

## ***New Testament Church Organization***

There is a simplicity about the church in the New Testament, as simple as the greeting in the letter to the Philippian church: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the bishops and deacons" (1:1). Bishops (also called elders, overseers and shepherds) lead the congregation. Deacons served the congregation. And they and all the rest of the congregation were saints, a term referring to their holy way of life. Elders and deacons with the saints: that is it.

There were to be "elders in every church" (Acts 14:23), indicating both a plurality of them and a need for them in each congregation. They were to "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28), showing their work was limited to their own congregation. I Peter 5:2 also says, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers." Elders and deacons were chosen by the congregation using qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, which is how the Holy Spirit, as He revealed God's truth, still makes men elders and deacons today.

This simple organization gave way to men's ideas over several centuries following the days in which the New Testament was written. Individual, self-governing congregations became part of larger groups and organizations. Historians tell us it happened along these lines...

- By 175-200AD one man was now distinguished from the elders and ruled over them: a Bishop.
- By 275-300AD there came to be a bishop over all of the bishops of a province: a Metropolitan.
- By 325AD three men ruled from the larger centers at Rome, Antioch and Alexandria, each as a Patriarch.
- By 606AD there was one Patriarch or Father at Rome who was now ruling over all, who was called the Pope.

It took 500 years, but finally a point was reached where individual, autonomous congregations weren't even a distant memory. All now were a part of the universal (the meaning of the word Catholic) church, as directed by one man, the Pope. It is not a plurality of men leading each congregation. It is one man ruling all, the man-appointed head of man's organization, comprised of all the congregations.

Surely the devil is pleased any time the New Testament is set aside and left behind. And he is patient, willing to wait 500 years or longer. But when did this error take place? It happened the first time a single congregation appointed a head elder to break tie votes and make things more efficient. Leave the Bible behind and the New Testament church will eventually evolve into the Catholic Church. But if we hold to the Bible as Divine Wisdom, we will be joyfully content in its beauty, no matter how inefficient it may seem to the worldly.

**- by Robert Hines**

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## ***Show Me Your Friends...***

The Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes wrote, "Tell me what company thou keepest, and I'll tell thee what thou art." Cervantes was not a prophet, he simply understood the strong influence friends exert over our lives. You can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep. Scripture brings this truth to light.

### **Show me your friends...**

**And I'll show you your religious convictions.** David wrote, "*I am a companion of all who fear You/ And of those who keep Your precepts*" (Ps. 119:63). Our companions will help or hinder us in letting our light shine, doing good works, devotion to God and in getting to heaven. We ought to be concerned if we realize all our close friends are either godless or involved in false religion.

**And I'll show you your favorite activities.** Proverbs 23:19-21, "*Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and guide thine heart in the way. Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: for the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man in rags.*" We do things with our friends. Obviously, we do not choose friends so we can AVOID them. We want to spend time with them and generally pursue common interests. Are you involved with the party-hard, drunken, drug-using crowd? Well, guess what that makes you.

**And I'll show you how you value wisdom.** "*He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed*" (Prov. 13:20). Your friends encourage you in the direction they are heading. The company you keep is commentary on your current values and a variable in future decisions. Thus you want to be with those who show wisdom and set goals for their future. Don't be with those who can't see past the weekend.

**And I'll show you your feelings about proper speech.** "*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise*" (Prov. 10:19). Some people's mouths are a hotbed for sin: gossip, profanity, anger, criticism. Let us remember, "*Evil company corrupts good habits*" (1 Cor. 15:33).

What do your friends say about you?

- by Andrew Roberts

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### ***If It Was Up To You, Would The Church Close Its Doors?***

Every year hundreds of new businesses are started here in our community. The Chamber of Commerce gladly reports on these new ventures in an effort to demonstrate that our local economy is healthy and growing. What they don't report quite so openly is that nearly an equal number of businesses close their doors each year.

Why do these businesses fail? It's really very simple. They just do not offer services or sell products that appeal to a sufficient number of customers. In short, they go out of business because the buying public is generally apathetic about their continued existence.

Whether we realize it or not, we're giving our vote as to whether these businesses succeed or fail. We do it when we make the choice to patronize a particular business or to trade elsewhere.

We wonder if certain church members realize that a similar situation exists in local congregations. Some folks show an apparent apathy toward the continued existence of the church. They may attend occasionally - perhaps even most Sunday mornings. However, it is just too hard for them to make the earlier Bible study and they never return on Sunday evening. Wednesday night assemblies are absolutely out of the question - they're entirely too busy, too tired, etc.

What these folks are doing, whether they know it or not, is giving their vote to "close the doors". If it was left up to them, no one would assemble and no work would be done. Are you one of these people who are trying to put the church out of business? Think about it!

- by Greg Gwin