

The New Testament Church

Part 10: The Organization of the Church

Ephesians 4:11-16

I. INTRODUCTION: I

- I. **2** Recall in lesson #3 we made a distinction, which is drawn in scripture, between the universal church and the local church.
 - A. The universal church is the church Jesus promised to build in **Matt. 16:18**: "...upon this rock I will build my church..."
 - (1) In its universal sense the church consists of Christ as its head (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18) and each faithful Christian as members of His body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:30).
 - (2) In its universal sense the church consists of all faithful Christians regardless of time and space.
 - (3) "The church in its universal sense is the 'general assembly' of saints 'who are enrolled in heaven' (see Heb. 12:23)." (Stauffer, p. 65)
 - (4) "It is a spiritual 'organism,' not an 'organization' or 'institution.' As a world-wide body of many members under the direct control of Christ as head and functions distributively as each member serves individually." (Stauffer, p. 65)
 - B. The local church is typified by the various congregations to which Paul wrote epistles; for example, he wrote to the local churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, and Thessalonica.
 - (1) Local churches are not permanent like the universal church; local churches come and go.
 - (2) When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi he addresses them: **Phil. 1:1**: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons..."
 - (3) The local church functions as a team as each member "does its share" (Eph. 4:16) of the work God has assigned the local church (e.g., evangelism, edification, and benevolence).
 - (4) In order for any group of people to function as a team requires organization and Paul's introduction in the epistle to the Philippians shows this as he addresses the saints, bishops and deacons. Such an organization is not found in the universal church.
 - C. Since the local church is instructed to assemble (e.g., to worship); and to fulfill the mission of evangelism, edification and benevolence, and discipline it needs a structure to perform these works.
 - (1) The structure God has given the local church is a "congregational" structure with each local church independent, autonomous, and self-governing as each follows the scriptures.
 - (2) In order for us to follow the New Testament pattern in all things it is critical we appreciate, understand, and respect this arrangement for a system of local control.
2. **3** Two important passages come to mind as we begin to consider the organization of the Lord's church:

Eph. 4:11: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,"

Phil. 1:1: "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:"

Jesus gave various gifts to benefit the church:

- A. Apostles and prophets benefit the church primarily in its universal sense as these men were guided into “all truth” (Jn. 16:13); they laid a foundation upon which the church exists (**1 Tim. 3:15**: “...the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”).
 - B. However, the apostles also benefited some local churches as men like Paul made his various “missionary” journeys and established local churches as he preached the gospel.
 - C. The apostles also benefited the local churches as they laid their hands on saints empowering them with spiritual gifts which were needed before the New Testament was completely revealed (Acts 8:14-19).
 - D. “When the truth was completely revealed and confirmed by signs that followed (Mark 16:17-20; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Jude 3), the work of the apostles and prophets ceased (see 1 Cor. 13:8-10). They were ministers of the new covenant and their message became the foundation on which the church was built (2 Cor. 3:3-6; Eph. 2:19-22).
 - E. In this sense, every local church is founded upon the “apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20).
 - F. The message of apostles and prophets governs all aspects of the universal and local church (Jn. 16:13).
 - G. But other men were responsible in the first century, and even now, for the function of the local church.
3. **4** The purpose of our tenth lesson on the New Testament Church will be to examine the organization of the local church.
4. However, before launching into our lesson I want to make a comment on the idea of “organization.”
- (1) There are many folks who reject what they call “organized religion”; and not without good reason.
 - (2) I believe brother David Smitherman’s comments on this in his series of articles on the New Testament church deserve our consideration: **5**
- “The word, and concept of, ‘organization’ in spiritual matters has a negative ring to it in the minds of many. To speak of anything pertaining to our relationship with Christ as ‘organized’ is a real ‘turn off’ to them. It is true that much of the religious community has organized and stressed organization in spiritual matters to such an extent that the organization has come to mean more than the Lord does and one’s fellowship with God is defined almost strictly in terms of a relationship to an organization. In that sense ‘organized religion’ certainly deserves criticism and rejection.
- 6** However, this does not mean there is not a type of ‘organization’ that the Lord approves of and wants his followers to be involved with. Sometimes these ‘organizations’ were referred to as ‘churches of Christ,’ Romans 16:16, others were called a ‘church of God,’ 1 Corinthians 1:1, or simply ‘the saints in Christ Jesus,’ Philippians 1:1, but they are all designations which indicate that first century Christians organized and acted in a collective manner.” (Smitherman, lesson #12, p. 1)
- (3) Thus, our purpose in this lesson is not to study “organized religion” as it is practiced by the churches of men in the denominational world and rightly criticized and condemned. Rather, our purpose is to study the “organization” the Lord has specified for His church.

II. DISCUSSION:

I. **7** Elders:

- A. We’ve already stated in the introduction the organization of the universal church:
 - (1) In its universal sense the church consists of Christ as its head (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18) and each faithful Christian as members of His body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:30).

- (2) In its universal sense the church consists of all faithful Christians regardless of time and space.
 - (3) “The church in its universal sense is the ‘general assembly’ of saints ‘who are enrolled in heaven’ (see Heb. 12:23).” (Stauffer, p. 65)
 - (4) “It is a spiritual ‘organism,’ not an ‘organization’ or ‘institution.’ As a world-wide body of many members under the direct control of Christ as head and functions distributively as each member serves individually.” (Stauffer, p. 65)
- B. As functioning assemblies of God’s people, local churches also have an organization, a very simple organization:
- Phil. 1:1:** “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:”
- (1) Elders are the spiritual leaders of the congregation,
 - (2) Deacons are servants of the congregation serving under the direction of the elders,
 - (3) Saints are the various members of the congregation with each one of them having a “part” in the congregation’s work as each “does its share”; which in turn “causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” (Eph. 4:16)
- C. **8** Elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 as funds and goods were sent by other brethren to assist the needy saints in Judea (**Acts 11:30:** “This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”).
- (1) Their work as overseers of the local church are only hinted at here.
 - (2) The next reference to elders is in Acts 14:23 where Paul and Barnabas were on their first preaching trip and established churches in the various cities of Asia Minor and then appointed leaders in those local churches to “oversee” them (**Acts 14:23:** “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”).
- D. But we still do not know exactly who and what these men are who are called “elders.”
- E. Let’s consider two important passage which shed light on the topic of “elders.”
- 9 Acts 20:13-31**
- (1) In this passage we find Paul hurrying on his return from his third missionary journey: **Acts 20:16:** “For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.”
 - (2) So when Paul arrives at the seacoast town of Miletus “he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17; Miletus ~50 miles from Ephesus).
 - (3) Paul knew he would never see these trusted men ever again (**Acts 20:38:** “sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more.”) so he desired to give them some final words of encouragement and exhortation.
- F. Notice again verse 17: “he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church.”
- (1) Thus, the men Paul is addressing in this section of scripture are “elders of the church.”
 - (2) Specifically they were “elders” serving/leading the local church meeting at Ephesus.
- G. The key verse is verse 28: “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.”
- This passage teaches us several facts about “elders”:**

- (1) Elders, bishops, and pastors are all referring to the same office.
 - (a) Remember, Paul is addressing “the elders of the church” (v. 17).
 - (b) Paul says these “elders” had, by the “Holy Spirit” been made “overseers.”
 - (i) The word for “overseers” is from the Greek word “*episkopos*” and expresses the idea of one who acts as a guardian or superintendent (i.e., manager).
 - (ii) It is used five times in the New Testament and in four of the five places it appears (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25) it is translated “*bishop*.”
 - (iii) Thus, an “elder” and a “bishop” are referring to the same office in the church.
- (2) Next, Paul says that the “elders” who are “overseers” are “to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”
 - (a) The Greek word translated “to feed” is from “*poimen*,” which expresses the idea of tending a flock, a shepherd.
 - (b) This is the same word used in Ephesians 4:11 that is translated “*pastors*.”
 - (c) Therefore, “elders,” “bishops,” and “pastors” all describe the same office!
 - (d) **10** Each of these three words describes the same office but emphasize different aspects of the nature or work of this office.
 - (i) An “elder” (Greek “*presbuteros*”) describes the fact that one serving in this office is to be an older, more experienced man (recall “the elders of Israel,” Ex. 3:16). “He is not to be a ‘novice’ (1 Tim. 3:6); that is, he is not to be a new Christian. Due to the lack of experience in being a child of God, he can be ‘lifted up with pride’ and ‘fall into the condemnation of the devil.’” (Edwards, p. 2)
 - (ii) A “bishop” or “overseer” describes the work an “elder” is to perform; Thayer defines it as: “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent...”

“Paul called an elder a ‘bishop,’ when he wrote Titus about their qualifications (Ti. 1:5, 7). The word ‘bishop’ suggests the idea of oversight as elders superintend the work of the local church. Even though religious bodies have made a distinction between an elder and bishop, the Bible makes no such distinctions! Not knowing that a bishop and an elder are the same man, bishops have been placed over a number of churches; finally resulting in one being made head of the Roman Catholic Church!” (Edwards, p. 2)
 - (iii) A “pastor” is also descriptive of the work an “elder” performs; a “pastor” tends and feeds the flock (i.e., local church consisting of individual Christians).

“The word ‘pastor’ carries the concept of one who shepherds or tends a flock of sheep. In this case, the Lord’s sheep is the church (Acts 20:28). Most churches refer to their preacher as ‘pastor,’ when he is not an elder. A preacher, who is also an elder, could be called a pastor. Otherwise, it is a mis-use (sic) of the term ‘pastor’ in reference to the preacher.” (Edwards, p. 2)
- (3) **11** Furthermore this passage gives some insight concerning the scope of the “elder’s” duties.
 - (a) Paul instructs the “elders” to “...take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28).

- (b) Limited oversight: the “elders” are to “oversee” only one flock; “*the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers.*”
 - (c) They are **not** given authority to “oversee” more than one flock!
 - (4) This passage also tells us something else about “elders”: there was a plurality of elders in each congregation.
 - (a) Plurality simply means *more than one*.
 - (b) Verses 17 and 28 both speak of “elders” or “overseers” in the plural.
 - (c) We’ll see that other passages also teach this important principle that first century churches under the guidance of inspired men always had a plurality of elders.
 - (5) Finally this passage also tells us elders “oversee”; what is it they “oversee”? They “oversee” “*all the flock among...which [they have been] made...overseers*” (Acts 20:28; spiritual work):
- Heb. 13:17:** “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

H. **12** / Peter 5:1-4

- (1) In this passage we find Peter addressing “elders” when he writes:

1 Peter 5:1-4: “*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: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.*”
- (2) Peter confirms the very same principles Paul taught about “elders” in Acts 20:13-31, esp. vv. 17 & 28).
 - (a) First, “elders,” “bishops,” and “pastors” are all referring to the same office.
 - (i) Notice in verse 2 that the “elders” are to “*Shepherd (feed) the flock of God which is among you.*”
 - ✓ Once again the Greek word used for “shepherd” or “feed” is from “*poimen*” the same word used for “pastors.”
 - ✓ A “pastor” acts as a “shepherd” who “tends” or “feeds” the “flock of God” which is the local church. Which local church? The one “*among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*” (Acts 20:28).
 - (ii) Peter, like Paul, also says the “elders” are to serve “*as overseers*”; they are to serve as “bishops” superintending the local church; watching out for their souls (Heb. 13:17).
 - (b) **13** Second, just as Paul taught us in Acts 20:28 Peter tells us the scope of the authority of the “elders,” “pastors,” or “bishops” is “*the flock of God which is among you*” (v. 2).
 - (i) A congregation’s elders only have authority to “oversee,” “tend,” “shepherd” or “superintend” the congregation that appointed them to serve.
 - (ii) They do not have divine authority to oversee more than one congregation!
 - (c) Third, just as Paul taught in Acts 20:28 Peter tells us a congregation is served by a plurality of “elders.”

- (i) He speaks to *“the elders who are among you.”*
- (ii) How many? *“elders”* a plurality, not just one.
- (d) **14** Peter sheds further light on the role of *“elders,”* in that their service is:
 - (i) *“not by compulsion but willingly,”*: A man who serves as an elder must do so because he himself *“desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work”* (1 Tim. 3:1); not because he is compelled by the popular sentiment of the congregation. Further, a man’s desire to become an elder is not something he campaigns for like a political office. His aspiration must arise from a genuine desire to serve the congregation.
 - (ii) *“not for dishonest gain but eagerly,”*: Those serving as bishops/elders/pastors are worthy of financial support (1 Tim. 5:17-18); however, men who serve are not to serve merely with the motive of financial gain.
 - (iii) *“nor as being lords over those entrusted to you,”*: It is true that elders *“rule over”* the congregation; but they do not do so as *“lords”* (i.e., *“tyrants”*; TLB).
 - (iv) *“but being examples to the flock,”*: Elders/bishops/pastors are *“servant leaders”* whose authority arises from practicing what they preach; they are parallel to Christ who is the *“Chief Shepherd”* (1 Pet. 5:3).

G. ****** The qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9:

1 Tim. 3:1-7: *“This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”*

Titus 1:5-9: *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you — 6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, 8 but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”*

2. **15** Deacons:

A. The word *“deacon”* comes from the Greek word *diakonos*.

- (1) The word *diakonos* appears 30 times in the New Testament; 21 times *“minister”* or *“minsters”* (noun and verb), 6 times it is translated *“servants”*; 3 times *“deacons.”*
- (2) Deacons are servants of the local church and are under the oversight of the elders.
- (3) Their role is to serve the needs of the local church. What needs? Acts 6 gives us insight.
 - (a) The Grecian widows were being neglected in the *“daily distribution”* (v. 1).
 - (b) This was not a job for the apostles because *“It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.”* (Acts 6:2)

- (c) Therefore, the apostles instructed the disciples to select qualified men “whom we may appoint over this business” (Acts 6:3; i.e., “this responsibility” NIV; the responsibility of seeing that the needs of the Grecian widows was taken care of.).
- (d) The duties of deacons are primarily in the “physical” realm so elders can attend to their spiritual duties (i.e., Heb. 13:17)
- (4) “These and many other needs of a local church demand the appointment of capable, righteous, dedicated, and qualified ‘deacons’ to minister (see 1 Tim. 3:8-13).” (Stauffer, p. 68)
- B. ** The qualifications for “deacons” are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

1 Tim. 3:8-13: *“Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, 9 holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. 10 But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. 11 Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. 13 For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”*

3. **16** Evangelists/Teachers:

- A. Evangelist comes from the Greek word “euaggelistes” meaning “a preacher of the gospel” (Strong); this word is from a related Greek word (euaggelizo; verb) meaning “to announce the good news” (Strong).
- B. “Evangelists can be valuable assets to local churches, but are not essential to their completeness in Christ. Christ gave this gift to men for the perfecting of the saints and the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11, 12). Timothy was left to work with the church at Ephesus and Titus with the churches on the isle of Crete (1 Tim. 1:3; Tit. 1:5).” (Stauffer, p. 68)
- C. Timothy was specifically instructed by Paul to: “...do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” (2 Tim. 4:5)
- D. As we’ve seen, an evangelist is simply a gospel preacher and their duty, though important, is very simple and straightforward:

2 Tim. 4:2: *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”*

They are to exhort the brethren to “consent”:

1 Tim. 6:3: *“...to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness,”*

They are to instruct the brethren in “scripture” because:

2 Tim. 3:16-17: *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

- E. Evangelists serve the congregation under the consent and direction of the elders; or by the consent and approval of the members in the absence of elders.
- F. **17** Teachers are Christians (men and women) who by reason of experience, sound judgment and diligent Bible study qualify themselves to teach the Bible to others.

- (1) In the first century teachers were prominent in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1); these teachers may well have been the recipients of “spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 12:8; “word of wisdom”; “word of knowledge”).
- (2) But supernatural spiritual gifts, given by the “*laying on of the apostles' hands*” (Acts 8:18); are no longer with us (1 Cor. 13:8-10).
- (3) Therefore, teachers today must be trained and taught by the church (an important duty of an evangelist):
2 Tim. 2:2: “*And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*”

4. **18** Final Principles:

- A. “A number of principles or conclusions grow out of New Testament teaching concerning the congregational organization. First the negative. (all from Stauffer, pp. 68-69)
 - (1) “An ‘episcopal’ form of church government in which a bishop rules a diocese of churches is both unscriptural and anti-scriptural. Bishops are overseers of a local church.”
 - (2) “A ‘presbytery’ form of government in which a national assembly of elders meet annually to decide church policy for all local congregations has no Bible authority.”
 - (3) “A ‘pope’ who claims to be head or bishop of the church universal and asserts infallible authority over local churches is assuming a role given only to the Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - (4) “A ‘mother’ church which maintains control over a newly formed local church and oversees and rules the ‘infant’ church finds no precedent in scriptural teaching or examples.”
- B. **19** Positive conclusions from the New Testament principles of local church organization (Stauffer, p. 69):
 - (1) “*Equal*. All local congregations stand on equal ground before the Lord Jesus who is the head of the church. Not once does the New Testament portray a local church of higher standing or greater value than other local churches.” (see Rev. 2 & 3)
 - (2) “*Independent*. All local churches were independent of every other local church. The church in Antioch was not dependent upon the church in Jerusalem for authority. Each congregation stood before the Lord and bowed only to his authority when carrying out his work on earth.” (see Rev. 2 & 3; Col. 3:17; no centralized earthly authority)
 - (3) “*Autonomous*. The word ‘autonomous’ means ‘self-rule’ and denotes the responsibility of each church to control, decide, direct, and rule itself in harmony with the Lord’s authority. No church determines for any other church its policies, its work program, its expedencies in worship, its benevolent work, or its program of edification.” (elders are subject to the “*Chief Shepherd*”; see 2 Jn. 9)
- C. “Each local church has its own elders/bishops/pastors and must execute the Lord’s will according to his commands in the best interest of what’s scriptural and beneficial to the flock of God among them. No national headquarters or organization is authorized to dictate to equal, independent, autonomous local churches under the oversight of their own bishops.” (Stauffer, p. 69)

III. **CONCLUSION: 20**

- I. The New Testament presents a clear pattern of organization for both the universal church and the local church:

- A. The universal church consists of Christ as its head (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18) and each faithful Christian as members of His body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:30).
 - B. The local church is subject to the authority of Christ (Matt. 28:18; Col. 3:17; 1 Pet. 4:11) and consists of “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1).
2. Local churches can exist without elders and deacons, but such is not God’s desire.
- A. As Paul wrote Titus, congregations without elders “are lacking” and “should be set in order” (Titus 1:5).
 - B. Therefore, it should be the goal of every congregation to develop and appoint men capable of serving as elders and deacons.
3. Very importantly, we also should notice the organization of the New Testament church is much different than the denominational churches of men (e.g., headquarters, pastor system, bishops over more than one congregation, national assemblies, pope, etc.).
4. Invitation

References:

- Caldwell, G. C., *Truth Commentaries: Ephesians*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY (1994).
- Chumbley, Kenneth L. (editor), *The Church of Jesus Christ*, Florida College Press, Temple Terrace, FL (2011).
- Cogdell, Gaston D. and Robert F. Turner, *The Cogdell-Turner Discussion: A Search For Truth*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Fairmount, IN (1983).
- Cogdill, Roy, *The New Testament Church*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY (date unknown).
- Cogdill, Roy, *Walking By Faith*, The Gospel Guardian Company, Lufkin, TX (1957).
- Edwards, Johnie, *The Eldership*, in *Back To Basics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, April, 2005.
- Patton, M., *Truth Commentaries: 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY (1994).
- Smitherman, David, *The Church in the New Testament* (from a series of 12 articles; source and date unknown).
- Stauffer, L. A., *The Church: A Biblical Perspective*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY (2006).