

Church Organization

The church of Jesus Christ is comprised of saved people. When those on Pentecost heard the gospel preached, they obeyed the message and were added to the church (Acts 2:41). Through time and preaching, the church began to grow in numbers. When Peter and John preached at Solomon's porch, "*many of them that heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand*" (Acts 4:4). At Acts 6:1, the Word of God states, "*Now in these days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying....*" There are multitudes of such verses that indicate the growth of the early church. Note that the disciples held the truth dear as they "*were scattered abroad going about preaching the word*" (Acts 8:4). Soon churches were established over all of Palestine as far north as Antioch of Syria (Acts 13:1).

When the apostle Paul began traveling and preaching, there were churches established in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Rome. Each of the churches that were established had their own organization. Paul went back through Galatia at one point to establish an eldership in each of the churches (Acts 14:23). Peter instructed the elders of the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia to "*Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God...*" (I Peter 5:2). When Paul addressed the Philippians, he opened the letter saying, "*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deans: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 1:1-2).

Each of these examples illustrates local, as opposed to universal, organization. Each church did its own work. We do not find the churches established in the first century cooperating as a collective unit to accomplish a purpose such as feeding the needy of the world or pooling funds together to establish a "world need fund." The word organization is defined as, "Something comprising **elements** with varied **functions** that contribute to the whole and to collective functions; organism" (AHD pg. 876). The elements of the church were identified in our Philippians 1:1 verse above; i.e., saints, bishops, and deacons. As the definition of the word organization suggest, the elements of the church have functions. In the next few weeks we shall identify and examine the functions that each element within the church serves.

One final note must be made. We must be careful to not to bind where the NT has not bound in the area of local organization. Remember that the same truth that made Christians in Ephesus also made Christians in Corinth. The doctrine that instructs one to salvation in Houston, Texas is the same in Wichita Falls, Texas. While the church is organized locally and practices local autonomy, this does not license the local church to isolate itself from the rest of the world. The faith of the brethren in Rome was known throughout the world (Rom. 1:8). Christians throughout the world were communicating with each other and rejoicing over each others' mutual stand in truth (cf. II Jn. 4; III Jn. 4).

A clear identity of church organization on a local level must therefore be distinguished from the universal church. The universal church is not organized and can in no way make decisions for any local church. Consider the issue of longsuffering for instance. We are commanded to be longsuffering with the disorderly (I Thess. 5:14). Only a local church that is working with the disorderly knows when the time of patience, instruction, and longsuffering ends with said disorderly. The elders make a decision to exercise discipline upon an individual after a period of effort to restore the brother has been made (I Cor. 5:1ff; II Thess. 3:6). I may advise and instruct others in the area of longsuffering; however, it will be de decision of the local church as to when they have exhausted their patience and teaching with a disorderly brother.

Another consideration is false teaching. When a brother publicly teaches false doctrines to the universal church through gospel meetings, internet, brotherhood magazines, etc., said event is no

longer a local issue alone (II Tim. 4:14-15). The elders (Acts 20:28ff), preachers (I Tim. 6:20), and members of the church (Rom. 16:17) are to watch, test and warn against said teaching no matter what its source of origin (cf. Acts 15). When I expose such false teaching on a universal basis, I have violated no church's autonomy, but rather have displayed a spirit of love for the souls of brethren. Next week we will examine the elders in the local church.