



“Innovations and the Divine Pattern”
Part III: Innovations in Church Government
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We have spent the last couple of weeks looking at the many changes that have occurred since Jesus established the church two thousand years ago up until our present day. Not only have many practices and doctrines been introduced since the apostles revealed the truth originally to the church. The very framework of the local congregation and its relationship to the universal church has changed. That is a detriment. It's a fundamental matter. When Jesus established His church and revealed it to us in the pages of the New Testament, He set it up in a particular way with an organization that would allow it to function as He intended for it to and to safeguard it against apostasy. But that pattern has grossly been forsaken and today, we see many ecumenical organizations that claim to be part of the church and just about as many forms of governing and overseeing them as there are organizations.

Well, is denominationalism or institutionalized sectarianism biblical? Did Christ intend for there to be hundreds of religious organizations as we have today, representing varying expressions of religious thought and practice? Do these organizations even have a right in the eyes of God to exist? What about the manmade forms of church government that they superimpose upon the simplicity of the first-century church? Does it even matter in what form the church exists and operates? These are very important questions and they are fundamental matters when it comes to the Bible's teaching about the church. I'll read Paul's words to Titus for our reading today.

Titus 1:4-5 “To Titus, mine own son after the common faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:”

In order to understand how the Lord wants His church to be governed, we need to understand how He organized it, or the framework of it. According to **Matthew 16:18-19**, Jesus is the builder and the

supreme head over the church, but He said that He would govern the church through the teachings and work of the apostles that He chose during His ministry (and of course, the apostle Paul coming later) **(Matthew 19:28)**. These men would be the agents through whom Christ would reveal His will to the church for all ages. Today, even though those men have long since died, they still occupy that seat of authority in the church. Even though they are not with us personally, they are represented by their sacred and inspired writings. Therefore, we are guided by the Bible, the New Testament alone, and it has the final word in all matters of faith and practice.

That's one of the things that makes the churches of Christ different. We have no earthly headquarters, no earthly rulers over the universal church other than Christ and the apostles that He appointed two thousand years ago. We are not a denomination. We have no creeds; just the Bible itself. No councils, conventions, or other ecclesiastical bodies to deliberate or dictate doctrine to all of the churches. None of that. In fact, the churches of Christ are absolutely nothing more than local congregations made up of Christians in a given vicinity led by their own leaders with Christ and Christ alone as their head. Each church is an autonomous body of believers governed by the New Testament alone. That truly makes the churches of Christ unique.

According to **Acts 2:41,47**, from the day of its beginning until today, when men and women are saved in obedience to the gospel, *the Lord adds them to the church*. That simply means that they become people who are separated spiritually from the world and who now abide in Christ and are considered part of the body of Christ. They become children of God and are in a special relationship with God that the world does not have. However, that's really all the church refers to in the universal or worldwide sense. I mean to say that the Bible never ascribes any type of organization or work to the worldwide church other than Christ being its head and the teachings of the apostles its foundation. The Lord didn't set up any kind of earthly headquarters or hierarchy of men to oversee it, yet the many denominations that have come about over the last five hundred years are all governed over by a central authority of some kind.

For example, Southern Baptist churches participate in a convention of delegates headed by an elected president and other officials. The Assemblies of God are overseen by a general council headquartered in Springfield, MO. The United Methodist denomination is governed by a general conference of up to 1,000 delegates that meet every four years. They also have a council of bishops and a judicial council. The denomination as a whole has a creed called 'The Book of Discipline' that local churches are to follow in order to remain in good standing with that denomination. The denomination is also divided into districts that are overseen by district superintendents. You get the picture. I could go from one to the next citing one form of government and another as each one is, in some way, unique but is that the kind of structure and organization that the Lord intended for His church to have on earth? Does any of that come from scripture? The truth is that you can search the New Testament from cover to cover and you'll never read of any such arrangement. Jesus is the head of the church and the only headquarters His church has are in heaven. His apostles gave the church its only creed and that is the New Testament. Not the so-called 'apostle's creed' that came along later, but their actual creed, which is simply their writings in the New Testament. Aside from that, there is no governing body, governing document, or governing council outside of each local church as mentioned in the scriptures, following the scriptures only.

Churches are always referred to in the scriptures as individual, local bodies of saints. For example, Paul addressed the churches of Galatia **(Galatians 1:2)** and the churches of Judea **(Galatians 1:22)**. He addressed multiple churches in a given geographical region, but he never referred to any kind of

organization larger than the one local church. He never spoke of those churches as having any kind of centralized headquarters or governing authority. Rather, within each local church that was established, qualified men were to be chosen to lead that congregation in its own work. It's not a complicated system like you see in many churches today. Each church, or local flock, was to simply be shepherded by qualified elders and deacons. Evangelists, or preachers, were sent out to preach and to establish new churches and set those churches in order. That simply means they were to help that church get organized and direct them in doing the Lord's will and functioning according to the Lord's plan and pattern given in the New Testament. As each church reached maturity, they were to select men who met certain criteria/qualifications and ordain them as elders and deacons to lead that church and only that church in its affairs.

Titus 1:5-9 "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers."

Here, Paul lists a number of leadership traits and moral stipulations that would qualify those men to be elders. According to scripture, there was always more than one elder in any given congregation. They had a plurality of men who met those qualifications. Those qualifications are also listed by Paul in **I Timothy 3:2-7**. I want you to notice that every church was to have its own elders appointed. Elders did not have any authority in any church outside of the one over which they were elders.

Acts 14:23 "And when they (Paul and Barnabas) had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

Every church was to look to its own elders for leadership. These elders have a number of responsibilities. They feed or pastor the flock (**Acts 20:28**), they guard the flock from false teachers (**Acts 20:29-31**), they are to rule the church by example (**I Peter 5:3, Romans 12:8, I Timothy 5:17**), they are to tend the flock (**I Peter 5:2**), and they are to watch for our souls (**Hebrews 13:17**). These elders were instructed to have the oversight of the flock of God that was among them. Their oversight reached only as far as their local congregation in which they were appointed. The word *elders* refers to the very same men as the words *bishops* and *pastors*. They are not separate offices, but simply different terms for the same office. The same men who do the same work.

Today, many churches like to call the preacher their pastor, but that's not correct. Even though an elder is to teach the church, being a preacher doesn't make one a pastor. In fact, it's a misnomer to call a man who is simply a preacher a pastor. He is not a pastor; the elder is the pastor. A preacher is a preacher. That is confusing two different works within the church, you see. First of all, elders are always spoken of in the plural. That is to say that every church was to have two or more qualified men serving in that role. The preacher's job is to find men who meet those qualifications and install them as elders, and then move on to do the same somewhere else. Now, there may be a time in which a church does not yet have elders because they don't have men qualified, men who have not yet been appointed. But that doesn't mean that we can come and substitute some other arrangement for what the Bible dictates to exist within the church. Friends, THAT is the Bible pattern and it is very simple and plain. We read it throughout the New Testament.

We can also read about deacons being appointed in each congregation. Paul began his letter to the church at Philippi like this:

Philippians 1:1 “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:”

The word *deacon* there means *a waiter, an attendant, a servant or minister*. It’s a distinct work within the local church done by men who serve under the elders, who can also be called bishops, in carrying out the things that need to be done within the church. **Acts 6:1-6** describes how these men were to relieve the apostles of secular duties and responsibilities so that they could focus on spiritual matters. Their relationship to elders today is the same. They are often assigned to take care of the physical and procedural needs of the church so that elders can concentrate on the spiritual needs of the congregation. Like elders, deacons have to meet a number of qualifications that Paul listed in **I Timothy 3:8-13**. They are to be grave or serious-minded, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money. They are to hold the faith in a pure conscience. They are to be proven. They are to be the husband of one wife and must rule their children and their homes well, Paul said. They work in conjunction with the elders of the local church to see that all of the needs of the church are taken care of.

The real difference between an elder and a deacon is found in the words themselves. An *elder* refers to an *overseer* and a *deacon* refers to a *servant or minister*. That is God’s simple pattern for church government. There is to be no human government over God’s people besides the oversight of leaders within each local congregation. One of the reasons that so many churches aren’t following that pattern is because they don’t fit the Bible definition of a church to begin with. We need to look at that for a moment. You know, the idea of a denomination having a centralized and universal form of government or oversight is unscriptural because the denomination itself is unscriptural. Think about it this way: the word *church* is only used in two primary ways in the New Testament. A) It refers to the universal body of believers the world over, which was never organized or assigned any particular role or work. The only other way is B) to refer to a local assembly or local church of the Lord’s people; a local group of Christians called together for work and worship.

But what is a denomination? You have the universal church and the local church in the Bible, but what is a denomination? It’s not a local church because a denomination is made up of many local churches joined together into a larger organization. Yet a denomination is not the universal church either because no denomination claims to contain ALL of the saved. You see, a denomination is LARGER than the local church and is SMALLER than the universal church. Therefore, it is something that you never read about in the Bible. No wonder we don’t read about conventions, councils, synods, or earthly headquarters in the word of God—because we don’t read about denominations in the word of God.

Christ only built one church in the first century, and that one church was comprised of local, self-governing congregations of like precious faith from place to place. Each church led by its own elders and deacons and the teachings of the apostles and the Lord Jesus as they are now laid out in the New Testament. But as is the case with almost every other aspect of the pattern, men have departed from the pattern when it comes to the organization and government of the church also. A fairly recent trend, even among some churches of Christ, is to have a number of local churches governed by one eldership. In other words, one church with multiple campuses or satellite churches; multiple neighborhood assemblies under the oversight of one central eldership. Friends, that is unbiblical. It matters not if it’s a church of Christ doing it or not—that is unbiblical. Elders cannot rule over more than one church. When

you have groups meeting all over town, you have more than one church, regardless of what you decide to call it.

In fact, many churches of Christ have completely forgotten or chosen to abandon the New Testament concept of what the church is and how it is organized. That is seen in their structure and how they go about their work. This is no small thing. It's a dangerous thing because history itself shows that God's way is a way of safeguarding the church against apostasy. As we've already pointed out in this series, the very first major departure from the original design for the Lord's church took place in the area of church government. It's how the Roman Catholic church arose after the deaths of the apostles. There was a fairly rapid evolution in church government after the apostles died that eventually morphed into the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism, a system that you read nothing about in the scriptures, frankly. Let me show you how something that begins with good intentions can quickly become something that is contrary to God's plan and that has terrible results. That's the way it always works with innovations; when men depart from God's pattern, rejecting HIS wisdom and turning to their own. We've already shown that each congregation was to be governed by its own elders and deacons. But after the first century, as problems began to spring up in various congregations, churches started adopting the practice of having their elders settle other's disputes and intervening in the affairs of other congregations besides their own. They abandoned the Bible pattern when that began happening. Over the course of time, the eldership became something else. It wasn't long until men were appointed to oversee the affairs of several churches in a given area. These men were called bishops. We've already pointed out that the Bible makes no distinction between an elder and a bishop, but as these ancient brethren went astray, they began to make such a distinction and they set up an office which the Bible says nothing about.

As this new system of government grew, it soon became apparent that someone would need to oversee the work of these bishops. To make a long story short, that's where archbishops came from. You certainly read nothing about such a name or office in the New Testament, but nonetheless, that's what these people of long ago began to do. You can see where this is going. By the seventh century, this pyramid of power had reached its pinnacle with one man officially given a title that implied supreme authority over the church. In 606 AD, Boniface III was officially crowned as the pope or supreme father over the catholic church. The pope was even considered the vicar of Christ, the sole representative of Christ on the face of the earth. Cardinals were added as an office second to the pope in presiding over the universal church. Consequently, this system of government produced countless edicts and encyclicals and creeds down through the ages that completely changed the make-up and practice of the first-century church into something the Lord never intended when He established the church 2,000 years ago.

Friends, you just simply don't read any of that in the Bible. You just simply don't. It is the result of the traditions, schemes, and innovations of men. Unfortunately, the protestant reformation did very little to restore the Bible pattern for church government. While Martin Luther and others DID oppose the corrupt rule of the pope at that time, what their followers established in place of Catholicism in no way restored the simple picture we find in the New Testament. In fact, they heavily borrowed from Catholicism in many cases.

The idea of having councils, conventions, conferences, superintendents, presidents, general secretaries and so forth is just as much a corruption of the divine pattern as that of a hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and a pope. Both are unbiblical. The idea of having a local church ruled by a majority vote or clergyman who wears special clothing and has a special title to elevate him above the

congregation is a departure from the pattern as well. God's pattern is for each local congregation to be governed in accordance with the teachings of the New Testament by qualified elders and deacons who are appointed by evangelists. That is God's pattern and there is nothing beyond, above, or short of that pattern. That is the Lord's pattern.

Friends, this is just one more area where men have, over time, said NO to God's way and decided to invent their own way. Surely, we can see the result of innovation own through the centuries. Religion today is fragmented into hundreds of divisions and is really nothing more than a goulash of conflicting doctrines and practices, and the Lord Jesus DID NOT intend for it to be that way when He said, "**...upon this rock I will build My church...**" (Matthew 16:18). But that is what has happened as men have laid the Bible aside and started following the traditions of men. Again, I believe that the admonition of the prophet Jeremiah long ago is just as needed today as it was in ancient Israel.

Jeremiah 6:16 "...Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls..."

We are just getting underway in our series. In the weeks to come, the Lord willing, we will talk about other innovations, not only in the work and organization but in the doctrine and worship of the Lord's church. I hope you'll make your plans each week to join me as we continue.

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