

STUDIES IN THE BIBLE



The Church—Its Organization And Work

Lesson 27

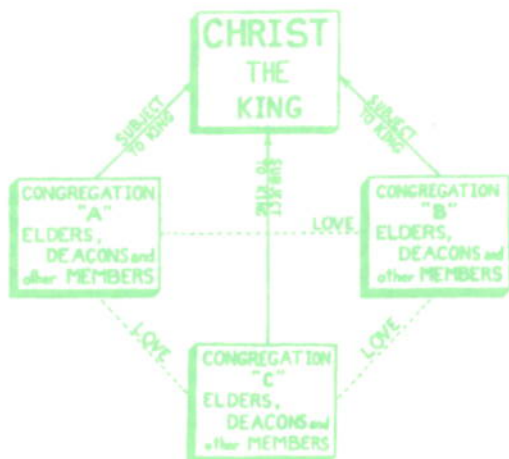
Many aspects of the primitive church are worthy of consideration. We will study just two more — its organization and its work.

Organization of the Church

The early church was not a democracy. It was an absolute monarchy with Christ as king. Paul describes Him as "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." (1 Tim. 6:15.) As king He could declare, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matt. 28:18—A.S.V.) Furthermore we read, "And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence." (Col. 1:18.) Since Christ, the only head of the church, is seated at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 10:12), we may conclude that the headquarters of His church is with Him in heaven.

As previously suggested the word "church" is used in the Scriptures in both the universal and congregational senses. However, no universal organization is mentioned in the New Testament. When congregations were organized, each was absolutely independent in the conduct of its affairs and was responsible only to the reigning monarch, Jesus Christ. We might suppose that a system devoid of synods and conventions would produce religious anarchy. Such was not true. Since all congregations were bound by the teaching of Christ, all taught and practiced the same things. But while there was no organic relationship among these congregations, they were united by the strongest tie of all — love. Hence they cooperated with one another that the Lord's work might be advanced.

In the absence of written guidance (the New Testament was only then being written) the early church was instructed in doctrine by the apostles. We have the same direction today in the New Testament. Jesus had appointed twelve apostles before His crucifixion, and when Judas, who betrayed Christ, committed suicide, he was replaced by Matthias. (Acts 1:26.) Other than this, the original twelve had no successors. When James was killed (Acts 12:2), we do not read that anyone took his place. Paul was a special apostle with a commission to go to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), but his apostleship should not be confused with



that of the twelve. When the last of the apostles died, the apostolic office died with them. An apostle was required (1) to have accompanied Jesus in His personal ministry, and (2) to have been a witness of His resurrection. (Acts 1:21, 22.) No living man can meet these qualifications.

Elders Or Bishops

In the first century each local assembly was under the guidance of men known as elders. Sometimes they were called bishops, overseers, or pastors, but all of these terms refer to the same office in the church. They were elders because they were older, especially in experience; bishops or overseers because they "oversaw" the work of the church; pastors because they shepherded the flock. They were ordained by evangelists. (The word ordain means to appoint and does not necessarily imply a special ceremony.) As spiritual shepherds, they led the church and directed its teaching. The Scriptures indicate that there was a plurality of elders in each congregation.

The qualifications of bishops were very strict. When Paul writes, "A bishop then must be blameless, etc.," (I Tim. 3:2), he clearly implies that one who does not possess the listed qualifications cannot serve in that capacity.

Deacons

The word deacon means servant. While the function of deacons is not described, the title indicates that they were servants of the church. They served under the guidance of the elders. Nothing in the Bible implies that they were to direct the church in its spiritual affairs. The seven men appointed by the apostles in Jerusalem to care for the needs of widows (Acts 6) have been called deacons, although this term is not specifically applied to them. Whether or not they were deacons it appears that the work of deacons included the service performed by these men. The qualifications of deacons were similar to those of elders, one of the major differences being that a deacon was not required to be able to teach.

Evangelists

Another important function in the early church was performed by evangelists. The word evangelist means "a preacher of the gospel." The young preacher Timothy was told, "Do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry." (II Tim. 4:5.) In this ministry he was to "preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (II Tim. 4:2.) Timothy was not "the" minister, but "a" minister. Since minister means servant and every Christian has a service to perform every Christian is a minister, although not every Christian has the ministry of publicly preaching the gospel. But while every disciple of Christ is a minister, not all are evangelists because these men have the responsibility of preaching the Word, establishing churches, appointing elders, etc. An evangelist is any gospel preacher, whether he works for a long period in one community or travels from place to place in his labors. It should be noted that preachers were not called pastors. The shepherds of the flock (pastors) were the elders, not the preachers.

Work Of The Church 1

Paul once wrote, "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15.) Since the church was the pillar and ground of the truth, its primary responsibility was to make the truth, the word of God, known to men for the salvation of their souls. In the apostolic age the work of preaching was done through the church rather than by a separate missionary society. Each Christian was to realize his personal responsibility as a worker for Christ. Thus when Christians in Jerusalem were scattered by persecution they "went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts 8:4.) Every disciple was a preacher, not publicly of course, but each taught his friends and neighbors as he had opportunity

The church existed to serve as well as to save. Therefore, when Paul traveled among the congregations in Greece and Macedonia, he took up a collection in each for the poor in Jerusalem. Of the responsibility of serving Paul wrote the Galatian churches, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:10.) James admonishes, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1:27.) It should also be observed that the message of salvation is often best presented through the ministry of service.

"Seek and Ye Shall Find"

Fill in the blanks:

1. When the Apostle was killed, no one took his place.
2. Elders are also called,, and
3. The word ordain means
4. A deacon is a
5. The apostles appointed (number) men to care for the widows in Jerusalem.
6. An evangelist is a preacher of the
7. In I Timothy 3:15 we read that the is the pillar and ground of the truth.
8. The early church existed to help souls and to serve.

Write true or false before each statement regarding the work of the church:

- 1. The Philippians had never given to Paul to help him preach the gospel. (Phil. 4:15, 16.)
- 2. Preachers should be sent to preach. (Rom. 10:14, 15.)
- 3. The church is responsible before family members to support a needy widow. (I Tim. 5:4, 16.)
- 4. When the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered, they did not preach the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1-4.)
- 5. Christians do not need to do good to those who are not of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10.)
- 6. The work Christians do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Col. 3:17.)
- 7. Christians should visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction. (James 1:27.)

Qualifications of elders (or bishops) are given in Titus 1:5-9 and I Timothy 3:2-7. Deacons' qualifications are listed in I Timothy 3:8-10, 12. After each statement write the word "elder", "deacon", "both", or "neither" to indicate whether this is a qualification of either an elder or deacon. First two are done correctly:

Holy	Elder	A good politician
A good dresser	Neither	Not soon angry
Husband of one wife		No striker
Not doubletongued		Blameless
Apt to teach		Handsome
Rich		Just
Given to hospitality		Rules well his own house
Not greedy of filthy lucre		Having faithful children

Student may write here any comment, question, or request.

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 Name..... Grade.....
 Address..... Date.....
 City..... By.....