

## Churches and The Church: Organizational Structure

### INTRODUCTION:

1. I was recently at a meeting where the speaker talked about the decline of a local church into apostasy and what causes it.
  - A. He spoke of four stages that take place during this decline.
    - i. The first was a **spoken understanding** of the truth, where the truth is preached and people under and appreciate the distinct nature of N.T. Christianity and the church.
    - ii. The second was an **unspoken understanding**, where the truth about the distinct nature of the N.T. Christianity/church is understood, but not preached on much because all know it.
    - iii. The third is an **unspoken misunderstanding**, where false ideas about the church and Christianity have crept in because the truth has not been preached. But, these false doctrines are not preached nor spoken of within the congregation.
    - iv. The fourth, and final stage of decline into apostasy is the **spoken misunderstanding**, where the truth of the unique nature of the church and salvation is forgotten, and false teaching is spoken and accepted by all.
  - B. I do not want that decline to happen here and to avoid that we need to all be very clear on what makes the true church different from the many churches that exist today and why only in the true church of Christ is there salvation.
2. Today I want to begin a comparison study of the mainstream, “*accepted by everybody*,” churches around us, to the N.T. church.
  - A. It is important that we do this because we tend to assume that most every church, those filled with people we meet and like, is basically like the N.T. church!
  - B. We assume that these churches have similar, or at least some, respect for the authority of the Scriptures, and that very little is significantly different than the N.T. church.
  - C. To assume these things would be a serious mistake and would not allow us to see, as nicely as I can say this, just how far from the truth these churches have chosen to go.
3. And, one of the areas where this is clearly seen is in their organizational structure.
  - A. The world, or even we, may assume this is of little consequence, but we will soon see otherwise.
  - B. For, how a church is organized says much about its view of the sanctity of the word of God, its authority, and the authority of Christ Himself.

### BODY:

#### **I. The Spirit-Revealed organization of the Church:**

- A. The organization of universal church, or the body of Christ:
  1. This church is headquartered, or ruled, in heaven.
    - a. Christ is the head of the Church, ruling over all things from his throne in heaven:
      - i. Col. 1:18 – “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.”
      - ii. Eph. 1:20-23 – “which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. <sup>22</sup>And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”
    - b. There is no *earthly* headquarters, or head of the church, on earth—no organizational structure revealed to us by God through which the universal church, or body of Christ as a whole, is to work or function.
    - c. The **individual** is the largest functioning unit in the church universal.
      - i. We as **individuals** are a part of this church, of Christ, and remain so, through our faithfulness to Christ (Jn. 15:5-6 – “I am the vine, you are the branches. **He** who **abides in Me**, and **I in him**, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If

**anyone** does not abide in Me, **he** is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”).

- ii. To be a faithful disciple of Christ requires **individual** obedience to His word (Jn. 8:31-32 – “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you **abide in My word**, you **are My disciples indeed**.<sup>32</sup> And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”).
2. So, the body of Christ functions throughout the world through individuals living out their lives in faithful service to Christ.
- B. The only earthly organizational structure God has revealed for us is that of **localized** groups, or **churches**, of Christians banding together to worship and do certain revealed works.
  1. After the gospel is preached, we read of the “church in Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22), how Saul “assembled with the church” at Antioch (Acts 11:26), etc.
  2. The oversight of these churches was local as well, placed upon the elders of each local church.
    - a. Qualified elders are to be appointed “in every city” (Tit. 1:5), or every church (Acts 14:23 – “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”).
    - b. Their job is clearly revealed:
      - i. Elders rule (1 Tim. 5:17 – “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.”).
      - ii. Elders oversee the local church they are a part of:
        - i) 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.”
        - ii) 1 Pet. 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: <sup>2</sup> **Shepherd** the flock of God which is among you, **servicing as overseers**, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly”
    - c. Under the elders are deacons, evangelists, the saints (Phil. 1:1 – “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons”).
  3. This is the sum of the organizational structure revealed for the church in the N.T.
    - a. It is specific, simple, and easily understood.
    - b. We will do well if we follow the admonitions of the Lord:
      - i. Through Paul (1 Cor. 4:6 – “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.”).
      - ii. Through John (Rev. 22:18-19 – “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book;<sup>19</sup> and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”).

## II. The organizational structure of mainstream churches:

### A. The Roman Catholic Church:

1. This church, claimed to be the universal (Catholic) church on earth, is led from Rome (Roman) by a man called the Pope:
  - a. This church claims the Pope to be the vicar of Christ on earth, or the one who stand in Christ’s stead on earth, as head over the universal church.
  - b. The church claims that the Pope speaks as the mouth of God, or speaks infallible truth, when he speaks ex-cathedra (from the chair), or in his official capacity as the Pope.

- c. Thus, in this position the Pope is the head, the **lawgiver** for the Roman Catholic Church.
  2. Directly under the Pope is the *College of the Cardinals* (193 worldwide, who are senior ecclesiastical leaders each considered a *Prince* of the Church, whose primary duty is to elect a Pope), *Bishops* (5000+ worldwide), including Archbishops (chief bishop of an archdiocese, or districts including many diocese), and Diocesan Bishops (oversees one diocese with many parishes/churches), *priests* (serves [oversees] one parish), deacons (help priest in Mass), and the laity, or members.
    - a. The only scriptural *titles* are Bishop/overseer, priest, and deacon, but they are applied to positions completely foreign to Bible's simple form and function.
    - b. Note that the priests are separated from the laity, or members, when God's will is for all Christians to serve as priests (1 Pet. 2:4-5 – "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, <sup>5</sup> you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.").
  3. NOTE: Although I will not deal directly with the organizational structure of the JW, LDS, or the SDA, suffice it to say that their upper organization structure is quite like that of the RCC.
- B. Methodist Church:
1. "Today, our denomination continues to be organized in a "connectional" system, which "enables us to carry out our mission in unity and strength" (Book of Discipline, ¶ 701). Every local church is linked to an interconnected network of organizations that join together in mission and ministry, allowing us to accomplish far more than any one local church or person could alone." (<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/organization-church-as-connection>).
  2. Organization: Consists generally of *conferences* which "provide the primary groupings of people and churches for discernment and decision-making" (ibid.)
    - a. *General Conference*:
      - i. This conference is made up of 1000 elected delegates from the annual conferences around the world and are made up of half clergy and half laity. (<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference>)
      - ii. This meets "every four years to consider the business and mission of the church" (ibid, organization-church-as-connection)
    - b. *Jurisdictional Conferences*: There are five geographic jurisdictions, or regions, in the United States, which are comprised of eight to 15 annual conferences each.
    - c. *Central Conferences*: In Africa, Europe and the Philippines, there are seven geographical regions, called central conferences, each of which is comprised of annual conferences and divided into several episcopal areas.
    - d. *Annual Conferences*: The annual conference is a geographical entity, an organizational body (made up of elected lay and clergy members), and a yearly meeting. It is the fundamental body of the church (*Book of Discipline*, ¶ 11).
    - e. *Districts*: Each local church is part of a district, which is an administrative grouping of churches in a geographic area.
    - f. *Charge Conferences and Local Churches*: As the visible presence of the body of Christ, the local church is the place where members grow in faith and discipleship, putting their faith into action through ministry in the world. (<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/organization-church-as-connection>)
  3. **The local church**: "All UM churches must have a board of trustees with at least three members and no more than nine members and it is recommended that no gender should hold more than a 2/3 majority. All churches must also have a nominations committee, a finance committee and a church council or administrative council. Other committees are suggested but not required such as a missions committee, or evangelism or worship committee." ([www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org))

C. Episcopal Church: (www.episcopalchurch.org)

1. Governed by a “bicameral (two-tier) General Convention made up of the House of Bishops and House of Deputies, which meets every three years, and by an Executive Council during interim years.”
  - a. “The House of Bishops is composed of every bishop with jurisdiction (diocesan bishop), every bishop coadjutor, every suffragan bishop, every retired bishop, every bishop elected to an office created by General Convention, and every bishop who has resigned because of mission strategy – each of whom has a seat and vote.”
  - b. The House of Deputies is composed of up to four lay and four clerical deputies from each of the jurisdictions, domestic and overseas, elected in the manner determined by each jurisdiction
  - c. It is traditional for the House of Bishops to meet at least annually in interim sessions between General Conventions, when its agenda is limited by the Constitution and Canons to matters affecting the general state of the church and meeting the needs of contemporary society.
  - d. **When the two houses meet concurrently in General Convention, legislation is enacted, church policy and programs are approved, and a budget for the next triennium is adopted.**
  - e. There are some 70 denominational board, committees, commissions, subcommittees, and task forces employed by this denomination to accomplish its work.
2. **Local church** organization: “At the local level, there are 6,447 Episcopal congregations, each of which elects a **vestry** or **bishop’s committee**. Subject to the approval of its diocesan bishop, the vestry of each parish elects a priest, called the rector, who has spiritual jurisdiction in the parish and selects assistant clergy, both deacons and priests... The diocesan bishop, however, appoints the clergy for all missions and may choose to do so for non-self-supporting parishes.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Episcopal\\_Church\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Episcopal_Church_(United_States)))

D. Southern Baptist Church: (*The Southern Baptist Convention: A Closer Look*)

1. The SB claim their local churches are *autonomous*, or self-governing: “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel.”
2. The SBC is the organization through which much of the local church’s work is done.
  - a. “The Southern Baptist *Convention* is a missional organization designed to facilitate maximum impact for Kingdom missions and ministries, designed and sustained by a network of autonomous churches working in cooperation with one another. Such cooperation requires trust; it requires commitment; it requires confidence that God’s purposes are bigger than what we can accomplish individually.”
    - i. SB churches must trust, commit to, and have confidence in the fact that God’s purposes are bigger than the local church can accomplish.
    - ii. If that is so, it would be acknowledging that God’s purposes are bigger than the organizational structure He revealed—that He did not fully equip us (2 Tim. 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”).
  - b. This trust involves local churches trusting a man-made organization to use *their* money and carry out *their* work of preaching, etc., that God assigned them to do.
  - c. These supposedly autonomous congregations are also connected and work “through local associations, ethnic fellowships, state or regional Baptist conventions, and a missions auxiliary—**through which** many of these same churches labor to fulfill God’s mandate to make disciples of all peoples.”
  - d. The SBC oversees for the churches “international and domestic missions, theological education, advocacy for religious liberty, production of church resources, insurance and

- retirement services for pastors and other church workers...Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God.”
- e. Where is this organizational oversight of the work of the local church revealed for us in the Scriptures?
3. Local SB organization: Pastor, possibly elders, a council of deacons, and members
    - a. According to www.SBCLife.net, “To the surprise of many and chagrin of others, **the New Testament does not give specific institutional structural guidelines to the church**. Whatever structure it does portray **is quite simple** and obviously met the needs of the local bodies **at that time**.”
      - i. So, SB acknowledge no specific organizational structure to be revealed in the N.T.
      - ii. Whatever you can read was only for the churches **at that time**.
    - b. Therefore, local SB churches are often organized differently without any issue.
    - c. In addressing 1 Pet. 5:1-4:
      - i. 1 Pet. 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: <sup>2</sup> **Shepherd the flock of God** which is among you, **servicing as overseers**”
      - ii. Remembers Phil. 1:21 that speaks of the Philippian church having overseers, or elders (Acts 20:28), deacons, and saints!
      - iii. Baptist Doctrine: “While that (scripture-rp) **does not deal specifically with structure**, it speaks a powerful word about the need for a Christ-like servant spirit among those who are leaders.”
  4. How does this compare?

#### CONCLUSION:

1. What is the point?
  - A. We need to know that there are major differences in **the church** and **the churches** of the religious world in view of the Scripture, its authority, and its role in the life of a Christian and a local church.
  - B. These differences present themselves in radical change in organization and oversight of the church, either supplanting the position of Christ over the universal church, or the revealed work and oversight of the local church.
  - C. And, these organizational changes are just the beginning, but lay the groundwork for all the other changes in work, doctrine, etc., that we will consider.
2. How many changes can man make, changes that supplant and contradict the plan of God revealed in the Scriptures, before a church stops being a church belonging to Christ and becomes one belonging to man?
  - A. I don’t want to find out!
  - B. For, when churches and Christians turn their back on the Lord’s will, judgement and destruction follow!