

## WHY ARE THERE SO MANY DIFFERENT CHURCHES (3)

### The Compromise of Church Organization

We are in the midst of a study in which we are examining why there are so many different churches. Thus far in this study we have noted the ONE true church as it was during its infancy having begun on Pentecost in Jerusalem, 7 weeks after Jesus arose from the dead. Its early history is recorded in the pages of inspiration (the New Testament). Last week we addressed the beginning of apostasy noting that it was foretold and we mentioned some of the false philosophies and reasons that contributed to ultimate apostasy. But another major area of apostasy that we find within the pages of history concerns the deterioration of the organization of the church over the next few centuries. Ultimately this led to the establishment of the Catholic Church. Our lesson today will address what happened to the simple pattern of organization we find in the pages of the New Testament.

#### I. The Organization of the New Testament Church

- a. In times past we have noted that the term church is used in two different ways – in its universal sense, which has reference to a relationship with God and those who are saved (Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, etc.), and as local churches or congregations of the ONE true church. It is important to understand this, because it was NOT a denominational type of set up where various churches taught totally different doctrines in the same city or abroad and simply agreed to disagree (Consider 1 Corinthians 1:10, 4:17, etc.).
- b. How were local churches organized?
  - i. **Each congregation was independent and autonomous.**

By **independent** we mean that a congregation was not tied to another congregation in its organization. Each church answered directly to the Lord (and His inspired messengers) and not some super church or headquarters.

Examples of this include how preachers were supported to preach the gospel (see 1:5, 4:14-17, 2:25 – money sent directly to Paul) and how needy churches were helped (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, each congregation contacted by Paul individually [not a church] and could send their help by whomever they chose). The book of Philippians reveals that Paul was supported by them when he preached elsewhere. Resources were sent directly to him rather than through another congregation

By **autonomous** we mean that each local congregation was self-governing. That is, it answered directly to the Lord for its own conduct rather than the dictates of some board of directors or organizational hierarchy. Consider Revelation 2 & 3. The letter of Revelation was written to “the 7 churches of Asia” (Rev. 1:4, 11), yet each church answered directly to the Lord for its own conduct. Chapter 1:12-20 notes that the Lord stood in the midst of each of the 7 lampstands and as such He provided them light. But in chapters 2 & 3 the individual churches were each judged by the Lord based upon their own conduct and as such they answered directly to the Lord (see 2:1, 5 – Ephesus, 2:8, 9 – Smyrna, etc.). There was no super church they answered to.

NOTE: I find it interesting that every epistle of the New Testament was written by an individual and not a church OR a representative of some church.
  - ii. **Elders exercised authority ONLY over the local church where they worked.**
    1. Within scripture we find that they were ALWAYS a plurality – cf. Acts 20:17, 14:23, 1 Peter 5:1-2
    2. Note also in these verse the limitation of their work – “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...” (Ac. 20:28); “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers...”
    3. The terms elders and bishops (overseers) referred to the same office, as well as the task of “pastor” See 1 Peter 5:1-2 as an example of this. Also note Titus 1:5 & 7 where the terms elder and bishop are used of the same person.

4. Within the New Testament - NOWHERE do we find elders working beyond the boundaries of the local church where they were, nor do we find a single elder taking preeminence over the others.

## II. The Organization of the Church Begins to Change

- a. It begins with a presiding elder. According to Gary Eubanks, who has developed a study entitled, **Church History: A Biblical Overview**, the first step toward change was when one of the elders of a local church took for himself the role of ***monarchical episcopate***, which means one ruling in the office of a bishop. We do not know exactly when this took place, but it was fairly early. There are documents that date to around **A.D. 100-117** (concerning Ignatius). Some believe it was actually starting even before John had completed his writings. While this one elder would distinguish himself above the others he didn't actually consider himself as superior to other elders. This would soon change.
- b. **Around A.D. 150**, this concept of a presiding elder began to develop even further. While scripture identifies all elders as equal within a congregation, this presiding elder would assume the title of ***bishop***, thereby making a distinction where the scriptures do not. Over the course of the next few decades, this presiding elder would assume the role of an office which ***officially*** placed him above the other elders. He would govern the local church (like the denominational "pastor" system today). **Around A.D. 200** we find this structure in full force throughout the Empire.
- c. **Around A.D. 250** the diocese began to develop. The diocese is a district or group of churches under the jurisdiction of a single bishop (dictionary.com). By **around A.D. 300**, we see the rise of ***metropolitans***. These were diocesan bishops in larger cities who would become ruling bishops over smaller cities. In this you now begin to find ***bishops presiding over bishops***. In 321, the Nicene Creed tells us there were 3 metropolitans. Rome, Antioch and Alexandria.
- d. **By A.D. 381** there was the rise of the ***5 patriarchs*** mentioned in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council in Constantinople. The 5 were Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem. All 5 of these patriarchs became the equivalent of popes governing as monarchs.
- e. **In the years that follow, (451-588)** we begin to see power grabs where various ***patriarchs*** attempt to claim more power.  
In AD 451, Pope Leo began to make claims about papal powers but they were ignored by most.  
In AD 590, Gregory began to act like a pope but denounces the title of Universal Bishop.  
**Then in 606 AD**, Boniface III of Rome declared himself to be the Universal Bishop. This was opposed by the bishop of Constantinople. The result was a split that resulted in the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church.
- f. **And thus we have** the beginnings of the Catholic Church as it stands organizationally today. In the years to come there would be many other changes, but they still submitted to these popes.
- g. What is the problem with this? Simply stated, it violates the nature of the local church, etc.
- h. NOTE: For charts that were used with this lesson illustrating this apostasy, see the interactive Bible @ (<http://www.bible.ca/nix-organization-historical-development-papal-patriarchal-systems-mouse-rollover.htm>) for the charts and much of the details presented here. The facts stated here are well documented in respected historical studies of the development of the church. Thanks to Steve Rudd for permission to use some of his charts.

Thus we see the gradual corruption of the organization of the church that led to the universal Catholic Church that is still very powerful today. Should we be concerned with this today? The answer is Yes! Because some 60 years ago the Lord's church divided over the work and authority of local church as brethren once again began changing the organization within churches of Christ. If we do not stand up for what is right, we are doomed to repeat the same trend in time. One might ask, how do we prevent such apostasies? The answer is through continually studying God's word and striving to keep the Lord's church as pure as it was when He died for her. What about you? Where do you stand concerning the ONE true church?