

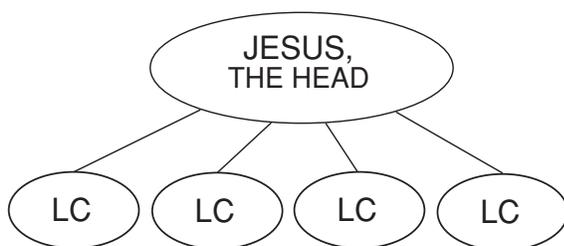
JESUS' CHURCH: ORGANIZATION

Exactly how the church is organized is of little concern to many. Nevertheless, organization is a vital subject. The organization of the church is the skeleton of the body. If the skeleton is crooked, the whole body will be deformed.

JESUS, THE HEAD

Most denominations have earthly heads and earthly headquarters, but Jesus' church had (and has) only one head: Jesus Himself. The church's headquarters are in heaven, where Jesus is. Paul said that God "put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over *all* things to the church"¹ (Ephesians 1:22; see also Colossians 1:18). Jesus told His disciples, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18).²

Earthly heads and headquarters for the church cannot be found in the Bible. Neither are the elaborate organizational arrangements of most denominations found there. In New Testament times, there were no district, national, or international organizations connected to the church. There was no organizational structure bigger than the local congregation.



In the diagram above, the ovals below "Jesus, the Head" represent local congregations ("LC"). In the diagram, each congregation is

pictured as separate and independent of the others. Local congregations were bound together by love. They helped each other (Acts 11:28–30; Romans 15:25, 26), but there were no organizational ties between them.

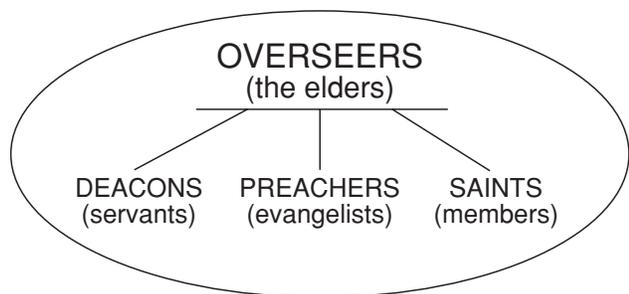
This arrangement is sometimes called "local autonomy." "Autonomy" comes from a compound Greek word which means "self-ruling." Each local congregation of the Lord's church is completely self-ruling, subject only to Jesus.

Some think that this simple arrangement will not work in today's complex world. They insist that additional ecclesiastical "machinery" is needed to carry out the church's mission. I can testify, however, that the Lord's arrangement is sufficient. I was part of a mission work in Australia for ten years without the "benefit" of any manmade organization: I was supported by the East Side church of Christ in Midwest City, Oklahoma. Other churches of Christ helped with needed funds. No missionary society was needed.

THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

In the New Testament, the local congregation is the only organizational unit of the church. For the remainder of this lesson, we will concentrate on how local congregations were organized in Bible times. When Paul wrote to a fully organized church³ in Philippi, he started his letter like this: "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers⁴ and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). Four groups are mentioned in this verse: Paul and Timothy were preachers or evangelists. They addressed "the saints" in Philippi, a term referring to members of the

church in general.⁵ Among the saints were two special groups which Paul called “the overseers” and the “deacons.” Here is a diagram showing how these four groups fit into a fully organized congregation:



Overseers: the Elders

The leaders over the congregation are called “elders.” This is the most common designation for this “office”⁶ (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17). The Greek word for “elder” is *presbuteros*, which means “older man”⁷; but regarding church leaders, the emphasis is as much on maturity as it is on age. Elders must be able to make mature decisions.

Elders were also known as “overseers.” When Paul wrote to Titus, he used the terms “elder” and “bishop/overseer” interchangeably:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint *elders* in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the *overseer* [the KJV has “bishop”] must be above reproach as God’s steward, . . . (Titus 1:5–7).⁸

The familiar word “bishop” comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, a compound word which means (as already indicated) “overseer.” Paul told elders that God had made them “overseers” (Acts 20:17, 28). Peter instructed elders to exercise “oversight” (1 Peter 5:1, 2). The word “overseer” (“bishop”) emphasizes the scope of the elders’ responsibility: They oversee all matters pertaining to a congregation.⁹

The elders/overseers were also called “pastors.” This word is found in the noun form in Ephesians 4: “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as *pastors* and teachers, for the equip-

ping of the saints . . .” (Ephesians 4:11, 12).¹⁰ “Pastor” is a Latin word used to translate the Greek word for “shepherd” (*poimen*). The verb form of this word is found in Acts 20, where elders/overseers were told “to *shepherd* the church of God” (v. 28).¹¹ The verb form is also found in 1 Peter 5, where elders/overseers were told to “*shepherd* the flock of God among you” (v. 2).¹² Both Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 use all three terms interchangeably.

ELDERS =
OVERSEERS =
PASTORS/SHEPHERDS

“Pastor” or “shepherd” is the job description of the elders. As conscientious shepherds would care for and protect their flocks, so the elders are to care for and protect the local congregation. Concerning the leaders of the church, Hebrews 13:17 says, “They keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.” It is an awesome responsibility to be an elder!

Today, preachers are often called “pastors”; but in New Testament times, the preacher was not “the pastor” of a congregation. The word “pastors” referred to the elders, not to those who were preachers.¹³

Anytime you read in the New Testament about “elders” in a congregation, the word is always plural (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). We never read of just one elder (or one pastor) having the oversight of a congregation.

Some religious organizations have “bishops” who control an area that includes many congregations. Remember the principle of local autonomy. Scripturally, a group of elders can only oversee the local congregation of which they are members. Peter told elders to “shepherd the flock of God *among you*” (1 Peter 5:2),¹⁴ not “all the flocks in a hundred mile radius.”

The qualifications for elders/overseers/pastors are given in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. Take a few minutes to read these passages. According to the qualifications, only godly Christian husbands and fathers can serve as elders. Single men do not qualify; men without children do not qualify; women do not qualify;

men without spiritual maturity and good judgment do not qualify.

Each congregation has the responsibility of selecting its own elders. They are to make their selections on the basis of the inspired qualifications.¹⁵

Servants: the Deacons

In Philippians 1:1 Paul referred to “the overseers and deacons.”¹⁶ “Deacon” is an anglicized Greek word that means “servant.”

DEACONS = SERVANTS

The deacons might be thought of as “the elders’ righthand men.” The first “deacons” were appointed to take care of a congregational need so that the leaders could devote themselves to the job God wanted them to do (see Acts 6:1–6).¹⁷

Deacons have no inherent authority.¹⁸ The only authority they have is that which the elders give them to carry out their responsibilities.

The qualifications of deacons are found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. The congregation has the responsibility of selecting deacons, based on those qualifications (see Acts 6:3, 5).

Preachers: the Evangelists

In the early church, preachers had three designations. First, they were called “preachers” (Romans 10:14; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11) or those who “preached” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The Greek word for “preacher” is the word for “herald.” Even as a herald for a king would announce his proclamations, so preachers were heralds for King Jesus.¹⁹

Preachers were sometimes called “ministers” (Acts 26:16; Romans 15:16; Ephesians 3:7; 6:21) or those who had a “ministry” (Acts 6:4; 2 Timothy 4:5). The word “minister” is translated from the same Greek word as “deacon” and simply means “servant.” Every Christian is (or should be) a minister/servant. That is, every Christian should have a ministry or area of service (Ephesians 4:12; Hebrews 6:10; 1 Peter 4:10, 11). Therefore, the preacher is not “*the* minister” of the congregation. When the term “minister” is applied to the preacher, it is good to qualify the term: “He is a minister of the Word” (see Acts 6:4) or “His ministry is preaching.”

The definitive designation of a preacher in

the New Testament was “evangelist” (Acts 21:8; Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5).²⁰ The word “evangelist” comes from the Greek word for “gospel” and means “one who preaches the good news [about Jesus].”²¹

Today, the preacher’s responsibility is to preach and teach the Word. He has no authority beyond the authority to proclaim God’s message.²²

Through the years, men have tended to exalt the preacher above his God-given status. Unscriptural titles have been bestowed on him (see Matthew 23:9). One of these is the adjective “Reverend.” The word “reverend” means “deserving of reverence.”²³ The term is found one time in the KJV,²⁴ in Psalm 111:9: Speaking of God, the psalmist said, “. . . holy and reverend is His name.” Only God’s name is “deserving of reverence.” Since I am not God, I do not wear the title “Reverend.”

Saints: Other Members

The local congregation has many other important works and special functions. For instance, there are those who teach the Word publicly (see Ephesians 4:11). For the moment, however, I will just use the term “saints” as found in Philippians 1:1 to include all the other members of the church. *Every* member is under the elders and is subject to them.²⁵ Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”

CONCLUSION

As you consider where you will worship and serve, you should ask questions like these: “Is this congregation independent—or does it have to answer to some human head or organization?”; “Is the preacher called ‘the pastor’ of the congregation?”; “Does he wear an unscriptural title such as ‘Reverend’?”

The organization of the church *is* important. It should be in accordance with God’s plan. ❖

¹Emphasis mine.

²Emphasis mine.

³We will see later in the lesson that the leaders of the church are to have certain God-given qualifications. If the men available do not have those qualifications, leaders

should not be appointed. When this is the case, however, the congregation is lacking in this regard (see Titus 1:5). Congregations should constantly be developing men who meet the inspired qualifications.

⁴The KJV has “bishops” here. As we shall see, the word “bishops” literally means “overseers.”

⁵Review the previous lesson.

⁶I put the word “office” in quotation marks because I want to emphasize that it is not *just* an office, but a *work*. Eldership is not so much a position as it is a responsibility.

⁷The terms used for church leaders (such as “elders” and “deacons”) were part of the common vocabulary of that day. Each of these terms is also used in a general sense in the New Testament. The context determines whether a word is being used in the ordinary sense of the word or in the special sense of a church leader.

⁸Emphasis mine.

⁹It is sometimes said that elders have oversight of spiritual matters and deacons have oversight of physical matters. This is not true. The elders can assign the deacons to take care of any or all of the physical details, but the elders still have the ultimate responsibility for every matter which affects the congregation.

¹⁰Emphasis mine.

¹¹Emphasis mine.

¹²Emphasis mine.

¹³If a preacher meets the qualifications of an elder, and if the congregation asks him to serve in that capacity, he may become *one of* the elders/overseers/pastors—but, scripturally, he can never be “*the* pastor.”

¹⁴Emphasis mine.

¹⁵For an example of a congregation choosing leaders on the basis of prescribed qualifications, see Acts 6:3, 5.

¹⁶Emphasis mine.

¹⁷I put the word “deacons” in quotation marks because there is some question whether these men were “officially” deacons or not. Nevertheless, they did the work of deacons, and the verb form of the word translated “deacon” is used in Acts 6:2.

¹⁸The New Testament does not teach that “a board of deacons” should run the church.

¹⁹It makes little difference whether a preacher is considered “full-time” or whether he has another job and preaches on Sundays. He is still a preacher.

²⁰The word “evangelist” has nothing to do with whether a man travels about or stays in one place preaching the good news.

²¹The *verb* form of the root of “evangelist” is found often in the New Testament. Literally, it means “to proclaim the good news,” but it is generally just translated “preach” (see Acts 8:35; Romans 1:15).

²²The New Testament teaches nothing of so-called “evangelist authority.”

²³*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v. “reverend.”

²⁴The NASB translates the word as “awesome.” The RSV has “terrible.” (Some preachers would like the title of “Awesome,” but most would not care for “Terrible.”)

²⁵That is, members of the congregation should comply with the elders’ decisions as long as they do not lead the congregation astray (Acts 20:28–31).

©Copyright, 1999, 2002 by Truth for Today
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED