

# Organizing the Church

M. W. Bassford, 3-28-10

Over the past five weeks, we've spent a great deal of time establishing the sole authority of Scripture as the way that God speaks to us today, and then learning what the Bible says about how it should be interpreted. Now that we have all of these concepts down, we can start to use them to address one of the most pressing problems in the religious world today: the question of church organization. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that the Lord's church is to be of the same mind and the same judgment. Sadly, this command is far more obviously broken today than it is obeyed. In the modern-day U.S., there are many thousands of different churches. Some of them are world-spanning giants who count hundreds of millions of worshippers in their ranks. Others are tiny independent congregations that meet in members' homes. Some have a very strict formal denominational structure, others are bound in loose associations, and still others promote congregational independence. The only thing they have in common is that they claim to worship God.

Such a sprawl of religious chaos is utterly at odds with the Biblical depiction of a God who is the author of peace, not of confusion. Every church out there disagrees with some other church on at least one doctrinal point, and nothing could be further from the Scriptural portrait of one church with one Lord. This organizational train wreck is not the work of the Most High. Instead, it has originated from the minds of men, men who decided that a particular pattern would be advantageous for their church and chose to follow it without consulting the word.

Today, we must not imitate their mistake. If we want to make the claim of obedience to the authority of God, we must obey that authority in all things, including His church. The Scripture draws a blueprint for us of what the early church was like. Let's study that blueprint this morning and learn to imitate it in organizing the church.

## The Universal Church

The word "church" itself is not in the original Greek text of the Bible. Instead, it is the translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means "assembly" or "group of people". Sometimes, *ecclesia* is not used in a religious sense at all. For instance, the angry Ephesian mob that wanted to lynch Paul in Acts 19 is described as an *ecclesia*.

Even when it is used to refer to an assembly of saved people, though, *ecclesia* does not always denote exactly the same concept. In fact, we can divide *ecclesia* uses that are translated as "church" into two main groups. First, it can refer to an actual, concrete assembly of people that has literally assembled just like the angry mob in Ephesus assembled, except that their purpose is to glorify God rather than to commit mayhem. That gathering of Christians is called a "church", but so also is the theoretical gathering of all Christians in all times and places.

Typically, we call the first the local church and the second the universal church. A passage of Scripture that is clearly talking about the universal church, not a local church, is Hebrews 12:22-23. This passage describes some of the Biblical imagery that is associated with the concept of the church of Jesus. It is the mountain of God prophesied in Isaiah 2 and Daniel 2. It is the heavenly Jerusalem, as opposed to the literal one located in Palestine. It is also the general assembly of those whose names have been recorded in the book of life. When we come together each Lord's day in our local church, we are many things, but we are not that general assembly. There are faithful Christians who have never assembled with us and will never assemble with us, so the Hebrews writer is using "church" here in a universal sense.

When we consider this body of Christians from all times and all places, one thing is true of it. Even though it is extremely diverse, it is entirely **HEADED BY CHRIST**. This point is made quite clearly in Ephesians 5:23-24. This idea is significant for several reasons. First, it illustrates the relationship between Christ and the church. As we discussed earlier, our bodies are subject to our heads in all things, and likewise, the church is subject to Christ in all things. If we do not obey every command that Christ has given us, either directly or through His apostles, we are not truly his church.

Second, this passage denies the claim that some religious leaders make to be the earthly head of the church. We recognize that an animal with two heads is grotesque, a freak, and to think of the church having two heads is equally grotesque and freakish. The position of the head of the church has been filled since the church was first established, and it has always been filled by our Lord. For any human to claim Christ's position is arrogant and indeed blasphemous.

Third, Christ is the only officer of the universal church. Anyone else who could serve as a leader for an organization that spans all times and places would have to be divine just as Christ is. Even the apostles are never referred to in Scripture as "apostles of the church". They were apostles of Christ Jesus, yes, but that did not give them some kind of status in the universal church. Instead, Christ is all the leadership that the universal church could ever need.

Next, the Bible teaches that this universal church is **COMPOSED OF THE SAVED**. This is explained by Acts 2:47. We learn from earlier on in Acts 2 that the people who were being saved then were being saved by baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. According to this passage, when they were saved, they were automatically added to the church by Jesus Himself. Contrary to what some teach, the purpose of baptism is salvation, not this adding.

Finally, as should be evident from all of this, the universal church is **AN ABSTRACTION**. That is to say, it does not have an earthly, concrete existence. It's just a convenient way to describe the entire group of people who have been saved by the blood of Jesus. The universal church, as it is presented in Scripture, does not have some kind of worldwide organization. It does not have a hierarchy or a bureaucracy. It is not subject to any commands other than those that Jesus issues through His word. None of these things are ever mentioned in the word, and as we learned last week, if we do things in the church that God does not command, we are disobeying Him. Some organizations claim to be this universal church, but all of those claims are long on presumption and short on authority. The universal church was assembled in fact during the early days in Jerusalem, before any Christians died or fell away. It will be assembled once again when all of the saved are gathered around the throne of God in heaven. Until then, it is just a theoretical construct.

### **The Local Church**

If we want to find a church in Scripture that has a more than theoretical existence, we must look to the local church. We see clearly that the idea of a local church exists from Galatians 1:1-2. Here, Paul is writing a letter to the churches of Galatia. This cannot be about the universal church. As we've seen, there is only one universal church for all times and all places, and here, Paul is referring to churches in the plural. Therefore, He must be talking about local churches, collections of Christians who literally assembled together throughout the Roman province of Galatia. Before we go on, notice that Paul does not use the word "church" to describe a building or an institution. A local church does not have some independent existence apart from the people who are its members. The church is the people.

We also learn that according to God's plan, local churches are to be **HEADED BY ELDERS AND DEACONS**. Look at the organization laid out by Paul in Philippians 1:1. In other words, everyone in the church in Philippi was either a saint, which is just another way the Bible describes ordinary Christians, an elder, or a deacon. Anyone who is willing to obey the gospel can become a saint, but it's more difficult to become an elder or a deacon. The Bible describes the qualifications for these church offices in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The word "deacon" itself is just a transliteration of a Greek word for "servant", and that tells us what the role of the deacon is. He serves in the church.

The elder's role is more complex than that, but its essence is captured in 1 Peter 5:1-2. He is to shepherd the flock of God which is around him. Christ, of course, is the Chief Shepherd, and it is He who gives the elders authority in the church. They have no right to go beyond what has been written. Instead, their role is to be sub-shepherds under the direction of Jesus. They make the day-to-day decisions that feed the flock, cause it to grow, and protect it from harm. There is no mention in Scripture of some kind of "lead elder", who has more authority and say than the other elders of the church. Instead, all of the elders, and there must be more than one, share equally in the shepherding.

We must also recognize from this passage, that the authority of the elder is limited even beyond this description of his work. Elders are only instructed to care for the sheep of the church where they are elders. An elder from one church has no spiritual authority over a Christian from another church. Just as there is no such thing Scripturally as a "lead elder", there is no such thing Scripturally as a "super-elder", an elder who has authority over more than one congregation of the Lord's people. It may well be that God chose not to create such an office because He believed that it would concentrate too much power in a single, fallible human, or even a council of humans. As always, the silence of the Scripture on this point is decisive. We are not permitted to have church leaders with authority beyond the local church.

The Bible also teaches us that the work of the local church is to **SUPPORT THE TRUTH**. This idea appears in 1 Timothy 3:15. As we implied earlier, the universal church, per se, doesn't actually do anything. Instead, Christ accomplishes His work through the actions of Christians who are associated with local churches. This work is the proclamation of the gospel to the lost and the building up of the saved. The church was never intended to be a benevolent organization. It was never intended to be a social organization. Instead, at its core, God designed it to be a teaching organization. If we are indeed a local church faithful to our Lord, that is where our focus will be. That's not to say that helping poor people isn't worth doing. That's not to say that having fun with friends isn't worth doing. However, they pale in comparison next to the importance of saving souls and keeping them saved. It's reasonable to conclude that the church has such a narrow focus because any other work than those would only be a distraction.

For our last point, we must turn again to the silence of the Scripture to conclude that the local church is **ORGANIZATIONALLY INDEPENDENT**. The churches of the first century were friendly to one another. They exchanged letters that the apostles had sent to them. In some instances, they even supported preachers who were working with another congregation. However, never do we see them establishing any formal coordinating body. The apostles had authority in more than one church, but that authority was based on their inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and in any event, the apostles are no longer with us today. We never get even a hint that the churches of Galatia banded together into the Galatian Church Synod. We never see the churches of Macedonia forming the Macedonian Church Association. Instead, no congregation took orders from any other congregation or group of people outside of the apostles. They were autonomous and independent, which is what we must be if we wish to imitate them.