

Lesson 4: *Organization of Church of Christ*

The Catholic church is famous for its worldwide hierarchy which peaks in the office of “Pope,” a seat fully unknown to Peter or any of the other apostles who walked with Jesus. Protestantism has generally erected a similar type of organization in which local congregations forfeit their scriptural autonomy to leaders with power over regions or the whole. Any church that follows the New Testament, however, will respect the pattern for organization and governing found in God’s will.

When there were no denominations during the writing of the New Testament, every church was of Christ and was autonomous (self-ruling) from every other local congregation. In Catholicism today, local groups are part of a regional diocese which answers ultimately to one man with total authority over every member, the Pope. Protestant denominations also contribute funds and authority to regional and universal powers that direct the local groups from afar.

There were numerous congregations in the New Testament but it is impossible to identify anything approaching the forfeiture of local congregational autonomy that we witness today. A local church chooses its own elders, deacons and preachers. It disciplines its own members and chooses how to expend its treasury according to Bible authority and expediency. No outside board or convention has any right to mandate what these decisions should be.

“And he gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). The office of apostle was filled by a finite number of men on the pages of the New Testament and individual seats were not filled once that apostle died (Acts 12:2), save for that of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1). Because prophecy involves a miraculous gift and all those have now ceased (1 Cor. 13:8-13), the only prophets in the church of Christ are found in the New Testament and all are deceased.

Evangelists are those who proclaim the gospel and we have numerous examples of them (Barnabas, Philip, Timothy, etc.). They may be itinerant or located in their work and have the right to be supported by those whom they teach (1 Cor. 9:14). He may also choose to labor in secular work to aid in his support, as did Paul who sometimes made tents for a living. Paul carefully lays out the role of the evangelist in writing the young evangelist in 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Evangelists who strayed into false teaching were openly reprovved or exposed if they refused to make correction (2 Tim. 2:16-18).

Pastor is not synonymous with evangelist or preacher. The word “pastor” means “shepherd” very obviously and the work of shepherding in the church is given to the elders (Acts 20:28; synonymous also with bishops, overseers and presbyters). An eldership was always composed of a plurality of men (Acts 14:23) and their qualifications can be found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Their authority did not extend beyond the local congregation which they served (Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:2). They were not considered to be infallible (1 Tim. 5:19-20) and the Bible never indicates chief elders or regional elders.

Teachers are distinct from evangelists in that they may instruct on a smaller scale in class or personal situations (Heb. 5:12). Deacons are servants of the church and must also be qualified according to the scriptures (1 Tim. 3). Members of the church are likened to the parts of a body (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

Denominations are built upon their creeds, but the church of Christ has no written creed, save for the New Testament.

1. Who is the head of the church of Christ (Eph. 1:1:22-23)? Who is the head of the Catholic church?
2. How has Protestantism mimicked the unscriptural organization of the Roman Catholic apostasy?
3. What does “local congregational autonomy” mean?
4. Does the history of the church of Christ include apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19-20)?
5. Consider 2 Timothy 4:1-5. What are evangelists to preach? What does it mean to be “ready in season and out of season”?
6. Some churches forbid their preachers to do any secular work while others demand it. What is the proper scriptural position?
7. Give the four terms that can be used interchangeably with “pastors”. What is their role, according to 1 Peter 5:2-3? What does this include?
8. Catholicism appoints one bishop to rule all the churches of a region. Give the scripture that authorizes this plan.
9. Why is it important for the elder to be married and have children (1 Tim. 3:4-5)?
10. How does the church deal with preachers who teach error?
11. Would the concept of congregational autonomy be violated if many churches sent their funds to one centralized eldership who made decisions about how to spend it? Why or why not?
12. Do you have a copy of the official creed of the church of Christ? What is it called?
13. Give the scripture that requires preachers be schooled and ordained by some artificial standard.