

# **WHAT WE BELIEVE AND TEACH ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH**

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In the mid sixties A.D., the apostle Paul left Titus behind on the island of Crete for the purpose of seeing to it that the church was properly organized. Paul wrote to Titus, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee” (Titus 1:5). Any doubt but that the church was organized identically throughout the world in the first century when under the guidance of inspired apostles is dispelled when I Corinthians 4:17 is consulted, “For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.” On Paul’s first missionary journey “they had ordained them elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). The Lord’s church at Philippi was a fully organized congregation with both bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Therefore, a fully organized congregation in the first century enjoyed the services of both elders and deacons because every city where there was a congregation of the Lord’s people that had men who met the Scriptural qualifications had elders, and every congregation within a particular city that had men who met the Scriptural qualifications had elders to oversee its work and worship.

## **The Pattern**

The New Testament is the all-sufficient pattern for the complete organization of the local congregation. Christians make up the “house” of Christ as the writer of Hebrews taught, “And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:5-6). The house of Christ is organized after the law of the Lord according to Isaiah 2:1-3, “The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” Like the Old Testament Law, the New

Testament constitutes a pattern to be followed by men living today. Again, Hebrews reads, “Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount” (Heb. 8:5). Paul taught that this pattern was all-sufficient when he said, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (II Tim. 3:16-17).

### **Substitutes Not Accepted**

The majority of the various religions claiming affinity with Jesus Christ have manuals, creeds, catechisms, disciplines, or guides which have been written by men from which the organization of the many denominations has emerged. These substitutions (or alterations) for the New Testament pattern are not tolerated by those who have learned that the Lord’s pattern cannot be improved upon. And, in fact, Jesus taught, “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9).

### **Elders**

As has already been presented, every local congregation that was fully organized in the New Testament had elders. Since so little is known by those who favor the Christian religion about what the Bible actually teaches on the subject, Acts 20:17-32 is offered as a basis for understanding the Lord’s teaching on the eldership. Six English words are translated from three Greek words (two for each word) for those who are commonly called “elders.” The significance of this text in Acts is that all three of these Greek words appear and all three refer to the one set or group of elders from Ephesus with whom Paul met at Miletus. The six English words are “elder” or “presbyter” [one who is older], “bishop” or “overseer,” and “pastor” [i.e., “shepherd”] or “one who feeds” [the flock]. These six words are all used of one eldership, therefore, they do not apply to someone outside of the congregation at Ephesus. It is true and continues to be readily observable that these words are abused today by those who make, for example, a bishop refer to one who supervises two or perhaps more separate congregations. Some speak of a “presiding bishop” meaning one man from among the eldership who is selected or appointed, whether by himself or the group, to alone bear the distinction of being a bishop. There is no Scriptural foundation for such practices, and those who engage in them sin by violating the inspired pattern for the organization of the Lord’s church.

Additionally, the word “pastor” is commonly lifted from its context and made to apply to one man who alone is responsible for the teaching and supervision or oversight of a local congregation. This arrangement, too, is sinful and for the same reason as the former abuse already noted. “Pastor” Adrian Rogers, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention (fifteen million members) rightly argued before the convention the Scriptural teaching which denies women the right to serve in the role, yet he himself does not have the right to serve alone as “pastor” of the Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis because the New Testament never allows one pastor to serve a local congregation. It is always “pastors” plural. In this way so many stand in flagrant violation of God’s will for the organization of the church.

### **Qualifications**

Not just anyone can serve as an elder within a local church. Each one who serves must meet the qualifications. Here is where so many churches stray. They take it upon themselves to make up qualifications and print them in their disciplines and manuals of church organization. There is no need for that because God has provided in his word all the information necessary for the complete furnishing of the good work of local supervision under the head of the church who is Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). The passages which must be given much prayerful consideration and serious thought before anyone is appointed to the position of elder within a local congregation are Titus chapter one and I Timothy chapter three.

### **Duties**

The duties of the elders are vividly portrayed as seen in the duties of a shepherd over a flock. Peter used this imagery in I Peter 5:1-6 wherein he also outlined the responsibility of the flock to be submissive and for all to be humble.

The preacher, teachers, deacons, and members all serve under the guidance of the elders as they serve under Christ and uphold his sacred word.