

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

Presented by
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We continue tonight the study of the N.T. church. Our lesson relates to the organization of that church. If we were to give our study a formal subject, we might put it in the form of a question, "Why does the N.T. church have no Central organization?" You might think it rather peculiar that a subject such as this would be used when speaking to an audience which is composed almost completely of members of the body of Jesus Christ. But I personally feel that that is all the more reason to speak on the subject. I sometimes think that, in fully understanding what kind of organization the church does not have, we have failed to appreciate the kind of organization that the church does have, and that we have so emphasized what it doesn't have that we have almost reached the point of believing that it doesn't have any organization at all. But I would emphasize in the beginning that this is not the question. The question is not, "Why does the church have no organization" but, "Why does it have no central organization?" Some people conclude from the fact that it has no central organization that the Bible doesn't really authorize any organization at all, but such is a gross misconception of the teaching of the N.T. Thus, in the very beginning, I want to set forth some of the basic principles which we find in the word of God which relate to the kind of organization which exists in the N.T. church.

One of the basic principles with which you must deal in discussing any kind of organization is the fact that any organization must have a head. When the Lord set up the church, He did not set it up without a head. In Colossians 1:18 we read that Jesus is the head of the church. In Ephesians 1:22,23 we read again that Jesus is the head of the church. There is something else which is also essential to an organization. An organization must not only have a head, it must have members. If Jesus is the head of the church, there must be some who are members in the church. We find in Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 12 a description of the body of Christ wherein those who are partakers in that body are described as being the "members". These members of the body of Christ are organized into various congregations. Thus when we turn to Revelation we find letters there to "the seven churches" or congregations of Asia. When we turn to the epistles of Paul we find them addressed to various churches, or congregations, and one in particular addressed to a plurality of congregations, unto the churches of Galatia. We have already discovered in passing in other lessons that these congregations are overseen by elders or bishops. These terms, we discovered, are used interchangeably and they refer to exactly the same office. We also discovered (Acts 14:23) that elders - plural - were appointed in every congregation or in every church. We'll not take the time to describe the office, but simply mention here in passing that these elders are assisted by deacons which have the responsibility of serving in the congregation.

But now the question is not so much the kind of organization that we have within a particular congregation, but the question that bothers us and the question that is so much debated in the religious world today is the kind of organization that exists between various congregations of the body of Jesus Christ. I think one thing is very clear from these passages which we have mentioned and from others which could be suggested in the

N.T. church, as it is revealed and described in the pages of the N.T., every congregation was autonomous. Now autonomous is just a "four-bit" word which means "self-ruling". It means that every congregation as it was overseen by the bishops under the headship of Christ was responsible for its own affairs. It did not answer to any organization or to any individual which was superior to the local congregation. Now in order that we might show that this is not a misinterpretation of what is revealed in the Word of God, I would read you two quotations from men who have studied the history of the early church, and give you their conclusions concerning the nature of the congregations and the intercongregational relationships. I might also emphasize in passing that I am not seeking to read these observations from the standpoint of a member of the "church of Christ" for neither of these men belongs to the church. First, I read from Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History. He makes this observation: "The church in those early times were entirely independent; none of them subject to any foreign jurisdiction, but each one governed by its own rulers and its own laws. For, though the churches founded by the apostles had this particular deference shown them, that they were consulted in difficult and doubtful cases; yet they had no juridical authority, no sort of supremacy over the others, nor the least right to enact laws for them. Nothing, on the contrary, is more evident than the perfect equality that reigned among the primitive churches;..." Secondly I read from Professor Lyman Coleman who in his book, "Ancient Christianity Exemplified" said, "These churches, whenever formed, became separate and independent bodies, competent to appoint their own officers, and to administer their own government without reference to subordination to any central authority or power. No fact connected with the history of these primitive churches is more fully established or more generally conceded, so that the discussion of it need not be renewed at this place." In other words, this church historian said that this characteristic of the early church - that the congregations were independent, that they were autonomous (self-ruling) - was so evident and so generally conceded to be true by all men that he really didn't need to enter into any lengthy discussion of it.

Now some have drawn from these premises the erroneous conclusion that, because the congregations are independent, because they are self-ruling, that there cannot be any kind of relationship or co-operation at all between the various congregations. Sad it is to say that there are some of my brethren among this very number. But surely this cannot be the case for when one turns to the word of God reads concerning the N.T. church, he cannot fail to see that, although these congregations were independent and self-ruling, the N.T. still literally abounds with examples of one congregation co-operating with another congregation of the Lord's people. What some of my brethren have failed to see is that while all patterns are examples, all examples are not patterns. Now let me explain what I mean by that statement. All patterns are examples. An example is something that shows how to do a thing. But by the expression "pattern" we mean that this is the way in which a particular work of the church is to be done. Now all patterns are examples, because they show us the way. But all examples are not patterns, which is to say that every time we read for instance in the book of Acts, where one congregation co-operated with another congregation, we do not find a method which is binding as a pattern upon the church of today. That this is so ought to be seen from at least this truth if from none other - that I do not find in the N.T. any two examples of congregational co-operation that are exactly alike. If one of them were a pattern, every case that followed that pattern would have to be exactly like the one that preceded it. The fact that this is not the case is evidence enough that these examples of N.T. co-operation

were not given to bind upon us every minute detail which characterized the intercongregational relationships of the first century.

There is, indeed there must be, co-operation between various congregations of the Lord's people, and any other attitude than this would kill the body of Jesus Christ. In speaking of the church as a body and looking at the members, individuals who made up that body, we discovered that, in the language of Paul, "If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body." I Cor. 12:15. It still belongs to the body. It is still essential to the body. But for a moment let us think of the congregations of the Lord's people as being the members that make up the body, and it is a ridiculous situation to suppose where one congregation of the Lord's body says, "I have no connection with that congregation of the Lord's people over there, and there is absolutely no relationship between us," so that this congregation refuses to co-operate with that one. It is just as silly to suppose a hand refusing to co-operate with the rest of the body. The body cannot function and confusion is going to reign. But in spite of this, some persist in saying that there is no organic connection between congregations of the church of the Lord. I do not believe that is true. For if the church is an organism, and a body is an organism, then there has got to be some organic connection between the members, because if there is no organic connection between the members, then there can be no life flowing between them. I think really that congregations need to learn this vital lesson. If congregations could learn that there is an organic connection between various congregations of the Lord's church we would not have situations arising where elders at one congregation are having difficulties with a particular member and this particular member learns that the elders are about to withdraw fellowship from him over here in congregation A, so before the elders there can act, this individual goes over to congregation B and places his membership. And over at the congregation A, the elders sort of wipe their brow and say, "Boy! We're sure through with that problem. We got out of that one easy." No, they are not through with that problem. They may be if there is no connection between the congregations, but they are not through with the problem according to the teaching of the N.T., because if they have a member who needs discipline they are wrong to let him go over to congregation B without repenting of the unChristian attitude or act or whatever it was that constituted the basis of the discipline. And congregation B is at fault in receiving him when he was not in full fellowship with congregation A. Just because some of my brethren think there is no relationship between congregations, we get into this kind of situation far too often--and once is too often. If we realized that there is a connection between congregations we would not have situations where congregations think they are growing when all in the world they are doing is proselyting members from other congregations of the Lord's body. We wouldn't have situations where congregations would seek to get everybody else's members in their particular situation on a particular Sunday, because they would realize that, though they would help themselves, they would be hurting others. If we could realize that there is a relationship between various congregations of the body of Jesus Christ, we could do away with a lot of the problems that we have. Indeed, we might have done away with some of the problems that have brought about some divisions in the body of Jesus Christ. So let us not conclude that because there is no central organization in the church there is no organization at all. There is organization in the church in the local congregations and there is legitimately a connection between various congregations of the body of Jesus Christ as they co-operate one with another in seeking to do what the Lord gave us all to do - carry the gospel of Jesus: unto the ends of the earth.

Wherein then do we see the wisdom of God in not authorizing a central authority or any central organization in the N.T. church. I have talked with individuals in denominationalism about the problem, and almost invariably they say to me, "The church just can't function without this kind of organization." But I believe that, if the church has accomplished nothing else in recent years, we have at least shown the world that without any kind of super organization great things can be done for the cause of Jesus Christ. But wherein is the wisdom of God seen in not authorizing this central organization? Let me suggest three things. 1. Such a central organization is an open invitation to legislate religious law, a field in which man has no business whatsoever. I suggest to you that there is no conference, no synod, no counsel of any kind but what has engaged in legislating law, which religious law became binding upon the churches represented in the counsel, which in turn became binding upon the members of the churches. You see counsels and synods and conferences usurping this kind of authority when Jesus Christ said that "all authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth." I have had individuals say, "Yes, but, while it is true that these conferences and counsels may legislate religious law, it is not binding upon the churches. They do not have to accept it." And that is true if you will add one more statement - they don't have to except it unless they want to stay in the counsel! If they want to stay in the counsel they accept it whether they like it or not. If they don't like it, and they don't accept it, the only way they can get out from under it is to break their denominational affiliation and their association with this unauthorized central organization. 2. The wisdom of God is seen in not allowing this central organization because such an organization is an open avenue to spread false doctrines throughout the entire body. You see, if a congregation of the church in Lubbock, Texas, goes astray doctrinally, it doesn't affect the congregation over in Texarkana, Texas, because there is no relationship between them. Now it may eventually work over there. It is possible. But let us assume that we, with the congregation in Texarkana, belong to some kind of central, super organization. We go and we have our meeting and we spread our false doctrines there. Immediately it has gone to all of the other congregations connected. It is an open avenue to spread false doctrine. It brings all of the brethren together where they may have access to it and be infected by it. 3. It is a ready vehicle through which to split the body all at once. Now surely the church of the N.T. has seen some sad days, and it is sad when brethren cannot love one another, and a difference in opinion has resulted in a splitting of the precious body of my Savior and my Lord. Yet it doesn't happen all at once and it doesn't affect the entire church. But let a group get together in some kind of central, super organization at the difference put there, and immediately the lines are drawn through the entire body. I could point to you specific examples where it has been done by denominationalism at their conferences, but this is not necessary to the point.

One last observation. Those who advocate, who believe that some gigantic, super organization above and beyond and connecting together all of the local congregations is authorized by the N.T., always point to Acts 15 and ask, "What about the Jerusalem conference?" The Jerusalem conference, according to these individuals, is authority enough, example enough for them to set up any kind of super organization which they may desire to have. I would suggest a few differences between the Jerusalem conference and the counsels we see today. First, the Jerusalem conference made a formal claim to inspiration by the words with which they began their statement, "It seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit." While there are numerous religious counsel engaging in propagating religious

law today, I do not know of any, save one, which purports to speak infallibly, which is blasphemous enough to say, "The Holy Spirit is speaking through us." No uninspired man used such language, and no counsel today, short of blasphemy, can make any such pretense. Second, though this example is used to authorize a counsel, the Jerusalem conference wasn't a general counsel at all. The Jerusalem conference was a meeting of the Jerusalem church with some brethren from Antioch. It was not made up of representatives from all of the congregations of the church of the Lord. Somehow I have always felt that that which is used to support a certain thing ought at least to resemble that which it is used to support. The Jerusalem conference doesn't in any way at all, however remote, save the fact that people are involved in both, resemble the counsels and the synods and the conferences of today. Third, the Jerusalem conference decided a matter of doctrine affecting the salvation of souls, and this no man or group of men save the inspired apostles of Jesus Christ have the right and the authority to do. When the Jerusalem conference met, at issue were the souls of men and women, and the decision they rendered affected the salvation of souls. I do not know of any religious counsel today, save one already mentioned, which purports to set forth edicts affecting the salvation of the souls of men. This is evidenced by the very fact that almost, if not completely without exception, they believe you can go to heaven without subscribing to their particular creed. This says it is really non-essential. This says they know they are not affecting any souls by it.

The N.T. authorizes no super organization. The N.T. authorizes the local congregation and it puts it under the oversight of the bishops or the elders, and I would suggest to you tonight that upon these points there is no real disagreement among religious students. The only area of disagreement comes when individuals stand up and say, "Yes, but we feel that we need it." I wonder why we need it? Back in the first century when, admittedly, the church did not have it, Paul was able to say, "The gospel has been preached to every creature." A number of years ago there came a division in the body of Jesus Christ over the methods of how to do foreign mission work. That, along with some other things, created a division in the body of Christ. One of the groups was saying, "We need some kind of central, super missionary society whereby we can conduct the mission work of the church. We will do far more." But evidence has shown that those who stayed with N.T. patterns have done more and more and those who departed from it have done less and less until they are legislating themselves out of existence to be swallowed up in a super, denominational group.

What we plead with you to do is to become simply a N.T. Christian, belonging to the precious body of Jesus Christ. We have discovered how this can be done, by believing what people in the days of the N.T. believed by doing what they did in the way they did it, for the purpose for which they did it, and you will become what they became. You have the promise of the Lord that it is so. If you do anything else, if you follow anything else, the religious world is divided. While they may offer you something beyond, they will not disagree with you for having rendered obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you have obeyed that gospel and you have wandered away, if you haven't been faithful to the Lord and Savior who shed His blood for you and cleansed you with it, would you not return to Him tonight, be a faithful member striving to spread His truth. Would you come while we stand and sing?