

How Do We Organise the Church?



It is our belief that God has not left us to wonder about how He wants his church to be organised, but has left us a blueprint within the pages of Scripture.

Blueprints or patterns are nothing new for God who had patterns for the ark, for the tabernacle, and the temple. Within the Old Testament Law He provided a pattern for the Jews to follow and within the pages of the New Testament is found a pattern for the Lord's Church. The pattern for church organisation is called church polity.

Meaning of the word "*ekklesia*"

The word "*ekklesia*" literally means, "the called out" or "the called out assembly." The church is the people of God who have been called out from the world to Christ.



The word is often used in the singular to refer to the church universal. For instance, Jesus said I have come to build my "church" (Matt 16:18), not "my churches." Paul calls Christ "the head of the church" (Eph 5:23). "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). The the Lord has **one** universal church.

Sometimes the word church is used to designate the church in a specific area. Acts 9:31 speaks of the church in Judea and Samaria. The Scripture also speaks of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1) on a number of occasions. We also read about the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:1), the church of the Laodiceans (Col 4:16), and so on. It is highly likely that there were more than one congregation in these cities, but the word church is used in the singular.

It is also true that the Bible speaks of the churches (plural). This tells us that the church is divided into a number of congregations. We know this because the New Testament often speaks of churches in the plural; in fact there are at least 34 verses that uses the word in the plural (Rom 16:16).

Personal Reflection

List below the various congregations of which you have been a part.

Reflect also upon how they were organised. This is not meant to be done to criticise others. We are only on a quest to determine what God says about church organisation.

THREE TYPES OF CHURCH ORGANISATION

Episcopal	Presbyterian	Congregational
<p>This form of church government comes from the Greek word <i>episkopos</i> which is translated as bishop or overseer.</p> <p>In this type of church organisation, a bishop will oversee a group of congregations called a diocese. Some churches have an archbishop who stands above a group of bishops.</p> <p>In this system, those within the various congregations have no say on who say on who leads them.</p> <p>This system began to develop in the 2nd century and is seen in the Roman Catholic Church who has a pope above the archbishops. The pope takes the place of the apostles in the New Testament.</p> <p>The Anglican Church also follows this model except that level equal to the pope.</p> <p>There is no biblical basis for this type of church organisation.</p>	<p>This form of church organisation comes from the Greek word <i>presbyteros</i> which is translated as elder.</p> <p>Here the leadership of the local church is in the hands of the elders and the elders are chosen by the members of the local congregation. Often there is a distinction made between ruling elders and teaching elders.</p> <p>An additional layer of leadership is added when the churches choose a regional body of elders often known as the “presbytery.” The presbytery has authority over the congregations in its area.</p> <p>There are often a layer or more above the presbytery with synods or general assemblies.</p> <p>In most cases the local church does not hold the deed to any property that they might own.</p> <p>Though some would point to Acts 15 as a justification for this type of organisation, the Jerusalem council had apostles present and so is not representative of any age beyond the 1st century.</p>	<p>The third form of church organisation is called <i>congregationalism</i>. In this form, the leadership of the church comes from the bottom up as local members choose their own leaders (Acts 6:3; 15:22).</p> <p>A key in this form of church leadership is local autonomy as each congregation is responsible to the Lord for itself. Elders have no authority beyond their own congregation.</p> <p>Local congregations are free to fellowship with other congregations and support common causes such as missionary and benevolent activity; however the decisions are made at the congregational level.</p>



DOES WHAT ORGANISATION WE USE MATTER?

God has revealed in Scripture a pattern or blueprint for the organisation of the church. If we desire to be faithful to Him, the pattern matters very much. In this we are not calling into question the faith of anyone anywhere, but agreeing that God has spoken about church organisation.

THE LOCAL CHURCH



Christ is the Head -- In word and in practice Christ must be the head of the local church (Eph 2:20). He is the head because he paid for the church through the cost of His blood. We are the Creation, He is the Creator. He is the Lord and we are His servants. He has given us His Word which contains our instructions for life within the church.

The Role of Deacons -- The Greek word for this group is *diakonos* and means servant or minister. It is one who takes care of the needs of another. In a generic sense all Christians are *diakonos* so men and women equally fit this role. There is also a specific role of deacon in the New Testament church (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8,12) where men are chosen to handle appointed tasks.

The role of deacon is not a role of authority. Whereas elders are responsible for the spiritual nurturing of the flock, deacons do not have that same responsibility. In the New Testament they serve alongside the elders as they are assigned certain responsibilities. Acts 6:1-6 serves as a sort of pattern for the deacon even though these men are not specifically called deacons in that passage. As deacons serve within the church, they free the elders and evangelist to attend to spiritual matters.

It is possible to have a congregation patterned after the New Testament without deacons if they are not needed; however it seems likely that before a church grows too large it will need these special men.

REFLECTION:

1. Have you been a part of a church that had deacons? If so, what was their role?

Acts 6:1-7

1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURE

Read Acts 6:1-7 and answer the following questions:

1. What problem had arisen in Jerusalem? (See also Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14)



1 Timothy 3:8-13

8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

2. How was the problem resolved?

3. How were they selected?

4. What qualifications were these men required to meet?

5. What was the outcome of this decision (6:7)?

6. Read also 1 Timothy 3:8-13. What additional qualifications and/or roles do you see here.