

# The Organization of the Church that Jesus Built

(by Bob Pulliam)

The organization of the church is clearly another identifying mark of the New Testament church. If a church today is organized some other way than the first century church, then it cannot be the same! (ex. If a body is organized with four legs and a tail, it certainly is not human) The organization of the church we read about in the bible is really quite distinct. Each local congregation was organized without ties to other churches (no conferences; councils; synods; districts; or diocese). Let's look at how the church was organized... how it looked...

## ***Local Churches Individually Organized...***

The wisdom of this arrangement can be seen as one views the events of history just after the first century. Apostasy overtook the churches, just as Jesus and the apostles had warned (e.g. Acts 20:28ff; Mt 7:15ff). When the churches began to tie themselves together, they planted the seeds for wholesale apostasy. Although they did this in the hope that they could better face the problems of their day, they also set up the church for all to follow the same course. The result was almost predictable. As the most influential groups apostatized, the remainder had no choice but to follow or be branded as heretics. Many were branded as heretics. However, they were actually the faithful.

Where, in the New Testament, do we find any indication that this was truly the way the church was organized? First, we find a dead silence. Can you find a diocese in the New Testament? Note that the churches were always written to by inspired men (inspired of God), rather than writing to other churches and telling them what to do. We never read of one church assuming the work of another church. Each church did what it could do. Nothing more.

Second, we find passages that clearly limit the scope of a churches work:

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Acts 2:28)

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;" (I Pt 5:1f)

The elders (who rule the local church - I Tim 3:5; Heb 13:17) were only to shepherd the flock of God which was among them. They were not to seek an oversight of other churches. This organizational structure is sometimes called "autonomy" (self rule).

When is this autonomy violated? One way is for one church to decide for another (sometimes called assuming it's work). No church in the first century ever did the work of another church for it. Today we can see many churches sending their monies to other churches for their management and distribution. Sometimes the money is sent to a central organization. Where is such found in the New Testament?...

Autonomy is also violated when teaching and practice is dictated from without. This occurred as the Roman Catholic Church formed in the 2nd - 6th centuries A.D., whipping it's congregations into line. It happens today as centrally organized religions vote and pass by-laws, and then demand that all member churches comply. This is the concept of a church in most people's minds. It's all they've ever seen in the world, and they assume it exists in the Bible. It does not, however.

### ***The Elders of the Church...***

The local church was organized with elders overseeing each church. These were ordained by qualifications specified in God's word. These are spelled out in I Timothy 3:1ff and Titus 1:5ff. The elders weren't just anyone in the church. If they were, why in the world did God set forth qualifications for the men to be set in place?

These elders were rulers, but not lords. Their position as shepherds illustrates well the total concern for the flock that must consume them. Their purpose is not to dictate matters of opinion, or even decide what truth is (that is already dictated by the New Testament). Their purpose is to see to the spiritual well being of the church. Teaching and discipline are a constant concern for them as they guard the souls entrusted to them (Heb 13:17).

### ***Deacons in the New Testament...***

What are deacons? The word deacon is actually a transliteration of a word that simply meant "servant". While we are all to be servants, there are some who are especially sought and trusted in the work of the local church. This is clearly indicated by the fact that deacons were to meet certain qualifications (I Tim 3:8ff).

In some denominations the deacons constitute what we might call the board of directors. Their preacher is called the "Pastor", although such is a misuse of the term. In scriptures, the term "pastor" was a description of the elders work, and applied only to them. In these denominations, the "Pastor" is under the direction of the "Deacons". Totally reversed from what is seen in the New Testament.

### ***Evangelists in the New Testament...***

What is an evangelist? The word evangelist means "one who proclaims good news". While all saints are to proclaim the good news, the term in the New Testament is not applied to all saints. So wherein lies the difference. Some have suggested that one must continually be on the move, like Philip, to be an evangelist. Their logic runs like this: Philip was an evangelist (Acts 21:8); Philip traveled a great deal in doing his work; Therefore an evangelist is one who travels about to preach the good news. That's like saying: Philip was an evangelist; Philip had seven daughters; therefore an evangelist must have seven daughters. It is more likely an application of a work that was taken up on a full time basis. Since the person evangelizes all the time, he is called an evangelist. Being an "evangelist" did entail a particular work (II Tim 4:5; Eph 4:11).

The evangelist is not a "Pastor", "Reverend", or "Father". The term pastor referred to shepherding, and referred to the elders of the church (Eph 5:11; Acts 20:28; I Pt 5:1f). The term reverend is applied only to God in scriptures (Ps 111:9), and is unthinkable in application to a human (although such is commonly done). The term father is forbidden as a religious title by Jesus (Mt 23:9).

What should be expected of an evangelist? There were certain things charged to Timothy before telling him to do the work of an evangelist:

- Preach the word.
- Be ready (and watchful) always.
- Reprove, rebuke and exhort with all longsuffering.

The evangelist will charge that nothing but the truth be taught (I Tim 1:3). He will commit the word of truth to others who can then take it forth (II Tim 2:2). He will also see to it that congregations are organized properly (Titus 1:5).

### ***Conclusion...***

Each local church in the first century was independent of all others. They answered directly to God, and managed their own affairs in serving Him. Elders were appointed (when qualified undoubtedly) who would oversee and shepherd the local church. They did not tend other churches. They saw to the welfare of those who were among them, not lording it over those allotted to their charge. There were also deacons and an evangelist who worked under the elders' oversight.

This picture of the New Testament church is very distinct from what you see in the world today. But if you want the church to be just what it was when it was first established, you'll have to sit up and take notice of these things. To find the church of our Lord today, we need to find one organized as it is clearly seen in scripture.