

Article of the Month  
May, 2023

## **Church Organization**

In II Thessalonians 2:3, the Apostle explains that Christianity would go through some changes. He calls it "a falling away" (Greek = *apostasy*) which would result in a counterfeit church headed by a "man of sin." Jesus treated the same concept in his parable of wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43). He teaches that Satan would install counterfeit disciples, but that Jesus would let the true and false Christians "grow together until the harvest." Such has been the history of the Christian church for the past two thousand years. The tare class has dominated the scene, and its warped concepts of church organization have generally triumphed. It has resulted in a situation of clergy over laity, of the politics of power and control over the spirit of Christ, and of errors over truth.

God's concept for the organization of His people was different; and throughout the history of the church there have been notable examples of sincere Christians attempting to maintain the simple organizational standards of the early disciples.

The congregations of early disciples were called churches. The word in the Greek original is *EKKLESIA* which means AN OUT-CALLING. It is a very appropriate term for the disciples because they were called out of the world and its ways in order to be servants and disciples of Jesus. (John 17:6-21) This *ecclesia* (the term is used for each congregation as well as for the world-wide group of individuals who constitute his church) has Jesus and the twelve Apostles as its foundation and law-givers. (Ephesians 2:19, 20; Revelation 2 1:14; II Peter 3:2; Jude 17) There have been other imposters who have tried to usurp the office of an apostle, but they all are apostates and liars. (II Corinthians 11:13; Revelation 2:2; 21:14) God, Himself, "gave" these Apostles to Jesus in answer to prayer. (John 17:12; Luke 6:12-16) They were imbued with the Holy Spirit in a special way so that their "official" pronouncements were inspired and quite set apart from their personal judgments. (See I Corinthians 7:25 as an example.) In their special office, these twelve could have been burdensome to the church, rightly expecting support and allegiance; but they were not of such a mind. (II Thessalonians 2:6, 7)

The Apostles were granted extraordinary authority to establish doctrine and practice in the church. (II Corinthians 2:10; I Corinthians 5:3-5; Matthew 16:19; Acts 2:42, etc.) It is their writings which constitute the doctrinal and prophetic books of the New Testament as well as two of the four Gospels. The standard, then, for any congregation of saints should be the inspired words of Jesus, his Apostles, and the prophets. Any other writings or teachers, which may be helpful, are not in the same category and have no authority save what is in harmony with those

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inspired sources. While to the church itself is given authority in some matters, its authority never supersedes or contradicts the Biblical standards given to it. (I Corinthians 6:1-3)

The Scriptures do not ever suggest that the church on earth should have any earthly head or central governing authority. To the contrary, every indication is that each and every ecclesia or congregation was totally autonomous. Each congregation was a representation in itself of the whole church. And while ecclesias shared communication and good-works opportunities, they never delegated authority over themselves to any outside source. (Colossians 4:16; II Corinthians 8:1-15)

The concept of denominationalism or sectarianism, unfortunately, arose early in the church but was quickly condemned. (I Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-9) Nevertheless it has persisted unto our day. It promotes narrow-thinking and closed-mindedness. While it is true that any one congregation (because of careful study and agreement on the Scriptures) may be of the same mind as is another congregation, there is no Scriptural authority for them to form an exclusive alliance with a fixed creed which binds the Christians within those congregations. Instead, we all are to be as those noble Bereans who "searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:10-12)

As history progressed, the Lord found it expedient to supply timely messages through selected men who faithfully pointed the churches to truths needed in their particular periods of history. (Revelation 2 and 3) These messengers ("angels") were men whose commissions were not through "inspiration" as were the words of the Apostles, but through enlightenment and understanding. Their services to the church in their days are legendary. They include men such as Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and Charles Russell. To have ignored their ministries in their days was to separate oneself from whatever "meat in due season" the Lord had to provide. (Matthew 24:45) Nevertheless, to establish denominations based on these men or their teachings is unacceptable Scripturally.

The organization of the individual congregation was simple and efficient. It was designed to take advantage of the benefits available through the more spiritually mature as well as the temporal talents of the brethren possessing various abilities to accomplish the daily functions of the church. It placed AUTHORITY in the hands of the congregants. Thus, all members of the congregation who were fully dedicated to Jesus' service and who were, therefore, begotten of the Holy Spirit, CHOSE THOSE who would serve the church as its ministers in spiritual and temporal matters. There was no clergy and laity. There was the church and its chosen servants.

The servants or ministers of the church were divided into two categories: (1) Those who would guide the congregation in spiritual learning and personal growth, and

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(2) those who would care for the non-spiritual needs of the congregation so that it could operate quietly and efficiently.

The spiritual servants are called ELDERS or BISHOPS. The terms seem to be mostly interchangeable, one referring to the person's spiritual maturity, the other being a description of his service responsibilities. "Bishop" comes from the Greek word *EPISCOPOS* which means OVERSEER—one who watches over something for its good.

The temporal servants were called DEACONS—a word which simply means servants. While all elders or bishops were deacons (servants), all deacons were not bishops.

Deacons were first instituted during the period when early Christians thought it advantageous to live in a large community. The first deacons were selected in order to relieve the Apostles of temporal duties so that they could dedicate their energies to spiritual matters. (Acts 6:1-6) Note that the Apostles did not select these deacons. The congregation selected them.

Paul instructs us (I Timothy 3:1-13) to do the same in our local ecclesias. But he not only expects the congregation to choose its deacons (as they did in Acts 6), but also its bishops. He shows in his letters to Timothy and Titus what the congregations should use as qualifications in their choices for bishops and deacons.

In his letter to Titus (Titus 1:5-9) Paul again shows how to "ordain" elders. The word "ordain" comes from the Greek word meaning "to stretch forth the hand." This was showing that the church should select its servants by a hand vote, not a secret ballot. Among other things, this helps the character-building of each in the congregation. It places ALL RESPONSIBILITY squarely in the voting hand of each Christian. This passage conceivably could be mis-read to suggest that Titus chose the elders. But Titus was not an Apostle and had no such authority; and even the Apostles who did have superior authority had the congregation choose its servants in Acts 6. Instead, Titus was sent as a messenger from the Apostle Paul to instruct the churches how to organize themselves. It also should be noted that, by a comparison of Titus 1:5 and 1:7, it is possible to see the interchangeable nature of the terms bishop and elder.

This was the simple, efficient, congregation-empowered, organization of the early church. There is no reason why it should be any different today. It supplies all that is needed while it protects the ecclesia from domineering leaders, false teachers, and any who might wish to use the church for his own personal, selfish ends.

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