

## **Should We Abandon the Structured Church?**

**By David de Bruyn**

Satan's strategies to try and distract and disarm the church are numerous. One of his recent ones is gaining ground among many Christians. It is this: to regard the structured church as unbiblical, and to abandon it for loose, non-structured 'fellowships'.

The strength behind this strategy is that believers are desirous of being as close as possible to the New Testament pattern for the church. Hence, with a few historical facts taken out of context, with a few Bible verses taken out of context, the idea is put forward that the structured church is really a paganised, humanised monstrosity, worlds apart from the original, simple New Testament churches. The idea is that the moss of tradition has grown thick on the walls of the church, as so by abandoning the structured church, we are scraping off the moss and returning to true Biblical Christianity. Such people feel they are recovering what the church really is, while church-going people, members of structured churches are really in the error of formalism, traditionalism – even legalism.

What then do they mean by the 'unstructured church'?

Well, in place of meeting in a building or local assembly point, the emphasis is on meeting in various homes. In place of gathering together on Sunday, the gatherings happen informally, with no particular day being singled out. In place of preaching, there is a sharing by all, a swapping of ideas as to what Biblical texts mean. In place of church leadership and paid pastors, there is no formal leadership, merely those who seem to take more of an assertive role in organising. In place of structured ministries, there is simply the emphasis on ministering to each other. In place of baptism and the Lord's Supper, there is the sharing of a meal, and sometimes baptising people in the bath or the house swimming pool. In place of membership, there is the informal welcome into the group.

Now, some of the things mentioned here are not wrong in themselves. Some of them, I believe, are. But the point is, this is how many believers are viewing the church. They hold that these practises that they are undergoing are in fact much closer to the New Testament pattern than anything found in the structured churches. Some believe that their cell group or home fellowship is in fact a more Biblical New Testament church than anything seen in structured churches today.

Now, I believe that there are two reasons for this phenomena today – the one is overreaction, the other is rejection. This abandoning of the structured church is both because of wrongs within the structured church which they are overreacting to, but it is also because of wrongs within themselves, things in the Word of God which they are rejecting.

Let me illustrate the first principle- which we can call the shower principle. You've probably had this experience. You stand in a shower with the cold and hot taps in front of you. You turn both of them on. The hot water does not seem to be coming really quickly, so you turn up the hot water and turn down the cold. The next thing, the hot water comes out in scalding steaming amount. You yelp and quickly crank up the cold water and turn down the hot water, within seconds a piercing blast of icy cold water makes you screech as you try to crank up the hot water. Finally you get it right. A happy balance between cold and hot provides you with the right temperature to

shower in. But in getting there, there was excess and then overreaction. It was first too cold and the hot didn't seem to be coming. So there was an overreaction by cranking the hot water way up more than it needed to be, and under supplying the cold water. When this brought a flood of boiling hot water, the hot water was taken down too far and the cold water brought in too much. This again produced too much cold. Excess produces overreaction. This is the pendulum effect.

Now, the current attitude towards supposedly recovering the biblical church by abandoning the structured church is a perfect example of excesses and overreactions.

Let's give some examples.

Often, in the 2000 year history of Christianity, there has been the excess of what I call tabernaclelism. By that I mean, an overemphasis on the place where the local church meets. Such was the excess, that in the minds of many people, the word church refers to a building, not a group of people. The emphasis on beautifully decorated building, on a church only regarding itself as truly being established when it has a building of its own, is an excess.

The biblical truth is that the early church did in many cases assemble in houses. We read in Acts 2:46: "breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Act 2:46)

Many early congregations met in people's homes. We read "The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (1Co 16:19) "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. (Col 4:15)

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: (Phm 1:1-2)

After Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal in the Roman empire, public meetings were encouraged, and of course, public places to meet for that purpose were built. This is not like it was a pagan addition to God's religion. Israel had been gathering in local synagogues for many years, even though God had not commanded the building of synagogues in His Word. Nevertheless, Jesus attended the synagogue because the public gathering of God's people has always been a part of the true faith of the Bible. Church history of course shows how much paganism and false doctrine entered the church, and true believers were once again underground, being persecuted and meeting from house to house and in secret locations. In the meantime, large, ornate cathedrals were being built, the more outwardly beautiful, the better. This excess of worshipping buildings, of counting stained glass windows to equal spirituality was false and unbiblical. We know Solomon said even at the dedication of the Temple, "'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1Ki 8:27)

But to this coveting of buildings and treasuring man-made structures more than the actual Body of Christ – a building made of living stones, there has been an overreaction. The overreaction is to say it is traditionalistic, or formalistic or even somewhat unbiblical to meet in a church building.

History shows us that whenever religious freedom became law, God's people chose or built locations for them to gather together publicly. When religious freedom swept over Europe and into the New World of North America, believers did not continue meeting in secret or in houses when they had the freedom to build structures in which

to gather together. Even in the early church, the church at Jerusalem met in the Temple area at first. We read in Acts 2:46, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple”. To say that the public gathering of God’s people into a building built for that purpose is unspiritual or paganised is a vast, unbiblical overreaction. It is correct to say we must not overemphasise buildings over people. It is incorrect to say that meeting in homes is superior or more biblical than meeting in a building when the religious freedom of your country allows for such a thing.

Connected to this is the overreaction against set times of meeting. Again, we find that the history of Christianity shows an excessive devotion to days. We see Paul warning the Galatians: “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. (Gal 4:9-10) Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Rom 14:5-6)

From these verses we see the emphasis in the New Testament was not on making a huge deal out of specific holidays or Jewish festivals or fasts. It does not forbid them either, it just points out that they are no longer the substance of New Testament Christianity. Unfortunately, this New Testament teaching was not followed, and there soon entered a parade of Christian holy days, celebrating all kinds of supposed Biblical events or saints. This was an unbiblical excess.

But the overreaction has been to say that it is no longer necessary for the church to gather together on Sunday. It is an unbiblical overreaction to the veneration of days to make out that God’s people have never selected a day on which to gather together publicly for worship and edification. Certainly, God’s people can gather together informally whenever they want to. But to then say that New Testament assemblies did not have a pre-arranged day and time to gather together for the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and other things is vastly unbiblical. We see Paul teaching on spiritual gifts and then saying in I Corinthians 14:23, “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place,” and again in verse 26 “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.”(1Co 14:26) Acts 20:7 suggests the church had begun to meet on the first day of the week. We see this again in 1 Corinthians 16:2.

Clearly, the early church had prearranged times to meet. Though they sometimes had to be in secret, they had public meetings. It was not all informal, come and go as you please. To say this is a vast overreaction.

A third overreaction has to do with church leadership. God certainly wanted the church to have appointed leaders. When Paul writes to Timothy, he gives the descriptions of the kind of character qualities to look for in a man to fill the office of overseer – which is another word for elder or pastor, and deacon. Obviously the idea

here is to identify such men and appoint them. Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure. (1Ti 5:22)

This carries the idea of laying on of hands in the sense of identifying a person as called of God to be an elder in the church, like the church at Antioch laid hands on Paul and Barnabas to identify them as God-called missionaries in Acts 13:3, or when deacons were chosen in Acts 6:6, these men were identified as being called, and then they laid hands on them as they recognised their appointment. It is true to say that man does not qualify another man to be an elder or a deacon. Men are called, and clearly identified by their Christlike character. But what is very obvious from Scripture is that men who were identified as being elder or deacon material were formally endorsed or recognised by the church to be such at some point. Call it what you will, there was some form of formal appointment. As Paul put it in Titus 1:5: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you"

Now we do not have to spend much time detailing how God's simple structure of under-shepherds, and their assistants, deacons (the sheep-dogs, if you'll allow me to press the metaphor) was corrupted into a form of hierarchy with all kinds of titles emerging, all kinds of powers, and a false two-caste system entering the church clergy and laity. Very often those in these positions have abused their power by teaching false doctrine, fleecing the sheep of their money and trying to control instead of guide. To this excess has come the overreaction. This overreaction to the false exaltation of men in church leadership has been to say that no such thing should really exist. Elders and deacons are not to be appointed, they are just kind of there, functioning in the background. They don't have positions or titles, they just are in the background. Moreover, to pay full-time elders, they say is unbiblical. These are vast overreaction that are patently unbiblical. Firstly, sheep know who the shepherd is. Nothing in that whole metaphor contains the idea of one sheep quietly guiding the other sheep without actually being identified as the shepherd. Secondly, the Bible is very much in favour of supporting those who labour in the Word of God and doctrine. This is the plain teaching of 1 Timothy 5:17-18 "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

Likewise 1 Cor 9:13-14: "Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

The fact of the matter is, because spiritual leadership has been abused does not mean we are to dispense with the whole thing, or remake it into something it isn't.

Biblically qualified elders and deacons are to be recognised by the local church and appointed, and function as God laid out in His Word. Pretending that we are all one happy fraternity with no leaders does not honour the priesthood of the believer. We are all priests, but God chooses to appoint leaders within the Body.

Connected with this idea is the serious error of dispensing with the preaching and teaching of the appointed elder or elders, and having everyone simply 'share' their interpretation of a passage of Scripture. So we all go around the room saying, 'what this verse means to me is...' At the end of the day, there has either been an argument about who is right and wrong, or there is less clarity as to what the Scriptures mean, not more. This overreaction comes as a result of the interpretation of the Word of God

being taken out of the hands of Christians and given to a select few. The Biblical pattern was that all believers were to be studying the Word of God together under the guidance of the elders and then teaching each other. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." (Col 3:16) All believers are to seek to understand the Word of God. Every believer today is a priest of God and may enter into His presence in prayer directly through our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. No other mediator is needed between God and people. As priests, we can study God's Word, pray for others, and offer spiritual worship to God. We all have equal access to God--whether we are a preacher or not. At the same time, the Bible makes it clear that God gifts certain people to be able to teach the Word of God. Ephesians 4:11 tells us God gives the Body of Christ evangelists and pastor-teachers. Romans 12:7 says some have the spiritual gift of teaching. I Tim 5:17 puts it as plainly as you can get: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." (1Ti 5:17) The conclusion is obvious – all believers have the ability to understand God's Word through the Holy Spirit, but God's pattern was for this to take place in a local church where God-qualified and God-appointed elders could preach and teach and thereby guide the saints in their understanding of the Word.

The excess which took place was that some spiritual leaders became too protective of their ministry. Bible reading was discouraged. Soon, only those who had attended a seminary or university were qualified to teach or even understand the Word of God. Now I have nothing against Biblical education, in fact, in our current climate of religious ignorance, I am very much in favour of it for those who seek to preach and teach full-time. But the Word of God is never to be taken out of the hands of the believer, who with guidance can understand it for himself or herself. This is an unbiblical excess, still present with us today.

But the overreaction to this excess was to say – let's all just meet together in a home, let's all say what we think a verse means, and then we're all right, because we're all priests. This is unbiblical. The Bible says, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." (2Pe 1:20)

Saying, 'this is what this verse means to me' is irrelevant. What is relevant is what the verse means. That is why God calls on elders, and on all believers to be workmen that do not need to be ashamed, who rightly divide the Word of truth. To correctly understand and apply the Word of God requires work. No, it is not something secret, that only the elite can unlock, by any means. But equally so, it is not something superficial, that the lazy can unlock. Correctly handling the Scriptures requires work – hard work. To do away with shepherds who labour to preach and teach the Word of God is an unbiblical overreaction to the abuse of the office of elder by some. The book of Acts clearly shows that Paul preached, he did not simply share his few thoughts on a passage along with a number of others in the Troas 'home-cell'. No, he preached to that local church.

One might add, that baptism and the Lord's Supper were recognised as local church ordinances. Certainly, if they were meeting in houses, they did not always have the means to do things as they might have wanted to. But no doubt the elders and deacons administered these things. The overreaction to hierarchical church leadership has been to just have an informal meeting, and then say – let's jump in the pool and have a baptism service. Or, let's have hot-cross buns and grapejuice as the Lord's Supper. No – God chose unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine as symbols of His Son's

perfect life and death. The excess of the church making the Lord's Supper and baptism into means of salvation does not justify the overreaction of making them common, or even profane.

Another overreaction has been the rejection of church membership. Certainly, structuring the church with a constitution and a formal membership roll is not commanded in Scripture. But it's not forbidden either. When Luke reports that three thousand were baptised on the day of Pentecost – obviously it implies someone was keeping track, keeping a record. When Paul speaks about letters of recommendation, (2 Cor 3:1, Romans 16:1) it implies that when a believer travelled to another city, they were sometimes requested to present evidence of membership somewhere else, from where they had been recommended. To now say that as long as you are saved you are a member of a local church – is not Biblical. To dispense with all membership and make everything a loose, informal association is not getting closer to the New Testament pattern, it is getting further away.

We could mention other things. For example – there has been an excess in terms of denominationism. Some have defended their particular denomination as being the only Biblical one, or have called all others evil. To this excess has come the overreaction of saying that being in a denomination is not Biblical. Certainly denominations are not mentioned in the Bible, but neither are South Africans. It's not unbiblical to be a South African, it just isn't mentioned. Certainly there are some denominations that are not biblical in their handling of Scripture, but that does not mean denominations are unbiblical per se.

We could list many more excesses and overreactions. The church has often been too rigid and not allowed any spontaneity. It has been excessively pre-planned. The overreaction is to have a free-for-all. The church has often been organised to death, with specialised ministries mushrooming. The overreaction to that is to do away with anything formal- constitutions, planning, ministries, any form of age-group ministry. The church has sometimes been excessively staid in its worship. The overreaction is to introduce carnal, worldly, profane things into worship, to make it folksy and less than majestic.

The bottom line is – where there has been excess, there has been overreaction. But the overreaction is not justified, because God has given us His Word. It is only when we are reacting to man, and not responding to God that we will end up abandoning the structured church that follows New Testament guidelines. That is why I said earlier that there are two reasons for this phenomena – overreaction and rejection. The overreaction is reacting to other men, other churches – but the rejection is rejecting the Word of God itself. It is rejecting the authority and submission that God requires in a local church, which is most often missing in the unstructured environment. It is rejection of the commitment required, which is often not required at all in an unstructured environment. It is a rejection of accountability, which is not often done without godly shepherds. It is a rejection of a lifestyle of submission, brotherhood and service, in exchange for a loose, informal environment where I remain a law unto myself. Therefore, those who opt for this approach, I believe will not stand guiltless before God, because the Word of God indicts their practises as being contradictory to His Word.

We do not throw out the local church with its organisation because it has been abused by some. Instead, we seek to study the New Testament pattern for the local church ourselves, and submit ourselves to a local church that we believe comes as close as possible to the New Testament pattern.