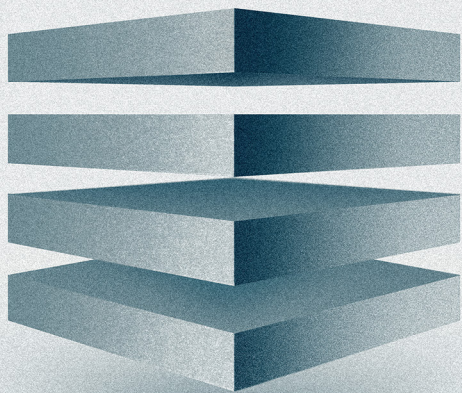


LEADERSHIP

IN THE CHURCH



R.C. SPROUL

Leadership in the Church

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Leadership in the Church

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Introduction

The Apostles' Creed defines the church as one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic. These are important truths to understand about the church, but they don't tell us everything there is to know about the church. The area of theology that deals with the doctrine of the church is known as *ecclesiology*, and one of its most important aspects has to do with who leads the church.

To understand the leadership of the church, we must first understand the church as an organization. This statement might spark an immediate negative response. Many people nowadays are resistant to the principle of organization in general, particularly young people who have felt frustrated or stifled by big organizations that seek to force people into certain molds. So it's a precarious task to attempt to speak of the church as an organization.

Many people would prefer to think of the church

instead as an organism. The term *organism* suggests something that's vital and alive. It suggests warmth rather than the cold, impersonal, or nonpersonal thing often connoted by the word *organization*. But every organism has organization, or it cannot function as an organism. The two words are closely related and are, indeed, inseparable. The New Testament church is not simply a living, vital organism but a living, vital organism that has its vitality within the framework of organization.

The issue that divides religious denominations in terms of church polity—that is, structure and leadership—is not whether the church should have organization but what mode or kind of organization the church should manifest. That question is inseparably related to the question of the nature and organization of the early church in the New Testament, yet it is a difficult question to answer.

There are basically three major forms of church organization today. The first is the episcopal form, in which the supreme authority of the church is vested in the office of the bishop. There are different varieties within that general form of episcopacy. One is called monepiscopacy. This is the form practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, and it means that one bishop has authority over the rest of the bishops. There are also conciliar forms of government in which no one bishop reigns supreme, but each is subordinate to a council of bishops.

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The second type of church organization is the presbyterian form, which involves rule by elected representatives known as elders. These elders sit in “courts” with authority over the local church, then over all the churches in a certain area, and then over the entire denomination.

The third basic form of church organization is called the congregational form of government, in which the highest judicatory of the local church is the assembly of the people, the congregation (though some churches vest this authority in a board of elders). The authority resides in the congregation rather than in the bishop or presbytery.

These three basic types of government all appeal to the New Testament for their legitimacy, and all claim to be faithful reproductions of the early church. The differences arise from the fact that many aspects of the New Testament form of government are obscure, so it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions in terms of how the early church organized itself.

In our study of church leadership, we will endeavor to analyze four basic offices that are discussed in the New Testament to better understand the nature, origin, and function of these particular offices. These four offices are Apostle, bishop/elder, deacon, and teacher. We will conclude with a general chapter on church leadership that is relevant for those who are engaged in various types of leadership positions in the church.

Chapter 1

Apostles

A proper understanding of Apostleship is crucial. Not only was it crucial to the early church, but it is crucial to the contemporary church as well. Many of the theological issues that divide people today are closely related to one's understanding of the nature of the Apostolic office and how it relates to other questions of authority, such as that of the pope, councils, and church leaders today.

The issue of Apostolic authority is also related to the question of the authority of the Scriptures. This comes up, for example, in proposals of a dichotomy between the authority of Jesus and the authority of Paul. People sometimes give more authority to statements that come from Jesus than statements that come from the Apostle Paul. This is not simply an issue in the contemporary church; it was

also something that the New Testament dealt with on many occasions.

Paul himself addressed his Apostleship in his letters to the Corinthians and to the Galatians. Some argue that Luke also entered this dispute, at least indirectly, by devoting so much time in Acts to tracing the historical activity of Paul. This controversy was also closely related to the other major controversy of the primitive church.

The single biggest controversy in the church in its formative years was the relationship between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. It's easy to see how, amid that controversy, a secondary controversy would immediately follow—namely, the authority of Paul, who was by definition the Apostle to the gentiles. There's a certain sense in which the fruit of Paul's activity provoked the other controversy of the relationship between Jew and gentile. Therefore, this question of the nature and function of the Apostle is not just a concern for modern-day Christians; it has been an abiding point of deep concern throughout the history of the church.

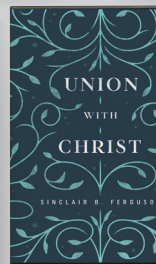
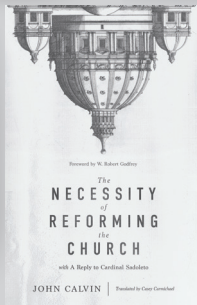
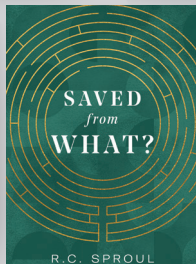
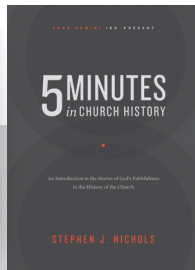
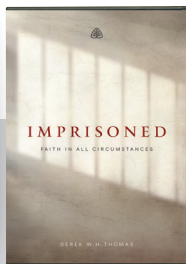
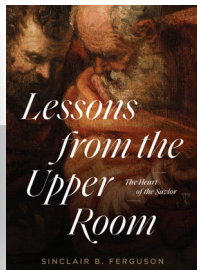
With this backdrop in mind, let's look at how the word *apostolos* is used in the New Testament. *Apostolos* is the Greek word from which we get the English word *apostle*, roughly meaning "one who is sent." If we examine the usage of this word in Greek culture, we gain some insight into its background. In the older periods of Hellenistic Greek, we find

that the term *apostolos* was used in close relationship to seafaring and military expeditions. A fleet of ships that was commissioned by the government to be involved in an act of war was called an *apostolos*. An army, or a division of the army, that was sent by the government on a military expedition could also be called *apostolos*. As the term evolved, it came to have specific reference to the commander in chief of those expeditions. The admiral of the fleet became the *apostolos*, or the general of the army was called *apostolos*.

In secular Greek culture, it was clear that the *apostolos* was not one who had the power or authority in himself to initiate military expeditions. Rather, he acted under imperial orders. The general was not the highest authority that motivated the movements of the troops. He was responsible to the king. He was the one whom the king had commissioned to carry out a task of military expedition, but the authority for the expedition rested ultimately with the king. To state it another way, the *apostolos* in Greek culture was a passive emissary rather than an active emissary. He did not act on his own authority or initiative; he was sent.

In later secular usage, the term *apostolos* was not restricted to military notions. *Apostolos* became a synonym for an invoice in the business world or was used as a synonym for what we would call a passport—a credential for movement from one sphere to another.

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