

LESSON 9 – APOSTASY IN LOCAL CHURCH ORGANIZATION

1) INTRODUCTION

- a) In our previous study we saw that churches in the NT when completely and scripturally organized had a two-tier system - **Phil 1:1**
 - i) There were a plurality of elders (also known as bishops or pastors) who oversaw and shepherded the local congregation among them
 - ii) There were deacons, men who ministered to the congregation under the oversight of the elders
- b) The authority of the elders was limited...
 - i) To the flock of God among them, i.e., the local congregation - **Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2**
 - ii) Thus each congregation was independent and autonomous, even while submitting themselves to the apostles' doctrine - **Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 4:17; 14:37**
- c) Over the years, many have not been content with the NT pattern
 - i) Soon after the apostles died, changes in the organization of the local church subtly occurred over the course of several hundred years
 - ii) Despite later efforts to reform the church, similar organizational changes continued to occur within protestant denominations
 - iii) In this lesson, we will look historically at why, how, and when these changes began to occur
 - iv) More importantly, we will discuss the significance of these changes and how they continue to affect the religious world today

2) HISTORICAL CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

- a) 2nd Century – The Exalted Elder
 - i) When the 2nd century began, false doctrine was already beginning to spread within local churches. This was in fact prophesied by the apostles – **Acts 20:29-31a; 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 4:2-4**
 - ii) Christians were so frustrated by the false teachers' ability to twist scripture, they mistakenly believed that consolidating power within local churches was the way to deal with the error
 - iii) Add to that the fact in most local churches there is one elder who tends to stand above the others in faith and ability
 - iv) History tells us that amongst local churches, therefore, one elder began to exalt himself above the other elders and then took on the title of “president” or “presiding bishop”
 - v) Eventually this one elder took on the title of “bishop” exclusively for himself and ruled over the other elders as they in turn ruled over the flock – **3 John 9-10**
- b) 3rd Century – Diocesan Bishop
 - i) When Christianity began, most local churches were started out in the big cities – Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, Antioch, etc.
 - ii) As Christianity then spread from these big cities, local churches were begun in the smaller villages that surrounded the city
 - iii) Instead of these local churches being recognized as independent, self-governing churches, the bishop of the city church would control them
 - iv) Even as these rural churches appointed elders and a “bishop” arose among them, the city bishop was looked at as having greater authority and came to be called a “diocesan bishop”
- c) 4th Century – Metropolitan Bishop
 - i) As false teaching continued to spread, Christians believed further consolidation of power was necessary to attain to unity

- ii) Diocesan bishops of the city churches that had been founded by apostles were said to be in succession to the apostles, and hence their teaching was held to be authentic and their authority collegial
 - iii) Therefore these bishops were soon looked at as having greater authority than other diocesan bishops and were called “metropolitan bishops”
 - iv) “Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all these, since the like is customary for the Bishop of Rome also. Likewise in Antioch and the other provinces, let the Churches retain their privileges. (The First Ecumenical Council of Nice, Canon VI, 325AD)
- d) Late 4th Century – Patriarchs Bishop
- i) By the late 4th century, consolidation of power rose to on a new level. It was deemed the bishops of 5 great cities of the Roman empire should have preeminence – Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria
 - ii) These five cities were seen to be preeminent because of their significance in church history as well as association with the apostles that began them
 - iii) Though these “Patriarch Bishops” were to be equal in power, they were to oversee the Metropolitan Bishops in their respective regions
 - iv) “The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour after the Bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is New Rome. (The Second Ecumenical Council, Canon III, 381AD)
- e) 6th & 7th Century – The Pope
- i) Not satisfied with sharing authority with the other 4 Patriarchs, in 588AD, John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople, declared himself Universal Bishop (Pope)
 - ii) Gregory the Great, Patriarch of Rome, declared it apostasy. These two men spent the rest of their lives disputing the matter
 - iii) In 606AD, however, Boniface III, Patriarch of Rome, declared himself universal bishop
 - iv) The rise of Islam rendered obsolete the patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople and left the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Rome with sole authority of the church
 - v) The ongoing battle for supremacy between the western and eastern portions of the church eventually led to the schism

3) ***THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUCH CHANGES***

- a) They reflect an attitude
- i) When we devise our own scheme by which local churches are to be organized, it reflects an attitude toward the Scriptures and the Lord, that we are free to change whatever we desire
 - ii) To say that we can come up with a more efficient plan of church organization and church cooperation than the Lord could shows a spirit of irreverence and a lack of faith that He has truly equipped us “for every good work” – **2 Tim 3:17**
 - iii) If local churches cannot organize themselves after the NT model, what is to prevent us from also altering God’s plan for the worship and work of a local church?
 - iv) This is not an irrelevant point – the apostasy of the early church began with a change in local church organization
 - v) Unless we approach God’s word with a desire to mimic the approved apostolic examples for early church organization, we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes of our ancestors

Question 1: Read **John 8:31-32**. What did Jesus say was the criteria for being a true disciple? What did He say the truth will do for us?

b) They change the purpose

- i) As we studied in the last lesson, organization and design reflects purpose. If we change the organization, we change the purpose
- ii) In the NT organization of the local church, the purpose of the elders is to watch and feed the flock over which the Spirit has appointed them – **Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2**
- iii) When elders become overseers of other churches or works in other areas, there are negative implications that result
- iv) First of all, they are no longer “shepherds”. Instead, they become administrators
- v) Secondly, they presume authority in areas they have not been given and therefore are in danger of losing their soul and causing others to lose their soul – **Gal 1:6-9**
- vi) Third, they take on works they cannot effectively oversee. You cannot effectively shepherd a flock that you are so far removed from in distance and the amount of time you can spend with them

Question 3: Read **3 John 9-10**. In vs. 10, what was Diotrephes doing to brethren who stood against Him?

c) They upset the balance of power

- i) Other than the authority given the inspired apostles, no man or group of men were given more authority than the elders of a church - **Heb 13:17**
- ii) Their authority was limited to the church (flock) “among them” - **Act 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2** – a plurality of elders in one congregation also kept them in check
- iii) But when changes in church organization occurred in the 2nd century, it became possible for one man to control one or more churches
- iv) If this one “Pastor” oversees a local church and he were to stray into error, there is no one with greater authority within the church to correct Him and see to it that the error is kept in check
- v) If one bishop oversees multiple churches and strays into error, multiple churches are in danger of going into error with no one to stop them
- vi) The practicality of God’s design for local churches to have a plurality of elders overseeing the flock “among them” ensures that no one man can drastically alter the course of the apostles doctrine
- vii) Even if a plurality of elders in one local church stray into error, given the independent autonomous design of local churches, only that one church is affected
- viii) That we have an approved apostolic example of NT organization is not a coincidence. God knew what He was doing when He designed it this way

Question 4: Consider the fact that the reason man likes to do things his way is because he trusts in his judgments. What does **Isa 55:8-9** reveal about the difference between God’s ways/thoughts and man’s ways/thoughts?

d) They increase the spread of error

- i) As we noted earlier, one of the primary motives for changes in church organization was an attempt to restrain error through consolidation of power
- ii) However, the 2nd century church' "solution" was worse than the problem. Whenever you have an organizational structure above the local church, the potential for error's spread multiplies!
- iii) If error creeps into a local church, it is less likely to spread if each congregation remains independent and autonomous
- iv) But if error creeps into a hierarchy like those developed in the 2nd century and later, it can quickly spread to churches expected to submit to the hierarchy
- v) Irrational fears can lead us into making very unwise decisions. We must guard our hearts with courage and faith

Question 5: Read **1 Kings 12:25-30**. Why did Jeroboam set up golden calves in Dan and Bethel? Now read **2 Chron 11:13-17**. What happened to Israel when Jeroboam set up the golden calves?
