

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY (PART FIVE B)

Introduction

1. This is a series of lessons in which we follow the journey of a person that is seeking to practice New Testament Christianity.
2. Review:
 - a. Lesson One: we discussed two major points: (i) Jesus promised to build or establish ONE CHURCH, His church (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:4). (ii) The spread of Christianity throughout the world and the establishment of new congregations (Acts 8ff). We paused at this point to expound on the difference between establishing a new **congregation** and establishing a new **religious organization**.
 - b. Lesson Two: we discussed two major points: (i) The Great Commission in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:46-49). (ii) The beginning of the fulfillment of the apostolic commission recorded in Acts chapter two – It is here that we saw what one must do to be saved and how one is added to Christ’s church (Acts 2:1-47).
 - c. Lesson Three: we discussed two major points: (i) Finding a local congregation of Christians with whom to place membership. (ii) We then asked, “Once a person has found a congregation that belongs to the Lord, does that mean our search is over?”
 - d. Lesson Four: we demonstrated that each congregation must organize itself, worship, and work according to the commands of the Lord handed down by the apostles (Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 14:37).
 - e. Lesson Five (Part A): we discussed two major points: (i) The old covenant - The Law of Moses - has been abolished (Ephesians 2:12-16); it came to end at the death of Christ (Hebrews 9:16-17; Colossians 2:13-17). While the Old Testament should be studied (Romans 15:14; 1 Corinthians 10:11), we cannot appeal to it to establish authority in regards to the organization, worship, and work of a local church. (ii) Our standard of authority in these last days is the New Testament, the law of Christ. We must do all things by Christ’s authority (Colossians 3:17). We establish authority by a direct **command**, an apostolically approved **example**, and **necessary inference** (CENI¹).
3. In this lesson we shall look at what the New Testament says about how a local congregation is to be organized, how it is to worship, and the work that has been assigned to it. You will notice throughout the lesson how we appeal to direct commands, examples, and necessary inferences to establish our points. Note: it may take two or three weeks to cover the points in this lesson.

I. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

The Lord desires that each congregation has elders to oversee it.

A. About the word “church”:

1. The word “church” (*ekklesia*) was a common word used among the Greeks that means “to call out” (see Vine), and it refers to any body of people who have been called out and gathered together.
 - a. The citizens of Ephesus had come together in the local theatre and Luke says, “Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the **assembly** was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (Acts 19:32). The word “assembly” here is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, and you can see that it was a common word used to refer to an assembly of people.
 - b. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says, “To the **church** of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2). The word “church” here is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, and you can see it is used to refer to a group of Christians located in Corinth.

¹ CENI is an easy way to remember how we establish authority: **C**ommand, **E**xample, **N**ecessary **I**nference.

2. As well as being used to refer to a local church (1 Corinthians 1:2), the word “church” (ekklesia) is also used in a **universal** sense to refer to all whom God has called out. For example, Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). Christ’s church consists of all those who are called out of the world. Also, Paul says of Jesus: “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” (Colossians 1:18). Christ is the head of the whole body of believers – the universal church.

B. Jesus, the apostles, and the church:

1. It is acknowledged by all religious organisations that Jesus is the head of the church, i.e., the whole body of believers in the world – the universal church. He is its founder (Matthew 16:18), builder (Acts 2:47; 1 Peter 2:4-5), and head (Colossians 1:15-18). Paul says that God “put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23).
2. The apostles were chosen (Matthew 10:1-5) and sent by Christ to preach the gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) and serve as His original representatives or ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). They held a unique position in the church: Jesus said He would build His church and He gave His apostles the “keys of the kingdom” and the authority to bind and loose (Matthew 16:19). The apostles revealed the will of God (1 Corinthians 2:7-16; 1 Corinthians 14:37) and they taught the same doctrine in every congregation (1 Corinthians 4:17). Much could be said about the office and work of the apostles, but our point here is that no man can be an apostle today because the Lord only chose a limited number for a limited time, and no man is able to meet the qualifications (Acts 1:15-22) or manifest the signs of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12).
3. There was never a church headquarters established and neither were there any offices that involved rule or authority over the universal church in any degree. In other words, there was never an earthly head appointed over the church or officers to oversee regions, etc.

C. How local churches were organized:

1. Offices and appointments:

- a. **Head.** Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23) and each congregation is to submit to His will (Ephesians 5:23-24). This means ensuring that all things are done by His authority (Colossians 3:17). The Lord’s will can only be known by studying the scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17), not a creed book or church manual. Each congregation is autonomous and no one has the right to interfere in its affairs (2 Corinthians 1:24).
- b. **Elders.** These were appointed in every congregation (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In order to be appointed to this office one had to meet certain qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). A study of the New Testament reveals these important facts: (i) Elders were also called bishops and pastors (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). (ii) The authority of elders was limited to the congregation to which they belonged (1 Peter 5:1-2), and, (iii) Each congregation had a plurality of elders (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14, et al).. We never read of a congregation with only one elder.
- c. **Deacons.** These were appointed in congregations that had elders (Philippians 1:1). In order to be appointed to this office one had to meet certain qualifications (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The word “deacon” is from the Greek word *diakonos*. Strong says, “Probably from *diakō* (obsolete, to run on errands; compare G1377); an *attendant*, that is, (generally) a *waiter* (at table or in other menial duties).” Thayer says, “One who executes the commands of another, especially of a master, a servant, attendant, minister.” It is probable, then, that deacons served under the direction of the elders. While not identified as deacons, the seven men appointed to attend to the physical needs of the brethren may have been prototypes of the kind of service they rendered (Acts 6:1-6).

- d. Elders and deacons are the only offices mentioned in the New Testament. However, in order to fulfill its work of evangelising (Acts 13:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:8), teaching (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 14:26; 2 Timothy 2:2; James 3:1), and ministering to needy saints (1 Corinthians 16:1-3), a congregation would choose qualified individuals capable of meeting these needs. “Those commonly referred to as preachers or ministers may do the work of both evangelist and teacher (e.g., 2 Timothy 4:5; 2:2). But whether they serve as evangelist, teacher, preacher, or minister, within the local church they likewise submit to the oversight of the elders, i.e., there is no indication they had ‘evangelistic oversight’ or authority akin to that given to the bishops (elders, pastors). They were to ‘take heed to the word’, whereas elders were to ‘take heed to the flock’ (cf. 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 20:28)” (Mark Copeland).
2. Some people might be surprised by the absence of such offices as pope, priest, vicar, arch bishop, district overseer, etc. Such offices are certainly prevalent in many religious organizations but they are either based on offices that existed under the Law of Moses or justified by man’s reasoning. Examples: (i) The office of a priest existed under the Law of Moses but, as we saw in an earlier lesson, we are no longer under that Law; (ii) The office of arch bishop is an invention of man and cannot be found anywhere in the Bible. A Christian must do all things by Christ’s authority (Colossians 3:17) and there is no authority for any office that is an invention of man.

II. THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

Our worship must be in spirit and in truth, and according to apostolic instruction.

- A. No worship to God is acceptable unless it is offered sincerely and in spirit and in truth. In a discussion with a Samaritan woman, Jesus contrasts the nature of worship under the Mosaic Law with that which was to come in the new dispensation (John 4:23-24).
1. In spirit. To suggest that this means “in sincerity” is to imply that none under the Mosaic Law worshipped sincerely: (i) Sincere worship was required (Deuteronomy 6:4-7; Isaiah 1:10-18), and, (ii) Many did worship in sincerity (e.g., Daniel, Samuel, Hannah). Worship under the Mosaic Law was very much physical, sensual (e.g., the Tabernacle, instruments in worship, various sacrifices). Worship in the new dispensation (in which we now worship) would be spiritual in nature. All Christians are priests, offering up spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:19; Hebrews 13:15; Revelation 5:8).
2. In truth. To suggest that this means “according to the commandments of God” is to imply that none under the Mosaic Law worshipped according to God’s commandments. (i) Worshipping according to God’s commandments was required (Deuteronomy 5:32-33), and, (ii) Jesus said they did so (John 4:22; 2 Kings 22:8-23:1ff). As we said, much of the worship under the Mosaic Law centered around the physical – the Tabernacle and its furniture, the priests, their clothing and their duties, various sacrifices, etc. – and all these things were types and shadows of what was to come (Hebrews 10:1). Our worship now, though, is in accordance to the realities.
- B. What takes place in the assemblies of the saints?
1. Paul said, “...when you come together as a church...” (1 Corinthians 11:18). There may be times when all the members of the congregation gather together, but such gatherings are not necessarily “as a church”. When we come together “as a church” will be determined by the elders (or the men in the absence of elders). It is important to understand this because it affects what may and may not be done (we will not discuss this any further at this time, though).
2. When we do come together “as a church” there are various activities that ought to take place.
- a. **The Lord’s Supper.** Jesus instituted a memorial feast in memory of His death (Matthew 26:19-30); it came to be known as “The Lord’s Supper”, “Communion”, or “Breaking bread”. From the day the church was established the apostles taught Christians to observe this memorial (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). There is no command that specifies the frequency of its observance, but we do have an approved example: Luke recorded, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight” (Acts 20:7).

- b. **Vocal Music.** There are two types of music: vocal and instrumental. Vocal music was certainly a part of the worship service (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19), but there is no command, example, or necessary inference that authorizes instrumental music. This may seem very strange to many, but the onus is on the one who believes that the use of instruments is scriptural to produce a scripture that authorizes their use in the worship service. It may surprise people from a denominational background to know that the following reformers opposed their use (I am including these quotes because they expose the false claim that the use of musical instruments was only ever opposed by men and women of the restoration movement):

Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon: “I would as soon to pray to God with machinery as to sing to God with machinery.”

Reformer John Calvin: “Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the law” (Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 33rd Psalm).

Methodist Preacher John Wesley: “I have no objection to the organ in our chapels provided it is neither seen nor heard” (Clarke’s Commentary, IV, 686).

Methodist Minister Adam Clarke: “I have never known instrumental music to be productive of any good in the worship of God and I have reason to believe that it has been productive of much evil. Music as a science I esteem and admire, but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music and I here register my protest against all such corruption in the worship of that Infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth” (Clarke’s Commentary, IV, 686).

Restorationist Alexander Campbell, “So to those who have no real devotion or spirituality in them, and whose animal nature flags under the oppression of church service, I think...that instrumental music would be not only a desideratum, but an essential prerequisite to fire up their souls to even animal devotion. But I presume, to all spiritually-minded Christians such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert” (Millennial Harbinger, I, 10, 581-582).

- c. **Praying.** In discussing public worship, Paul says, “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). The apostle Peter was in prison and Luke notes, “...but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” (Acts 12:5).
- d. **Teaching.** Teachers are among those that God has appointed in the church (1 Corinthians 12:28). The church at Antioch had teachers (Acts 13:1). Paul taught (the same thing) in every church he visited (1 Corinthians 4:17). Paul instructed Timothy what he ought to teach the brethren (1 Timothy 4:1-11).
- e. **Collection.** A local congregation has a responsibility to support (where necessary) elders who labor in the word, evangelists, and needy saints, and this is why congregations had a weekly collection. There is a direct command to the Corinthians to take up a collection on the first day of the week, but this was for a specific purpose (it was a collection for needy saints) (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). So how do we demonstrate that the money from the collection was used to support evangelists? It is established by example and necessary inference: To the Philippians, Paul wrote, “Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities” (Philippians 4:15-16). Notice how Paul might have expected other churches to support him, too.
- f. **Scripture Readings.** Paul instructed Timothy to “give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:13). To the Colossians Paul wrote, “Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16; cp. 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

III. THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

We must ensure that the work we do as a corporate body is according to God's will.

- A. We demonstrated in an earlier lesson that authority is established by a direct command, an approved example, and necessary inference. It is not for man to determine the work of the church or to seek to improve upon the methods of achieving that work.
- B. Every congregation has the following responsibilities...
 1. **Preaching.** Paul said that the church is the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The church supports and holds up the truth to the world. The church in Antioch sent out evangelists to preach the gospel (Acts 13:1-3), and it is said of the church at Thessalonica that "from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place" (1 Thessalonians 1:8). As well as sending out their own evangelists, churches would support other evangelists (Philippians 4:15-16; 1 Corinthians 11:7-9; cp. 1 Corinthians 9:14).
 2. **Edification.** Paul wrote, "How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26). The church is to build its members into the likeness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). This is achieved through all congregational activities: the Lord's Supper edifies, praying edifies, singing edifies, preaching edifies, and scripture readings edify. As well as these things that are done when we come together "as a church", the church may also arrange other opportunities for edification: Bible classes at the building or in someone's home.
 3. **Benevolence.** The Lord's church is a spiritual organisation and Christians come together as a church for spiritual purposes – to worship, to preach the gospel, and to edify itself; a local congregation is not a quiz club, theatre, sports club, restaurant, social club, charity or a relief agency. However, a congregation does have a responsibility to care for needy saints. From the very beginning we see congregations taking care of its needy members (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35; 1 Timothy 5:1-16) and sending aid to needy Christians in other congregations (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; Romans 15:26-27).

Conclusion

1. The organisation, worship, and work of a local congregation are simple and clear, and easy to understand:
 - a. A local congregation is overseen by qualified elders and deacons who serve under the elders. Within the congregation there may also be evangelists and teachers.
 - b. When we come together as a church on the first day of the week we partake of the Lord's Supper, teach, pray, sing, give attention to reading the scriptures, and take up a collection to support the work of the church.
 - c. The work of the church is to sound forth the word, edify itself, and distribute to the needs of the saints.
2. If we follow the New Testament pattern and ensure that we do all things by the authority of Christ, then we will be unified and there will be no divisions amongst us.
3. It is when men seek to change the organisation, worship, and work of the church that contentions and divisions arise. Here are three examples:
 - a. Changes in organisation. If someone suggests that we introduce a new office (e.g., an Arch Elder) to rule over the existing elders and the whole church, then such an unscriptural action is bound to cause contentions and divisions.
 - b. Changes in worship. If someone suggests that we introduce musical instruments into the worship, then such an unscriptural action is bound to cause contentions and divisions.
 - c. Changes in the work of the church. If someone suggests that we ought to distribute food parcels to the poor (unbelievers) in the community, then such an unscriptural action is bound to cause contentions and divisions.

4. Unscriptural changes in regards to the organisation, worship, and work of the church, no matter how small or minor, are what cause contentions and divisions. Each of us has the responsibility to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). This unity can only be maintained if we recognise that...

“There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called in **one** hope of your calling; **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; **one** God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:4-6 NKJV).

Note: the “one faith” is objective faith, the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

5. All the things we have discussed in this lesson are in connection with the question, “Once a person has found a congregation that belongs to the Lord, does that mean our search is over?” There are, sad to say, divisions within the body of Christ – some congregations have introduced new offices, new forms of worship, and works of the church. Each one of us must diligently study the scriptures to ensure that the congregation to which we belong is adhering to the New Testament pattern.

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