



HOW CHURCHES GREW IN ACTS

Governance for Growth and Stability

Lesson 1 | 6/13/2021

Overview and Introduction

“Who’s in charge of the church?” Most American Christians would answer, “The pastor is.” Further, most American churches are run like American government where it is assumed that democracy is the form of government that God approved. Members have a “vote” and they use that vote to

exercise control. If they don’t like the way things are done, they organize a movement to vote them out of office. *That’s the American way!* But it’s not the biblical way. We need to answer clearly from the Bible, “How did God intend disciples to view their governance?” so that we don’t just do things the American way – but the way God intended for growth and stability.

First, I want to show where things stand in the religious world with governance structures before we begin with the Biblical model.

As currently organized in the modern world, the major forms of church government are called:

1. **Episcopal** - strong hierarchy of ordained clergy, namely the Bishop, above the local congregation. It is closely tied to the idea of apostolic succession, the belief that bishops can trace their office in a direct, uninterrupted line back to the Apostles of Jesus. The bishop supervises the clergy within a local jurisdiction. Some examples of this structure are found in churches who are Orthodox, Methodist, Anglican, along with some Lutherans, and the Roman Catholic Church. The authority is placed in the bishop *where the authority is shared downward* in the structure. Some find their proof for this in Acts 6:3, 6; as well as 14:23; Matthew 16:18; and most pointedly in the role of James or Peter in the early church.
 - a. Though the rest of the government of the Roman Catholic Church resembles, to a great degree, the Episcopal form, some distinguish the form of government as its own structure as Papalism or Romanism. One source says, “Romanism holds to a transmitted infallibility. The pope is infallible: 1. when he speaks as pope. 2. When he speaks for the whole church. 3. When he defines doctrine or passes a final judgment. 4. When the doctrine thus defined is within the sphere of faith or morality.” [Augustus H. Strong. Systematic Theology, 914-917].
2. **Presbyterian** - a series of church courts with emphasis upon the local presbytery. Presbyterian governance by the rule of assemblies of elected presbyters, or elders, or church board. Groups of local churches are also governed by a higher assembly of elders known as the presbytery (or classis). These presbyteries can be grouped into a synod. Presbyteries and synods nationwide often join together in *a general assembly*. Presbyterian polity was developed as a rejection of governance by hierarchies of single bishops (episcopal polity). Presbyterianism is also distinct from congregationalism, in that individual congregations are not independent, but are answerable to the wider church, through its governing bodies (presbyteries, synods and assemblies). Some examples are churches that are Presbyterian, Reformed and some Bible churches.
3. **Congregational** - emphasis upon the local congregation and democracy. Congregationalist polity, often known as congregationalism, is a system of church governance in which every local church or congregation is independent, ecclesiastically sovereign as some churches would describe or as brethren would say, “autonomous”. Among *contemporary* churches, perhaps the most popular form of government is the congregational church government where the final governing authority resides within the congregation itself. While many churches of today are defined as “congregational” is this way, there is a variety of ways this governance is managed

within those congregations: a member “vote,” the pastor, etc. In addition to churches of Christ, churches that are often described as congregational in their polity are churches that are Baptist, Congregational and Independent churches, and Quakers, just to name a few.

As we explore the book of Acts to see how governance was executed among churches in the New Testament, we will realize that, in language, “congregational” will be the Biblical way even though most of the present practices within that structure called “congregational” are not Biblical. And since our aim is to be Biblical in everything, we will defend only what the New Testament teaches.

Just as Ephesians 4:1-6 teaches, there is clarity from Paul that churches were to be united in their view of the oneness of what they were to believe. To the Corinthians, Paul said that “you all agree and [that] there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1Corinthians 1:10). And he further says that Timothy would “remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church” (1Corinthians 4:17).

The authority Timothy would have in teaching (c.f. 2Timothy 4:1-4) would not be organizational. It would be authority from the word he would deliver from inspired men (2Corinthians 13:1-10). Those men would be moved to write what we could understand (Ephesians 3:4) by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:13; 16:13; 2Peter 1:3-4).

What we will discover is that churches in the New Testament are seen to be – or were instructed to be – independent, local and self-governing bodies. While one could say there were acting as democracies complete in themselves, they were following the executive orders from the Apostles’ teaching and none of whom had legislative power.

The English word democracy comes from two Greek words that together mean “the rule of the people.” A democratic government is one in which the people rule. Although there have been very few civil governments that have operated by pure democracy, the democratic principle, at least in theory, has been incorporated into the way the United States is governed. However, in his famous address to the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:16–38), Paul gave important insights into how the church of Jesus Christ was to be governed:

Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them.

While some may see in Paul’s word an evolving, governance format, it is clear from Peter’s words that he viewed his work among the 12 apostles as truly pastoral (or like an elder or pastor) in 1Peter 5:1-3. And even for Peter and the other 12, the authority that they had was in the message that they shared (c.f. Acts 15).

We will progress to the next lesson as the Apostles as the Source of that authority. And as we progress, we will see the Biblical model found in their teaching in Scripture that was established as precedent in contrast to the governing practices among churches that have led people away.



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Governance for Growth and Stability

Lesson 2 | 6/20/2021

The Word of Truth: The Authority of the New Testament Church.

The Authority is the Word. To understand the church of the New Testament we need to understand where they perceived their authority. In our last lesson we considered that the authority that the evangelist Timothy would have would not exist in his office – but

in his teaching (c.f. 2Timothy 4:1-4). The authority of the New Testament church was never intended to be organizational. Even for the Apostle Paul, it would be authority from the word he would deliver as an inspired man (2Corinthians 13:1-10) that would be the source of authority for Corinth. Those men would be moved to write what we could understand (Ephesians 3:4) by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:13; 16:13; 2Peter 1:3-4). And it would be that word that is the expression of the authority for (not of) the New Testament churches wherever they would be.

The Authority is the Apostles' Teaching. So when we read that the early church “devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching” (Acts 2:42), this is the demonstration of authority. The first congregation of people who followed Jesus did not imagine their way or follow their inner consciences to guide them to what they were to be or to do – instead they devoted themselves to the authority of those whose “ways which are in Christ” that “they taught in every church” (1Corinthians 4:17) so that they would “learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf on one against the other” (1Corinthians 4:6). These apostles gave the early church “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2Peter 1:3) because they were given “all truth: (John 16:13) by the Holy Spirit. The early church who wanted to follow Jesus turned to Jesus’ Chosen Ambassadors for their every direction. Churches who want to follow Jesus today should be no different.

The Authority is Truth. It was this “word of truth” that Jesus hoped that his Disciples would follow (John 17:17). Abstractly speaking, truth is what is “a conformity to fact or reality” and its authority is the authority of reality or what is real, not what seems to be real. Therefore, defying truth is defying reality. Even in other relationship like the authority of a parent over his child or government over its citizen, it must ultimately conform to truth or “right,” or each will face the inevitable rebellion. Might does not make right – and neither does majority rule. Further, rebellion, of itself, does not prove a thing right either. What makes something right is that it is true, or truth. Truth does not seek to force itself on us. We must seek after it – for only in it is true freedom (John 6:44-45; 8:31-32).

Only God has such Truth in Him. Such sovereign authority is, in its ultimate sense, suited only to God. He is God of truth, His word is truth (Deuteronomy 32:4). Respect and desire for truth leads man to God, and any other attitude is contrary to God-like-ness. The way to heaven is the Way of truth (John 14:6). And Jesus is Head over all things to the church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

So how did the early church respond to this?

1. **The early church followed Christ as the Head of the church.** Even from Pentecost, Jesus was declared Lord (Acts 2:36) and Lord to every believer (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). As Lord, Jesus must be master or owner of something. Jesus is Lord of all because He is Lord of each. And from the church’s viewpoint of things, His authority and position over them is because He has been raised to be Lord (Acts 2:36) over His Kingdom of which they were citizens (Colossians 1:13).
2. **The early church followed the Apostle’s word as the authoritative, and final word from God.** This word was authoritative *when spoken* by the Apostles and as written, was equally authoritative. Paul told Corinth they were not to exceed what was written (1Corinthians 4:6). The reason is that when the Spirit guided their spoken words, He also guided the result of their

written words. The Scripture is inspired of God (2Timothy 3:16-17) or “God breathed out.” As noted before, this gospel is “one” (Ephesians 4:5); it is the final expression from God (Hebrews 1:1-3), that has been “once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). There will be no other because there is no other gospel (Galatians 1:6-8). And so, the early church was consistently told that “everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2John 9).

3. **They distinguished the authoritative message from the Old Testament of Moses.** Several times these Apostles said the New Testament replaced the Old Testament (2Corinthians 3:1-11; Ephesians 2:14-15; Hebrews 8:6-13, 10:9). Especially when efforts to use the Old Testament rule or practice as a binding aspect on Christians, the Apostles disavowed the practice as wrong (Galatians 5:1-4). All the writers expressed that there was value in the study and understanding of Old Testament Scripture (Romans 15:4). However, Christians considered their normative patterns belonged to the new covenant alone (Colossians 2:13-17).
4. **They were told the message of the Apostles had a uniformed pattern.** Paul spoke of his ways that he taught in “every church” (1Corinthians 4:17; 7:17) – just as he taught evangelists (2Timothy 2:2) and elders (Acts 20:28-32) – that the words delivered were the pattern for their thinking and their actions (2Timothy 1:13). And Paul clearly said to Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” Even the practice of the custom, Paul said was to be uniform as he had “directed the churches of God” (1Corinthians 11:16). Further, Paul directed the Corinthian church in regard to the contribution for the saints to follow the same practice as he had taught the “churches of Galatia” (1Corinthians 16:1). If the teaching Paul delivered was uniform, then the practice of churches that Paul instructed should be the same as well. It was, in fact, handed down as authoritative tradition or teaching (cf., 2Thessalonians 3:6; Philippians 4:9).
5. **The early church learned they were to speak the oracles of God** (1Peter 4:11) and if there is no instruction, they should not speak (Acts 15:24) and not exceed what is written (1Corinthians 4:6). The principle that only what God reveals is authoritative is modelled in the Old Testament, is used to teach in the New Testament (Hebrews 7:17) and is implicit to the walk as a Christian (2John 9). If God is silent, there is no authoritative word to empower us with God’s approval to do in the name of Christ. If churches would just listen to this truth, there would be much greater unity among disciples.

The early church received these Apostolic writings to resolve their difficulties (i.e. 1Corinthians, 2Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1John). Notice how Paul addressed the problems that the Corinthian church had. Regarding marriage, Paul cited Jesus’ teaching (1Corinthians 7:10-11 with Mark 10:9). When the Lord’s supper was being misappropriated, Paul appealed to what the Lord had said to him (1Corinthians 11:22-25). Consequently, If we are to solve our problems in churches, then we must turn to Scripture – not tradition – not culture – not conscience – and to Scripture alone – to resolve our differences because the authority for the church is in the word of truth delivered by the Apostles from the Holy Spirit. For us today, the New Testament is the only Divine solution to our problems or grievances.

The only solution to our problems as churches is to return to the New Testament because the only place we should start when we become a Christian, when we start as a church and when we do the works that we do for Jesus Christ’s sake is to finish with the New Testament. It alone is the authority to, for and of the New Testament church.



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Governance for Growth and Stability

Lesson 3 | 6/27/2021

The Arrangement of a New Testament Church.

Local churches had organization just as God gave instruction for families to have organization. But just as a family is a relationship and not an Organization, neither is a church an Organization.

But in that organization a church has, or arrangement, there is a group of men called elders that Paul appointed in "every church" (Acts 14:23) and instructed Titus to appoint in "every city" (Titus 1:5). When Paul told Titus to "ordain elders in every city" (kata polin), some contend this means only one church per town. Of course, it could as well mean elders in every church in every city. Greek scholars (Robins, Lenski) say that kata her is distributive and cite passages for comparison (Lk. 8:1; Acts 15:21,26; 20:23, Expositors, Alford, Meyer). They translated "city by city," and indicate it means "all over the island," "of the church in several cities," etc. Lenski says "the placement of elders in each congregation." These men are not quoted as final authority, but their expertise in Greek is respected.

And in that arrangement, these elders were appointed to rule, or "lead through example" but also to "maintain oversight" and to "shepherd" (1Peter 5:2-3). As Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God." In 1Timothy 5:17 where it speaks of "directing the affairs of the church" (NIV), the NASB & KJV translate this as to "rule". The CEV translates it as "doing their job well." Which begs the question, what is their job? This is the arrangement of responsibility, order, and rule God has placed in a local church in the eldership.

Yet, in that arrangement, the elders shepherded only those Christians that were "among them" (1Peter 5:2-3). This, coupled with "elders in every church," clearly teaches that elders of one church or congregation have no business in another congregation or have any rights to oversee any part of another congregation's work. Church historians agree that the early apostasy began with the Metropolitan system, where overseers of one church controlled other churches around them, forming a diocese. This is a change in God's plan for independent churches, and is as wrong today as it was then.

Still, in Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul said, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The Greek "he himself gave some," etc., could be understood to mean "he himself gave (to the church)," etc. The statement he appointed some to be may be rendered as "he chose some to be." But often a more appropriate rendering is equivalent to "to some he gave the task of being..." or "...assigned the task of being..." (from the UBS New Testament Handbook Series. Copyright © 1961-1997, by United Bible Societies.)

Appointing biblically qualified elders to lead churches is important in any context for at least three reasons. First, God is the one set in order the role and the work of elders. Second, God uses elders to maintain church health. And third, the only model for any arrangement in the New Testament is a leadership of "elders in every church" that "oversee the flock of God."

Elders are needed in every church... BECAUSE OF THEIR FUNCTION

They are described most frequently as elders. It means "aged, advanced in years." The word is "presbuteros" indicating maturity, not just in age because maturity doesn't always come with age. It's a maturity of experience and wisdom. They second word used to describe their function is shepherd or

pastor. This word carries with it the sense of care and tender attention needed of shepherd to truly guide the flock of God. In fact, this is the same term Jesus uses to describe his relationship with those who follow Him (John 10). This word is "poimen" which is one who leads, feeds, and protects the flock. Other significant translations use the term pastor which is the Latin word for "shepherd".

The least used word in the New Testament is bishop, used only five times in the NT, one of which refers to Jesus as the Shepherd and Bishop of Souls (1Peter 2:25). The Greek word is "episkopos" often translated "overseer." – The term refers to a manager-supervisor or in modern synonyms - director or superintendent. It's another New Testament word that gives the same sense of meaning as "steward" -- "One who runs or oversees the master's household." It means "to care for as a protector or guardian, to be out in front leading and guiding."

Ultimately, their function mimics the Master. They are not redeemers, Saviors, Lords or anywhere close to His rightful place. But in Acts 20:28, Paul told Elders to "shepherd or tend to the flock of God" all of which fits quite well with the leadership style of Jesus. This Leading, guiding, shepherding and teaching of God's people leads to a greater relationship with God. It points us back to Jesus, the Great Shepherd. That's why in the qualifications, an elder is a man who models Jesus' will.

Elders are needed in every church... BECAUSE OF THE SYNERGY OF THEIR COLLECTIVE WISDOM

The Apostles appointed for each church a plurality of godly leaders who met God's criteria (1Timothy 3:1-6/Titus 1:5ff). Here is an example of how multiple gifts, abilities and perspectives can synergistically work together for a greater total effect than the sum of several individuals. Without plurality, a church can be led astray by one personal agenda. Look how the Scriptures refer to them:

1. In Jerusalem, the elders (plural) were as plural as the Apostles (Acts 15:4).
2. James instructed sick believers to "call for the elders" (5:14, plural)
3. Paul appointed elders (plural) at each new church (Acts 14:23)
4. Paul calls "elders" (plural) from at Ephesus to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20:17).
5. Peter views the same plurality in each congregation (1Peter 5:1-4)

The eldership is comprised of a council of equals --Each one has the same authority and works together for the betterment of the church of Christ. And with each man creates a synergy of benefit for the congregation. Without a plurality, there would be no synergy.

Elders are needed in every church... BECAUSE OF OUR NEED FOR LEADERSHIP.

Of course, they need to be qualified leadership and in those qualifications, we get some idea why we need them. They are to be living examples for people to follow. Simply put, if elders are leaders – then it is because we need to follow. Even Paul acknowledged such in 1Corinthians 11:1 of himself. As Hosea said, 'Like people, like priests.' (Hosea 4:9) Jesus said, 'Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. (Lk. 6:40) Biblical history demonstrates that people will seldom rise above the spiritual level of their leadership.

So, if elders are contentious, the congregation will become contentious. If elders are inhospitable, the congregation will become unfriendly and cold. If elders love money, the congregation will become worshippers of money. If elders are listless and cold in their service, churches will grow cold. The qualifications for elders can be divided into three categories of leadership we need (1Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

Ultimately, churches need elders because God placed them there (Ephesians 4:11). If we are to be a New Testament church, we must follow the arrangement of God and have elders in every church.



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Governance for Growth and Stability

Lesson 4 | 7/4/2021

The Growth of New Testament Churches.

We began our study asking, “How did God intend disciples to view their governance?” so that we don’t just do things the American way – but the way God intended for growth and stability. And first, we learned that the

governance of churches that flowed from Christ as Head of the church would be congregational. And that governance from Christ would be through the authority of the revealed word in Scripture. And then through elders within that local church is where the limit of human governance would come. What we have discovered as well is that churches in the New Testament were, because they were instructed to be, independent, local and self-governing bodies. If we will remember that the book of Acts tells the story of how a small group of Jewish disciples grew to become a multi-ethnic movement sweeping across the Mediterranean world, all within the span of a single generation (Colossians 1:23), then seeing how Apostles, elders and churches behaved then becomes a pattern for our behaviors today.

The passages that most powerfully convey their growth in Acts are the statements that refer in general terms to the ongoing *numerical* growth of the church (Acts 2:47; 5:13–14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20). These statements are often considered to be merely summaries (perhaps with the exception of 6:1) because they consistently follow a detailed narration of actions, events, and circumstances, that advanced the early church’s pace. We shall find churches that grew by doing right, by being dedicated to the authentic gospel and by remaining faithful to God.

Look first at Acts 2:47. After Peter had preached the gospel in Jerusalem on Pentecost, Luke tells us that those who heard “gladly received his word” and were baptized. And then he goes on to tell us that three thousand souls were added. In verse 47, he will go on to say that the Lord was adding to “their number” daily from those who were being saved by that gospel. The numerical growth began because the number of times the gospel was being shared was increasing. In application, a local church will grow only by the expanding number of times that the story of the gospel is retold. While it is true that “preaching the gospel” is the same as “preaching the Christ” and “the faith” in Scripture (c.f. Galatians 2:2, 1:16; 1:23), it should be self-evident that the message that began to be shared in Jerusalem was the telling of the story of Jesus’ life and what He came to bring to humanity. They filled Jerusalem with the teaching about Christ (5:28). “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (5:42). **It is only in that telling of the story of Jesus that the Lord will “add to our number”** those who are being saved.

Second, notice in Acts 5:13-14 that the addition of men and women to the numbers of the church in Jerusalem was the result of the church’s witness in the community. They were held in “high esteem” because they were in 1) one accord in Solomon’s portico (12) and 2) in fear of “these things” (11) which were the demonstration of standard of fidelity to Christ to which all believers were held. Peter stressed the gravity of their sin in their actions (i.e. lying to God, 5:4) because falsehood ruins fellowship. Churches grew because their relationships were based in not only following truth – but in being truthful with each other. He also focused on the conscience where Christians should live transparent lives before God, without guile, like their Savior (Hebrews 4:15) and what their Savior praised (John 1:47). And the event itself authenticates what it called church discipline. We can not oscillate between the extreme severity of disciplining members for trivial thing and the extreme laxity of avoiding significant violations of God’s will for Christians (1Corinthians 5:1). Secret sins should be addressed secretly, private sins privately, and public sins publicly. But note, **it was their fidelity to truthfulness that provoked the growth.**

Then, in Acts 6:1 and 6:7, Luke tells us again that the church is increasing in number from the last report of five thousand men (4:4). Thus far, it is a reference to the Jerusalem church. The first problem was deceitfulness. The second here is prejudicial treatment. And when the church saw its continued commitment to equitable treatment of all – manifested and maintained – “the word of God kept spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase.” It cannot be emphasized enough that growth was the result of their **doing**. They were doing what the Apostles had asked them to do locally.

Continuing on in Acts 9:31, the Jerusalem church that had continued to grow even through persecution would bring the gospel to the churches in Galilee. First, there was the martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-7:60) that was followed by Luke’s testimony that this “young man named Saul” (7:58) who imprisoned many Christians (8:3). But the church in its persecution scattered in force to continue to proclaim the good news (8:4). And in the next summary, Luke says, “So the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace, as it was being built up; and as it continued in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it kept increasing” (9:31). They did not stop doing what God told them to do. They remained committed to the **doing** and kept preaching the gospel. It is also significant to note that Peter describes five characteristics the church that was connected to their increase. They had 1) peace, 2) strength, 3) encouragement, and they continued in their 1) fear of the Lord and 2) in the comfort they received from the Holy Spirit.

Now notice Acts 11:21, 24. The same people who left Jerusalem under the persecution of Stephen went further abroad to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch and took the gospel to Greeks. Perhaps they had heard about the preaching of Peter to Cornelius (c.f. Acts 10) but Luke tells us that they were scattered by the martyrdom in Acts 7. The church at Antioch will become another model of growth because “considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.” Jerusalem helped Antioch by sending Barnabas to them (11:22). Here is a powerful point that a church saw the need for the gospel and generated of their own assets (ie. Sending Barnabus) to a church who never “asked” for help. When Barnabas arrived (at Jerusalem’s sending), he saw what the Lord was doing through Christians who were teaching others and he encouraged them in it. And then Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul and the two evangelists worked together with these highly evangelistic Christians to share the gospel. They are to be praised because they were committed to the **doing**. And here they were first called Christians (11:26).

The last summary of Luke in Acts 12:24 says, “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” The chapter began with what appeared to be the triumph of the severely brutal and hostile King Herod and ends with the dramatic reversal that the tyrant king had now been consumed. Luke’s last summary report here concludes that now the Word of God remains triumphant. The ominous reality that James is now also dead was countered with the freedom of the once imprisoned Peter. And the reason for the reversal is the power of the word of God to keep growing. The positivity that concludes Luke’s narrative on the mission to the Jewish world will continue on in the narrative of Paul’s work to the Gentile world. But the lesson that should be finally seen in all of this is that the growth of the kingdom is in the Seed, the word of God. We are but farmers – sent out into the world with a powerful message. But that seed will never accomplish its purpose if the farmers will not be active in their **doing**.

The growth of the New Testament church will always be in the doing. And the doing that we have focused on was done by the individual in those churches.