

A Study of The Local Church
Lesson 5 - The Organization God Gave the Local Church

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Introduction: Let us review our previous studies.

- A. Our attitudes will determine whether or not God's word will direct our lives.
 - 1. If we are willing we can know God's will. (**Jn 7:17**)
 - 2. Are you willing to be tested by the word of God?
- B. The solution to our differences lies in an understanding of Bible **authority**.
 - 1. We will stand before God and be judged by our willingness to stand within the law of God (**Mt. 7:21-23**)
 - 2. This means respecting the silence of the scriptures. (**Rev 22:18-19**)
 - 3. This stand has been ridiculed by many through the years but provides the only way to unity among brethren and acceptable service to God.
 - 4. We must then have authority (book, chapter, verse) for our practices. (**Col 3:17**)
- C. We must recognize the difference between the Universal church (**Mt 16:18**) and the local church. (**Rom 16:16**)
 - 1. We must not **confuse terms!**
 - 2. Only one is a functional body.
- D. There is a difference between the work of the individual Christian and the local church.
- E. We must abide within only those works authorized for the local church by the Lord.
 - 1. The local church is authorized by the scriptures to:
 - a. Preach the gospel (**2 Cor 11:8**)
 - b. Edify its members (**Eph 4:11-12**)
 - c. Relieve its members (**1 Cor 16:1-4**)
 - 2. The work therefore of the local church is:
 - a. That which is authorized for the local church to do.
 - b. That which is completely the work of the church.
 - c. That which the church may use its resources to support.
- F. In this lesson we will determine what organization is given for the local church.

I. Departures in God's will on organization has plagued the church historically.

- A. God provided for a local organization only! (**Phil 1:1; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 3:1, 8; 1 Pt 5:1-2**)
- B. Consider the departures that produced the Catholic Church and the Christian Church.
- C. God's Organization is sufficient! (**2 Tim 3:16-17**)

II. What Does Local Oversight Mean?

- A. Brethren often speak of the autonomy of the local church.
 - 1. This is a Bible concept which indicates self government (**Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; 1 Pt 5:2**)
 - 2. What has God chosen?
- B. What does Oversight mean?
 - 1. It cannot mean functioning as a lawgiver! (**Jas 4:12; Col 1:18; Eph 1:22-23**)
 - 2. **episcopos** - an overseer, a man charged with the duty of seeing that things done by others are done rightly. (Thayer, p. 243)
 - 3. Those who oversee must abide within the authority of God.

C. Consider the areas involved in local oversight.

1. There is the care and discipline of members (**Heb 13:17**)
 - a. This involves teaching. (**Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 3:2**)
 - b. This involves discipline. (**1 Cor 5:1-5, 2 Thess 3:6**)
 - c. This is the responsibility of the local church to its own members!
2. All of these things requires planning.
 - a. No one else has this responsibility for another church.
 - b. In preaching as well as in other areas of God's work, the local church must be responsible for selecting the men it uses! (**Acts 6:3**)

III. Bible Examples of a Local church doing its Work

- A. A local church may send out a preacher to a certain work. (**Acts 11:22**)
- B. Local churches may support a man in another area. (**Phil 4:15-16; 1:4-7; 2 Cor 11:8**)
- C. A local church may select men to assist in meeting a benevolent need. (**Acts 6:3-4**)
- D. A local church may send money to another church that is in need. (**1 Cor 16:1-4**)
- E. A local church when in need may receive funds from another church to use to relieve that need. (**Acts 11:30**)
- F. A local church can study God's word and solve its problems! (**Acts 15:2, 5-7**)
- G. Everything God assigned to the local church can be carried out through this organization!

IV. Violations of the Autonomy of the Local Church

- A. Autonomy may be surrendered in two possible ways.
 1. There may be coercion and pressure from others.
 2. It may be voluntarily surrendered.
 3. When part or the whole of work God gave the local church is surrendered to another organization, then the local autonomy of that church has been violated!
- B. Additions of organizations smaller than the local church
 1. It is possible to have Bible classes become a separate organization! The Christian church had "Ladies Aid Societies" that did this.
 2. Many "Bus Ministries" and "Campaigns" have become separate organizations.
- C. Additions of organizations larger than the local church
 1. The Christian church had the missionary society!
 2. Today brethren believe it is right for a local church to make contributions to colleges, orphan homes and independent evangelistic organizations to do its work.
- D. Why do brethren seek to arrange these centralized efforts?
 1. Some say it is more efficient. Is it really?
 2. Often we are 10 years behind whatever the denominations are doing.
 3. These large efforts have an appeal to the flesh.
 4. What does Bible history tells us? (**1 Sam 8:4-7**)

V. Centralized Organizations are a sure sign of decay and apostasy

- A. When a church seeks to do its work through other organization it is giving up its unique responsibility.
 1. Often when people fail in their individual duties they want someone else to do it! Often this is behind many who seek the help of organizations.

2. Historians know this is a sure sign of stagnation.
- B. Satan always brings the church into apostasy when local autonomy is surrendered.
 1. Apostasy is gradual but follows a certain course. (**2 Tim 4:3-5**)
 2. Consider the wisdom of God in overcoming apostasy. Human organizations eventually gain great power and influence! They will later use it for their own selfish interest!

Conclusion: God's organization is sufficient to do God's work.

- A. Let us recognize His wisdom and be busy in His work.
- B. Let us not be ashamed of God's ways.

Preserving Distinctive Church Organization

James P. Needham

In such passages as **Eph. 4:3; 1 Tim. 6:20 and 1 Cor. 11:2**, Christians are charged with the awesome responsibility to "keep" (preserve) the faith "as delivered." Christians in almost every generation have failed to discharge this duty.

The charge to preserve the distinctive church organization revealed in the New Testament seems to be a most difficult one. Most apostasies in the church have begun within its organizational structure, just as Paul prophesied (**Acts 20:28-30; 2 Thess. 2:24**).

Perversions of church organization take on two dimensions: (1) Local, and (2) Universal. Paul's warnings of organizational perversions in **Acts 20** were delivered to the elders of a local church. Those he prophesied in **2 Thess. 2:2-4** are of universal dimension since the "man of sin" would usurp the place of God in "the temple of God." Apostasies usually begin in the local church and from there proceed to universal-church perversions.

The formation of the missionary society in 1849 was an effort to remodel the organization of the church - to shift from a local to a universal structure. Alexander Campbell, in arguing for the society said, "A church can do what an individual cannot, and so can a district of churches do what a single congregation cannot" (MILLENNIAL HARBINGER, 1831).

W. K. Pendleton, another advocate of universal church action said: "We fear that the large conception of the church universal is too little realized by many Christians of the present day. Their idea of the church and of the responsibilities and work of the church circle too much within the limits of the local congregation" (MILLENNIAL HARBINGER, 1866).

It was this kind of thinking that led to the formation and promotion of organizational perversions in the last century.

But, alas, the children of those who were willing to oppose this kind of thinking to the division of the church now have become its most avid proponents. This is made clear in a recent book entitled, *THE MIRROR OF A MOVEMENT*, authored by Wm. Banowsky, preacher for one of the largest as well as one of the "leadingist" liberal churches in the country. The book traces the evolution of modern pervasive organizational thinking in the speeches of the annual lectureship at Abilene Christian College. Let us note two short quotations. "The absence of an organized missionary society among churches of Christ created several unique handicaps in selection and preparation of qualified missionary workers" (p. 273). "They could not resist the temptation to shop and contrast their plight with the obvious strong points in denominational machinery. Thus, they sought for some practical, scriptural means of BROTHERHOOD-WIDE CO-ORDINATION without creating an agency for brotherhood-wide control." (p. 313) (Emphasis mine, JPN).

In describing the development of a "solution" to "their plight," brother Banowsky shows that it took about sixteen years to sell some of the traditionally anti-missionary-society brethren on certain pervasive plans and programs (such as the Herald of Truth) patterned after "the obvious strong points in denominational machinery" (page 319).

The four most important questions to be answered in this study are: (1) what is scriptural church organization? (2) How can it be perverted? (3) How is it being perverted today? And (4) how can we preserve scriptural church organization? To this task we now devote our energy:

1. What Is Scriptural Church Organization

(1) Universal level: Universal church organization includes the totality of the saved in all parts of the world. - It was to this organization that inspiration referred in such passages as **Mt. 16:18; 1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 3:10, 11**. In

these and other such uses of the word 'church', no particular local church is under consideration, but the entire body of the saved over which God is the "all in all" (**1 Cor. 15:20**). Christ is the only head of this body, and must have preeminence in everything pertaining to it (**Col. 1: 18; Matt. 28:18-20**). When considered as a kingdom, he is the king (I Tim. 6:15). If thought of as an army, he is the captain (**Heb. 2:10**). However, in the universal church, Christ gave gifts unto men through whom he revealed the law of the church (**Eph. 4:11, 12**). APOSTLES were named as ambassadors to represent the king (**2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20; Mt. 18: 18**), and to act as the judiciary in the kingdom (**Matt. 19:28, Cf. Acts 15**). PROPHETS, who are "divinely commissioned and inspired person(s)" (Bagster, p. 354), were set in the church (**I Cor. 12:28**) to reveal the king's will and perfect law (**James 1:25**) "Unto . . . edification, exhortation and comfort" (**1 Cor. 14:3**).

It is well to remember that each and every UNIVERSAL FUNCTIONARY in the church is as active and important in the church today as ever. They do not function personally (in the flesh) as they did in the infancy of the church, but through that which they said and did (**see Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 11: 1; Phil. 4:9**). This is a vital truth that is missed by those who mistakenly think these functionaries must have successors.

Christ gave the universal church no earthly organization, hence no mission to meet or duty to do as a functional entity. Its organization begins and ends with Christ as the universal head. The church universal, therefore, is not an ecclesiastical hierarchy over which fallible men sit as dictating overlords, or as receiving and disbursing agents. Any effort on any scale (regardless of how well-intentioned) to activate the universal church through a single agency is but a pitting of the foolish wisdom of man against the infallible wisdom of God (**I Cor. 3:19**).

(2) Local Level: The organization, of the church on a local level consists of this totality of the saved in any given geographical locality, such as: "the church of God at Corinth" (**1 Cor. 1:2**), or Philippi (**Phil. 1:1**), etc. In these local units Christ has given "some to be evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (**Eph. 5:11; 1 Cor. 12:28**). The pattern also reveals that deacons are to be used as special servants in the local church (**1 Tim. 3; Phil 1: 1**). This constitutes the only earthly functional unit of the church. Anything larger than, smaller than or other than this is a failure to preserve the distinctive nature of New Testament church organization. While religious historians may describe it as "the most extreme form of congregationalism among churches" (E. F. Mayer, RELIGIOUS BODIES IN AMERICA, p. 216), those who believe in it and contend for it as the only divinely authorized plan, see it as a meaningful expression of the wisdom of God, the designer of the church (Eph. 3: 10).

In order to preserve the distinctive nature of local church organization, we must understand that these local units are characterized by:

(A) 4 autonomy: Autonomy is defined as "Independent in government; self -govern ing: without outside control" (Webster's International Dictionary). It is composed of two Greek words: Auto-self, and Nomos-Law. Hence, autonomy means self-law, self-governing, self-rule, or that each local unit is to govern itself. Though the word autonomy is not found in the Bible, we know that it accurately describes the nature of local churches from the following considerations:

(a) The law of exclusion: Local independent government is the only kind the New Testament authorizes; hence all other kinds are thereby excluded.

(b) Direct statements: Such passages as **I Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28; Acts 14:23; and Titus 1:5** limit the authority of elders to the flock where they are members. This constitutes a direct statement to the effect that local autonomous government is the exclusive pattern.

(c) Apostolic example: Antioch did not go to Judea during the famine and take over the benevolent work of the Judean churches, but rather sent help to the ELDERS of those churches (**Acts 11:27-30**). They respected the autonomy of the Judean churches whose responsibility it was to care for their own needy members who were among them. They helped the Judean elders meet a responsibility that was exclusively theirs.

(d) Necessary inference: A close study of the New Testament reveals that local congregations are: independently organized (**Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Phil. 1:1**), independently directed (**I Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28**), independently charged (Eph. 4:12) and are to independently function. (**Acts 11: 27-30; 2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:15, 16**). Hence, how could they be anything but autonomous? The point is that EACH church is to be organized in the same way: directed by the same type of functionaries: are each charged to do the same works, and are to function independent of each other, not through each other.

It is also necessary that we understand the proper application of autonomy. Autonomy has to do with government, but government has three branches: legislative (makes the laws), judicial (interprets the laws) and executive (executes or carries out the laws). Autonomous local church government does not mean that each local church functions in all three of these fields. Indeed not! Christ is the only law giver (**James 4:12;**

Gal. 6:2). The law he gave is complete (**2 Peter 1:5**), perfect (**James 1:25**) and final (**Gal. 1: 8, 9: Jude 3**). Hence, local church autonomy does not mean that the local church can legislate, or make its own laws. The apostles form the judiciary in the kingdom (**Matt. 19:28**), and have properly applied the law to the function and discipline of the church. Thus local churches are not at liberty to sit in judgment upon the law (**James 4:11**) to determine its "official" meaning (**2 Peter 1:20**).

This leaves only the EXECUTIVE to be considered, and it is here that the local church is autonomous. Earlier we showed that one definition of autonomous is "without outside control." This is what congregational autonomy means. Each local church has the right under God to decide what expedencies it will employ in executing God's law. Autonomy relates to the function of the local church. Each local church is at liberty to function in harmony with the king's law in reference to everything the law authorizes it to do. This would include the spending of its resources, determining its fellowship (**Acts 9:26**), disciplining unruly members (**1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 7, 14, 15**), and deciding matters of expediency as to: how to do its work, which work to do, who shall do it, and when to do it. Local autonomy is violated when a congregation delegates any of this (or anything else pertaining to its work) to another church, or another organization.

(B) Equality: Equality is a necessary inference from autonomy. If local churches are autonomous, they are certainly EQUAL.

This means that there are no distinctions between churches such as: CHURCHES and MISSIONS, or SPONSORING churches and CONTRIBUTING churches. The many sponsoring church promotions today overlook this salient feature of the New Testament church. That they make such distinctions not only in deed, but in word also is evident from the following quotations from THE MIRROR OF A MOVEMENT to which we made earlier reference. Notice:

"While all congregations large and small were obligated to practice missionary work, many were simply unable to function capably in a fully sponsoring or overseeing capacity. What, then, have the multitude of churches in this category done? They have either created much disappointment and confusion, for both themselves and the missionaries involved, by attempting to oversee a work and ending in frustration and failure . . . Though it was never expressed in so many words, implicit in the Abilene Lecturers' plea for improved mission methods was a recognition of the important concept of VARYING CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Responsibility is, after all, simply the ability to respond. While all congregations are obligated to participate in then, have the multitude of mission work, they are not equally obligated to participate at the same level, in the same measure, or in the same manner. The point in the parable of the talents applies to corporate groups of Christians as well as to individual Christians" (Page 312).

"At the Abilene Lectureship, a momentous biblical principle governing missionary methods was articulated and recommended as a remedy for this brotherhood predicament.

The principle was described as INTER-CONGREGATIONAL, COOPERATION WITHOUT ECCLESIASTICAL ORGANIZATION. It greatly expanded the scope of the church's evangelistic opportunities and led logically to recognition of the special role of the sponsoring congregation as compared with the part to be played by the smaller participating churches" (Page 313).

This sort of thinking led to the formation of the missionary society a hundred years ago, and it will ultimate in the same conclusions in this century. It is a failure to preserve local church organization.

(C) Sufficiency: Another characteristic of local churches is sufficiency. This means that each local church is wholly sufficient to do everything God has given it to do. To form "boards and conclaves unknown to the New Testament" to assist local churches is to make God's divine organization dependent upon human wisdom and spells doom to the distinctive organization God designed for his churches.

II. How Scriptural Church Organization Can Be Perverted

Universal church organization is perverted when such as popes, presidents, sponsoring elderships and human boards are set up as universal functionaries. The universal church is amenable ONLY to CHRIST the king (**Col. 1:18; Matt. 28:18-20**). Any man or group of men who set themselves up as universal-church functionaries usurp the authority of Christ the king and become rebels and subversives, and all who subscribe allegiance to the king must take the "sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" (**Eph. 6:17**) and do battle against them and their adherents, and either "recover" them "out of the snare of the devil" (**2 Tim. 2:26**) or let the world know that "They went out from us, but they were not of us . . . but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (**1 John 2:19**).

Local church organization is perverted when organizations smaller than the local church are formed to function independent of the church. Such organizations are committees which function independent of the church and Sunday school organizations which have their presidents, superintendents, treasuries, etc., which function

independent of the church. Bible classes which perform works in their own name separate from the local church or young people's organizations which work independent of the local church, etc., are other examples of perverted organization.

Local organization is also perverted when organizations larger than the local church are formed to function for the churches. Such organizations are: synods, conferences, conventions, sponsoring churches, area-wide meetings, and various societies.

Local organization is also perverted when organizations other than the local church are formed to do the work which, it is claimed, God gave the local churches to do. Such organizations are Orphan homes, old folk's homes, unwed mothers' homes, etc.

III. Now Can We Preserve Distinctive Church Organization?

Every Christian and every church needs to studiously guard the purity of church organization ' Here, I want to make some suggestions as to how we can do this:

(1) EVERY CHURCH PLAN ITS OWN WORK: Today this is not done. Churches simply help to execute the plans of certain brotherhood promoters. In an article in the FIRM FOUNDATION brother Glenn Wallace has ably dealt with this problem. I quote an excerpt from his article for your consideration:

"It is likely true today that 75% of our congregations do not plan their own work. They simply meet to read and heed the calls. They allocate and plan to distribute. Hundreds of boards and well meaning elderships have outlined their program for them. Project solicitations and movements, area wide, even national and world wide in their scope, may be worthwhile aims. It is not the doing of these things on a BIG scale that presents a disturbing problem. It is the fact that more and more of our congregations are losing their identity, their independence and their sovereign rights under God and the New Testament bill of rights. It is the mounting Pressures of a marching movement to fall in line or be counted out; this is what should make one tremble."

As we said earlier, autonomy means independence in function. This is what is badly needed. Hundreds, even thousands, of churches today have forgotten how to plan their own' program. They simply dole out their resources to the programs and promotions of others.

(B) EACH CHURCH OVERSEE ITS OWN WORK: Today churches are failing to do this. If they feel some obligation in edification, benevolence or evangelism, there is always a human board ready and eager to take their money and oversee the spending of it for them.

(C) EACH CHURCH MANAGE ITS OWN AFFAIRS: Today many churches are looking to human organizations to manage their money, train their personnel and dictate their policies.

(D) EACH CHURCH DISCIPLINES ITS OWN MEMBERS.

(E) EACH CHURCH DECIDE ITS OWN FELLOWSHIP: There are congregations which desire to manage the memberships of other churches. They want to tell them whom they can employ and fellowship. There are churches which will allow them to do this for them.

(F) EACH CHURCH PROVIDE FOR ITS OWN INDIGENT MEMBERS: The current practice is for churches to send their indigent members to other churches or organizations to be cared for. They may pay their keep, but in most cases they expect others to do it.

(G) EACH CHURCH MAKE ITS OWN DECISIONS IN MATTERS OF EXPEDIENCY AND JUDGMENT: That is, let each congregation decide how it will do its work, when, etc.

(H) EACH CHURCH CONTROL ITS OWN RESOURCES IN DOING THE WORKS GOD DESIGNED IT TO DO: Let each local church oversee the expending of its funds rather than allowing some other church or organization to do it for them.

(1) EACH CHRISTIAN "AFFIRM CONSTANTLY" GOD'S LAW CONCERNING THESE MATTERS: When we take these matters for granted, we have taken the first step to destroying the distinctive nature of New Testament church government.

CONCLUSION: One would think that a study of the consequences of perversions of church organization in the past would forever constrain brethren to cling to the Bible pattern in this matter, but this is not true. Each new generation has to try its hand at overcoming the church's "handicaps" in organization, and hence, "shops about and contrasts its plight with the obvious strong points in denominational machinery." The consequences of this folly have been and always will be disastrous to the cause of "the faith once delivered" (**Jude 3**).

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