

**The Church You Can Read About in the Bible**  
**The organization of the local church**

**Intro:** In our last lesson we saw that the church that you read about in the Bible has a mission to perform.

**It gives visibility to God's redemptive purposes.**

**It brings together God's people for corporate worship.**

**It provides ongoing instruction to God's people.**

**It brings accountability to those who profess to be disciples.**

**It provides a means by which God's people may work together.**

**But how does a congregation go about accomplishing that mission? The answer: God gave the church organization so that it could function efficiently and in unity in accomplishing its work. Let's think about the organization of the local church.**

**Again, it is important to remember how God reveals His will concerning the local church. He tells us what to do through commands and statements. He shows us what to do through apostolic examples. He infers what we should do through the first two.**

**God's order for the local church is to have qualified elders, deacons, & members.**

**As I pointed out in an earlier lesson the apostles were entrusted with the task not only of preaching the gospel, but organizing the churches established through their teaching. They implemented the will of Jesus as it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit by appointing elders in every congregation.**

Initially the first congregation, the Jerusalem church, was overseen directly by the apostles; but eventually elders were appointed to lead and deacons were appointed to serve.

*And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. (Acts 6:2-3)*

*And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. (Acts 15:6)*

Similarly when Paul and Barnabas made disciples among the Galatians elders were appointed for every church:

*And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)*

Paul's work in Asia and Greece indicates a similar pattern of organization:

Elders were appointed in the church in Ephesus:

*And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. (Acts 20:17)*

Elders were appointed in the church at Philippi:

*Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)*

*Comparing precedent with apostolic command*

Though the church at Ephesus already had elders, it was important for Timothy to continue to instruct the church in the proper qualifications of leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-15).

In contrast, Paul left Titus in Crete to set in order the things that were lacking and appoint elders in every city:

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, (Titus 1:5)*

**Those appointed as elders and deacons were selected according to criteria revealed by God.**

Paul gave explicit qualifications for those who would serve as elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:6-9).

*It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, (1 Timothy 3:1-2)*

*Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, (1 Timothy 3:8)*

Later Paul appears to describe the qualifications of women who were given special roles of service (perhaps widows who were enlisted to serve the church in exchange for maintenance).

*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. (1 Timothy 3:11)*

What is clear is that the qualifications of elders portray a man of spiritual maturity who will be able to provide guidance through teaching and example to the church.

The qualifications of servants portray people of trustworthiness who can serve the congregation with faithfulness.

**God gave specific instructions about how that organization was to work.**

**The role of elders is indicated in several NT texts.**

*Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. (Acts 20:28)*

*Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording*

*it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)*

*Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17) (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); (1 Timothy 3:5)*

**The role of deacons is to, just as their name describes them, “be servants of the church” working under the oversight of the elders.**

The seven of Ac. 6 were appointed to servant roles:

*And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. (Acts 6:2) The apostles use the Greek word "diakonein" to describe what it is these appointed men will be doing.*

Twice the qualifications of deacons reference their role of service:

*And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 3:10,13)*

**The role of the membership**

The role of those who do not occupy leadership roles is also carefully defined and encouraged in Scripture.

*Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)*

*But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,<sup>13</sup> and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)*

*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin. (1 Timothy 5:17-22)*

*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. (James 5:14-15)*

God's vision for the local body involves that "which every joint supplies" (Eph. 4:16).

### **The sufficiency of God's organization**

**Many churches simply ignore the organization given it the Scriptures and substitute their own ideas for organization.**

Many groups simply do not have elders, deacons, and members as the makeup of the congregation. Instead they may be led by the local preacher who they may call the "pastor;" and he is given authority to lead.

Others will establish intra-church organizations like Sunday school boards or ministry heads

Some have the names of the offices, but do not insist upon the qualifications. For example, the Mormon church has "elders" in name but they are simply young unmarried men who are sent out to do mission work.

**It would be going beyond God's revelation to attempt to organize the church beyond the organization God has given it. Yet numerous attempts have been made to organize local churches into super-structures above the local level that are without Biblical authority.**

One way this is done is by organizing the church beyond the local level through additional offices.

Roman Catholicism does this by adding to the Scriptures an organizational super-structure that includes diocesan bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope.

Many denominations likewise have attempted to organize local churches beyond the local church with representative governments made up of individuals from various congregations. These organizations include conventions and synods with their respective officers.

Another way the church may be organized beyond the local level is through institutionalism. In this case, churches are asked to join together under the oversight of an umbrella organizational structure like the board of a missionary society, college, orphanage, or other service organization. One should think carefully and objectively about the issue of church organization and not get caught up in the emotional appeals of the organization's work which may be at times very worthy and improperly used to justify the concept of institutionalism.

In the past century many churches were united through a cleverer attempt at institutionalism or organization of churches called the “sponsoring church”. In this case, the elders of a local church stepped outside the sphere of their oversight (the local church) and assumed oversight of a work of many congregations. In principle this kind of oversight is not substantively different from the hierarchal offices of denominationalism.

**God's organization of local elders, deacons, and members is sufficient to do all that God commanded the local church.**

The fact that elders were appointed in “every church” is a strong indicator that God sought that each church be fully functional and independent of all other congregations.

**Conclusion: The Scriptures reveal a clear pattern for the local church's organization that enables it to accomplish its mission.**