Church Leadership: A Church History Survey
By Bob Young

The New Testament teaches that God's purpose for the church includes all the members actively involved in the work of ministry. Ephesians 4 notes the work of the ministry of the saints and the activity of every member. God intended that the church be in the hands of the people (the priesthood of believers) and not in the hands of a priestly class, a scribal class, or religious professionals.

A survey of church history shows that often God's purpose has not been fulfilled in the development of the church. It also provides valuable lessons about church leadership. The following paragraphs are generalized descriptions of major historical time periods. There are exceptions to the generalizations, but it is impossible to describe every detail of the historical development of the church.

EARLY (NEW TESTAMENT) CHRISTIANITY (30-100)
The church Jesus promised to build began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).[1] The letters of the New Testament show us how the apostles and the first century Christians understood God's plan for the church. We also learn about the practices of the early church. We learn how the early church understood God's instructions. While the early churches were guided by apostles for a time, before long churches existed where the apostles had never been. The organization of each local church as reflected in the New Testament included lay (non-professional) leaders[2] and the presence of those who served as preachers, ministers, or evangelists.[3] Another group of workers were designated as deacons or servants. The Greek word deacon simply means servant or minister. A point of confusion today is that those who preached the word were ministers, the same word that is translated deacon. Technically deacons are also ministers, but it is not the case that all deacons preached.[4] The leaders described in the New Testament served as guides, facilitators, and workers with specific responsibilities. Ephesians 4 says that one task of the leaders was to prepare the church members for participation in the work of the ministry of the local church. Thus, the responsibility for the work of the church was never far removed from the people.

DEVELOPING CHRISTIANITY (100-600)
After the close of the New Testament canon and the death of the last of the apostles, changes were slowly introduced in the organization and structure of the church. One of the first changes involved adding a regional superstructure so that various geographic areas were under

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[1] Dates assigned to each section of this outline are approximate.

[2] Elders, bishops, and pastors are descriptions used in the New Testament to refer to only one group of leaders, always plural.

[3] Eph. 4:11 connects pastors and teachers, but there were also teachers who were not pastors. Ephesians 4 also mentions prophets, but in the context of Ephesians it is likely that this role in the local church was not as miraculous foreteller but as spokesperson, herald, or proclaimer. This is consistent with the meaning of the word prophet.

[4] By the time the New Testament was translated to English, the idea of deacon had special official connotations that are not reflected in the role described in the New Testament.

the oversight of a singular bishop. This added a leadership level above the local church and was a first step toward putting Christianity in the hands of a clergy class and removing it from the people. During these centuries, various other changes were also introduced. This is the period of the Councils as official church representatives met to decide various points of doctrine. This practice tended to give some leaders more importance than others, another move away from the roles described in the New Testament.

CATHOLICISM (600-1500)
The beginning and development of Catholicism was an influence toward placing religion exclusively in the hands of the clergy. The church was governed, as is yet reflected in Catholicism today, through a hierarchical priestly system. The system was fraught with abuses. In one sense, the Reformation was a reaction to the abuses of Catholicism. This can be seen in some of the concerns the Reformation tried to address—putting the Bible in everyday languages, ending abuses by the clergy class, and putting Christianity within reach of the common people.

REFORMATION (1500-1800)
The Reformation was potentially a step forward.   Leadership was less concentrated. Huss and others identified the church as a body of believers rather than a superstructure or organization. Calvin identified the roles of doctors, elders, deacons, and teachers. Models of congregational leadership in the Reformation included episcopal (usually characterized by a single bishop), presbyterian (with a body or board of presbyters, elders, or deacons), and congregational. The episcopal and presbyterian organizational structures came to be the most common forms within the Protestant churches. As a result, most often Reformation Christianity was still characterized by a controlling, organizational structure. The work and ministry of the church remained one step removed from the common members.

RESTORATION (1800)
One goal of Restoration movements[5] was to return to the forms and practices of the New Testament church. In the American Restoration Movement, progress was made toward that goal on a number of fronts, but less attention was given to church organization. Elders, deacons, and ministers (preachers) were established in many congregations in an effort to reflect biblical organization, but these were often seen as official positions rather than work to be done or responsibilities to be fulfilled. In many contemporary Restoration churches, elders have become decision makers more than shepherds, and deacons are often appointed in name with no specific tasks in mind. Little attention is given to defining and developing the roles of teachers and evangelists. The mentoring, training role of church leaders described in Ephesians 4 is too seldom in view. As a result, the members in many Restoration churches remain little involved in the work of the church, especially when compared to the New Testament descriptions of the church.

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[5] The American Restoration Movement is only one example of various efforts.

PENTECOSTALISM (1900)
Pentecostalism began near the beginning of the 20th century and has undergone various developments and adjustments across the past century. The movement is multi-faceted with many variations, but a common thread is a focus on the presence of the Holy Spirit within the church. One result of this focus is that in many churches the practice of Christianity has been put back into the hands of the common person, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

MISSIONAL (2000)
The missional church movement charges every Christian with the necessity of living out the reality of Christianity. The movement began outside the U.S. in some of the missionary movements of the last half of the 20th century, but seems firmly entrenched in the thinking of many Christian churches at the beginning of the 21st century. The missional church is characterized by the idea that the church (through its members) is sent into the world, called to carry the good news to the world immediately around it. Missional is more than taking the gospel to distant lands through specialized missionaries. Missional is every member taking the gospel into his or her own world every day. This idea empowers members and places responsibility for the work of the gospel on every member.

Conclusion
This brief survey focuses the fact that through much of the 2000 year history of the church, the average church member has had a minimal role in the work of the church. It is the task of biblical leaders to prepare the members for the work of ministry. One important facet of returning to biblical organization structures will be the involvement of the membership in the work of the church.