

Planting by the Waters

'Church-Planting' in the 21st Century – Some Essentials.

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From a faraway continent someone asks about the Lord's work, specifically about the ins-and-outs of planting a new church in a neighboring town. We, in turn, ask for more details: background information of the place and the people, past exposure to the Gospel, and, very importantly, who is going to be actively involved in the "planting" – is that going to be a team effort?

We offer the following points as basic, biblical principles for guidance. They are not time- or locality-bound, but the sort of material that **MUST** be seriously considered for any Christian work, at any time, in any locality. It is never *too early* to teach a group of new disciples the facts of Life. But if those called to church-planting pass up their God-given planting opportunities, soon it will be *too late!*

Pray or Decay

Obviously the first thing is to be much in prayer about the Lord's will, his timing and his enabling! If there is a true team-effort (which is ideal), everyone must be **unanimous** in the asking for, and in the receiving of the Lord's guidance (Mt. 18:19-20). It is what in some Bible versions is called "*with one accord*"; it is continually mentioned in the first chapters of Acts. It characterized God's work at that time, and it must characterize present day work just as much. You can't effectively start a work together if you can't effectively pray together first. Neither is it possible to effectively *continue* working together if that joined prayer-in-unanimity loses out.

Of course, the apostle Paul and companions give us the best examples of teamwork in the NT. Think, for example, of Acts 15 and 16, where Paul, at the end of chapter 15, starts out with one companion, Silas. They are fully engaged in the Lord's work, visiting the Galatian congregations that had been planted before by Paul and Barnabas. Then clear guidance is given to further include Timothy in the team. Once the work they came to do in this region has been done, the three of them are on their way, looking for new regions where a "planting season" might be dawning.

Though prayer as such is not actually mentioned in the first 10 verses of chapter 16, we find great lessons about the reality and practicality of unanimous prayer. Here are these three "planters", ready for 'planting', yet how very conscious they are that it *must* be the Holy Spirit himself who orders, not only their 'steps', but also their 'stops'. Having been 'stopped' a number of times, as they travel vast distances on foot, they finally get to the Aegean coast at Troas, and can only wonder *where* their Master is leading them.

They continue praying, and probably preaching, when at some point the 'three' become 'four'. Luke, the narrator of the story, from hereon counts himself in as a team member - the story becomes a firsthand account. It is not clear where he came from and how he came to be part of the team. His conversion might have taken place at Pentecost, nearly 20 years earlier, when many Jews from Asia had gathered in Jerusalem. As these workers are before their Lord in prayer, Paul is given the vision of the Macedonian man, but it is not Paul who decides to move. It is the whole

team who catch ‘the vision’. There is unanimity and as a team they conclude the Lord is calling them to cross the sea and preach the gospel to the Macedonians.

What stands in the way for a team to experience earnest prayer that is unanimous and victorious? How do stumbling blocks arise that hinder this? They arise when simple differences are allowed to develop into jealousy, mistrust, disdain, resentment, grudges and conflict (e.g. Ps.73:2-3). The unanimity is not real anymore, or spiritual. When differing backgrounds, opinions, ideas, visions, attitudes, likes and dislikes, etc., are not continually submitted to Christ, the Leader of the team, then a sense of frustrated self-importance, of self-pity and self-vindication easily fills the heart, and easily hardens it against another worker. Praying and working in harmony have fallen by the wayside...

Praying Plus

The somewhat mysterious words of Proverbs 27:17: *“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend”*, find their meaning in Philippians 2:1-4: ***“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”***

This is God’s model for team work! It shows us the prosperous tree of Psalm 1 (and Jeremiah 17) – its branches bearing wonderful fruit! However, these four verses from Philippians only give us a bit of that psalm. What follows, in Philippians 2:5-11, reveals that the roots of the fruit-bearing tree are planted by the waters! We discover that the man-of-blessing is a man-of-meditation – his mind and heart are in God’s laws day and night:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”.

If the “mentality” of Christ is in the believer, it will become the “**instru-**mentality” that the Master is looking for. Without **that** ‘mentality’, the Master has no use for him - He finds no true ‘instrumentality’! To do any serious ‘planting-by-the-waters’ – like the planting of congregations - a team must itself first be firmly “planted by the waters”. Only then will their work together bear the spiritual fruit they long and pray for. They will be ‘instrumental’, not only in the ‘planting’ of *new* congregations, but also in the ‘watering’ (1 Co. 3:6-8) of existing ones.

Now, it is not *man's* way to humbly seek the face and the will of God in prayer, especially if it involves a prolonged time (1 P. 5:5-7). Man prefers to have “brain storming” sessions, outline the best ideas, seek a consensus on the way forward, get a publicity campaign going, organize a fund-raising campaign, engage all the talent and professionalism available, etc., etc. That is the way it is done in politics, in business, in NGO's and in any enterprise you can think of – in other words, it is the way of the world, *not* the way of the Lord... Even so, religion, also Christian religion, has adopted this way-of-the-world to such an extent that by now there simply is no turning back.

In John 2 we have the example of the Lord in the precincts of the Jerusalem temple. He turned the tables on the clever entrepreneurs of the time. That was at the outset of his ministry. Did it bring change? Not a bit; soon they were back in business and with a vengeance. At the very end of his ministry the Lord had to deal with them a second time (Mt. 21). Forty years later that temple, and all it stood for with its multiple ministries, was looted, burned and razed to the ground... Mixing the Lord's work with the world's wisdom is asking for disaster!

But here is time-honored wisdom from Proverbs 3: *“Trust in the **LORD** with all your heart, and lean **not** on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and **He** shall direct your paths. Do **not** be wise in your own eyes; fear the **LORD** and depart from evil.”*

In Jeremiah 17 the Lord's word is devastatingly clear and simple, and one can only wonder how any sincere Bible reader manages to somehow miss it or dodge it:

*“Cursed is the man who trusts in **man** and makes **flesh** his strength, whose heart departs from the **LORD**. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall **not** see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited.”*

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the **LORD**, and whose hope is the **LORD**. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.”*

The apostle Paul, consummate church-planter, humbly admitted his own condition as he started out in Corinth: *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom, declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God”* (1 Co. 2).

His secret was prayer; in nearly all his letters he puts great emphasis on it. In Colossians 4 he gives the example of another church-planter: *“Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God”*.

Aware of what often stands in the way of the Gospel, he calls on the Thessalonian believers to pray with the workers: *“Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith”* (2 Th. 3:1-2).

In Ephesians 6 he gives us “military intelligence” about the enemy. We cannot afford to ignore it. He says, we are up *“against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* Then, when he has summed up the spiritual armor at our disposal, he comes to the spiritual “air force”. All of that armor is God-given, yet it will be of little use if the believers’ spiritual “air force” is grounded... It is provided to cover the ‘war’ and the ‘warriors’ – whether these are far or near: ***“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints — and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”***

Such dependence on God and such *“labor in prayer”* always bear wonderful fruit. No team, desiring to be spiritually useful to their Lord, can afford to go without. There is no other way to do the *“planting by the waters”*.

Getting It

True unity, harmony and unanimity in prayer and team work are not values from another planet, the Lord has provided for them to be experienced here and now, but they require a groundwork of spiritual understanding of what the Word - specifically the NT - teaches on the practical issues of a new work and the functioning of a congregation right from its earliest beginnings. It is not good enough to have vague notions; the Word is clear and by God’s grace and the ‘mentality’ of Christ we may firmly grasp it!

Take Ephesians 4, it shows us the organic growth of the body of Christ. If we don’t ‘get it’, then like *“children”*, we shall be *“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting”* (4:14). And so, the apostle Paul prays that the *“eyes of our understanding”* may be *“enlightened”* (1:18), that we *“may be able to comprehend”* (3:18). If it is important to grasp the tremendous truths of our Lord’s redemption, surely it is not less important to have a profound understanding of the ways in which He wants that redemption to advance in a lost world. In that advance, the redeemed themselves invariably are the key players - they must be truly acquainted with the divine strategy *and* equipped by the Holy Spirit.

In a modern group of workers one or more may be convinced that *conventional* methods are best. If these appear to clash with Scripture, well, perhaps the problem is they haven’t quite stopped to think about that. Others feel very strongly that, yes, there must be a real adherence to Scriptural principles. Still others, professing to be tolerant of diverging

views, say: “Let’s not quarrel about minor matters (meaning: if we’re all convinced of the deity of Christ, his death and resurrection, eternal destinies, etc., then “the rest” doesn’t really matter that much). Just let’s get on with the job.”

At the outset, when the emphasis is on evangelism and discipling, all may go well, and the team may be greatly encouraged. Yet, pretty soon, they may meet their first serious conundrum. In a wonderful conversion, a whole family has surrendered to the Lord and they are anxious to move ahead. Baptism is mentioned, and then it hits everybody that the parents are expecting their small children, one a mere baby, to be baptized as well. One of the team supports that view, saying: “And why not? In Acts several times entire families were baptized...” The other team members are opposed, and, eventually, prevail - for good Scriptural reasons too - however, the damage has been done. The point of baptism is only one “small” matter about which a church planting team **cannot** afford to be divided.

Then another matter comes to the fore: Now that a small group of new believers is regularly meeting, *who* is going to take care of them? The “evangelically-correct” thinking prescribes that one member of the team will have to take this on provisionally, until a more permanent solution can be found, meaning: a “paid-pastor-solution”. To most of the team anything else would sound like wild-eyed drivel...

The one or two who are opposed insist though that this is not a Scriptural way of proceeding. They will point out that the apostle Paul and companions never stayed on to pastor a new congregation, either provisionally or permanently – not even Timothy and Titus. But the others manage to impose their view: “in our modern times this is just not practical”, they say, and “if we leave these few sheep on their own, then soon the wolves will make minced meat of them”! And so, not wanting to rock the boat, the one or two that are in disagreement acquiesce...

It may not occur to anyone that “pastor” and “shepherd” depict exactly the same concept and ministry; they are translations of the very same word in Greek (ποιμην). You get that sort of situation quite a bit in the English language - think, for instance, of words like “pardon” and “forgive”: totally different words, yet indicating the very same thing. Now if our Lord is “The Good Pastor”, as He tells us in John 10, then all that the sheep need to be taught is to recognize and obey his voice! It is what The Good Pastor underlines.

Knowing what future generations would be up to, the Good Pastor warns against the “pp”, the “paid pastor” (or, if you prefer, the “hh”, the “hired hand”) – the “hireling”, as some translations have it in vss 12-13! Jesus says the “pp” **cannot** be trusted. Once the sheep have become utterly dependent on him, he may abandon them in their hour of need and leave them defenseless.

If we understand this as referring (also) to our modern practices, then, of course, it must be admitted that, yes, there are “pastors” who turn out to be good and faithful servants of the Lord. **However**, they still die, or they move on to another parish (in very many cases because the “salary” –

or the “stipend” - is higher in the new place), and then what? The sheep are left on their own...

That in itself may be a real blessing-in-disguise, as, in the interim, they learn to be more dependent on their one Good Pastor. Even so, the system soon (re)imposes itself; a new “pp” is hired – with everybody hoping for the best. Alas, the new “shepherd” may turn out to be anything but “good”...!

The pp system requires the flock to willingly depend on a man they do not really know - for better or for worse. They know he has degrees in theology, philosophy and psychology, but they ignore if “kneeology” is among them and any ‘degree’ of true surrender to the Lord. But they’ll have to do his bidding, *and* pay up, so he can be paid for his services.

The Word speaks about the fruit-bearing tree. However, Jesus also tells us about the “mustard-tree”. Now a mustard *seed* never grows into a *tree*, so why does the Lord speak of a mustard-*tree*? He is simply highlighting the fact that developments on earth in the context of the kingdom of heaven were not necessarily going to be normal - many would be abnormal! Continuing in the parable’s line, it might be suggested that the precious little mustard-plant springing up, is fed on a diet of spiritual ‘steroids’ – they must ensure it grows into a ‘mega-mustard’. The result is a mustard monstrosity. In his parable, the Lord then warns against the “birds” (compare Mt. 13:4, 19; Rev. 18:2) - an ideal environment has been created for ecclesiastical demons. These are only biding their opportunity to settle comfortably amid the *tree*’s branches once the tree has grown out of proportion.

Rome, of course, is the prime example with its Vatican, priestcraft, traditions and age-old customs, vestments, practices, observances and superstitions. But apart from Rome (and the ‘Orthodox Church’), not a few Protestant and ‘Evangelical’ churches (and whole denominations) have been extending their friendly ‘branches’ to friendly flocks of ‘birds’. Extreme examples are the “prosperity” churches and the so-called “emerging” churches...

It could be said, though, that nothing is quite as flagrantly at odds with the simple and vital NT principles as the p.p. system, which stands for “paid pastor” system, but doubles for “pulpit-pew” system... To quote Donald K Reiner: “The church and the pastor of our day go hand in hand, and if someone asks, ‘how can you run a modern church without a pastor?’, the answer is simple: you can’t! You cannot run a modern church *without* a pastor any more than you can have a church (in the NT sense) *with* a pastor” (see: “Dear Pastor...”: <http://ntmu.net/?p=376>).

Through the centuries, such preconceived ideas have been permitted to root down and branch out, and, long since, they have become the status quo, in other words, by now, it may be very painful to get wrenched away from such roots. But is the Holy Spirit able? The wonderful fact is that He does this all the time in individuals and sometimes in groups! What He is looking for is a *deep* longing and a *true* willingness to get back to simple Bible basics, cost what it may!

Wineskins

A NT team of workers will, at times, face the temptation to contemplate the old, the ‘conventional’ ways of doing things. In another eloquent word-picture, Jesus speaks of “old wineskins” into which his followers are tempted to pour some of his “new wine”, i.e., his pure and unfermented teaching. The relative passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke should be very clear to all Christian workers! The temptation to ‘pour the new into the old’ is not usually thought of as a ‘temptation’, rather as an acceptable and normal procedure. To most there doesn’t seem to be another option...; where are we going to look for ‘**new** wineskins’?

Yet Jesus says that, in the material world, **nobody** in his right mind would do such a thing. So why do it in the spiritual world? “*No one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine **must** be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved*” (Lk. 5:37-38). The “wineskin” was a specially prepared goatskin that, hung in the coolest spot of the house, served commonly to preserve the newly harvested grape juice for quite a long time. However, even so, it would, after a time, start to slightly ferment. That fermentation liberated certain gasses. If the wineskin too was new, it would be sufficiently supple to stand the pressures by expanding. But if the wineskin is old, it **cannot** adjust to such pressures and, after a while, a tear develops, allowing the precious liquid to be spilled and lost...

New life in a new family, enjoying a new relationship with God, working under his new yoke, and running the new race towards the new goal, and so bearing new fruit for HIM, **must not** be forced into the straightjacket of the old rigid wineskins! If you do, these “*will be ruined*”, He says. If that is bad, how much worse that “*the new wine will be spilled!*” In other words, the Master warns against the old hardened traditions of the conventional systems. They must be discarded! “*Old things have passed away, all things have become new!*” (2 Co. 5:17).

True NT workers have in many cases been pulled out of one or other of the old ecclesiastical systems themselves. The fact they have had to face these issues in their own lives, and later as a team too, will stand them in good stead. In the process of teaching their new (or not so new) disciples, their personal stand, will, right from the outset, rub off on the others. Even so, their testimony and example must never be more than a humble introduction to what the Word itself declares and reveals. In other words, the tendency of new converts to become followers-of-men, instead of the Lord’s followers, will always be of serious concern to the workers, prompting them to point *away* from themselves and point *to* the Lord – “**He must increase, I must decrease!**” (John 3:30).

Another temptation in their ministry, now that they have foresworn any compromise with the “old wineskins”, is to look *down* on the multitudes of redeemed members of the “body of Christ” who are still trapped in those very systems. The fact is, of course, that their Lord does *not* love them less, so why should *we*? Every redeemed man or woman is a member of the body of Christ, even if he or she is not quite grasping that NT ‘blueprint’. The “hour” that Jesus said was coming, may not quite have dawned on them. He said, that hour “now is, when the true worshippers...

worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him **must** worship in spirit and truth” (John 4).

The workers seek to teach the new believers that - from the moment of conversion - they **are** enabled to worship the Father, **and** they *can* now hear **and** obey the voice of their one Good Pastor, individually **and** congregationally. They will also instill into them a love for *all* of the Pastor’s sheep, even if a vast majority of these continue to reverence and pedestal mortal men and their methods.

Building

What happens, on the other hand, if the team soldiers on *without* true unanimity? They experience some victories, they suffer some defeats, but they are not getting to grips with the NT blueprint! They may still pray together, but it is no longer “*of one accord*”, even if it was before. The NT concept of “***standing fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel***” (Phil. 1:27) has become hazy and unreal. Surely, if even Paul and Barnabas experienced a stand-off that split the workers and the work (Acts 15), modern workers are not immune. In this NT case, the lack of objectivity on the part of Barnabas, concerning the role of his beloved relative, John Mark, appears to have tripped him up (cf. 13:1-5, 13).

There is something the compromising team cannot avoid! Ominous cracks will appear in what they are seeking to build. From the very outset the structure is a precarious one, even though it appears to weather some rough storms. From Psalm 127 we learn that there is a Builder and there are builders. “*Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it*”. That Builder promised to build; He said: “***On this rock I will build my church...***” (Mt. 16:18). His Will is sovereign; his Word is straightforward; his Work is solid... But how about “the builders”?

If the builders have a different “agenda”, not really in line with the **Builder**’s, i.e. with his Will, his Word and his Work; if in reality they keep to a blueprint that is their own; if, in short, they are not about to submit, unconditionally, to the **Builder**..., then what? The true Builder pronounces their lot to be inevitable: “*The ruin of that house was great!*” (Lk. 6). The Builder leads, reveals, teaches, enables – He also demands strict discipline. His discipline is a most *loving* and *wise* discipline, but a strict discipline none-the-less.

When the other “builders” (say, from the Pope on down) dismiss what the NT shows of the Builder’s master-plan and of his doings, and are more confident in their *own* time-honored schemes and “wineskins”, *then* Revelation 17 and 18 project the unequivocal outcome: Babylon the Great: self-exaltation ending in sheer self-desolation!

“Now all these things... were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore, let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall!” (1 Co. 10:11-12).

When we talk about NT ‘building’, we can hardly avoid talking about ‘prophecy’. A distinction must be made between typical OT prophecy

and typical NT prophecy. When, in the OT, Samuel was a young boy, it was said that in his days “the word of the LORD was rare” (1 Sam. 3), meaning there were hardly any true prophets left that knew and spoke God’s Word, even though in the previous chapter one did prophesy to Eli, the high priest. Conditions among God’s people were abominable and there may have been just that one anonymous man who was able, and had the courage, to clearly speak God’s Word. It was in those conditions that God was raising up young Samuel to be his ‘prophet’.

Much later - after Malachi - prophets disappeared altogether. Then, after four centuries, John the Baptist started his ministry and faithfully spoke the Word of God. He announced that our Lord himself had come to be, not only the “Word of God”, but also the prophesied “Lamb of God”. Calvary, the Resurrection and Pentecost fulfilled many OT prophecies, and when the Holy Spirit was poured out on that New Day, Peter, quoting from Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:17-18), indicated that among the EKKLESIA - God’s new people - there should be no lack of ‘prophets’, **all** would be equipped by God to prophesy, men & women, young & old, free & servant. In the course of several years this was confirmed as Paul shows in 1 Corinthians 14.

Of course, we must understand that prophecy is not necessarily focusing on future events. That is what Agabus did, and he was the exception. NT prophecy is much less ‘foretelling’ and much more ‘telling forth’. Every true Christian who reads and studies his Bible and seriously meditates on what he reads, may develop the gift of prophecy, i.e. sharing the treasures of the Word. Not for nothing did Paul list the NT prophets next to the Twelve Apostles in Ephesians 4. The Twelve gave us the NT, after which the (countless) prophets spread the Word, far and wide.

As the OT prophets proclaimed: “**Thus says the Lord!**”, so the NT prophets. But the NT prophet points at the Bible, the Scriptures of his God – now complete – and he quotes them and expounds them under the guidance of the same Holy Spirit. Writing in Romans 10, about peoples still to be reached by God’s Word, the apostle says: “And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’” NT Church-planters **must** be conscious of the NT gift of prophesying. As they prophesy God’s Word, the Holy Spirit will plant the seed in hearts, and the miracle of ‘new birth’ occurs. The planting of a congregation by-the-waters may then follow!

That prophecy **in** the congregation is likewise of immense value is made very clear by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, who keeps on telling us that it amounts to “church-building” - ‘edification’ literally meaning ‘building’. But when he states: “**you can all prophesy one by one**” does that include the sisters-in-Christ? According to Joel, Peter and Luke, it definitely does (Acts 2:17-18): “daughters” and “maidservants” are equipped by God’s Spirit to prophesy God’s Word. So how does Paul state, three verses on, that women (or wives) must be silent and are not permitted to speak?

It should be clear that here, instead of contradicting himself, what he does is reprimanding the habit of some women to just ‘speak’ among themselves, or ask questions of their husbands who are on the other side of the meeting place, interrupting the goings-on, and displaying the fact that

they are not exactly ‘submissive’ to them. There is no question here of ‘prophesying’. Paul refers them to ‘the law’, i.e. Genesis 3, where the Creator tells Eve that her husband shall rule over her. She is *not* to be submissive to anyone else, only to her husband, as Paul reiterates in Ephesians 5:22-24: “Wives, submit to **your own husbands**, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their **own** husbands in everything.” It wasn’t a ministry problem, but a marriage problem, which is also the key to understanding 1 Timothy 2. That ‘key’ includes the linguistic fact that the Greek language has no separate word for ‘wife’, so as you read, it looks – at first glance – as if it is all about women in general. In reality, in both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, we must read “wife”, where the translators have put “woman”, and “husband” where it says “man”. With that, everything falls into place.

The Password

To understand the spiritual blueprint that we have in the New Testament, and to be able to pray by faith on the basis of it, we need to realize that we have a new “identity” and a spiritual “password” that comes with it. A good number of Scriptures tell us about this brand new identity. The old self-identity was declared null-and-void and done away with on the cross of Christ. Here are some of the most explicit Scriptures on the subject: Luke 9:23; John 12:24-25; Romans 6:5-11; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:1-4, 9-10; there are others. In 1 Corinthians 1 & 2, Paul explains that to “access” the new identity we need the “**word of the cross**”, i.e. our password. This is not a *secret* password; it is right out in the open – it is simply: “**Not-I-but-Christ**” (Gal. 2:20). This password is available and valid for “*all those calling upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Co. 1:2).

The ‘password’ is for the Christian to claim his new identity - the Christ-identity - to enter into it, and to ‘walk’ in it. “*You have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on **the new man** who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him*” (Col. 3:9-10).

Continually, as he uses his ‘password’, in any and all circumstances, he does so on the basis of his true identity. He cannot afford anything less. It is by faith that he uses it, over and over again, in sickness and in health, in poverty and in prosperity, in trials and temptations, alone and in company. Retaining the ‘password’ - “**not-I-but-Christ**” – is of paramount importance; by it he gets to grips with the fact of his own demise: “*I have been crucified with Christ*”; and by it he realizes afresh: “**Christ lives in me**”.

Concerning ‘the old’ and ‘the new’, the apostle had this to say: “*For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then **all died**; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*” (2 Co. 5:14-17).

How could the death of Christ have the effect of the death of all of humankind? He accomplished this by taking the place of Adam, which is why, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul calls our Lord "*the last Adam*". HE, in himself, took Adam to the cross of Calvary and into the grave. Adam - and that includes all of his offspring, all who have the Adam nature - was dealt a death-blow! It is what the passage above states: "*that if One died for all, then all died*". Old Adam (the "old man"), and all Adamites with him, have died in that "last Adam". As we move about through the world and through time, it is important to have our eyes and ears opened to these realities, even as we are conscious of the teeming masses of people on this planet that seem to be so very much alive. To God they are born dead, they live dead and they die dead... Didn't Jesus tell a would-be disciple: "*Let the dead bury their own dead*" (Lk. 9)?

Whoever accepts, by faith, the reality of his "death", in Christ crucified, can appreciate and **know** the reality of his "resurrection in Christ". Noah's ark is a beautiful picture of resurrection - life beyond the reach of universal death! In the Bible, numbers often have symbolic values and "eight" is the number of "resurrection". Jesus rose from the dead on the "eighth day"; and, remarkably, the letters of the Greek name "Jesus" have the total 'value' of 888. The Bible tells us of eight individuals in all who received new life after having died; Noah is mentioned by name in the NT exactly eight times, and, of course, on board the ark it was eight people who survived the Flood.

Man's corruption was universal (Gn. 6:5), until death and destruction "*took them all away*"... (Mt. 24:38-39). Yet eight human beings from among all the others were *not* taken away. They were absolutely safe within the ark - death could not touch them. Eventually they emerged from the ark to start a new life on what may be termed a 'new earth'.

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul speaks of universal death, not only the 'sentence' of it, as in the OT, but the actual 'execution' of it in that Last Adam. Did Christ die? Then all died! Immediately, though, he goes on to say something about "*those who live*". It turns out that amidst death, which according to Paul is universal, there is an 'ark', and it holds "*those who live*". In other words, in our 'ark', i.e. **in Christ**, there is Life - Life that defies all of the universal corruption, death and destruction around us!

Are you "in Christ"? Then you are 'alive' - with Resurrection Life. It means that you are a "new man" in Christ, and that you have a new identity! It also means that Paul has a special message for you. He addresses "*those who live*". His message is that they "*should live **no longer for themselves, but for him** (or unto him) who died for them and rose again*". It is where the 'password' comes in: "***Not I, but Christ!***"

Turn Back?

Now, being fully conscious of having received the 'new-man identity', *how* can someone go back to 'old-man' Adam and his corruption, death and destruction? Impossible? In the case of the ark's eight, pretty soon one of them succumbed to the old ways. He thus brought a curse on himself and on his descendents (Gn. 9:25). In this dispensation too, how

many of those who received life-in-Christ seem to be happier living-for-themselves; they go back to what was cursed and has died. It is only too easy to let things slip, and the great impostor will gladly oblige and hand us back our old 'password': "Not Christ, but I!" All this goes to show that Paul was right on target when he said: "*those who live should live **no longer for themselves, but for him (or unto him) who died for them and rose again***".

Those very Corinthians (and they were truly alive) were not so different from many true Christians today. They have known Christ, they are *in* Christ, yet they walk like old Adam: "*For I fear lest... there are contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest... I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced*" (2 Co. 12:20-21).

What we have here is a New Testament church with a huge problem! Lack of prayer, lack of love, lack of humiliation, lack of repentance, lack of confession, lack of reconciliation, lack of counseling, etc. How could they ever be used by their Lord in teamwork and testimony to the world...?

From the Gospels we know how fishermen were bound to work together as closely-knit teams. Jesus promised to make his disciples fishers-of-men, but whether they worked in the old job, or in the new – i.e. in any spiritual ministry - closely-knit teamwork was of the utmost importance, and that included constant attention to the state of their 'nets'. In Matthew 4 and Mark 1, we find the fishermen busy **mending** their nets. For that the Greek verb "katartizo" (καταρτιζω) is employed, which, with two related forms, is found a total of 15 times in the New Testament, translated also as 'repair', 'complete', 'restore', 'reestablish'.

However carefully the fishermen managed their nets during a long night's toil, in the morning, as they looked them over, they would usually find broken parts that needed professional repair. These could **not** be left in any precarious condition. The nets **had** to be 'complete' before they'd go fishing again; if not, some of the fish would escape and the damage would worsen. Leave the breaks for a few days and the net may as well be thrown out. That's how it is with spiritual team-work: it **must** include spiritual damage control.

Right after the above passage, in the following chapter (13), Paul shows that man's weakness is wonderfully responded to by the power of the resurrection, and so in verses 9 and 11 he uses "katartizo", to tell them he was praying in that sense, and counseling them to get on with it. Too long had they just left things. The breaks in their 'nets' had become huge...

A living congregation, aware of having been made a team of fishers-of-men, make sure they have their nets in good repair. They don't want to miss out on what their Lord is doing. Governed by the principle of "**Not I, but Christ!**", they apply "katartizo" whenever the need is there. And when others apply "katartizo" to *them*, they praise God for his faithfulness! That's what Paul teaches the Galatian congregations in 6:1: "Brothers, if a man is overtaken (or caught) in *any* trespass, you who are spiritual **restore** (katartizo) such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself...".

Reproduction

The life of Christ in the believer, and in the congregation, is a life of reproduction - in John 12:24-26 - our Lord gives us the law of reproduction: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves me, him my Father will honor”*.

It is a spiritual law that may be paraphrased as follows:

A. I maintain ‘my throne’ – I remain alone!

B. I consent to die – there’ll be a harvest in reply!

One ‘grain of wheat’ has its value, but whatever that Christian undertakes in order to ‘be of value to his Lord’ (good works, good husband, good father, good church ‘member’, good deacon, good seminary-student, good ‘pastor’), and whatever good things he embarks on to ‘bear fruit’ (open home, door-to-door work, choir, men’s conferences, you name it), he and his efforts are condemned to stay on the natural, *fruitless* plain. He cannot rise above it. The only way to leave the natural plain is by dying...! No death - no fruit! Of course, when the Lord speaks here of the Christian’s dying, he is not referring to his physical death. That death does not solve anything! What the Christian needs to **know** (by revelation: Ro. 6:6 & 9) is: “My *old* man and I have died”, once for all; and “My *New* Man and I are alive for ever more”. My new identity is **‘in Christ’**!

If that little grain of wheat does **not** want to fall to the ground and lose its beloved identity in death, then it *can* resist and refuse to be sown... It is man’s ‘normal’ reaction: his ‘spirit’ would fain say: “Yes!”, but the ‘soul’ shouts “No!”. We see it in Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road. For a long time, his ‘soul’, with all his soul-powers, wisdom and religious fervor, had been fiercely “kicking against the goads”, but then, at last - in the confrontation with the Risen Christ - as his body collapsed, so did his soul! New Life took over, as the soul of Saul, defeated, accepted his Lord’s reality: “**Not I, but Christ**” (Acts 9).

Let me tell you about one small book: "**The New Life**", by Reginald Wallis. This is a classic that introduces the reader to the realities of the new identity in Christ. Several generations have been greatly blessed by it. **The New Life** can be downloaded in its entirety here: <http://ntmu.net/?p=473> . With the widespread shortage of clear teaching on these essential truths, we can only pray that these digitalized pages will prove to be God’s provision for very many. Ignore the Bible’s teaching on the subject at your peril. At the “Tribunal of Christ”, no excuse will do. If we have the Bible, we cannot plead ignorance. Our faithful Lord has never stopped revealing more and more of himself and of his promises and plentiful provisions, i.e. to those who are “hungry and thirsty”. His Word is still the Fountain! That said, it is also true that God definitely uses gifted teachers to shed light on the Word, and Reginald Wallis, author of “The New Life”, is one of them.

In our new identity **in Christ**, we have the obvious key to victory over the flesh, over the world and over the devil. Men and women, who

have learned (and are learning) to use their spiritual password, are in a position to work closely together – they can bear much fruit together. Of course, there will be humbling experiences as, again and again, old EGO is cut down to size in their lives, but these become Christ-exalting experiences.

In their united prayer of faith they will plead for guidance into all truth, and that includes the truth of church-planting, according to NT principles. There is a new clarity of perception, as the eyes-of-understanding are increasingly illuminated, and as there is a willingness now on the part of all to “*put the hand to the plow*”, as they **stop** “*looking back*” to the ways of the world and to dead traditions (Lk. 9:62).

Heading Home

There is nothing in the NT about the need or requirement of a "formal" meeting place. In fact, it is usually detrimental to the work *if* the church-planters insist on such a formal place before there might even be a group of truly converted men and women. In chapters such as Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16, Colossians 4 and Philemon we see how the Christians at that time did not need special buildings, they always, very simply, gathered in each others' homes!

What about the Jerusalem temple though? Didn't the Christians worship there? Moses in his day, on God's detailed instructions, built the first “sanctuary”, the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Centuries later King Solomon was instructed to build the Temple in Jerusalem. It stood less than four centuries and was destroyed by the Babylonians. After the exile, Zerubbabel and his companions, in very troubled times, built what is known as the second Temple (Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah). Amazingly, it stood for five centuries. Then the Jews allowed Herod to dismantle it and reconstruct a new Temple practically from scratch. This (third) one wasn't even completely finished during Jesus' years of ministry, when its construction had already taken 46 years (John 2). Jesus predicted it would be destroyed soon after (Mt. 24:1-2). It was the Romans who saw to that in AD 70. Compared to its predecessors this particular sanctuary was very short-lived.

In the first chapters of Acts we find the apostles and believers often gathering in the precincts of this last temple, the one built by Herod. All of them were Jews and, at that time, they were not completely weaned of the Temple as the “sanctuary” where God is worshiped. They made good use of it, as they preached the Gospel of the Messiah and as they taught the multitudes of new Christians. Later, through fierce persecution (Acts 8), they had to give up that privilege. Then, as the Roman siege started in AD 66, the Jewish “zealots” took over the temple, while all the Christians fled the city, just as Jesus had told them to do. So, when eventually the temple was destroyed, the Christians had been truly weaned of any “sanctuary-syndrome”.

There are OT scriptures that show how the earthly sanctuary was never more than a mere shadow of the heavenly reality (see e.g. Ps. 102:19, Is. 57:15). Jesus himself had prophesied about the “hour” when true worship would **no longer** be sanctuary-bound: “*The hour is coming when you will*

neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4). And later Paul had declared in Acts 17: “He [who] is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things”.

It is the epistle to the Hebrews in particular which shows us the present reality. Explaining how earthly sanctuaries, priesthoods (hierarchies) and sacrifices were **done away with**, we are told: *“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking **the assembling of ourselves together**, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:19-25).*

What did our Lord tell us about “assembling ourselves together”? In Matthew 16, He raised the subject of the “EKKLESIA” (the universal Church). It is built on HIM, the Rock, and the gates of Hades will not be able to swallow it. Then, in chapter 18, He teaches about the Ekklesia again, but this time, it is the local congregation, and He points out some of its basic functions. He mentions the way of love and forgiveness, when there has been some offense, and what procedures to follow when there’s a ‘falling out’. He speaks about authority and discipline; about praying together and about unanimity; all that on one basis: **the believers gathering around HIM**. In such a congregation there *may* be leading brothers, i.e. “elders” (called ‘pastors’ – in plural - in Eph. 4:11, see also Acts 20:28), or there may not be, but though ‘elders’ will normally take the lead, the believers do **not** gather around *them!* There is only One to gather around; that is the “Good Pastor”, the Head of the body of Christ. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133).

Even in the NT, how easily that ‘pleasantness’ evaporated. The apostle John had had very disagreeable experiences in a congregation where a certain ‘leading brother’, called Diotrephes, was acting as a Dictator, not as a good shepherd. In his 3rd epistle, John describes him as coveting for himself a place of prominence and ‘preeminence’. Today many hundreds of thousands covet that position, *and* the pulpit, *and* the plaudits that come with it...

In Matthew 18, Jesus made it clear that God’s way is perfectly practicable, also when the congregation is a very small one, when there might be just that minimum of ‘two or three’. He obviously loves to be the “Good Pastor” in the midst of his flock, but there is a condition! For their gathering to be truly around him, so that He can manifest his presence in love, guidance and power, the gathering **must** be "in HIS name", which means that He is acknowledged as having all responsibility! The gathered depend **not** on a preacher, pastor or priest! Rather on HIM alone, and on HIS open word. Denomination, organization, ‘sanctuary’, seminary-

training, so many ‘things’ deemed indispensable today, are found to be quite dispensable.

It is touching how in Romans 16, the apostle mentions dear brothers and sisters in the city of Rome. They may have been very unremarkable people, sort of Tom, Dick and Harry, yet how special they were to Paul! Not in the least because many, if not all, hosted a congregation of the Lord’s redeemed right in their homes, strewn all over the city as “lighthouses” in the darkness of the world’s capital.

The saints mentioned are: Priscilla and Aquila, Epaphroditus, Mary, Andronicus and Junia, Amplias, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, Philologus and Julia, Nereus and Olympas.

Neither Paul, James, Peter, John, or Jude ever addressed any brother as “the Pastor of the so-and-so Church” as they wrote to the congregations. There was no “Pastor”, there was no “Reverend”, so what was there? Just saints, i.e. redeemed men and women, who sought to gather around their precious Lord as often as they could. In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses the saints **first**, then the elders (also called ‘bishops’, which means, ‘overseers’) plus the ‘deacons’ that were among them.

Re deacons, we may as well mention in passing how seven brothers were first chosen unanimously and appointed as ‘deacons’ in the Jerusalem congregation. Luke describes the event in Acts 6, where we learn that their task typically was administrative and material, so that others would have more time for important spiritual ministries. Later on, we find out that such administrative duties do not keep deacons from being preachers and teachers at the same time, i.e., if they have the corresponding gifts.

At the time of writing to the Roman saints, Paul was in Corinth - another dark, dark city - and as he was about to finish his letter, he makes a point of sending greetings from three Corinthian friends, one of them Gaius, in whose house he was staying. As in Rome, so in Corinth too, there must have been a *number* of local congregations. The house of Gaius would seem to have been bigger than other houses, for Paul says that (at times) he hosted the “*whole church*” (Ro. 16:23). Perhaps he had a big patio, which would have helped, or there may have been a big ‘upper room’, as the one used by the Troas congregation (Acts 20:8).

It is important to notice that even in the big cities, the Lord’s work never depended on “sanctuaries”. There is a legitimate use of special “halls” as venues for the preaching of the Gospel and for the edification of the saints, especially in areas where homes are just too small or rickety to receive many visitors. In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul refers to the fact that there were times when the different Corinthian house churches - in the city and district - would all gather in one place. That may have been at the event of special teaching, perhaps in the open air, or in a hall acquired for the occasion, or as mentioned, in the house of Gaius.

Nevertheless, a hall for special occasions may in the long run acquire the status of “sanctuary” - a sure nail in the coffin of the congregations concerned. The point is that a congregation must *never* become dependent,

for its proper functioning and advance, on a hall of any description. That trend started, together with the implementation of other “improvements”, in the 4th century, when the fierce persecutions had abated. As Christianity became the main “religion” of the empire, it was no coincidence that its living testimony grew into dead traditions. Down that slippery slope the world eventually got to admire superb basilicas and cathedrals - filled with a **sterile** Christendom. In our day, the cathedrals are still superb, but they stand as empty, lifeless, fossilized, tourist attractions...

First Steps

The ‘planters and waterers’ of the team, ever much in prayer about how to proceed, will rejoice at the first clear conversions, and guidance will be sought about baptisms (by immersion). In the group that is forming, there may, of course, be saints who have known the Lord for some time and have also been baptized in a Biblical manner. It is of the utmost importance that, in such cases, any particular ‘denominational’ peculiarities, hidden under the surface, but cherished by folks who have an ‘ism’-background, are carefully countered and adjusted. If not, such denominational background ideas will later, at some point, rear their heads and almost certainly cause confusions or even divisions. This happens ALL the time when home-churches are started in countries with a Christian history!

After true conversion then, and baptism, the new Christian, from *that* moment on, is a **functioning part** of the congregation in all its weekly activities, mainly those mentioned in Acts 2:42: the teaching and learning of Bible doctrine, with adults and children, the fellowshiping at the Lord's table with the breaking of bread, and the times of prayer and evangelism.

We are avoiding the terms, ‘member’ and ‘membership’, for they are never used in connection with the *local* work. Every true Christian, as soon as he or she is born again, even before baptism, is a ‘member’ (foot, arm, tongue, etc.) of the Body of Christ - Christ being the Head. This beautiful figure is clearly taught in Romans 12, 1^a Corinthians 12, and in Ephesians 4 & 5, but used exclusively in relation to the *universal* EKKLESIA, **never** in connection with a *local* congregation.

Modern pastors, talking among themselves, are apt to ask each other: “How many members do you have? I’ve got ‘so many’...” And nearly every Christian will, at some point, say that he is a ‘member’ of a so-and-so church. Through the centuries the idea of ‘memberships’ and lists of ‘paying members’, etc. has become so common that it takes a while before new believers grasp what in fact the Bible teaches.

Now that we’re on the subject, we’ll briefly mention ‘tithing’ as well. For sects, as well as for many Christian denominations, tithing has become part and parcel of the religious panorama, hence the idea that ‘members’ should pay their ‘dues’, i.e. their tithes. If they don’t, they *may* be tolerated; if not, they may lose their ‘membership’...

In the NT, Jesus only mentions tithing in passing, as something required by Jewish law, and as being twisted by the Pharisees. Then, in Hebrews, there is mention of the tithe that Abram gave to Melchizedec. There is not a single mention of tithing being applicable to Christians.

So, if Christians are not taught to tithe, what *are* they taught. They are taught to give – voluntarily - and to do so secretly, liberally, joyfully, regularly and proportionately, i.e. to the Lord's work, *not* to maintain a 'pastor', but to help pay for the needs that come up in the local work, as well as, for worldwide Gospel expansion and consolidation.

In places where 'digital' ways of paying are not yet common, two boxes, or one box with two compartments, one labelled 'local work', the other 'mission work', may be placed in a corner that is not too conspicuous. All the believers in fellowship deposit their gifts in these, either before or after meetings, as the Lord leads them. Outsiders, welcomed to the meetings, are *not* expected to participate in this. Every week, at some point, two trusted brothers (never just one), take out the contents, count everything up carefully and then register the amounts in a special kind of a ledger. If they don't know how to go about this, they can easily be taught how to register what comes in, what goes out, and how to determine the balances for both accounts. A bank account could be opened for its safekeeping.

Being new Christians, they will, obviously, need more teaching. The apostles' team in Acts 2:42 also realized that. In view of that, the church-planting team should be able to count on one or more "teachers", who, like Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3, "water" what has been planted. Such teachers must be thoroughly convinced of what the NT teaches about the functioning congregation, without wanting to introduce foreign ideas. For that, they must discern very clearly between *NT* practices and what were *OT* observances, like Israelite feasts & Sabbath-keeping, temple & sanctuary, hierarchy & vestments, sacrifices & tithing, etc. All of these, like circumcision, have passed away. Trusted and sound Bible teachers may come in from other places, from time to time, but strictly to "open the Word", *not to lead*, or make decisions for the young congregation.

If there is true life, it will not take long for the new Christians to grasp how they themselves can meet several times a week, right from the beginning, even in the absence of the team-members who taught them. They should have times of prayer together, at least once a week; and on the Lord's Day gather around the Lord's table, where all the baptized can share in readings, brief testimonies, singing, meditations on certain passages, all leading up to the moment that the 'presiding' brother reads 1 Corinthians 11:23-32. Following that, after having given thanks, he passes first the plate with small pieces of bread to the person next to him, and then the cup. That one cup might, if more convenient, be replaced by a number of small cups on a tray, one for each of the participants.

A small but important point about the "cup" is that **nowhere** in the NT is the contents called 'wine', however, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus did call it "the fruit of the vine", and *that* can only be represented by pure, unfermented grape juice. On the other hand, our modern 'wine' stands for a distilled and fermented drink, which often is only remotely related to 'grapes'. In spite of this, certain brothers insist that what the Lord and his apostles used, as He instituted the Lord's supper, was fermented (alcoholic) wine, and that we are bound to do the same...! This a sad and serious misunderstanding, *not* born out by history, or the Scriptures.

Elders

Having mentioned a “presiding brother”, we must clarify that the expression is based on Romans 12:8, where a “leading brother” is mentioned; see also 1 Thessalonians 5:12. When there are elders, one of them will normally preside any meeting, but when there are no elders (yet), then, of course, any brother with a good testimony may do so. That may be at the Lord’s table, in the prayer-meeting and in other meetings.

It is after a time of prayer that - for the week following - the ministries of teaching, preaching and presiding are decided on, **not** by ‘majority versus minority’, but by unanimity. All *must* be conscious of the Lord being “in charge”, and all look to *him*, for him to indicate *who* should do *what*. Obviously, He does not guide one segment of the gathered in one way, and the other segment in a different way. If differences do surface after having prayed, there may be a few words of clarification of the issues, followed by another time of calling on *him*. Thus, humbly seeking unanimity is one sure way of spiritual development. Spiritual gifts, like the seven mentioned in Romans 12, will become manifest before many months have passed.

In the long run the congregation will need “**elders**” for the oversight, but not in the beginning when they are few. The Lord is in their midst and He will lead them aright, as long as they truly look to him for all their needs. Then after a time of development, perhaps after a year or more, it may become clear to the congregation that, having grown in numbers, they do now need the oversight of mature brothers, who have the blameless testimony and the gifts which are strictly required for eldership. So, the congregation communicates with one or more of the church-planting team, and it is arranged that these will come to give teaching on this practical issue, expounding especially the relative parts of Acts 20, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5.

Time will be needed with the congregation for both prayer and teaching. Even though this ground has been covered before, it will be carefully explained that God’s Spirit works in *every* believer after conversion; that He seeks the growth of new life in Christ, in order for *every* believer to attain to a testimony of life that is blameless, also in his marriage and home. Such development is only normal, while anything less is *abnormal*, betraying immaturity. We are not talking of ‘perfection’, for there will *always* be room for more growth (Phil. 3:12-15). However, the word “elder” suggests precisely ‘maturity’. So, it should be clear, or become clear, that an *immature* brother cannot (yet) be considered for eldership.

But what when a brother is obviously mature in Christ, yet his wife is not (yet) converted, or, if converted, she somehow avoids coming to most of the meetings, not because she can’t, but because of some spiritual stumbling block? With prayer and perseverance such a sad situation may change, but, meanwhile, it does prevent him from being an elder. Every married elder needs the full support of his wife...

Apart from an elder’s personal testimony, there will also be a focus on what his future ministries and responsibilities will be all about. Will the elders now be doing all the preaching and teaching, and the presiding over the meetings? The answer is ‘No’. Apart from doing their

share, they will be constantly on the lookout for others to begin to “take ministry”, even new believers to some extent.

Such was Titus’ mission, as Paul left him, when he sailed from the island of Crete. Several congregations on the island were in need of elders, and Titus was to set them on the right path.

Today we profit from Paul’s correspondence with team member Titus who, in 1:5-9, is given a clear profile of a normal elder. Verse 9 emphasizes the great need for any elder to be well-taught, and the following verses of 10-16 leave no doubt why that is. The elders’ task is truly a daunting one; there are all kinds of “Philistines” out there - playing Goliath.

After their special times of prayer and teaching with the congregation, the worker or workers may sense that, indeed, the time could now be ripe to choose elders, and they will agree with the congregation on a tentative date. Prayer continues to go up that the Lord may show to all the believers-in-fellowship just *which* brothers among them should be appointed as elders. Believers who at this particular time are separated-from-fellowship, can of course, not take part in the process.

For a young congregation, not many elders are needed, but the minimum is always *two or three*, i.e., mature brothers as described in the four NT chapters above. It must be stressed that true, spiritual unanimity is essential! E.g., if the congregation appears to be unanimous about *one* brother *only*, then the process will simply have to be shelved for some time...

So, now, when the church-planters, in their times of prayer and in their conversations with the believers, sense that God *may*, indeed, be giving unanimity, they will - *with* the congregation - set aside a special meeting on an agreed date. In that meeting, everyone is expected to be ready to express the names of the brothers they sense are the Lord’s choice for elders.

In many cases this is done in writing, which means no one needs to speak up. Everyone – i.e., only those in full fellowship - writes down the particular candidates’ names on a half-sheet of paper, then signs his or her own name at the bottom. The workers of the ‘team’, having collected all the papers, will soon see if true unanimity has been reached, i.e. on "two or three" (or more) brothers from among the congregation.

In the case of **unanimity**, this will be announced, and, either on that same day, or soon afterwards, perhaps on the Lord’s Day, the church-planters will preside over a very special meeting, in which, after readings from the Word, they will pray for the men chosen, *with* the laying on of hands. Following that, the congregation is bound to have a time of prayer and thanksgiving, in which they will wholeheartedly commend their new elders to the Lord's grace for their important ministry among them.

When the need for “deacons” is there, the same process, for a minimum of two or three men - who have already been “tested” - should be followed, preferably *not* at the same time as the ‘choosing of elders’. The chapters to be studied on the subject are: Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3.

Sad but Crucial

Although the concept of ‘discipline’ seems to be outdated in most modern churches, in the Word it is clear that ‘discipline’ is still very much connected with ‘discipleship’. A ‘disciple’ bows to his master’s discipline, and when he doesn’t, he stops being a ‘disciple’ (Heb. 12:5-11). Discipline, though seemingly negative, is meant for truly positive results. When, for instance, a brother or sister refuses to acknowledge having slandered someone, and will not ask for forgiveness, separation from fellowship becomes inevitable, i.e., after also refusing to heed the loving rebuke of the whole congregation. This is the Lord’s own teaching in Matthew 18, using the Jewish expression of “*let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector*”. First of all, ‘exhortation’ is given, then ‘admonition’, and finally ‘rebuke’. Even so, a sad separation always has in view an eventual joyful restoration!

There are three important observations here:

First; in the NT we find that five times the order is given to separate from one or more brothers (sisters), the first time is the one just mentioned in Matthew 18. These five directives of disciplinary action (separation) may be compared with the five smooth stones that David went to look for in the “brook”, which, incidentally, may be compared to the Word of God. He attacked Goliath by faith (1 Sam. 17) and found that the first stone of the five did the job perfectly. After that the other four were not needed.

If and when the congregation humbly obeys the Lord’s order of Matthew 18 by faith, whenever something relatively simple occurs, they will find that their loving but stern disciplinary action prevents other cases that might fester and do much harm. The apostle Paul writes about these other ‘cases’ that required urgent action in: Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 11-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; and Titus 3:10-11.

Secondly; it is important to notice that the apostle does not act for the congregations. **They** are responsible! Nor does he urge the elders to do the job. The congregation as a whole must act! When there are elders, they will, of course, take the initiative, but involving the whole congregation. In the case of Titus, Paul tells him to “reject a divisive man”, which would be in the case of a congregation not fully functioning yet.

Thirdly; it must be understood that not in all cases can the particular offender(s) be given a chance to avoid separation by instant repentance, like in Matthew 18. The incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5 **had to be** immediately separated, *whatever* he might suggest about repenting. Where there has been such blatant bowing to Satan’s suggestions, the offender must be “delivered to Satan” (vs. 5). That will cure him (the destruction of the flesh). In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul mentions two ex-coworkers of his whom he “delivered to Satan, that they may learn...”. As for the offender in 1 Corinthians 5, eventually, he must have learned, so that in 2 Corinthians 2:5-10, Paul urges the brothers to lovingly receive him back in fellowship.

The congregation that has learned to always stoop deeply at the “brook” of the Scriptures (see the reference to the Messiah stooping to drink from the brook in Psalm 110:7), that congregation will not only satisfy its thirst continually, but they will also know where exactly to locate the necessary “smooth stones” that will stand them in good stead against any ‘invaders’.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord”.

1 Corinthians 15:58

All Bible quotes are from the NKJV.