

New Testament Church

Lesson 12

Organization of Local Churches

Brief History Lesson

- Organizational changes were among the first major departures from the truth.
 - One elder elevated above others, given title of bishop.
 - One bishop can rule over the church and its elders.
 - Then, bishops in larger churches gradually began to exercise influence over smaller churches (each with own diocese).
 - Bishops in five major cities became known as the “five patriarchs,” and eventually one of them claimed the title of “universal bishop” (pope).

What do we learn from this?

- When people become comfortable with one departure, it's easy to become comfortable with more.
- Even the slightest tendency toward centralization of power, control, or oversight should raise red flags.
- In other words, it should concern us greatly when men or churches **in one place** try to oversee what's done **in another place**.

Organization of Local Churches

- Complicated? Elaborate? Various levels of organization?
- Do we see any evidence of local churches being linked together organizationally? Any conventions, associations, dioceses, synods, etc.? The hierarchy seen in many denominations—do we see this in the N.T.?
- Who is the only acting **head** (authority) over local churches? Eph. 5:23–24; Col. 1:18.

Southern Baptist Convention

GA State Conv.

AL State Conv.

FL State Conv.

East Liberty Baptist Association

Troy-Salem Baptist Association

(75)

Autauga Baptist Association

First Baptist

Crestview Baptist

Calvary Baptist

(27)

Notice the different tiers or levels or organization



CHRIST

CHRIST

CHRIST

**Prattmont
Overseen by its
own elders**

**Perry Hill Road
Overseen by its
own elders**

**Oak Mtn.
Overseen by its
own elders**

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Peter 5:2).

Notice there is **NOTHING** between Christ and these local churches, just like what we read in the N.T.

Be careful with terminology

- THE New Testament church (the one body) did NOT meet on the first day of the week to observe the Lord's supper; it did NOT fund its work by saints giving on the first day of the week; it is NOT overseen by elders and served by deacons; etc.
- This terminology CAN give the impression that the one body is composed of local churches, because all the above is true of local churches.

Be careful with terminology

- Instead say, “The local churches we read about in the N.T. funded their work by saints giving on the first day of the week, were overseen by elders and served by deacons, gathered together on the first day of week to observe the Lord’s Supper, etc.”
 - Say it this way and you’re saying EXACTLY what is depicted in the N.T.
- When we study various aspects of worship, work, and organization, these are marks of local churches, not the “one true church.”

Very Simple

- “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops (“overseers”—ESV, NAS) and deacons” (Philippians 1:1).

Various Descriptions of Elders

- **elders** (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; Jam. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1).
- **bishops** (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7) or **overseers** (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2)
 - NASV uses the word overseers in **all** the above passages.
- **pastors** (Eph. 4:11) or **shepherds** (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2)
- **stewards** (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:3—“those entrusted to you”).
- **rulers** (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:17).

Elders in every local church

- “So when they had appointed **elders in every church...**” (Acts 14:23).
- “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders in every city** as I commanded you” (Titus 1:5).
- What if a local church presently has no qualified men to serve as elders? Appoint the best they’ve got?
- Same situation as above, except they have men qualified to serve as deacons. Appoint deacons without elders?

Okay to have just one elder?

- “Let him call for the **elders** of the church” (Jam. 5:14).
- “Appoint **elders** in every church” (Acts 14:23);
“appoint **elders** in every city” (Titus 1:5).
 - These churches, then, would have had more than one.
- Church at Jerusalem had more than one (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4).
- Church at Ephesus had more than one (Acts 20:17).
- Church at Philippi had more than one (Phil. 1:1).

Deacons

- The English word *deacon* is translated from the Greek word *diakonos* (30x).
 - Vine: “primarily denotes a servant, whether doing servile work, or as an attendant rendering free service, without particular reference to its character.”
 - Thayer: “one who executes the commands of another; a servant, an attendant, a minister.”

General and Specific Usage

- Used **generally**, it is translated servant or minister.
 - Jesus (“a **servant** to the circumcision”—Rom. 15:8).
 - The apostles (“**ministers** of the new covenant”—2 Cor. 3:6)
 - Timothy, an evangelist (“a good **minister** of Jesus Christ”—1 Tim. 4:6).
 - Civil authorities (“God’s **minister** to you for good”—Rom. 13:4).
 - Phoebe, a godly woman (“**servant** of the church in Cenchrea”—Rom. 16:1).
 - All faithful followers of Christ (“if anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My **servant** will be also”—John 12:26).

General and Specific Usage

- When used in a **specific** or **special** sense, it is translated deacon.
 - “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and **deacons**” (Phil. 1:1)—obviously talking about a distinct group of servants.
 - All Christians are ministers or servants, but deacons are specially appointed servants. They have to meet specific qualifications (1 Tim. 3:8–13).