

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 27, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

This is the fourth in a series of studies of things we believe and why we believe them. In New Testament times there was only one church. During the lifetime of the apostles the church was united in both faith and practice. In succeeding generations, however, unity gave way to division. Oneness became multiplicity. Today, after nineteen centuries, the original church of our Lord has been fractionated into 258 different denominations, according to the *1963 Yearbook of American Churches*.

Few things are more obvious than the fact that this was not the way that the Lord intended for his church to do. For example, on the very night of his betrayal Jesus fervently prayed, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me. And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou didst send me and lovest them, even as thou lovedst me." (John 17:20-23).

Several years after the church began, the Holy Spirit guided the apostle Paul to write, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul?" (I Cor. 1:10-13).

In view of these and similar passages emphasizing the importance of unity, the question comes, "How did the present divided condition of Christendom come about?" While it is not possible to discuss, nor even to mention all of the elements that contributed to the division, it is possible to discuss one very significant element.

First Major Departure

Church historians have often mentioned that the first major modification of Christ's original plan for his church came in the field of church government. Not only was this departure the first major departure, but it was also one of the most far-reaching because it laid the foundation for other departures. It was simply this: the plurality-of-elders-in-every-church idea gave way to the idea of "the bishop," as superior in rank to the elders of a congregation. A few generations passed and the bishop of a local congregation had become a "monarchical or diocesan bishop" with a number of congregations under his control. By the third century church historians were speaking of the bishop of Rome, the bishop of Alexandria, the bishop of Carthage, the bishop of Ephesus, the bishop of Constantinople, and the bishop of Jerusalem. Inevitably, these bishops struggled for power and eventually the bishop of Rome declared himself to be the supreme bishop, or pope, the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth. Thus there came into being a structure in the organization of the church that was completely foreign to the New Testament church as established by the Lord through the apostles in the first century A.D.

It is rather easy to see that the religious world had simply borrowed the monolithic structure of the Roman Empire. In secular affairs Rome had demonstrated a genius for organization and systematization of its political affairs. Caesar was at the top, with supreme dictatorial authority; beneath him was the Roman senate; next there were the governors of the various provinces that made up the Roman Empire; and beneath these governors were the proconsuls and other subordinate officers. This organization proved to be very efficient, and the Roman legions, directed by the Emperor of Rome, conquered most of the inhabited earth. It is no wonder that men, seeing the power and also the glory of the Roman Empire, should adopt its entire organizational setup. Thus, the pope stood at the apex of the triangle, with the college of cardinals, the various metropolitans, the various bishops, and finally the lowly parish priests beneath him. The organizational setup of the early church was entirely changed within a few short centuries.

Christ's Original Plan

Now that we have seen what men did to Christ's church, let us go back and study in some detail the original plan as given by the inspired writers of the New Testament. First of all, there was a plurality of elders in each congregation. This is shown by the fact that when Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians he began it with these words, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." (Phil. 1:1). Similarly, Paul wrote to Titus, "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge." (Titus 1:5). Originally, then, there was a plurality of elders in each local church.

At this point we need to pause and demonstrate that the terms--elders, presbyters, bishops, overseers, and pastors--are synonyms and are to be used interchangeably. The New Testament pictures a group of men, all of equal rank, ruling each congregation. As pointed out above, the first major digression came when one of the elders was elevated to a superior level of authority and took the title of bishop, to designate a rank above the elders of the church. The New Testament teaches rather that bishops were simply elders. The Bible often shows that the Holy Spirit who guided the Biblical writers anticipated erroneous doctrine and included special passages to refute false teachings even before they arose. Such is true in the case under consideration,

In the 20th chapter of Acts, we find a clear demonstration that all of these terms refer to the same group of men and that all of them were of equal rank. The apostle Paul came to the city of Miletus on his third mission Journey. We read, "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." (Acts 20:17). The Greek word, translated into English here by the word elders, is the word presbuteros. It may be translated into English either by the word elder or presbyter. Obviously these two terms are synonymous since they come from the one Greek word. When the elders or presbyters from Ephesus had come Paul delivered to them a sermon in the middle of which he said, "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28). The word translated here as bishops is from the Greek word episkopos. It may be translated into English either as bishop or overseer. Obviously bishop and overseer are interchangeable since both come from the same Greek word. Now notice that Paul called the elders or presbyters to him and then addressed them as bishops or overseers. Without question all four terms referred to the same group of men.

The New Testament also uses a third Greek word poimen, to refer to elders. It is usually translated as pastor, as in Eph. 4:11, "And he gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." The work of apostles and prophets was an inspired work, and after the first century, their work having been done, these two classes ceased to exist in the church. Evangelists, pastors (bishops, elders, presbyters, overseers), and teachers continue as the permanent organization of the church.

Qualifications

In our study of church organization it will be of value to notice the qualifications which the Lord has laid down for elders or bishops. In I Tim. 3:1-7, the apostle Paul enumerates the qualifications as follows, "Faithful is the saying, If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. The bishop therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, orderly, given to hospitality, apt to teach; no brawler, no striker; but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money; one that ruleth well his own house, having [his] children in subjection with all gravity; (but if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) not a novice, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have good testimony from them that are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." A similar list of qualifications for elders is found in Titus 1:5-9, and in I Peter 5:4.

While we have not the time to discuss the matter with any degree of thoroughness, for the record's sake, we need to mention that working under the elders there are also deacons, evangelists and teachers. The deacons are younger men who are to serve in any capacity that the elders direct them. The evangelists are preachers of the gospel, whose duty it is to declare and explain the gospel of Christ. Teachers, likewise, are to guide and instruct from the word of God. When these additional offices in the church have been named, the structure of the Lord's church, as outlined in the New Testament is complete. There is no other office in the church; there is no other structure.

Each Congregation Autonomous

It is quite clear that the New Testament conception of the church is one of autonomous congregations, with no central organization linking these churches together. Instead of a vertical or monolithic structure such as the Roman church, Christ's church has a horizontal organization. Congregations exist side by side, but independent of each other. They can cooperate with each other, assist each other, and encourage each other, but no one congregation (or its elders) has the right to control or dominate any other congregation.

In the eyes of men this seems a rather weak system, for man likes big things, things that can be controlled from the top in an impressive and immediate manner. After all, wasn't the Roman Empire very efficient? Caesar could give a command and within a matter of a few days it would be carried out throughout the entire Empire. Similarly, the pope can make a declaration and within a few short hours the entire Roman Catholic world has modified its faith and practice to suit the Pope's new directive. Is this not impressive?

It is just at this point that we can see the wisdom of God in using the other system. With the monolithic structure of the Roman Catholic church, it is possible by corrupting the Pope--either doctrinally or morally--to contaminate the entire organization. Whereas, on the other hand, if the elders of one local congregation become contaminated either doctrinally or morally, it means only the loss of that one church. Each other congregation stands firmly in the path of truth, unaffected by the digression of the neighboring church.

To put it in the form of an illustration, we might call attention to the oil fields of any of our oil producing states. Near the huge refineries that handle the crude oil there are often scores of large storage tanks. These are usually in neat rows separated from each other by a reasonable extent of open land. If lightning should strike one of these tanks and fire should destroy its contents, the other

tanks remain undamaged because they are separated by a protective area of open country. This is the reason that the oil is not put in one great reservoir. It is a safeguard. It is a matter of security. Similarly, when God planned the organization of his church he planned it in such a way that it could not be swept into error in one quick stroke. The New Testament church is in some respects like a pontoon bridge. In such a bridge the destruction of one pontoon does not materially affect the other pontoons that support the bridge.

It is also interesting by way of comparison to remember that of the three major organizations ordained by God--the home, the church, and secular government, the home is also autonomous. Each family is independent under God from all of the other families in the neighborhood or in the city. The father and the mother and the children make up a separate unit. The father is the head of his own family, not a score of families or a city of families.

Conclusion

We have been dedicated for a long time to the principle, "Let us speak where the Bible speaks and keep silent where the Bible is silent." This principle applies also in the area of church organization. Let us simply accept the wise structure of Christ's church as outlined in the New Testament. In its simplest terms it is as follows: (1) Christ is the head of the church. (2) He rules through his inspired word, the Bible. (3) The elders, or bishops, or presbyters, or overseers, or pastors are Christ's administrators, operating under the Bible and under the headship of Christ. (4) Beneath the elders are deacons, evangelists and teachers. This is the total structure of the New Testament church.

If this organization had been respected through the centuries, much of the religious division of our day would have been avoided. Also, most of the false doctrines that have splintered the religious world would not have been brought into the church. It is safe to conclude that if God's original plan for the organization of the church had been respected, millions more would have been saved.