

Bay Roberts Seventh-day Adventist Church

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THE CHURCH

The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times, we are called out from the world; and we join together for worship, for fellowship, for instruction in the Word, for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for service to all mankind, and for the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. The church derives its authority from Christ, who is the incarnate Word, and from the Scriptures, which are the written Word. The church is God's family; adopted by Him as children, its members live on the basis of the new covenant. The church is the body of Christ, a community of faith of which Christ Himself is the Head. The church is the bride for whom Christ died that He might sanctify and cleanse her. At His return in triumph, He will present her to Himself a glorious church, the faithful of all the ages, the purchase of His blood, not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish.

Overcome by anger, the elderly man pounds the rod he carries against the boulder. Drawing it back, he swings again, and shouts: "Hear now you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" A stream of water gushes out of the rock, meeting Israel's need. But, in taking credit to himself for the gift of water instead of ascribing it to the Rock, Moses had sinned. And because of that sin, he would not enter the Promised Land (see Num. 20:7-12).

That Rock was Christ, the foundation on which God established His people, both individually and corporately. This imagery runs throughout Scripture.

In the last sermon Moses preached to Israel, perhaps recalling this incident, he used the metaphor of the rock to picture God's stability and dependability:

Because I will publish the name of the LORD: ascribe ye greatness unto our God. *He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.* (Deut. 32:3,4).

Centuries later David echoed the same theme—His Saviour as the rock:

"In God is my salvation and my glory; The rock of my strength, And my refuge, is in God" (Ps. 62:7).

Isaiah used the same imagery of the coming Messiah: **"A stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation"** (Isa. 28:16).

Peter testified that Christ fulfilled this prediction, not as a common stone, but a **"living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious"** (1 Peter 2:4). Paul identified Him as the only sure foundation, saying, **"No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"** (1 Cor. 3:11). Referring to

the rock that Moses struck, he said, "**And all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ**" (1 Cor. 10:4).

Jesus Christ Himself used the image directly when He declared, "**On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it**" (Matt. 16:18). He established the Christian church on Himself, the Living Rock. His own body was to be sacrificed for the sins of the world, the striking of the Rock. Against a church built on the solid foundation He provides, nothing can prevail. From this Rock the healing waters would flow to the thirsty nations (cf. Eze. 47:1-12; John 7:37,38; Rev. 22:1-5).

How feeble and weak the church was when Christ made that pronouncement! It consisted of a few tired, doubting, self-promoting disciples, a handful of women, and the fickle multitude that vanished when the Rock was struck. Yet the church was built, not on frail human wisdom and ingenuity, but on the Rock of Ages. Time would reveal that nothing could destroy His church or deter it from its mission of glorifying God and leading men and women to the Saviour (cf. Acts 4:12,13,20-33).

The Biblical Meaning of "Church"

In the Scriptures the word church is a translation of the Greek ekklesia, which means "a calling out." This expression was commonly used of any assembly summoned by the practice of calling people to meet.

The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament popular in Jesus' time, used ekklesia to translate the Hebrew qahal, which stood for "gathering," "assembly," or "congregation" (Deut. 9:10; 18:16; 1 Sam. 17:47; 1 Kings 8:14; 1 Chron. 13:2).

This usage was broadened in the New Testament. Note how it uses the term church: **(1)** believers assembled for worship in a specific place (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19,28); **(2)** believers living in a certain locality (1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:14); **(3)** a group of believers in the home of an individual (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2); **(4)** a group of congregations in a given geographic area (Acts 9:31); **(5)** the whole body of believers throughout the world (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 10:32; 12:28; cf. Eph. 4:11-16); **(6)** the whole faithful creation in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:20-22; cf. Phil. 2:9-11).

The Nature of the Church

The Bible portrays the church as a divine institution, calling it "the church of God" (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2). Jesus invested the church with divine authority (Matt. 18:17,18). We can understand the nature of the Christian church by viewing its Old Testament roots and the various metaphors the New Testament uses in speaking of it.

The Roots of the Christian Church

The Old Testament portrays the church as an organized congregation of God's people. From the earliest times God-fearing families in the lineage of Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, and Abraham were the guardians of His truth. These households, in which the father functioned as the priest, could be considered the church in miniature. To Abraham, God gave the rich promises through which this household of God gradually became a nation.

Israel's mission was simply an extension of that given Abraham: To be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3), showing God's love for the world.

The nation God brought out of Egypt was called "the church [or "congregation," RSV, NIV] in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, KJV). Its members were considered "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5), God's "holy people" (Deut. 28:9; cf, Lev. 26:12)--His church.

God placed them in Palestine, the center of the major civilizations of the world. Three great continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—met in Palestine. Here the Jews were to be "servants" to other nations, to extend the invitation to others to join them as God's people. In short, God called them out in order to call the nations in (Isa. 56:7). He desired, through Israel, to create the largest church on earth—a church where representatives of all nations of the world would come to worship, learn of the true God, and return to their own people with the message of salvation.

In spite of God's continual care for His people, Israel became involved in idolatry, isolationism, nationalism, pride, and self-centeredness. God's people failed to fulfill their mission.

In Jesus, Israel came upon a watershed. God's people were looking for a Messiah to free their nation, but not a Messiah to set them free from themselves. At the cross, Israel's spiritual bankruptcy became evident. By crucifying Christ they demonstrated outwardly the decay that was within. When they shouted, "We have no king but Caesar!" (John 19:15), they were refusing to allow God to rule over them.

At the cross two opposite missions came to a climax: the first, that of a church gone awry, so centered upon itself that it was blinded to the very One who had given it its existence; the second, that of Christ, so centered on love for people that He perished in their place to give them eternal existence.

While the cross signified the end of Israel's mission, Christ's resurrection inaugurated the Christian church and its mission: the proclamation of the gospel of salvation through the blood of Christ. When the Jews lost their mission they became just another nation and ceased to be God's church. In their place God established a new nation, a church, that would carry forward His mission for the world (Matt. 21:41,43).

The New Testament church, closely related to ancient Israel's community of faith, is made up of both converted Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ. Thus true Israel is all those who by faith accept Christ (see Gal. 3:26-29). Paul illustrates the new organic relationship of these diverse peoples by the imagery of two trees—a good and a wild olive tree, Israel and Gentiles, respectively. The Jews who do not accept Christ are no longer the children of God (Rom. 9:6-8) and are represented by branches broken off of the good tree, while those Jews who received Christ remain attached.

Paul portrays the Gentiles who accept Christ as branches from the wild olive tree grafted into the good tree (Rom. 11:17-25). He instructs these new Gentile Christians to respect the divine heritage of God's chosen instruments: "If the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the

olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Rom. 11:16-18).

The New Testament church differs significantly from its Old Testament counterpart. The apostolic church became an independent organization, separate from the nation of Israel. National boundaries were discarded, giving the church a universal character. Instead of a national church, it became a missionary church, existing to accomplish God's original plan, which was restated in the divine mandate of its founder, Jesus Christ: "Make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

Metaphoric Descriptions of the Church

The metaphoric descriptions of the New Testament church illuminate the nature of the church.

1. The church as a body.

The metaphor of the body stresses the unity of the church and the functional relationship of each member to the whole. The cross reconciles all believers "to God in one body" (Eph. 2:16). Through the Holy Spirit they are "baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13)--the church. As a body, the church is nothing less than Christ's body (Eph. 1:23). It is the organism through which He imparts His fullness. Believers are the members of His body (Eph. 5:30). Consequently, He gives spiritual life through His power and grace, to every true believer. Christ is "the head of the body" (Col. 1:18), the "head of the church" (Eph. 5:23).

In His love, God has given to each member of His church body at least one spiritual gift that enables that member to accomplish a vital function. Just as what each organ does is vital to the human body, the successful completion of the church's mission depends on the functioning of each of the spiritual gifts given members. What good is a body without a heart, or how much less efficient is it without eyes, or a leg? If its members withhold their gifts the church will be dead, or blind, or at least crippled. However, these special, God-assigned gifts are not an end in themselves (see chapter 16 of this book).

2. The Church as a temple.

The Church is "God's building," "the temple of God" in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Jesus Christ is its foundation and the "chief cornerstone" (1 Cor. 3:9-16; Eph. 2:20). This temple is not a dead structure; it displays dynamic growth. As Christ is the "living stone," Peter said, so believers are "living stones" that make up a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-6).

The building is not yet completed. New living stones are constantly added to the temple that is "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:22, NIV). Paul urges believers to use the best building materials in this temple, so that it will endure the fiery test at the Day of Judgment (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

The temple metaphor emphasizes both the holiness of the local congregation and of the church at large. God's temple is holy, said Paul. "If any one defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him" (1 Cor. 3:17). Close alliances with unbelievers are contrary to its holy character, Paul noted, and should be avoided, "for what fellowship has

righteousness with lawlessness?...And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:14,16). (His counsel pertains to both business and marriage relations.) The church is to be held in great respect for it is the object on which God bestows His supreme regard.

3. The church as a bride.

The church is represented as a bride, the Lord as the bridegroom. The Lord solemnly pledges, "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy" (Hosea 2:19). Again He assures, "I am married to you" (Jer. 3:14).

Paul uses the same imagery: I "present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). Christ's love for His church is so deep and lasting that He "gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). He made this sacrifice "that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26).

Through the sanctifying influence of the truth of God's word (John 17:17) and the cleansing that baptism provides, Christ can purify the members of the church, taking away their filthy garments and clothing them in the robe of His perfect righteousness. Thus He can prepare the church to be His bride—"a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but...holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). The church's full glory and splendor will not be seen until Christ returns.

4. The church as "Jerusalem above."

The Scriptures call the city of Jerusalem Zion. There God dwells with His people (Ps. 9:11); it is from Zion that salvation comes (Ps. 14:7; 53:6). That city was to be the "joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2).

The New Testament sees the church as the "Jerusalem above," the spiritual counterpart of the earthly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26). The citizens of this Jerusalem have their "citizenship in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). They are the "children of promise," who are "born according to the Spirit," enjoying the liberty by which Christ has made them free (Gal. 4:28,29; 5:1). The citizens of this city are no longer in the bondage of attempting to be "justified by the law" (Gal. 4:22,26,31; 5:4); "through the Spirit" they eagerly wait for "the hope of righteousness by faith." They realize that in Christ Jesus it is "faith working through love" that gives them citizenship (Gal. 5:5,6).

Those who are part of this glorious company "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Heb. 12:22,23).

5. The church as a family.

The church in heaven and on earth is considered a family (Eph. 3:15). Two metaphors are used to describe how people join this family: adoption (Rom. 8:14-16; Eph. 1:4-6) and the new birth (John 3:8). Through faith in Christ, those who are newly baptized are no longer slaves, but children of the heavenly Father (Gal. 3:26-4:7) who live on the

basis of the new covenant. Now they belong to the "household of God" (Eph. 2:19), the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

Members of His family address God as "Father" (Gal. 4:6) and relate to one another as brother and sister (James 2:15; 1 Cor. 8:11; Rom. 16:1). Because he brought many into the church family, Paul sees himself as a spiritual father. "In Christ Jesus," he said, "I became your father through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15, NIV). He refers to those he brought in as "my beloved children" (1 Cor. 4:14; cf. Eph. 5:1).

A special characteristic of the church as family is fellowship. Christian fellowship (*koinonia* in Greek) is not merely socialization but a "fellowship in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5). It involves genuine fellowship with God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14, RSV, NIV), as well as with believers (1 John 1:3,7). Members, then, give anyone who becomes a part of the family "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9).

The metaphor of family reveals a caring church "where people are loved, respected, and recognized as somebody. A place where people acknowledge that they need each other. Where talents are developed. Where people grow. Where everybody is fulfilled." It also implies accountability, a respect for spiritual parents, a watching out for spiritual brothers and sisters. And finally, it means that each member will have toward each other member a love that engenders a deep loyalty that undergirds and strengthens. Membership in a church family enables individuals who vary greatly, in nature and disposition, to enjoy and support one another. Church family members learn to live in unity while not losing their individuality.

6. The church as the pillar and foundation of truth.

The church of the living God is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15, NIV). It is the depository and citadel of truth protecting truth from the attacks of its enemies. Truth, however, is dynamic, not static. If members claim to have new light—a new doctrine or a new interpretation of the Scriptures—those of experience should test the new teaching by the standard of Scripture (see Isa. 8:20). If the new light meets this standard, then the church must accept it; if not, it should reject it. All members should yield to this Bible-based judgment, for "in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14). Through spreading the truth, i.e., through its witness, the church becomes "the light of the world," "a city that is set on a hill" that "cannot be hidden," and "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13-15).

7. The church as an army—militant and triumphant.

The church on earth is like an army engaged in battle. It is called to war against spiritual darkness: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Christians must "take up the whole armor of God" that they "may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13).

Throughout the centuries the church has had to fight against the enemy, both within and without (see Acts 20:29,30; 1 Tim. 4:1). It has made remarkable progress and obtained victories, but it is not yet the church triumphant. Unfortunately, the church still has great

defects. By means of another metaphor, Jesus explained the imperfections within the church: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away" (Matt. 13:24,25, NIV). When the servants wanted to pull up the weeds, the farmer said that when "you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest" (Matt. 13:29,30, NIV).

Weeds and wheat both flourished in the field. While God leads the converted to the church, Satan brings in the unconverted. These two groups influence the whole body—the one working for purification, the other for corruption. The conflict between them—within the church—will continue till the harvest, the Second Advent.

The church's external warfare is not over yet either. Tribulation and strife lie ahead. Knowing that he has but a short time, Satan is angry with God's church (Rev. 12:12,17), and will bring against it "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation." But Christ will intervene in behalf of His faithful people, who will be "delivered, everyone who is found in the book" (Dan. 12:1). Jesus assures us that "he who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matt. 24:13).

At Christ's return, the church triumphant will emerge. At that time He will be able to present "to Himself a glorious church," the faithful of all ages, the purchase of His blood, "not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

The Church Visible and Invisible

The terms visible and invisible have been used to distinguish two aspects of the church on earth. The metaphors we have discussed above particularly apply to the visible church.

1. The visible church.

The visible church is God's church organized for service. It fulfills Christ's great commission to carry the gospel to the world (Matt. 28:18-20), and prepares people for His glorious return (1 Thess. 5:23; Eph. 5:27).

Christ's specially chosen witness, it illumines the world and ministers as He did, preaching the gospel to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, preaching deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, preaching the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18,19).

2. The invisible church.

The invisible church, also called the church universal, is composed of all God's people throughout the world. It includes the believers within the visible church, and many who, though they do not belong to a church organization, have followed all the light Christ has given them (John 1:9). This latter group includes those who have never had the opportunity to learn the truth about Jesus Christ but who have responded to the Holy Spirit and "by nature do the things contained in the law" of God (Rom. 2:14).

The existence of the invisible church reveals that worship of God is, in the highest sense, spiritual. "The true worshipers," Jesus said, "will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Because of the spiritual

nature of true worship, human beings cannot calculate precisely who is and who is not a part of God's church.

Through the Holy Spirit, God leads His people from the invisible church into union with His visible church. "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16, NIV). It is only in the visible church that they can fully experience God's truth, love, and fellowship, because He has given to the visible church the spiritual gifts that edify its members corporately and individually (Eph. 4:4-16). When Paul was converted, God put him in touch with His visible church and then appointed him to lead out in the mission of His church (Acts 9:10-22). Just so today, He intends to lead His people into His visible church, characterized by loyalty to God's commandments and possessing the faith of Jesus, so they may participate in finishing His mission on earth (Rev. 14:12; 18:4; Matt. 24:14; see chapter 12 of this book).

The concept of the invisible church has also been considered to include the united church in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:22,23) and the church in hiding during times of persecution (Rev. 12:6,14).

The Organization of the Church

Christ's mandate of carrying the gospel to the whole world involves also the nurturing of those who have already accepted the gospel. New members are to be established in the faith and taught to use their God-given talents and gifts in mission. Since "God is not the author of confusion" but desires that all things should be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:33,40), the church must have a simple but effective organization.

The Nature of the Organization

Let us consider church membership and organization.

1. Church membership.

When they have met certain qualifications, converts become members of the new covenant community of faith. Membership involves the acceptance of new relationships toward other people, the state, and God.

a. Membership qualifications.

People who wish to become members of His church must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, repent of their sins, and be baptized (Acts 2:36-41; cf. 4:10-12). They should have experienced the new birth and accepted Christ's commission to teach others to observe all things He commanded them (see Matt. 28:20).

b. Equality and service.

In harmony with Christ's declaration that "you are all brethren" and "he who is the greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:8,11), members are committed to relate to one another on the basis of equality. Yet they must also realize that following Christ's example means they are to minister to the needs of others, leading them to the Master.

c. Priesthood of all believers.

With Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary the efficacy of the Levitical priesthood came to an end. Now the church has become "a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5). "You,"

Peter said, "are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

This new order, the priesthood of all believers, does not authorize each individual to think, believe, and teach as he or she chooses without accountability to the body of the church. It means that each church member has a responsibility to minister to others in the name of God, and can communicate directly with Him without any human intermediary. It emphasizes the interdependence of church members, as well as their independence. This priesthood makes no qualitative distinction between clergy and laity, although it leaves room for a difference in function between these roles.

d. Allegiance to God and state.

The Bible recognizes God's hand in the establishment of government and commits believers to respecting and obeying civil authorities. The one who holds civil authority is "God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." Church members, therefore, render "taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:4,7).

In their attitudes to the state, members are guided by Christ's principle: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). But if the state should interfere with a divine command their highest allegiance is to God. Said the apostles, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

2. The major function of church organization.

The church was organized to accomplish God's plan to fill this planet with the knowledge of God's glory. Only the visible church can provide a number of the functions vital to meeting this end.

a. Worship and exhortation.

Throughout history the church has been God's agency for gathering believers to worship the Creator on the Sabbath. Christ and His apostles followed this worship practice, and the Scriptures admonish believers today not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together,...but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25; cf. 3:13). Congregational worship brings the worshiper refreshment, encouragement, and joy.

b. Christian fellowship.

Through the church the members' deepest needs for fellowship are fully satisfied. "Fellowship in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5) transcends all other relations, for it provides an intimate relationship with God, as well as with others of like faith (1 John 1:3,6,7).

c. Instruction in the Scriptures.

Christ gave to the church "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19). These keys are the words of Christ—all the words of the Bible. More specifically, they include "the key of knowledge" regarding how to enter the kingdom (Luke 11:52). Jesus' words are spirit and life to all who receive them (John 6:63). They bring eternal life (John 6:68).

When the church proclaims the truths of the Bible, these keys to salvation have the power to bind and to loose, to open and shut heaven, because they declare the criteria by which people are received or rejected, saved or lost. Thus the church's gospel proclamation exudes "the fragrance of life" or "the smell of death" (2 Cor. 2:16, NIV).

Jesus knew the importance of living "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Only by doing so can the church fulfill Jesus' mandate to teach all nations "to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

d. Administering of the divine ordinances.

The church is God's instrument for the administration of the ordinance of baptism, the rite of entrance to the church (see chapter 14 of this book), and the ordinances of foot washing and the Lord's Supper (see chapter 15 of this book).

e. Worldwide proclamation of the gospel.

The church is organized for mission service to fulfill the work Israel failed to do. As seen in the life of the Master, the greatest service the church provides the world is in being fully committed to completing the gospel "witness to all nations" (Matt. 24:14), empowered by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

This mission includes proclaiming a message of preparation for Christ's return that is directed both to the church itself (1 Cor. 1:7,8; 2 Peter 3:14; Rev. 3:14-22; 14:5) and to the rest of humanity (Rev. 14:6-12; 18:4).

The Government of the Church

After Jesus' ascension the leadership of the church rested in the hands of the apostles. Their first organizational act, in counsel with the other believers, was to elect another apostle to take Judas' place (Acts 1:15-26).

As the church grew, the apostles realized the impossibility of both preaching the gospel and caring for the church's temporal affairs. So they turned the church's practical business over to seven men whom the church appointed. Though the church distinguished between the "ministry of the word" and "serving tables" (Acts 6:1-4), it made no attempt to separate clergy from laity in discharging the mission of the church. In fact, two of the seven, Stephen and Philip, were noted for their effective preaching and evangelism (Acts 7 and 8).

The church's expansion into Asia and Europe called for additional steps in organization. With the establishment of numerous new churches, elders were ordained "in every church" to ensure stable leadership (Acts 14:23).

When a major crisis developed, the parties involved were allowed to state their respective positions to a general council comprised of apostles and elders representing the church at large. The decisions of this council were seen as binding upon all parties and were accepted as the voice of God (Acts 15:1-29). This incident illustrates the fact that when it is a matter of issues affecting the entire church, counsel and authority on a much broader level than that of the local church are necessary. In this case the decision of the council grew out of the agreement reached by the representatives of all parties involved (Acts 15:22,25).

The New Testament makes it clear that as the need arose God guided the leadership of His work. With His direction, and in counsel with the church, they formed a church government that, if followed today, will help safeguard the church from apostasy and enable it to fulfill its great commission.

Biblical Principles of Church Government

1. Christ is the head of the church.

Christ's headship over the church is based primarily on His mediatorial work. Since His victory over Satan on the cross, Christ has been given "all authority" in "heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). God has put "all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22; cf. Phil. 2:10,11). He is therefore "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev. 17:14).

Christ also is the head of the church because the church is His body (Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18). Believers are "members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Eph. 5:30). They must have an intimate connection with Him because from Him the church is "nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments" (Col. 2:19).

2. Christ is the source of all its authority.

Christ demonstrates His authority in (a) the establishment of the Christian church (Matt. 16:18), (b) the institution of ordinances the church must administer (Matt. 26:26-30; 28:19,20; 1 Cor. 11:23-29; John 13:1-17), (c) the endowment of the church with divine authority to act in His name (Matt. 16:19; 18:15-18; John 20:21-23), (d) the sending of the Holy Spirit to guide His church under His authority (John 15:26; 16:13-15), (e) the appointment within the church of special gifts so that individuals can function as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (shepherds), and teachers to prepare its members for service and to build up "the body of Christ" till all experience unity in the faith and reflect "the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:7-13).

3. The Scriptures carry Christ's authority.

Though Christ guides His church through the Holy Spirit, the Word of God is the sole standard by which the church operates. All its members are to obey that Word because it is law in the absolute sense. All human traditions, customs, and cultural practices are subject to the authority of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

4. Christ's authority and the offices of the church.

Christ exercises His authority through His church and its specially appointed servants, but He never transfers His power. No one has any independent authority apart from Christ and His word.

Seventh-day Adventist congregations elect their officers. But while these officers function as representatives of the people, their authority comes from Christ. Their election simply confirms the call they received from Christ. The primary duty of the elected officers is to see that the Biblical instructions for worship, doctrine, discipline, and gospel proclamation are followed. Since the church is the body of Christ, they are to seek its counsel regarding their decisions and actions.

The New Testament Officers of the Church

The New Testament mentions two church officers—those of the elder and the deacon. The importance of these offices is underscored by the high moral and spiritual requirements set for those who would fill them. The church recognized the sacredness of the calling to leadership through ordination, the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; 13:2,3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22).

1. The elders.

a. What is an elder?

The "elders" (Greek, *presbuteros*) or "bishops" (*episkopos*) were the most important officers of the church. The term elder means older one, implying dignity and respect. His position was similar to that of the one who had supervision of the synagogue. The term bishop means "overseer." Paul used these terms interchangeably, equating elder with overseers or bishops (Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7).

Those who held this position supervised the newly formed churches. Elder referred to the status or rank of the office, while bishop denoted the duty or responsibility of the office—"overseer." Since the apostles also called themselves elders (1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1), it is apparent that there were both local elders and itinerant elders, or elders at large. But both kinds of elder functioned as shepherds of the congregations.

b. The qualifications.

To qualify for the office of elder a person must be "blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, soberminded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:1-7; cf. Titus 1:5-9).

Before appointment to the office, therefore, the candidate must have demonstrated his leadership ability in his home. "The family of the one suggested for office should be considered. Are they in subjection? Can the man rule his own house with honor? What character have his children? Will they do honor to the father's influence? If he has no tact, wisdom, or power of godliness at home, in managing his own family, it is safe to conclude that the same defects will be carried into the church, and the same unsanctified management will be seen there." The candidate, if married, should demonstrate leadership in the home before being trusted with the responsibility of the leadership of "God's household" (1 Tim. 3:15, NIV).

Because of the importance of the office Paul charged, "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily" (1 Tim. 5:22).

c. The elder's responsibility and authority.

An elder is first and foremost a spiritual leader. He is chosen "to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28). His responsibilities include supporting weak members (Acts 20:35), admonishing the wayward (1 Thess. 5:12), and being alert for teachings that would create divisions (Acts 20:29-31). Elders must model the Christian lifestyle (Heb. 13:7; 1 Peter 5:3) and set examples of liberality (Acts 20:35).

d. The attitude toward the elders.

To a large extent, effective church leadership depends on the loyalty of the membership. Paul encourages believers to respect their leaders and "to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:13). "Let the elders who rule well," he said, "be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17).

Scripture makes clear the need to respect church leadership: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb. 13:17; cf. 1 Peter 5:5). When members make it difficult for the leaders to perform their God-assigned responsibilities, both will experience grief and miss the joy of God's prosperity.

Believers are encouraged to observe the leaders' Christlike lifestyles. "Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7, NIV). They should pay no attention to gossip. Paul warned, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 5:19).

2. The deacons and deaconesses.

The name deacon comes from the Greek diakonos, meaning "servant," or "helper." The office of deacon was instituted to enable the apostles to give themselves fully "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Although deacons were to care for the temporal affairs of the church, they were also to be actively involved in evangelistic work (Acts 6:8; 8:5-13,26-40).

The feminine form of the term appears in Romans 16:1. Translators have rendered this word either as "servant," (KJV, NIV), or "deaconess" (RSV). "The word and its usage in this text suggest that the office of deaconess may have been established in the church at the time Paul wrote the book of Romans."(*10)

Like elders, deacons are also selected by the church on the basis of moral and spiritual qualifications (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

The Discipline of the Church

Christ gave the church the authority to discipline its members and provided the proper principles for doing so. He expects the church to implement these principles whenever necessary to maintain its lofty calling of being a "holy priesthood" and "holy nation" (cf. Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Peter 2:5,9). Yet the church must also attempt to impress upon the erring members their need of amending their ways. Christ commends the church of Ephesus because it "cannot bear those who are evil" (Rev. 2:2), but He rebukes the churches of Pergamus and Thyatira for tolerating heresies and immorality (Rev. 2:14,15,20). Note the following Biblical counsel on discipline:

1. Dealing with private offenses.

When one member wrongs another (Matt. 18:15-17), Christ counsels the wronged person to approach the offender—the sheep that went astray—and persuade him to change his behavior. If unsuccessful he should make a second attempt, accompanied by one or two unbiased witnesses. If this attempt fails, the matter should be brought before the entire church.

If the erring member rejects the wisdom and authority of Christ's church he severs himself from its fellowship. In disfellowshipping the guilty person, the church simply

confirms his or her condition. If, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church has carefully followed the Biblical counsel, its decisions have been acknowledged in heaven. Said Christ, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).

2. Dealing with public offenses.

Though "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), flagrant and rebellious offenses bringing a reproach on the church should be immediately dealt with by disfellowshipping the offender.

Disfellowshipping both removes the evil—which otherwise would work like leaven—restoring the purity of the church, and acts as a redemptive remedy for the offender. Upon learning of a case of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, Paul urged immediate action. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," he said, "when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus....Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump" (1 Cor. 5:4,5,7). Do not associate with anyone who calls himself a believer, he said, "but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat....'Expel the wicked man from among you'" (1 Cor. 5:11,13, NIV).

3. Dealing with divisive persons.

A member who causes "divisions and offenses" (Rom. 16:17), "who walks disorderly," refusing to obey Biblical counsel, should be avoided so that "he may be ashamed" of his attitude. "Yet do not count him as an enemy," Paul said, "but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:6,14,15). If the "divisive man" refuses to listen to the "second admonition" of the church, he should be rejected, "knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being selfcondemned" (Titus 3:10,11).

4. Restoration of offenders.

Church members should not despise, shun, or neglect the disfellowshipped. Rather, they should attempt to restore their relationship with Christ through repentance and a new birth. Disfellowshipped individuals can be restored to church fellowship when they reveal sufficient evidence of genuine repentance (2 Cor. 2:6-10).

It is especially through restoring sinners to the church that God's power, glory, and grace are revealed. He longs to liberate the captives of sin, transferring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. God's church, the theater of the universe, displays the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice in the lives of men and women.

Today Christ, through His church, invites all to become a part of His family. "Behold," He says, "I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Rev. 3:20).