

## **4 Unique Features of the N.T. Church**

### **Their Organization**

Introduction;

1. In previous lessons we have addressed the subject, “Unique Features of the N.T. Church.”
  - a. In the first lesson we talked about their loyalty, as an explanation of why they were unique (i.e., different from most modern religious organizations).
  - b. In the second lesson we discussed their worship. We observed that their worship was founded on their loyalty, sprang from their gratitude and resulted from their renewed minds. From Rom. 12:1-2 we learned that their worship consisted of lives given to God.
  - c. Most recently we talked about their work. Looking at the evidence in Scripture we learned that they devoted themselves first and primarily to preaching and teaching the gospel. Along the way they worked to support the needy among them.
2. This morning we want to look at how they organized themselves to carry out this work.
  - a. The evidence indicates that they did not pattern their organizational structure after the government under which they served. Many religious organizations in our society pattern themselves after our democratic government. They elect representatives, have “capital headquarters,” vote by majority rule and do other things obviously patterned after our democratic government.
  - b. Others look to the business world and pattern themselves after that model. They have boards of directors and presidents. Preachers often act as chief executive officers.
  - c. Many modern religious organizations organize themselves with a mixture of these patterns combined with elements from the Biblical model.
3. Let’s look at the N.T. evidence.

Discussion:

- I. From the earliest stages of the development of the church the organization was from heaven down.
  - A. In Matt. 16:13-19 this structure is in evidence. The whole assumption of this text is that the organization begins in heaven.
    1. “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”
    2. That the Son of God has a role in the organization is necessarily implied.
    3. That the apostles were granted a role in this is evident in v. 19. It is implied that even they were governed by the authority of heaven.
    4. That this was a statement made to the disciples is evident from v. 20 and Jn. 20:20, 24.
  - B. Also evidenced in the great commission (Matt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-16).
    1. All authority has been given to me, therefore go.

- 2. The Lord worked with them and confirmed the word by the signs.
- C. Further evidenced in Heb. 1:1-2; 2:1-4.

## II. There are many evidences that the apostles' took on a special role in the first century church.

- A. Their teaching was foundational (Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20).
- B. Funds for the work that the church was doing were "laid at the apostles' feet" for distribution (Acts 4:35).
- C. At the very beginning of the church there was only one congregation (that in Jerusalem), but the gospel began spreading and congregations were begun outside of Jerusalem.
  - 1. A new group was begun in Antioch (Acts 11). We might wonder about how this affected their organization. Did Jerusalem become the mother church, exercising authority over those in Antioch? Was each group separate?
  - 2. Jerusalem sent Barnabas.
    - a. "He encouraged them to remain true to the Lord" (v. 23). Both groups had the same loyalty.
    - b. Indeed Christ was the head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23).
  - 3. A distinction needs to be recognized at this point between the church in the universal sense and that in the local sense.
    - a. The church in the universal sense consists of those people who give their allegiance to Christ (i.e., those who acknowledge Him as Lord, Matt. 16:18; Acts. 11:23).
    - b. The church in the local sense: at Jerusalem; at Antioch.
  - 4. No evidence in Scripture of congregations being organized together under some common organization, like some religious organizations today. Group congregations together in synods, presbyteries, dioceses, districts, conventions.
  - 5. Each group maintains its own independence.
    - a. They were all loyal to Christ, but they were a brotherhood not a churchhood. In other words the universal church was composed of individual Christians, not congregations.
    - b. We see evidence of this in Acts 11:27-30.
      - 1) Those at Antioch determined to send a contribution for the needy brethren in Judea. The Jerusalem church did not determine that for them.
      - 2) There was no denominational headquarters that collected funds from congregations and sent out money to others.
    - c. Same principles evidenced other places and when there were many congregations (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

## III. A new development in the organization of the church locally is evident in Acts 11:30.

- A. The contribution from Antioch was sent "in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the

elders.”

1. Note that it was not sent to the apostles, but to the elders.
  2. Who are these elders in the church at Jerusalem? They are mentioned only incidentally here.
- B. On Paul’s return through the churches established on his first preaching trip Acts 14:23 says, “they appointed elders for them in every church.”
1. Does not say they appointed elders over a group of churches.
  2. “Elders in every church.”
    - a. Note the independence evident between these congregations organizationally.
    - b. Note also that elders (plural) are appointed in each church.
  3. Evidently a practice founded on the apostles’ teaching.
  4. Evidently something practiced throughout the churches (Titus 1:5ff).
  5. Special qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7).
- C. In the matter regarding Gentiles and observance of the Law of Moses, the elders at Jerusalem and the apostles were in lead roles in considering the matter (Acts 15:2, 6).
- D. In other passages we learn more about their responsibilities.
1. They are to shepherd (1 Pet. 5:2). Pastors.
  2. The flock among them (1 Pet. 5:2).
  3. Exercising oversight (1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). Bishops.
  4. They keep watch over souls (Heb. 13:17).

IV. There is much more to learn about the organization of the church in the first century, but we have covered a lot. Our interest is to identify unique features of the organization of the N.T. church. We have looked at the evidence. Already, we see many differences between their organization and that of religious organizations today.

- A. First, founded upon the authority of heaven.
1. Modeled accorded to what is revealed by God, not modeled after current governmental or business organizational structures.
  2. Based upon loyalty to Christ.
- B. Second, no inter-congregational structure.
1. Each congregation was independent.
  2. Not like the denominational structures of today where there are synods, presbyteries, dioceses, conventions, etc.
  3. No “mother church” acting as head over other churches.
- C. Third, at a congregational level they were organized under the leadership of those known as elders, shepherds (pastors), overseers (bishops).
1. Special qualifications.
  2. Plurality in each church.
- D. Things that are noticeably absent from the evidence.
1. One pastor over a congregation.
  2. One congregation over other congregations.
  3. Groupings of congregations together in some organizational structure.
  4. Associations, conventions, dioceses, synods, presbyteries, general

assemblies, counsels, presidents, cardinals, archbishops, generals, colonels, sergeants.

5. It is impossible to identify all the things that are absent from the evidence, but you get the point.
- E. But men reason, “One way of organizing is just as good as another.”
  1. It is if it is man’s way.
  2. And most assume that the organizational structure modeled in the N.T. is just that: one man-made way of organizing.
  3. But if it is a model revealed by God, then that’s different. If we opt for man’s organization rather than God’s we have let go of the one thing that makes us unique—our loyalty to Him.
  4. Some say, “One religious organization is as good as another.” That’s right if they are all man-made. But if you compare those to the one revealed in Scripture, the one revealed in Scripture is God-made, and that one is different.

Conclusion:

1. In our organization, in our work, in our worship we need to model ourselves after what is revealed in Scripture.
2. But first we must give our loyalty to Jesus Christ. When we do, that loyalty will be reflected in our worship, our work and our organization.
3. “They first gave themselves to the Lord” (2 Cor. 8:5). Are you ready to do that?