; Gal 3:28). The early church had an organic unity that grew out of a common fellowship with Christ (Gal 3:28; 1 John 1:3, 7).

Paul’s letters strongly indicate that the Corinthians and the Romans were not reaching the ideal in unity. Through Chloe’s people, Paul had received word of Corinthian “quarrels” (1 Cor 1:11).¹¹ Brethren were taking brethren

⁷ *Octavius* 9.3 (ANF 4:177).

⁸ Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 8; 9:12.

⁹ White, 45.

¹⁰ Rom 15:5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-27; Eph 4:3-24.

¹¹ *Clement* notes these quarrels, but affirms that the current sedition against the presbyters involves more

to court (1 Cor 6:5-6). Differences of opinion regarding food offered to idols and Jewish ritual days caused dissension (Rom 14:1-6). Entreaties for peace and tolerance—unity among the church members—takes up many verses in Paul's writings.¹²

The cultivation of Christlike attitudes fostered unity and fellowship. Paul and Peter urged kindness among church members (Eph 4:32; 1 Pet 3:8). Tolerance would also contribute to fellowship (Rom 14:19-15:1). Paul wished for his churches a spirit of forgiveness (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Finally, love was the foundation and culmination of good relations in the church.¹³

Care of the Poor and Suffering

The care of the poor, first of all within the church, seems to have been a very important church activity in the NT era. From the earliest times in Jerusalem, those in need received help (Acts 2:45). To meet these physical needs, the church members even sold properties (Acts 4:34). The "seven" were appointed to see to physical needs of church members (Acts 6:1-6). The church at Antioch supplied—whether food or cash we cannot tell from the text—the needs of the congregation in Judea at the time of the famine predicted by Agabus (Acts 11:27-30). Dorcas of Joppa engaged in a compassionate ministry in behalf of the widows and other needy persons of that town (Acts 9:36-39).

Paul encouraged the Ephesian elders to care for the weak (Acts 20:35; cf. Eph 4:28). In Hebrews he recommended the care of prisoners (13:3). Throughout the Epistles Paul appears as the moving force behind a financial aid program to the church in Jerusalem, ravaged by poverty.¹⁴ James makes caring for widows and orphans a test of true religion (Jas 1:27). These texts all emphasize the care of the poor and suffering especially within the church community, but probably was extended at times to the nonchurch community at large.

Hospitality. Hospitality—lodging and food—was offered to Paul and his traveling companions by Christians in Philippi (Acts 16:15, 34), Corinth (Rom 16:23), Tyre (Acts 21:4), Ptolemais (Acts 21:8), Jerusalem (Acts 21:17), and finally Puteolin, on the way to Rome (Acts 28:14-15). Hospitality is further encouraged in Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; and 3 John 5-6. Receiving guests appears to be mostly related to traveling evangelists and missionaries.¹⁵

guilt than that dissension condemned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:45-47 (*ANF* 1:17-18).

12 Rom 14:13, 19; 15:2; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:1-3, etc.

13 Col 1:4; 1 Thess 1:3; 4:9-10; 2 Thess 1:3; Heb 13:1; 1 John 3:14; 1 Pet 4:8.

14 Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 8; 9:12.

15 In the late first century we have Clement urging hospitality upon the Corinthian church, following the

Secular vocations. Paul encourages the young churches to see that their members work, rather than be idle (Eph 4:28; 1 Thess 4:11). “If any one will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess 3:10-12, RSV). He wants Christians to give a good example, to take care of their own needs, and to have enough to provide for others.

Good deeds. New Testament writers forcefully admonish Christian churches to display “good works.”¹⁶ No specific description is given of these “good works” which form a vital part of the Christian community’s life. However, the context of Titus 3:14 suggests that good works are done to “meet pressing needs.” Hebrews 13:16 puts “good works” together with sharing. The most complete picture of “good works” comes from the Gospel stories of Jesus’ activities (see Acts 10:38). In John 10:32-33, Jesus’ good works are clearly the miracles done to help others. It would probably be fair to define “good works” as those activities done for the benefit of others. On seeing these, people would praise God (Matt 5:16).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* (second century) lists activities that qualify as “good deeds.” Some of them are, helping widows, looking after orphans and the poor, “rescuing the servants of God from necessities,” offering hospitality, “reverencing the aged,” caring for the brotherhood, “encouraging those who are sick in soul,” “not oppressing debtors,” and doing “any other actions like these.”¹⁷

Christian “good works” were first of all directed toward the members of the community. These “good works” included the care of the poor, homeless, and prisoners.¹⁸ Christians also provided a decent burial as part of their “good works” program.¹⁹

An interesting “good work,” mentioned only once in the NT, was the

OT example of Abraham, Lot, and Rahab (*1 Clement* 10.7; 11.1; 12.1, 3, *ANF* 1:7-8). In the early second century the *Didache*, chaps. 11 and 12 (*CC* 1:177) clearly enjoins hospitality of itinerant preachers—for a limited time. Hospitality figures as an important virtue in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, mid-second century (*Mandate* 8.10 [*ANF* 2:25] and *Similitude* 9.27 [*ANF* 2:52]).

16 Rom 2:7; 2 Cor 9:8; 1 Tim 2:10; 5:10; Titus 2:7; Heb 10:24; 1 Pet 2:12.

17 *Mandate* 8.10 (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *ANF* 2:25).

18 Lucian gives a hostile account of the Christians’ care of prisoners in his second century satire on Peregrinus: “And so, because Peregrinus was in jail, money poured in from them; he picked up a very nice income this way” (*Peregrinus* 12-2, Loeb ed. 5:1936).

19 The *Apology of Aristides* (ca. A.D. 125) notes the care of the poor, in life and death, and the rescue of prisoners for Christ’s sake (chap. 15, Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History*, 71). Eusebius records the Christians’ care of the dying and dead during a pestilence in Alexandria as opposed to the pagans’ leaving the sick to die alone and throwing bodies out without burial (*Church History* 7.22.5-10 [*NPNF* 1:306-7]). Harnack lists ten areas of early Christian philanthropy, in which are included the care of convicts in the mines and furnishing employment for those in need (*The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* [New York, 1908], 1:153-98).

anointing of a sick person (Jas 5:14-16). Anointing appears to have been only for the members of the congregation. As anointing contains worship elements, it forms a bridge to the discussion of worship activities of the early church.

Worship

Early church worship activities are only hinted at, although clearly church meetings were important (cf. Heb 10:25).²⁰ Several activities formed part of the early church worship service: worship proper (praise, prayer, singing) and reading of Scripture, the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, and proclamation.

Worship Proper

Acts 2:46-47 refers to early public meetings (Temple, homes), at which Christians gathered to praise God. Paul's Epistles abound in praise to God. They also urge Christians to praise (Heb 13:15).

Prayer. Prayer figures prominently in church gatherings, as early as at the meeting which determined Judas' successor (Acts 1:12-14). At least seven other meetings in which prayer was an important part are mentioned in Acts.²¹

Singing. The singing of hymns and psalms is mentioned in three texts.²² Only one of these obviously refers to public worship (1 Cor 14:26), but even then, it seems to depict a solo song rendered by a member. However, Pliny's well-known letter (ca. 110) describes singing of hymns to Christ as an important part of Christian worship.²³

Scripture reading/study. The study of Scripture, for which the Bereans were commended (Acts 17:11), was definitely a part of the worship services. Paul clearly recommends the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13). He also intended for his own letters to be read in church (Col 4:16).

"Breaking bread." "Breaking bread" at times refers more to fellowship meals than to the Communion service (see Acts 2:46). Peter and Jude speak of "love feasts" which may or may not have been connected with the Communion service (2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12). However, 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 gives specific instructions on celebrating the Lord's Supper. The frequency with which the early Christians may have celebrated the Lord's Supper is not

²⁰ In this study the worship scenes of Revelation have been omitted because the focus is on heavenly, cosmic worship, rather than the congregational worship around the Mediterranean in the first century.

²¹ Acts 2:42; 4:24; 6:4; 10:2, 4, 9; 12:5; 20:36; 21:5.

²² 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16.

²³ Christians admitted meeting to sing "in alternate verses a hymn to Christ" (Pliny, *Letter* 10.96.7 [Loeb ed. 2:403]). Ignatius writes, "Take heed, then, often to give thanks to God and show forth His praise" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 13, ANF 1:55).

given; that the memorial of Christ's Last Supper was celebrated is evident.²⁴ Pliny's letter informs Trajan of the Christian practice of taking food together, "ordinary and harmless food," perhaps communion.²⁵

Meeting time. No specific indications are given regarding the day or days on which worship took place. Some meetings appear to have taken place on common days (Acts 3:11-26). Paul's preaching in the synagogues was evidently on the seventh-day Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 18:4). In Philippi he met the women at the riverside prayer place on Sabbath (Acts 16:13). No change from the Sabbath as a day of special worship appears in the NT. Thus, it may be assumed that the Christian day of worship was the same as the Jewish day of worship, the one blessed by God at Creation (Gen 2:3).²⁶

Spiritual Gifts

Another important feature of the early church's worship was the manifestation of gifts of the Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit was not limited to church leaders (Acts 2:4; 4:31), but appeared sometimes as a visible part of the conversion process.²⁷

Although in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is speaking to the misuse of spiritual gifts, his admonition allows us glimpses of a first century Christian worship service. Prophecy—a message from God—was given for exhortation and consolation (1 Cor 14:3). In Paul's view, this gift was the most edifying and to be preferred above others (1 Cor 14:1, 24-25). Speaking in tongues was appropriate, if there were a translator (1 Cor 14:5). Some members might receive and share a revelation; others might bring a psalm; another might have a teaching; all these items should contribute to the church's edification (1 Cor 14:26). All of these different elements of worship should blend into an orderly and harmonious service (1 Cor 14:40).

The place and participation of women in worship in the first century church is not entirely clear. If she were properly covered, according to 1 Corinthians 11:5, a woman might pray and prophesy in a meeting. But she could not "speak" in church, according to verses 34-35. The immediate context of this

24 The *Didache* commands weekly worship services. Christians are to come together every "Lord's day" to break bread and give thanks, after first confessing their sins so that their sacrifice might be pure (14.1). Prayers for the Eucharist are specifically enjoined (*Didache* 9.1-10.7 [LCC 1:175-76]).

25 Letter 10.96.7 (Loeb ed., 2:405). The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (second century) gives specific instructions on the celebration of the Lord's Supper (secs. 9 and 10 [LCC 1:175-76]). Justin (ca. 150) describes the Christians' Communion service (*Apology* 1.66 [ANF 1:185]). However, these precise descriptions belong to a period later than that of the NT church.

26 According to the *Didache*, Christians were to meet on the "Lord's day" (14.1 [LCC 1:178]).

27 Acts 8:15-17; 9:17; 10:44-48; 19:5-6.

prohibition in this instance may suggest that “to speak” (*laleō*) refers to speaking up, expressing opinions, or asking questions. It appears that if the woman’s participation in worship were a manifestation of a spiritual gift, she was free to take part in the service, along with the rest of the members.

Proclamation

The sermons recorded in Acts were missionary proclamation,²⁸ intended to bring men and women to faith. Unfortunately, no sermons for the edification of church members are preserved in Acts. However, if the Epistles are letters to be read in church (Col 4:16), we might have some idea of the kind of sermons the apostles preached in the Christian congregations. The main features of these would have been teaching, exhortation, and encouragement.

The earliest Christians devoted themselves to the “apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Both in houses and in the temple courts they taught, as well as preached (Acts 5:42). Paul and Barnabas taught (Acts 15:35). Paul taught the Word of God to the Corinthians for 18 months (Acts 18:11). Some teaching was private, as that provided to Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26); other teaching was public (Acts 20:20; 1 Cor 4:17). Timothy was told by Paul to preach (literally, “command”) and teach: He was to give the “what” and also the “how” (1 Tim 4:11). The teaching which was part of the corporate worship would have contained both doctrinal matters and instruction in practical Christian living, as is shown in the NT Epistles.

Exhortation, according to the NT, includes urging and admonishing (mostly from *parakaleō* and *paraggellō* and related nouns). Paul exhorted believers to continue in the faith (Acts 14:22). Exhortation was an important task entrusted to Timothy (1 Tim 4:13); after teaching the Christians both the “what” and the “how,” he was to urge them to “do” (1 Tim 6:2). Exhortation could also be negative: Christians were rebuked for what they were doing wrong (1 Tim 5:20).

Acts records several instances of encouraging (*parakaleō*, as in 15:32, 41 and 16:40) and strengthening (*sterizō*, as in 15:32). This type of speech seems to have affirmed the believers (Rom 1:12). Paul’s Epistles often begin with encouragement for what the church has already achieved (Eph 1:15-16; Phil 1:3-7); even the Corinthian church is commended for the grace of God given them (1 Cor 1:4). The Apocalyptic messages to the seven churches contain commendations (acknowledgment of what is good) and encouragement (urging believers to persevere and hope).

²⁸ Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 7:2-53; 10:34-43; 13:16-41; 17:22-31; 26:2-23.

Little information is available on the length of worship services. Paul, at least in one instance, preached until midnight—and temporarily lost one of his listeners (Acts 20:7-12). Normal church services would probably have been much shorter.

The description of 1 Corinthians 14 suggests a lively worship service, with participation of several church members.

Outreach

For lack of a better word, I have used the term “outreach” to refer to all the activities carried out by first century Christians to bring others to a knowledge of the Christian gospel. Today we might call these “church growth” activities.

Adding numbers was a vital part of church life. Beginning with Pentecost (Acts 2:41), throughout the book of Acts, the focus of church activity was on growing and adding believers.²⁹ As far as we can tell from the NT, no one set a goal of preaching so many sermons or baptizing so many new members. On the other hand, the apostles and church members did seem to have a goal of reaching the whole world with the good news of Christ, of calling people to faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 1:6, 13). John and Peter made it their business to follow their evangelistic instructions (Matt 28:19-20); no matter the cost they would tell what they had experienced (Acts 4:19-20).

Bringing others to faith in Christ was not the sole prerogative of apostles or church leaders. Acts suggests that there were many preachers and teachers. In the late second century Celsus could write against Christians, accusing them of being simpletons trying to convince others of their message. “Wool-carders, cobblers, washermen, people of the utmost ignorance and lack of education,” wrote Celsus, “put forth their wondrous tales,” seeking to make converts.³⁰

Regardless of an apparent absence of goals as we understand them today, near the end of Paul’s life his enemies would say that he was “an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world” (Acts 24:5, RSV). Paul himself could say that the message of Christ was growing in the whole world (Col 1:6). The only mandate for reaching out to others was that given by Christ.³¹

Ellen White describes the attitude of the early Christians as follows: “They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the

²⁹ Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 14:21; 16:5; 17:4; 18:8; 19:18, 20; 21:19-20.

³⁰ Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.55 (ANF 4:486).

³¹ Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8.

burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.”³²

The methods used for attracting people to Christ were simple: preaching, witnessing, and serving. On the other hand, there does not seem to have been any specific mission or outreach program. The Christian way of life, together with the teaching and preaching of Christ, brought people into the Christian fellowship. The door to fellowship was baptism, which is almost a *leitmotif* in Acts.³³

Evangelistic Preaching

Preaching to unbelievers and potential believers was a priority occupation of the apostles. Acts records many preaching events.³⁴ Most of the preachers were the well-known apostles, Peter, John, Paul, and their companions, along with Apollos, and deacons like Stephen and Philip. But unnamed preachers could also preach. The gospel was first preached in Antioch by “men from Cyprus and Cyrene” (11:20). Later, Paul and Barnabas and “many others” preached in Antioch (15:35).

Paul’s letters tell about his own preaching, but also note that others were preaching—some from wrong motives (Phil 1:14-18). Paul commends the believers in Thessalonica for having made the message ring out in Achaia and Macedonia (1 Thess 1:8). The elders of the church directed by Timothy were to preach (1 Tim 5:17). Timothy himself was instructed to preach, “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). Preaching was not limited to a chosen few.

The book of Acts records several missionary sermons: Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-26); Peter’s sermon in the Solomon portico of the Temple (Acts 3:11-26); Peter’s speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-20); Stephen’s defense (Acts 7:2-53); Peter’s discourse in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43); Paul’s presentation at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41); and Paul’s address on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31). Perhaps these sermons are not recorded verbatim, but the information given is sufficient to show that outreach preaching centered on Jesus Christ as Saviour and the need for people to accept Him as Lord.

Sermon presentation varied according to the audience. The difference between Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and the Mars Hill discourse (Acts 17) is notable. In the first he began with the Israelites in Egypt,

³² White, 37.

³³ Acts 2:41; 8:36-39; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8.

³⁴ Acts 5:20-21, 25; 8:4-5, 40; 9:20, 22; 11:20; 13:5; 14:3, 21; 15:35; 17:2-3; 18:4; 20:20.

led to freedom by God's own hand (13:17-19). The second began with an altar to the unknown god (17:23). The first incorporated OT quotations; the second quoted Greek poets. Yet both sermons led to Jesus: The first spoke of forgiveness through Him (13:39); the second, of judgment by Him and resurrection through Him (17:31).

Witness

From the moment Christ appointed His disciples to be witnesses of what they had seen, heard, and felt (Acts 1:8), they could not keep from telling their experience (Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1-3). Early Christian believers felt themselves to be witnesses (Acts 1:22; 5:32), both of what Christ had done and what He had said.

The verb *martureō* (witness) and the nouns *marturia* (the content of the witness) and *martus* (one who witnesses) repeatedly describe a prime evangelistic method of the first century. Christians told what they knew about Jesus and what Jesus meant to them. And on more than one occasion, Christians became martyrs—the ultimate witness—of the gospel (cf. Rev 6:9-10; 12:11).

Service

Service was part and parcel of early Christianity. Service as a way of life was described in an earlier section of this article. Like numerical growth in the church, it just happened. For early Christians, who had a wholistic approach to life, service was a function of being.

Nowhere in the Bible or in the early Christian literature is service to the community, either of believers or unbelievers, specifically enjoined in order to attract people to the Christian gospel. Christ did, however, say that good works would cause others to glorify the Father (Matt 5:16). In any case service—wholehearted, kindly, genuine service—drew at least as many as the proclamation and witness.³⁵

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen records a letter from Julian the Apostate (fourth century) to Arsacius, high priest of Galatia. "The progress of Atheism [godlessness, here standing for Christianity] has been principally owing to the humanity evinced by Christians towards strangers [and] to the reverence they have manifested towards the dead."³⁶

³⁵ See Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* 1:153.

³⁶ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16 (NPNF 2:338).

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

The first century Christian church, as glimpsed in the NT writings, was an organized body of believers. Elders (elder-bishop), at times more than one in a given location, directed the local churches. They were assisted by deacons and—for lack of another name—deaconesses. The qualifications for church officers suggest spiritual rather than material leadership. By the laying on of hands, church leaders were set apart for ministry. Through the laying on of hands Christians also received the gifts of the Spirit needed for ministry. Preaching, teaching, coordination of charity, and direction of worship were the most obvious leadership tasks.

Church activities clearly attested in the NT fall into four categories. These are fellowship, service, worship, and outreach.

Fellowship among early Christians was warm and spontaneous. To support it, there was communication within the local congregation and between congregations. Sharing of means was vital to the unity and oneness of the church. To achieve this fellowship, Christlike attitudes were encouraged in teaching and apostolic letters.

Service to other members of the community was a way of life. Hospitality, care of the sick and poor, and attention to orphans were part of the life of service. Included later in the good works of the Christian congregations was the care of prisoners and the burial of those who had no one to perform this service for them. Christian service appears to have been directed first of all to other Christians. However, at times its benefits spilled out to non-Christians.

Early Christian worship consisted of praise, prayer, and singing. Worship included reading the Scriptures as well as teaching, proclamation, and exhortation, or encouragement. Although the elders were responsible for orderly worship, members could participate in testimony, song, teaching, or prophecy.

The outreach or mission activities of the early church resulted in the addition of many members. Church growth appears to have been a spontaneous result of Christian proclamation, witness, and service. The apostles took a leading role in proclamation, but mission was the task of the whole body.

Conclusions

Organization in the first century church is evident. However, it is simple. Naturally, smaller churches would permit the church to function effectively without a heavy organizational machinery. On the other hand, the emphasis on local church organization is clear. Local congregations, under the leadership

of their elders, could make decisions and carry them out.

The “laying on of hands” (the word “ordination” does not appear in the NT) brought with it the empowering for a definite ministry and also the gift (or gifts) of the Spirit needed for that ministry. There is no evidence of laying on of hands as a step to a higher church office. Neither does the laying on of hands appear as a recognition of or reward for service already rendered.

The setting of the first century church contributed to fellowship. Christians were a definite minority. They were often persecuted. To some extent they were ostracized from family and society. It was natural that they should seek warmth and fellowship by close association together. Perhaps the circumstances surrounding Christians today are not conducive to the kind of fellowship early Christians knew. On the other hand, fellowship and community are vital. A strong, caring, sharing relationship among church members and among congregations must be developed if the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to flourish as did the early church.

Service, as rendered by the early church members to one another, is conducive to fellowship. We love because we have already served. Giving of ourselves to others in joyful, unselfish service can revitalize congregational life. Serving as a way of life will attract the attention of nonmembers who observe our ways.

Spontaneous, participatory worship was effective in transmitting the Christian message and giving members opportunity to worship God. Preaching and teaching were not the exclusive domain of paid church workers. Perhaps experimentation with acceptable forms of NT participatory worship are in order.

The place of the gifts of the Spirit in early church life is notable. Different gifts operated in different members, all to the edification of the body. The doctrine of the gifts of the Spirit needs to be recovered in many Seventh-day Adventist churches today. Especially important is the understanding that all members of the body are to exercise these gifts. Naturally, misuse of the gifts is to be avoided.

Mission in the early church was a natural outgrowth of the way Christians lived. Without numerical goals and programs handed down by top leadership, the church grew by leaps and bounds. The apostles were “inter-division” missionaries. Their success was phenomenal. However, the great growth of the church was the result of the everyday witness of Christians whose learning and social position would not have made them probable evangelists. They worked close to their homes, with people they met every day, on an intimate basis. And they won thousands.

The First Century Local Church

The NT does not provide a one-and-only model church whose activities we are commanded to reproduce today. Situations seem to have varied from church to church. There was unity but not uniformity.

The glimpses of church life we see in Acts and the Epistles reveal activity organized for worship, service, and proclamation. Lacking specific, comprehensive directives for church activities, we should look to the principles undergirding what the apostles enjoined. I believe these are best summarized in the words of Paul: Do all in an orderly way, to the glory of God (see 1 Cor 14:40; 10:31).

Following the lead of the NT church can be profitable to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the late twentieth century. However, the first step in imitating the early believers is to recapture the joy of knowing the risen Christ as our risen Saviour and serving Him with the same burning zeal experienced by first century Christians.