



Basic Bible Course

by *Ira Y. Rice, Jr.*

The ORGANIZATION & GOVERNMENT of the CHURCH



Lesson Twenty-Six

INTRODUCTION: In Lesson 25 we were able to discover, from a careful study of God's Word, that a clearly-defined WORK and WORSHIP is set forth for the CHURCH described therein. SEVERAL DIFFERENCES were noted between the WORK AND WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH as it was IN THE BEGINNING of Christianity and what has gradually come about in the so-called "CHURCHES" of TODAY. We asked WHY, WHY these differences exist. Also we demonstrated from the Scriptures that it was CONTRARY TO GOD'S WILL for them to continue.

In our present lesson, we turn next to consider the ORGANIZATION and GOVERNMENT of the church. Let us SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES DILIGENTLY to determine just what the church should be in these further respects:

I. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH.

A. WORLD-WIDE. A careful examination of the New Testament reveals NO ORGANIZATION of the church as OVER or BETWEEN the congregations of Christ ON EARTH.

1. In the general sense of the word, Jesus Christ is the HEAD.

a. "And gave him to be the HEAD over ALL THINGS to the CHURCH, which is his BODY" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

b. "Christ is the HEAD of the CHURCH..." (Ephesians 5:23).

NOTE: Other than Jesus as the HEAD, the New Testament authorizes NO OTHER OFFICIALS over the congregations IN THE AGGREGATE. Neither is there any GOVERNMENT or ORGANIZATION for a GROUP of churches, or churches in a certain VICINITY or COUNTRY. Any other arrangement is strictly of HUMAN ORIGIN have NO STANDING WHATEVER in the Word of the Lord.

2. Under the HEADSHIP of JESUS CHRIST, the CHURCH UNIVERSAL, is styled as:

a. His BODY (Read Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18-24).

b. His WIFE (Read Ephesians 5:22-32; Romans 7:4).

c. His KINGDOM (Read Colossians 1:13; Reverse 1:9).

d. A PRIESTHOOD. Under JESUS as "HIGH PRIEST" (Hebrews 5:6; 6:20) those who make up His church in the aggregate are "an holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5), "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). Being ROYAL, this priesthood comprises PRIESTS who are also KINGS (Revelation 1:6). Rather than a particular class WITHIN the church having this distinction, ALL its members are not only KINGS, but PRIESTS, also.

e. A SPIRITUAL HOUSE. 1 Peter 2:5-6 shows believers "as lively STONES... built up a spiritual house," Jesus as the "CHIEF CORNER STONE" in the house. Verse 7 describes Him as "HEAD" of the corner.

B. LOCALLY.

1. In a CITY, PROVINCE, NATION or VICINITY. Although no organizational arrangements are given in the Scriptures as concerning more than one local assembly or congregation, yet, all the people of God in a given city, province, nation or vicinity are called the “church” in this or that area. EXAMPLES: “Church” in a city—1 Corinthians 1:2; in a province—Acts 9:31; in a nation—Galatians 1:2; etc.
2. As a CONGREGATION. The only organizational arrangement for the church as authorized by the New Testament is for locally autonomous congregations or assemblies.
 - a. These local congregations (churches) could (and did) exist without being organized with officers of any kind for a time. As such they were merely groups of baptized believers maintaining together the work and worship of God according to His revealed will—groups of Christians banded together to carry out the will of God on earth.
 - b. Later on, when brethren grew enough in the grace and knowledge of Christ to qualify, two classes of “office” were authorized within the local congregations: 1) ELDERS, also called BISHOPS, PRESBYTERS, PASTORS, OVERSEERS, and 2) DEACONS.
 - c. Thus, when a local congregation was fully organized, as at Philippi, Paul could address his letter “to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the BISHOPS (i.e., elders) and DEACONS” (Philippians 1:1).

II. THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH.

NOTE: It should be noted and emphasized that the local congregations, as presented in the New Testament, were ALL on an EQUALITY before God; that they were ORGANICALLY SEPARATE; that they were ALIKE IN ORGANIZATION; that they were INDEPENDENT of each other; and that they all had the SAME WORK AND MISSION.

- A. THREE THEORIES have been devised by man for the government of religious people in the congregational capacity, giving rise to THREE DIFFERENT FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT. Let us dispose of these first that the NEW TESTAMENT teaching of church government may stand out the more emphatic:
 1. EPISCOPAL. This form of government recognizes three orders of the clergy—namely, deacons, who are generally young men serving a kind of apprenticeship; priests, who have charge of parishes and exercise large powers; and bishops, who have the oversight of a number of parishes. The entire district over which the bishop presides is known as a diocese. The Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Anglican churches are examples of this form of church government. The Methodist Episcopal churches have a modified form of this kind.
 2. PRESBYTERIAL. This form is an attempt to reproduce the practice of the New Testament churches in which there was a plurality of elders. This form of government makes a distinction between the teaching elder, who is ordained as a minister and preacher, and the ruling elders, who are laymen selected for their ability in leadership. They together form the session and decide matters of ecclesiastical business. The Presbyterian Church is one example of this form of government.
 3. CONGREGATIONAL. This form of church government is based on the theory that each local church is a self-governing institution. All matters are settled by the vote of the members. The churches are loosely organized into associations, conventions, and congresses, but they retain complete independence. The Congregationalist and Baptist Churches are examples of this form of church government.

NOTE: The churches, as authorized by the New Testament, are governed by NONE of these forms.

- B. All the authority for governing the church that Jesus left on earth has been vested in the ELDERSHIP of the church.
1. When Paul “called the ELDERS of the church” to Miletus from Ephesus (Acts 20:17), he told them to take heed unto themselves “and to all the FLOCK, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you OVERSEERS” (verse 28).
 2. Paul instructed Timothy, “Let the ELDERS that RULE well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17).
 3. Paul besought the Thessalonian brethren to “know them that labor among you, and are OVER YOU IN THE LORD, and admonish you; and to esteem them exceeding highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thessalonians 5:12).
 4. Again: “Remember them which have the RULE over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of *their* conversation” (Hebrews 13:7).
 5. Again: “OBEY them that have the RULE over you, and SUBMIT yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).
 6. And again: “The ELDERS which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder,...FEED the flock of God which is among you, taking the OVERSIGHT *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over *God’s* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.... Likewise, ye younger, SUBMIT yourselves unto the ELDER” (1 Peter 5:1-5).
- C. In the infancy of the church in the New Testament, Paul declares Jesus “gave some, APOSTLES; and some, PROPHETS; and some, EVANGELISTS; and some, PASTORS and TEACHERS” (Ephesians 4:11).
1. In order to be an APOSTLE it was necessary that he be especially chosen from among those who companied with Christ’s disciples “all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us,... to be a witness...of his resurrection” (Acts 1:15-26). Note especially verses 21 and 22. It must be evident that since all such qualified “witnesses” of Jesus’ resurrection are DEAD, there can be no LIVING apostles in either the organization or the government of the church today. Of course, they are still with us through “the apostles’ doctrine—Acts 2:42—i.e., the New Testament, which they wrote as inspired from on high.
 2. PROPHECY was a special “gift,” not given to all, but to those whom the Holy Spirit chose. (Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11). However, prophecies were not to continue forever. As Paul said, “Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* PROPHECIES, they SHALL FAIL;...we PROPHECY IN PART. But when that which is PERFECT is come, then that which is in PART shall be DONE AWAY” (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). As to what is “perfect,” David prophesied that “The law of THE LORD *is* perfect” (Psalm 19:7). This did not refer to the OLD TESTAMENT law, for, referring to THAT law, Hebrews 7:19 declares “the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope *did*; by the which we draw nigh unto God.” Well, what law is it by which we obtain a better hope. James calls it “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25). This almost **has** to refer to the **New Testament** Scriptures, as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that “All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be PERFECT, throughly furnished unto all good works.” At the time Paul wrote that prophecy, being “in part,” should be “done away,” when “that which is perfect is come,” the New Testament was the COMING—but not fully revealed. It was not until John laid down the pen of inspiration in A.D. 96, forbidding more to be added (Revelation 22:18) that the words “IS COME” could be applied to that which “is perfect”—the perfect law of liberty, the New Testament. Prophecy thereupon being

“done away,” there were no longer LIVING prophets in the church. Of course, we still have them insofar as their prophecies are recorded in the New Testament.

3. EVANGELISTS were in the church from the start, but **not** as **rulers**. Evangelists, preachers, ministers and such like were all one and the same. For instance, the young preacher Timothy was told to “PREACH the word” (hence a PREACHER)...“do the work of an EVANGELIST”...and to “make full proof of thy ministry” (hence a minister) (Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5). The word “evangelist” means one who tells glad tidings or a preacher of the gospel. Since this work was to go on “always even unto the end of the world,” it follows we still have evangelists, preachers or ministers. However, since God gave them no part in church government IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, it would be WRONG TO INCLUDE THEM IN IT NOW.
 4. PASTORS (i.e., elders, bishops, presbyters, overseers) we still have. They alone are authorized to “rule” in the churches. However, in order to be ordained to this high office, brethren must first prove themselves qualified, which qualifications are given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These brethren are members of the congregation of which they are a part. Their authority does not go beyond the boundary or membership of their own congregation. No elder (pastor) has any authority over more than one congregation. As Acts 14:23 shows Paul and Barnabas ordaining elders (pastors) “IN” every church (NOT OVER SEVERAL CHURCHES). Any system of church government that extends the authority of elders beyond the confines of their own local congregation is contrary to the New Testament teaching and perverts God’s order for the government of His people. If one elder or all the elders of a congregation had authority over other congregations, then the congregation of which that elder or elders are members would be superior to the church over which this elder or elders rule. This would destroy the independence and equality of the churches; it would nullify the autonomy of the local congregation.
 5. TEACHERS, too, continue in the Divine plan. Teaching was to continue to the end of the world (Matthew 28:19-20). It was a self-continuing arrangement (Read 2 Timothy 2:2). However, the New Testament nowhere authorizes teachers to RULE but only to TEACH. Therefore, teachers are no part of the GOVERNMENT of the church.
- D. DEACONS and DEACONESSES:
1. Although their office carried no authority to govern, yet as we have already noticed, there was a certain class of officials in the New Testament church known as “DEACONS.”
 - a. The word *diakonos* translated “deacon” means ministrant, i.e., servant. Thus deacons were brethren specially designated to serve in the church. Qualifications for their appointment are found in 1 Timothy 3.
 - b. Since the Scriptures make no provision for deacons to **rule**, they have no part in the church government.
 - c. Since the bishops (elders) ruled, deacons evidently served under their oversight, as directed by them.
 - d. The seven brethren who were looked out to look after the Grecian widows (Acts 6:1-6) are commonly referred to as deacons. They MAY have been deacons; but if so, the Bible is silent about it.
 - e. There were no differing ORDERS of deacons, arch-deacons, etc. As far as revealed Scripture is concerned, deacons were all of equal rank.
 2. Phebe (in Romans 16:1) is described as “a servant of the church” at Cenchrea.
 - a. This word “servant” sometimes is translated “deaconess.”
 - b. Qualifications for deaconesses are not given in the New Testament.
 - c. Nothing is said in the Scriptures giving deaconesses authority to rule.

- d. Because of her good work, Paul commended Phebe, asked the brethren to RECEIVE her in whatever business she had need. However, no indication is given that she had authority to enforce this request.

E. STEWARDS

1. Although the words “steward” and “stewardship” appear in God’s Word, they are not used to designate an office in the church.
2. In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, Paul and Sosthenes (who wrote the book together) described themselves as MINISTERS of Christ and STEWARDS of God.
 - a. Paul was an apostle—and a steward.
 - b. Sosthenes was not an apostle—but he was a steward.
3. Bishops also are stewards (Titus 1:7).
4. In fact, ALL of God’s people are stewards. Peter teaches, “As EVERY MAN hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good STEWARDS of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10).

NOTE: Since “EVERY MAN”—INCLUDING APOSTLES, BISHOPS, AND ALL—is a STEWARD, it should be apparent to all that THIS WORD CANNOT REFER TO CHURCH GOVERNMENT. By definition, it simply means MANAGER. God holds ALL CHRISTIANS RESPONSIBLE for GOOD MANAGEMENT of resources and opportunities, the idea of “steward” or “stewardship” is in THIS SENSE ONLY in New Testament Scriptures, NEVER in the sense of an OFFICE.

CONCLUSION: Contrary to modern custom, the organization and government of the church, as taught in the New Testament, is a simple, uncomplicated arrangement. With Christ as its only HEAD, the church universal has no hierarchy or superstructure of any kind over the congregations. Rather, as His body, wife, kingdom, priesthood and spiritual house, the church comprises locally autonomous congregations or assemblies, each responsible solely to Him and not to any human agency in between. Locally, these congregations can exist in an unorganized state until they can qualify a plurality of men to be appointed as BISHOPS (elders) to oversee the work and other men as DEACONS serving under the bishops. Bishops and deacons are to be appointed IN each church, not OVER a plurality of churches. The bishops rule; deacons do not. Not only the deacons (and deaconesses, if any), but also the evangelists, teachers, and any and all other members of a local church are under the “oversight” of the bishops. ALL are stewards.

Church organization and government, as described in the New Testament, applies to the PEOPLE involved therein, not to the TERRITORY where they live. The “parish” or “diocesan” idea, as under an episcopal form of government, nowhere is to be found in the New Testament.

Within a congregation, there is no such distinction as TEACHING elders and RULING elders, as all are required to be “apt to teach” and all are equally authorized to rule. Likewise, decisions are not made by majority vote of the congregations where elders have been ordained; neither by a majority vote of the elders and deacons jointly. Such would destroy completely the rulership of elders. And, as we have seen, God has given the RULE to ELDERS.

No distinction is made in the New Testament as to “clergy” and “laity.” Since all Christians are referred to as stewards, priests, and kings, without discrimination as to CLASSES of same, it follows that the whole clergy-laity concept is contrary to the Word of God.

When Christians follow the New Testament pattern, all of these artificial forms of church organization and government, invented by man, will be put aside. In their stead, all local congregations will be independent from each other, equally autonomous under God, yet interdependent as in the same body of Christ. The elders of each congregation will rule over it, and it alone. All other members in each congregation will submit to that rule. Order and peace, according to God’s Word, will prevail; and denominations will all end.