



GOVERNMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH
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Welcome to Let the Bible Speak. I'm pleased to be with you today and grateful for a few moments of your time to study the word of God together. We're in the midst of a series of studies of the church as we read about it in the New Testament. Our objective is to carefully look at the church as it existed in the lifetime of the apostles when Christ established it – after His Passion and then His glorification and enthronement in heaven.

We learned in our first sermon that the church is divinely planned institution and that it began on the first Pentecost after the ascension of Jesus. It is therefore an ancient thing. God planned it; Christ built it; the Holy Spirit working through the apostles revealed it; and the New Testament, therefore, defines and describes it. No one was ever given any right by God to build any church other than the church that Christ Himself built. And if that church is revealed in the inspired New Testament scriptures, shouldn't we be concerned with what the scriptures say about it? And shouldn't we be interested in honoring God's design and plan for the church as opposed to renovating and rearranging things that God revealed about it in His word?

Last week, we learned about the form of the New Testament church. What exactly is the church anyway and what form did it take when Christ established it? Today, we wish to take that question a step further and ask: how did the Lord intend for it to be governed? Not only does every human institution has some framework of organization and government, but every living thing does also as well. Well, the church is not a human institution, but it is a divine institution, and it is certainly a living organism. It is the body of Christ. And that makes it all the more important that we understand how the church is to be governed and thus, how it should operate on earth. This is not a matter that God left it up to us to do as we please. Rather, the Holy Spirit, through the apostles, gave specific instructions and revealed certain facts that tell us how He expects the church to be organized and governed, even today.

Reading now from Ephesians 4:11-12, where Paul wrote: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” And this is one of several passages we will look at today that give us a composite picture of the government of the church as we find it in the New Testament. There are many forms of church government that are not found in the scriptures but are rather the result of changes on the part of men. We want to see what type of framework Christ placed within His church from the beginning and that will be our lesson today: The Government of the New Testament Church.

So far in our series, we have established the following facts about the church of the New Testament:

- 1) That the church of Christ is a divinely planned and planted institution.
- 2) That Christ established the church, just as He promised, immediately after His ascension to heaven, nearly 2000 years ago.
- 3) He only established one church. He never gave anyone the right to build any other church or to change the one He established. It is HIS church.
- 4) That church exists on two levels.

Universally, it is simply the spiritual collection of all baptized believers in Christ. Universally, it is a description of all the saved throughout time. The universal church is a spiritual reality but not a visible organization in the way that we think of other organizations. The universal church is headquartered in heaven, governed from Heaven, and it does not have any earthly form of organization. However, baptized believers in a given locality come together as the body of Christ and form a congregation of the church of Christ (Romans 16:16). It is the local church through which the work of God is carried out from place to place throughout the world. Any religious organization larger than the local church is not found in the scriptures. There is no such thing as a denomination in the Lord’s church. You have the church universally and you have local congregations of the church each made up of Christians who assemble and work together to carry out the churches mission and message. If we would return to that simple and straight-forward concept, we would get much closer to understanding God’s plan for governing the church. So, keep those facts in mind today and it will help us as we note several passages today.

Now, it is also necessary to understand that the kingdom of God is a divine monarchy, not a republic or a democracy. It does not operate by the will of the majority or follow the dictates of the state or the demands of the culture. It is a divine government sovereignly ruled by Jesus Christ. He is its King and its only head. Colossians 1:18 says: “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” As we have already emphasized: Christ has but ONE church. He promised to build HIS church and no other. And that church is the one which submits to Him as its supreme and only ruler. But King Jesus had an envoy of ambassadors to whom He delegated authority when He built the church. Those ambassadors were His personally chosen apostles who were with Him and were eyewitnesses of His resurrected majesty. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul taught that the household of God (the church) was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Himself being the cornerstone.

So then, who are the prophets? A prophet was a person given a spiritual gift that allowed them to miraculously speak forth messages from God. The prophets were people selected by the apostles and who the apostles laid their hands upon to impart this miraculous ability. There were several prophets who functioned in the early church and assisted the apostles in the work of revealing the truth to the church. Some of these prophets were used by the Holy Spirit, even, to pen scripture. Men such as Mark, Luke, and Jude all wrote portions of the New Testament, and their writings were accepted by the early church as scripture because they were recognized as inspired prophets.

Now, today we don't have apostles and prophets living among the church because the apostles were selected by Christ personally and no man today can meet the qualifications of an apostle. Nor do we have living prophets because we don't have apostles to lay hands on others and impart the miraculous gifts necessary to function as a prophet. Besides, the purpose of apostles and prophets was fulfilled when the New Covenant was fully revealed, according to 1 Corinthians 13: 8-13. Actually, the apostles and prophets are still with us today, not in person, but in the form of their inspired writings left to guide us. Jude said that faith was once for all delivered to the saints, according to Jude verse 3.

So, the church of Christ is solely headed by Christ and He has expressed His authority over the church through His apostles and prophets who left us the New Testament which is our guide and our authority in the Christian faith today. The Lord never established any other framework or hierarchy of authority to govern the worldwide church, nor did He sanction the dividing of the church into separate bodies or denominations with systems of government over each of them. He established ONE church with Him as the head and that is to follow the teachings of His apostles and prophets who were originally appointed in the early days of the church. You will not read in the New Testament about a pope, an archbishop, a cardinal, nor will you read of a president or superintendent, a convention, a synod, nor any other such form of government larger than or outside of the local church.

You see, beginning on the Day of Pentecost, as the gospel began to spread first in Jerusalem and then from there to Judea, Samaria, and ultimately throughout the Gentile world, when people were converted and baptized into Christ, a congregation would be planted in a city, or a region and it would be left there to function as the body of Christ in that place. Each church was intended to be self-sustaining and sufficient to carry out the work of the kingdom in that locality and they were to be guided by the teachings of the apostles and prophets. But there would be a need for that congregation to be organized and overseen. It had to be shepherded; instructed in the faith and in the Christian life; it had to have a system of internal accountability. It had to have some kind of organization, just like a physical body, for it to properly function as a SPIRITUAL body. So, in Ephesians 4:11,

Paul says besides apostles and prophets (who had authority over all churches for all time), Christ also put evangelists, pastors, and teachers in place to function in each local church. These men function in the context of the local church. Evangelists were men sent out by a congregation to spread the message of Christ, including establishing new congregations. "Pastors" is another word for a shepherd or an elder and does not refer to a preacher 'per say'. I know most people refer to preachers as pastors but that's a misnomer. A pastor may be a preacher, but preachers are not necessarily pastors. Pastors are simply men who are appointed by preachers (evangelists) to oversee the congregation they are members of. So, when you hear the word "pastor", if you think biblically, you shouldn't think of your 30-year-old preacher, but you should think of the elders in the congregation – older, experienced men who meet the qualifications outlined in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3, who have been appointed to oversee and shepherd the flock. That's a distinct work from simply being the preacher.

Then, Paul uses the word “teachers”. He says, “some pastors and some teachers”. We should note that in the Greek text here, scholars say it reads “the pastors and teachers” and some point out that when you apply rules of grammar, pastors and teachers refers to the same person and that being a “teacher” is just a further description of the work of a pastor or elder. After all, Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:2 that a qualification of an elder was he be “apt (or able) to teach”. So, within the local church, pastors or elders are to shepherd, feed, and oversee that flock. Each church, in other words, is to have its own elders to oversee it.

This is apparently God’s will for the government of EVERY local church, for Paul directly commanded Titus in Titus 1:5 “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.” In Acts 14:23 were told of Paul and Barnabas’s travels together. It says, “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” So, every church, you see was overseen by its own elders. These elders did not oversee multiple churches, they oversaw the church where they were a member and were appointed to serve in that role. To the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul said in Acts 20:28 “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Later, Peter would write in 1 Peter 5:1-2, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: [2] Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.”

You see, each church had its own oversight. The only authority outside of the local congregation was that of the apostles and prophets. This idea that churches come together and form an organization with a system or hierarchy of governance is simply not taught in the bible. In fact, its contrary to the bible. Now, I know there are many who make a distinction between the offices of an elder and a bishop and some claim that a bishop is a higher office with a broader scope of authority but that’s not what the bible teaches. In the New Testament church, a bishop and elder were the exact same person. In fact, in Acts 20:28, which we read a moment ago, the word overseers is the exact same word for bishops and Luke makes it clear that the ones Paul was calling bishops or overseers in verse 28 were the elders of the Ephesian church that he called for in verses 17 and 18. An elder, a bishop, an overseer, a pastor, a presbyter, they are all the same person and they are appointed overseers of the local church of which they are members and no other. They were to shepherd the “flock that was AMONG THEM”, Peter said.

Consequently, something else we never read of in the New Testament was a church with multiple campuses or locations under one central leadership. Each church was a congregation of people who came together in one place (1 Corinthians 11:20; 14:23) to eat the Lord’s Super together, learn the word of God together, and to edify one another, and to serve together as a body. Once men could be found who met the qualifications Paul cited in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, those men were appointed to oversee the work and shepherd that flock. And that church functioned as the body of Christ in that place.

But then, there was another role described in the local church. In Philippians 1:1, Paul addressed the church by writing: “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:” You see, Paul refers to the bishops or overseers in the church at Philippi and mentions the deacons. Now, a deacon is simply a servant. There are qualifications for those who were serve as deacons in 1 Timothy 3 as well, but these people are appointed to meet and carry out the more temporal and physical needs of a congregation while the elders focus on the

more spiritually related issues within the church. And the bishops and deacons work in tandem to see that that local body functions as it ought it.

Friend, that's God's simple but profound design for the church. Now, any other arrangement than that is simply not of the bible. Any organization larger and more complex than that, is not what we read about in the New Testament. And we need to abandon the inventions and traditions of men and return to that simple New Testament model. You can't improve upon God's design, though men and women have certainly tried. In fact, one of the first departures from the design of the original church was in the corruption of these offices in the local congregation. In a relatively short time after the ministry of the apostles, a regional and then worldwide hierarchy of power evolved in the church that ended up opening the door for all manner of apostasy and false doctrine. And that's one of the problems with replacing God's simple arrangement with a larger pyramid of power. My friend, if we desire to imitate the church of the New Testament and simply be the church as Jesus established it, a necessary part of that effort is to restore the form, organization, and government of the church as it existed in the beginning. And that means to lay aside the ideas of men that are contrary to the bible and let the scriptures be our pattern and our only guide.

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