



Foundations of

FAITH

Church Organisation

Lesson 29

The great apostasy began as early as the second century. In no way was this departure from the truth more evident than with respect to changes made in church organisation. Since that time many other alterations to the divine plan have been made and therefore a careful study of the organisation of the primitive church is highly desirable.

CHRIST, THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH. The New Testament church is not a democracy. It is a monarchy, with Jesus as the absolute king. We read, "And he is the head of the body, the church." (Col. 1:18) The supremacy of his authority is stated in the Great Commission, "And Jesus came to them and spoke unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matt. 28:18 A.S.V.) Since his authority is complete, the worship, organisation and work of each congregation must be regulated by the teachings of Jesus and his divinely commissioned apostles. These are found in the New Testament. No local church may rightly present any teaching not sanctioned by Christ.

THE APOSTLES. In giving the body of teachings found in the New Testament, the apostles were acting under authority granted them by the Lord. The apostleship was a temporary office designated to lay the groundwork of the church which was "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." (Eph. 2:20) Of the apostles, only Judas Iscariot was replaced after his death (by Matthias), and that was because he had committed suicide prior to the establishment of the church (See Acts 1.) Paul was a special apostle with a special commission to take the gospel to the

Gentiles. (Acts 9:15) He was not one of the twelve. With the death of the last of the apostles near the end of the first century, the work of the apostles was completed.

CONGREGATIONAL INDEPENDENCE. In the first century each congregation was completely independent, subject only to Jesus as the head of the church. There was no hierarchy with authority over the local church. However, this does not imply that there was a lack of fellowship and co-operation among congregations. They were united by love, and assisted one another as occasion demanded. When a famine arose in Judea, the church in Antioch sent help to the elders by Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 11:29, 30) A few years later Paul travelled among the churches he had established, asking for contributions for the saints in Jerusalem. (I Cor. 16:1-3; Romans 15:25, 26) Yet in all of this each church maintained its autonomy and no super organisation was established.

ORGANISATION OF THE CONGREGATION. As soon as possible after their establishment, churches of the first century were organised. We find Paul and Barnabas planting churches in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. (Acts 13, 14) Later they returned to these congregations and appointed elders. (Acts 14:23) Prior to the appointment of elders, these were scriptural congregations. A church may scripturally exist without elders, but as soon as qualified men are available, they should be appointed. Elders were appointed in the first century by preachers of the gospel as the above example shows. Also, Paul wrote to the young preacher Titus, "For this cause left I you in Crete, that you should set in order the

things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee." (Titus 1:5) (To ordain is to appoint.) When seven men were chosen to care for the Grecian widows in the Jerusalem church, they were selected by the body of Christians, but specifically appointed by the apostles. (Acts 6:3)

Two offices existed in the local congregations – elders and deacons. The elders were also known as bishops, pastors, overseers and presbyters. Each congregation had more than one elder and more than one deacon.

THE WORK AND QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS.

The elders of the church are the shepherds of the flock. Into their hands has been committed the welfare of the congregation. Peter admonishes bishops, "**Feed** the flock of God which is among you, **taking the oversight** thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." (I Peter 5: 2, 3) Elders are overseers, not dictators. Yet we are told, "Let the elders that **rule well** be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." (I Tim 5:17) Therefore it is their responsibility to rule the church, and having taken into consideration the needs of the members, to make the final decisions which will shape the spiritual destiny of the body. They are to be teachers. Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, "take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **feed the church of God**, which he has purchased with his own blood." (Acts 26:28)

The qualifications of elders, (which Paul says are "musts" and therefore cannot be dispensed with) are given in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The student should read these passages carefully. Space does not allow extensive comment on these qualifications, but brief of a few should be made. A bishop must be apt (or given) to teach. He must "be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (Titus 1:9) Many fine Christian men who are otherwise qualified are not competent to teach and should not be made elders. A bishop must also rule well his own house. He is to have faithful (or believing, as rendered in the A.S.V.) children. Paul explains that a man's family is his proving ground. "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (I Tim. 3:5) Moreover, he must not be a novice. A beginner in the

Christian faith usually does not have the knowledge, and certainly does not possess the experience necessary to shepherd the flock of Christ.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE MEMBERS TO THE ELDERS. Since the elders are their spiritual shepherds, the members should be subject to them. We read, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you." (Heb. 13:17) Although Christians may occasionally doubt the wisdom of the decisions of the elders, they should submit themselves and not rebel. When elders are lacking in discretion or zeal the fault usually lies with the selection of unqualified men for that office. Hence it is most important to select only men who possess the qualifications given by the Holy Spirit.

THE WORK AND QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS.

The scriptures tell us little about the work of deacons. The Greek word from which the word deacon is derived means servant. It is elsewhere translated minister. Sometimes it is used in the scriptures in the general sense of "servant" while on other occasions it refers to a specific function in the church. From the definition of the word we conclude that deacons act as servants rather than shepherds as is true of elders. In Acts 6 we read that seven men were appointed by the apostles to care for the needs of the widows of the Grecian Jewish Christians. Although they are not called such in this chapter, the work which they performed would be similar to men who were called deacons. Their specific responsibility was to minister to the needs of members of the church while the apostles confined themselves to the oversight of the church. Thus it would appear that deacons have the responsibility of looking after matters to which they are assigned by the elders.

The qualifications of deacons are discussed in I Timothy 3:8-13. They are similar to those demanded of elders, the chief distinction being that deacons are not required to be able to teach. Otherwise, they are to possess the same high moral characteristics stipulated for bishops.

THE WORK OF EVANGELISTS. When Paul came to Caesarea we are told that he "entered into the house of Philip the **evangelist**, which was one of the seven; and abode with him." (Acts 21:8) Paul wrote to Timothy, "But watch you in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an **evangelist**, make full

proof of your ministry.” (II Tim. 4:5) An evangelist is a preacher of the gospel. The word is used in the scriptures to refer to preachers without respect to whether they confine their work to one locality or travel from place to place. Paul did both. Much of his time was spent in going from city to city establishing new congregations. Yet he remained a year and a half in Corinth (Acts 18:11) and three years in Ephesus. (Acts 20:31).

Paul outlines the work of an evangelist in his epistles to two young gospel preachers, Timothy and Titus. Timothy is charged, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine.” (II Tim. 4:2) Evangelists are to establish new churches, strengthen established churches, and proclaim the word of God wherever opportunity affords itself. They may labour with congregations having elders as Timothy did with the church in Ephesus. (See Acts 20:17 and I Timothy 1-3) However, in this capacity they are not to usurp the work or authority of the bishops. An evangelist is not a pastor or shepherd unless he serves in the dual role of elder and preacher as was true of Peter. (I Peter 5:1) He should be subject to the discipline and direction of the elders and ought not to be held in higher esteem

than the bishops by members of the church. When the initiative for new works must always come from a preacher rather than the elders, or when a preacher has the prime responsibility for shepherding the flock, it indicates that he is doing the work of an elder rather than an evangelist. Moreover, if the congregation is unable to provide its own talent for preaching and edification in the absence of an evangelist, it is a sign that elders are failing in their responsibility to feed the flock. And when members will not attend the worship unless they like the speaker, it shows that they are more wedded to a man than to Christ. These are danger signs of which to be aware.

Jesus condemns the use of titles of distinction by evangelists or anyone else. “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and ye are all brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.” (Matt. 23:8-10) In these verses Jesus condemns not just the three titles specifically mentioned, but all other titles of distinction such as “Reverend.” In this, as in all other things, let us hold fast to the “faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3)

TEST ON LESSON 29

Underline the phrase which correctly completes each statement:

1. The church is a: (a) democracy; (b) republic; (c) monarchy.
2. First century congregations were united by: (a) a convention; (b) love; (c) a hierarchy.
3. Elders are to: (a) feed the flock; (b) lord it over God’s heritage; (c) act as dictators.
4. Christians should: (a) be subject to the elders; (b) openly oppose the elders; (c) refuse to submit to the elders.
5. Deacons are appointed to: (a) preach; (b) serve; (c) preside at the Lord’s table.
6. An evangelist is a: (a) pastor; (b) preacher of the gospel; (c) bishop.
7. The responsibility for directing the church is that of: (a) the deacons; (b) the bishops; (c) an evangelist.

WHO:

- 1. Is the head of the church?
- 2. Was charged by Christ with the responsibility of setting forth the teachings of the early church?
- 3. Was a special apostle?
- 4. Appointed elders in Iconium? and
- 5. Are shepherds of the flock?
- 6. Are servants in the church?
- 7. Are known as evangelists?

Read I Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. Then answer the following questions:

- 1. Is it proper for a man to desire to be a bishop?
- 2. Who was told to ordain elders in every city?
- 3. What does Paul call the office of a bishop?
- 4. How many wives is a bishop to have?
- 5. Of what are his children not to be accused?
- 6. Why must a bishop have his own house in subjection?
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- 7. What qualification given by Titus expresses the thought that an elder must not always insist on having his own way?
- 8. What phrase in Timothy mentions an elder's teaching ability?
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- 9. What expression teaches that a deacon must not be a money lover?
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- 10. What word implies that deacons are to be serious minded?

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Answers

These lessons are based on the King James Version, so if you are using another translation the words employed may vary slightly. Sometimes an alternative answer is possible. The following is a useful guide.

- Section 1 –
1. (c)
 2. (b)
 3. (a)
 4. (a)
 5. (b)
 6. (b)
 7. (b)

- Section 2 –
1. Christ
 2. Apostles
 3. Paul
 4. Paul and Barnabas
 5. Bishops or elders
 6. Deacons
 7. Preachers of the gospel

- Section 3 –
1. Yes
 2. Titus
 3. A good work
 4. One
 5. Riot
 6. If he does not know how to rule his own house he can't take care of the church.
 7. Not self-willed
 8. Apt to teach
 9. Not greedy of filthy lucre
 10. Grave.

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