

# **GOD'S ORGANIZATION *for* THE CHURCH**

■ ***By James E. Gibbons***

**SOME SAY** that God has no set organization for the church. They say it just happened, coming about in an evolutionary way. The apostles preached, and men were selected to serve tables when the need arose. We are told that the organization of the church was simply copied from the synagogue as the need arose. They had a church council to consider problems when the need arose. Later on the strong organization of the Catholic Church developed as the need arose for such an organization. Thus, we are told, whatever organization that is "needed" to get the job done is okay—there is no set plan.

We do not believe these statements. Yes, there is a sense in which the Holy Spirit led the early church into all truth step by step (John 16:13; I Corinthians 13:9,10; and this would include the organization of the church, which also perhaps was prefigured in a sense in the setup of the synagogue), but there is also such a thing as falling away from the truth after they had been led and established in it. The situation is not a matter of evolution, but of revelation. Once God's plan has been unfolded, that is the way He wants it, and that is the way we must carry it out if we are to be found faithful to Him.

It is unreasonable to think that God has no plan for the organization of the church and that it just happened. God is a God of order and precision. This can be seen by looking at the heavenly bodies and the exact movement of the earth and planets; by taking note of the times and seasons. The organization of the human body is an amazing thing with its various interrelated and synchronized systems. Even the structure of a single living cell is a wonder. God is a God of order. Paul declared in I Corinthians

14:33 that “God is not the author of confusion,” then he stated in verse 40, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” It is unreasonable to think that God would plan the church from eternity and have no arrangement in the plan for its corporate function. It is unreasonable to think that Christ would give the great commission with no plan for its execution. This is not the way God works. “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18).

The Scriptures claim for themselves that they will make us completely furnished unto all good works, and at the same time they tell us about God’s organization for the church. “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, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:16,17). We are told that God “hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). Then amidst all the wonderful teachings of the Scriptures we also find teachings on the organization and function of the church. Ephesians 4:11 tells us that Christ “GAVE” these various offices of responsibility and leadership to the church. If he gave them they are divine in origin, and God has spoken on this subject. Acts 20:28 tells us that the Holy Spirit had “MADE” these men elders in the local church. That being the case, this office and the implied organization did not originate with man, but God. The inspired pen of Paul tells us more things about this organization in Philippians 1:1, and in other places we find the exact qualifications for officers in the church (I Timothy 3; Titus 1). All of this is of God. God has spoken.

## **I. THE NATURE OF GOD’S ORGANIZATION FOR THE CHURCH**

### **The Church is a Kingdom**

Jesus Christ is the seed of David who would reign upon the throne of David (and the church is the kingdom). God said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen; I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations” (Psalms 89:3,4). With announcement of the coming birth of Jesus, the angel said, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:32,33). John the Baptist came preaching, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus took up the same message (Matthew 4:17). Upon Peter’s great confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus made a statement: “. . . Upon this rock (this truth) I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. . .” (Matthew 16:18,19). Here the word “church” and the expression “kingdom of heaven” are used interchangeably. They are the same. Jesus said in Mark 9:1, “Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.” On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 this was realized. Referring to a prophecy of David, Peter said on that day that God “would raise up Christ to sit on his (David’s) throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ” (Acts 2:30,31). Then he tells them that Jesus had ascended to heaven where he was seated with authority on the right hand of God. This great declaration follows: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36). Yes, Jesus had been raised to sit on the throne of David with his resurrection and ascension to heaven and is now reigning over his kingdom, the church, with all power and authority (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-23). Men are now in the kingdom (Colossians 1:13; John 3:5; Matthew 18:3). All Christians are the spiritual heirs and seed of Abraham (Romans 2:28,29; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7,8; 6:16). The church is the kingdom.

We need to keep all of this in mind, or we are forever doomed in understanding the nature of the organization and function of the church. That authority for the organization, and the authority exercised by those who govern in the organization of the church, is not derived from the governed (the people) but from the KING—the church is a KINGDOM (not a democracy). The authority comes from above, not below. Authority is delegated by the ONE who has all authority (Matthew 28:18; Mark 13:34). However, we need to always remember exercising authority in the kingdom of Christ is very different from the world (Matthew 20:25,26). Since the authority is delegated, and since the kingdom is spiritual, the authority is not so much in the office as in the Word as it is lived and as it is used in exercising the office (Christ has all authority, and He governs His church by His Word). Also, the church is a kingdom of kings and priests unto God—the priesthood of believers must fit into the scheme and system of things (Revelation 1:6; I Peter 2:5,9).

### **The Principle of Simplicity**

Keep in mind the teachings of Christ are characterized by simplicity (no flesh is to glory in His presence)—so we can expect the same in connection with the organization of the church. II Corinthians 11:3 speaks of “the simplicity that is in Christ.” Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:27-31, “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And



base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. . . That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." Whether it be the old rugged cross, his humble followers, or the organization of the church, all are governed by the same principles. So when we come to the organization of the church, it is found to be very simple (in fact, we will find that the local church is all there is to it). We do not find a vast organization where men may vaunt themselves and exercise human authority (Matthew 20:25,26).

The church is a spiritual kingdom, a simple but powerful force in the hearts and lives of men and women. We are a kingdom of "kings and priests" unto God. People who are strong people under the impact of the personal rule and government of KING JESUS need little human government. However, it seems that when the personal government of Christ is weak or not felt at all in religious circles, men seek a strong ecclesiastical organization to hold the people together and to accomplish their ends.

### **The Organization of the Church is Locally Based and Autonomous**

Corporately speaking, the church has ITS BEING locally. When the New Testament makes reference to Christ's followers in an organized sense in the whole world, or in any given region, it is never THE CHURCH, but CHURCHES. There is no such thing as a universal church or a national church. There is no such thing as a church organization in any sense of the word on a state, regional, or district basis (just the local, autonomous church is all that we find in the inspired Scriptures). Yes, Jesus said, "I will build my church," but he is speaking of the whole church in a general sense and did not have reference to a collective unit or organization. When we read the New Testament Scriptures about Christ's followers in an area, it was never THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, but CHURCHES OF CHRIST (Romans 16:16). It was never THE CHURCH OF MACEDONIA, but THE CHURCHES OF MACEDONIA (II Corinthians 8:1). It was never THE CHURCH OF ASIA, but THE CHURCHES OF ASIA (THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA) (I Corinthians 16:19; Revelation 1:4). It was never THE CHURCH OF GALATIA, but THE CHURCHES OF GALATIA (Galatians 1:2). It was never THE CHURCH OF JUDAEA, but THE CHURCHES OF JUDAEA (Galatians 1:22). And so we could go on!

Beloved, this is not without significance—in fact, it is very significant! This means the followers of Christ in the world or any given area were not welded together by an ecclesiastical organization on a universal scale, nor on the basis of some political region—but that each church was locally based, independent,

and autonomous in its church life and government. Each was a complete entity within itself—the only entity. Therefore, we read the following: “The church of God which is at Corinth” (I Corinthians 1:2); “The church of the Thessalonians” (I Thessalonians 1:1); etc.

Colossians 4:16 and Philippians 4:15 are also significant references. Philippians 4:15 is especially significant. The latter part of this latter reference reads: “NO CHURCH communicated with me concerning giving and receiving, but ye only.” By CHURCH he means the local church, for he is saying this in contrast with the local Philippians church, and this implies that Paul was not expecting CHURCHES (as a group) to communicate as an organized singular unit to support him—for the extent of the government and organization of the church was only local. (Yes, this implies that he was not expecting help from an organized unit such as a district or national church, nor from local churches working through a crystalized district or other organization beyond their local boundries: NO CHURCH communicated).

Thus, the only way we can speak of Christ’s followers in the world in an organizational sense (when speaking of more than one congregation) is to speak of them as “CHURCHES OF CHRIST.” To think in terms of “THE CHURCH OF CHRIST” is to move in the direction of denominationalism.

### **The Local, Autonomous Organization of the Church**

A composite picture of the organization of the local church is seen in Philippians 1:1. Paul and Timothy, who had helped get the church started there, are writing a letter to this local church: “to ALL THE SAINTS in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the BISHOPS and DEACONS.” Paul was a preacher who had been sent out by the local church in Antioch of Syria (Acts 13). A local church in central Asia Minor had likewise sent Timothy out to be a preacher (evangelist) of the gospel with Paul (I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 4:5). So these two preachers, assisted at the time by Silas and Luke, had helped get the church going in Philippi. The church had now reached the point of maturity where it had leaders in an organizational sense, and they are identified as bishops and deacons.

Ephesians 4:11 is another revealing verse: “And he (CHRIST) gave some, APOSTLES; and some, PROPHETS; and some, EVANGELISTS, and some, PASTORS AND TEACHERS.” Of course, the first two mentioned, apostles and prophets, were extraordinary offices, have served their purposes, and passed away (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; I Corinthians 13:8; etc.). They are not filled by living men on earth today. However, inspired writings of these men guide the churches today. The other offices are permanent and enduring in nature.

He gave some, **EVANGELISTS** (messengers of the local church sent out into the world to carry out the good news of the great commission: as Paul (who also was an apostle) and Timothy—Acts 13; Acts 16:1-3; I Corinthians 16:10; Ephesians 4:7-11; I Timothy 4:14; 1:18—II Timothy 4:5). As ambassadors of Christ, and the local churches, these men spearheaded the work of Christ in new areas. Souls were won, churches were started, and brought to a point of maturity where they could carry on with their own leadership. This work was repeated time and time again. Evangelists might even work for a while with established churches, but their work was not to be confused with the next office.

He gave some, **PASTORS AND TEACHERS** (these are two functions of the “some,” having reference to the one office). These men are likewise called **ELDERS** (Acts 14:23), **BISHOPS** (Titus 1:5-9), and **PASTORS** (I Peter 5:1-4)—all talking about the same office, but different aspects of its work. The extent of their governing is the local church (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1-4). They are over all phases of the work of the church, both “spiritual” and “material” (Acts 20:28; Acts 11:29,30). The church is to submit to its mature and faithful leadership (Hebrews 13:17).

**DEACONS** were also mentioned in Philippians 1:1, and their qualifications (along with the elder) are given in I Timothy 3. They are not “rulers,” but servants (as their name suggests) to help the church and assist the elders as needed.

According to Ephesians 4:11,12,16, the leaders are to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Check various translations on this. This involves the priesthood of believers (I Peter 2:5,9). In other words, Christ wants every Christian to get to work. The church has no clergy or laity, only leaders and a priesthood of believers.

Because of the priesthood of believers the church can function as a church before it has ordained officers (leaders) (Acts 14:23).

## **II. THE FAILURE OF MEN TO FOLLOW GOD’S ORGANIZATION FOR THE CHURCH**

### **Tremendous Success and Failure**

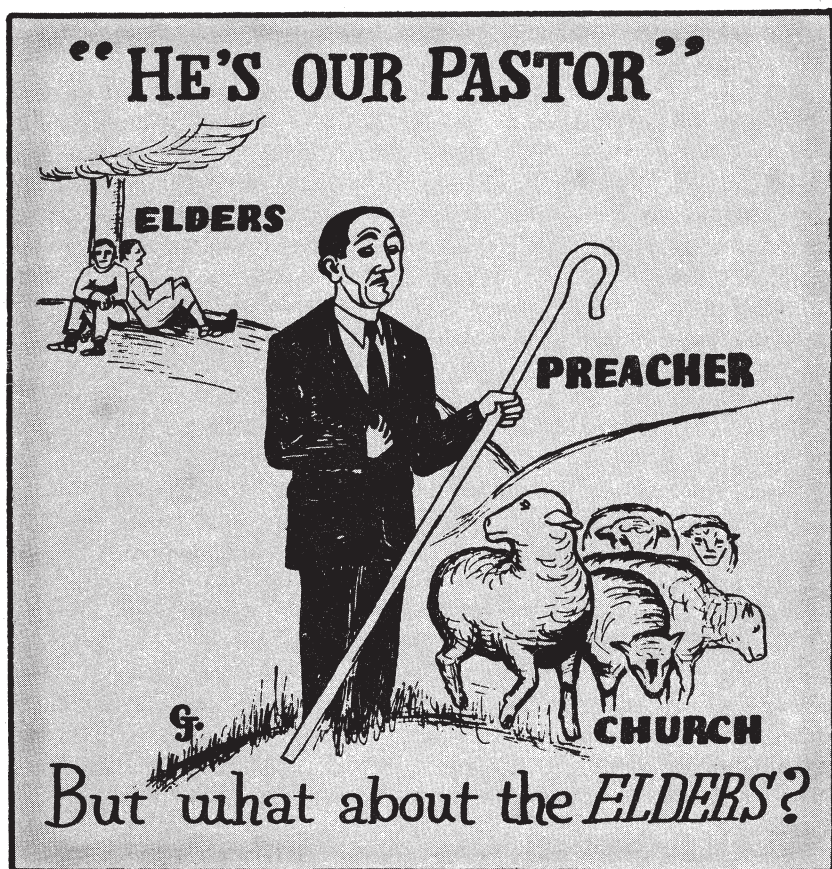
With this God-given organization (animated by His Spirit) the early church saw tremendous success. Our study of God’s Word has made us conclude that the church’s functions are in the areas of worship, evangelism, edification, and benevolence. It’s main thrust was in evangelism and edification. The great commission said to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Read Colossians 1:23 and Romans 10:18 and see if we are matching their success and accomplishments today. They successfully accomplished all of these things through the simple, local, autonomous church. This was done through the local church with its



elders and deacons. This was accomplished as evangelists were sent out from the local church. This was accomplished by means of the priesthood of all believers. They uprooted the pagan Roman Empire and in its place planted the seed of heaven. They turned the tide of corrupt humanity and world history.

They did this without the "HELP" of any man-made religious organization. All they had was the church as it came from God (Ephesians 3:10; I Timothy 3:15). They had no man-made missionary societies or evangelizing organizations—*just the church!* They had no Sunday School organizations or Bible Colleges—*just the church!* They had not a single one of the numerous religious organizations that keep appearing on the scene today—*just the church!*

Maybe *that* is our problem. We are told that such organizations are the servants of the church. There is something terribly wrong here. In the first century of Christianity *the church was the servant* and look what they got done! If we won't do what the Lord



wants us personally to do, and try to put it off on a servant, we have missed the whole point. Therein lies the difference between the New Testament church and that which passes itself off as such today!

But men failed. They didn't continue to follow God's organization. If the early church was such a success with God's plan of church government the only thing that could bring about a change would be apostasy, and that's exactly what happened. Paul warned the Ephesians elders that even of their own number men would arise speaking perverse things (Acts 20:28-31). Men like Diotrefes, who loved to have the preeminence, seized control of the church (III John 9,10). With a gradual apostasy II Thessalonians 2:1-8 was finally fulfilled with the pope at the head of the apostate organization, an organization modeled very much after the old Roman Empire. Now they had a different doctrine and a different organization for the church.

### **Failure to Follow God's Organization Today**

We are made to ask why men fail to follow God's organization for the church today.

Modified versions of the Catholic system have been carried over into denominational churches by unthinking people. The clergy/laity concept still prevails among people with their "RIGHT REVERENDS." People think that the kind of organization doesn't matter—just whatever we want (they don't respect or listen to the Bible). The original change in the organization of the church came about in connection with apostasy in areas of doctrine and this falling away continues. We can't expect people to want to have the organization right when they aren't concerned enough to get their doctrine right.

We take a look in so-called Restoration circles. The so-called RESTORATION MOVEMENT of the last century saw an effort of men to forsake man-made religious organizations for the church. Alexander Campbell spoke out against man-made religious organizations and societies to start with. But he later changed his position, and by the time of his death the foundational groundwork had been fully laid for the organizational structure of the Disciples denomination. A lot of people came out of denominationalism but it seems that denominationalism had not come out of a lot of them. Finding it rather hard to put God's organization into practice, they felt more secure having a denominational status to fall back onto. Erroneous practices still persist today in the full-fledged DISCIPLES DENOMINATION and in their reactionary counterpart, the INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (which aren't so reactionary anymore)—and it also can be seen among NON-INSTRUMENT CHURCHES.



## **Why Men Forsake God's Organization (Who Have Once Followed it)**

Generally speaking, why would men forsake God's organization who have once known it? Here are some possibilities.

God's organization requires complete conversion, fully qualified leaders, and the priesthood of all believers to work successfully. In these times of much worldly influence upon the church it is easier to forsake than it is to put God's organization into practice. Some preachers begin to compromise on other things and no longer respect the Bible as they once did—so why bother and be so strict about the organization?

Some people simply want a denominational status. They talk about OUR conventions, OUR colleges, etc. But any organization beyond what God has given is denominationalism; any gathering or convention claiming to represent the churches or speak for them in any sense is ecclesiasticism and denominationalism. God has not given such authority and woe be to the person who is so presumptuous as to assume it. (Although it is not on a par with the Disciples conventions, this statement found in the North American Christian Convention publication of September, 1956 illustrates this point: It said: "...any man not in sympathy with the procedure of this gathering will be manifesting in no uncertain manner the fact that he is out of step with the great Restoration movement." The church, corporately speaking (and Scripturally speaking), does not exist beyond the bounds of the local church (as an organization). No man, or group of men, have the authority to claim to speak for those local churches, set up a rally or convention, and make such statements. It is pure ecclesiasticism for anyone to prefix the name of a gathering, convention, or anything beyond reference to the local church (in other words, prefix it with an area, regional, or national name). It gives the impression that they have the authority to speak for or represent the churches in such a capacity. It is usurpation. If not an official, there is a quasi-official position assumed in the eyes of the brethren and certainly such an impression is made on the world. It would appear that a person was out of step with the brotherhood if he did not support such gatherings. It is our conviction that if we are ever to be successful in our efforts at restoration, we must divest ourselves of such terminology (as well as practice). It all represents a move away from the local church, which is wrong.

Some supposedly well-meaning people, seeing the local church is not getting the job done, try to get it done some other way. Some churches, which have elders who are not qualified and functioning (and don't know any better), have the denominational PREACHER/PASTOR/CLERGY system (and the "preacher"

may not know any better either). Then among some people, because the local church and it's leadership have not accepted their God-given responsibility of evangelism, missionary societies have been started within and beyond the local church. And some churches have really wanted qualified elders and have held off ordaining unqualified men, but in the meantime, having never practiced the priesthood of believers so that leadership could develop, have in *de facto* made the "preacher" THE PASTOR. . . and he seems happy with the situation and is doing nothing to work toward the Scriptural eldership becoming a reality.

A final reason that we would like to suggest as to why some people have forsaken God's simple organization for the church (although they once stood for it) is that they are ambitious and God's organization will not fit into their scheme of things. Perhaps they want to do things and want the church to do things the Lord never intended for the church as an organization to do, so they have to form a more expansive organization (or corrupt the Lord's simple organization) to go where their expanded ambitions lead them. To some vainglorious people the local church is not a big enough platform for them to vaunt themselves. Their EGO TRIP needs something larger, something bigger, something more expansive. Then some people ("preachers") want money for their projects. They many times find they can get it from these man-made religious organizations when the church won't give it to them (they can by-pass the elders). And some people become missionaries (instead of evangelists) and start missions (instead of starting churches). Besides by-passing the Scriptures, perhaps this is more conducive to bringing in and holding on to the money.

**IN CONCLUSION**, let us admonish you to always remember God's organization for the church. It seems that men forget so soon. God has spoken on this subject, and when God speaks it is always to our best interests (as well as His) for us to listen. The simple, local, autonomous church is all that we find in the Scriptures as far as organization is concerned. The early church successfully accomplished its purpose in the world working within the framework of this organization. When our aims and aspirations are the same as God's for us we will be able to do the same thing. Let us be found faithful in that which has been committed to us. Amen! □

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# ***NOTES:***

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