
How Should the Church be Organized?

“Tradition! We who are about to die salute thee!”

In the previous lessons we have sought to demonstrate the folly of a legalistic definition of the church or a legalistic job description for the church. In this lesson we will deal with the organization of the church from the same perspective. Our use of the term “church” will be in the broadest possible sense. If there are only two or three of you gathered together in the name of Jesus we will most charitably acknowledge you as a church. We will not pause to inquire if you have elders or deacons or whether you are incorporated by the laws of your state. On the other hand you may be a part of some denomination which has an organization even larger than a city church. Again we shall not attempt to deny your standing before God. Rather, in this lesson we will make an appeal for love and common sense to triumph over traditions, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Hans Christian Anderson has given to the world a great many folk stories and fables which have profound implications. One such story is of an eccentric emperor who was obsessed by clothing. His uncontrollable desire for something new and novel made him an easy prey for two swindlers. The swindlers pretended to be weavers and boasted of the ability to make a miraculous garment. The miracle of the garment was this — to everyone who was unfit for office or hopelessly dull, the clothing became invisible. Thus, the emperor, by wearing this apparel could immediately discern all who were worthy in his kingdom.

The foolish ruler paid the swindlers a large sum of money and they began their pretense upon an empty loom. Periodically the emperor would send one of his officials to check on their progress. Each was shocked to see absolutely nothing but was too timid to tell the truth. If he admitted what he saw he feared that everyone would think he was incompetent. The clever criminals described in great detail the imaginary garment so that each intimidated "observer" would carry a consistent report to the emperor.

At last the deluded ruler himself was brought in to see his expensive and elegant clothing. He too was too proud to tell the truth. And thus upon a special day he removed his real clothing and draped in nothing but his imagination he paraded through the town for all to see.

Everyone saw that the emperor was naked but no one had the nerve to say it. Each assumed that such a statement would be an admission of incompetence. At last a little child cried out, "But he has nothing on!" The initial implications of this bold assertion brought out feelings of sympathy and compassion for the poor little innocent child, so void of understanding. The longer they thought about it, however, the more reasonable it seemed. Soon everyone, even the emperor, was aware that he was naked.

The saddest part of the story is that even then he refused to hide himself in shame. Instead he stiffened himself with pride and marched on.

The application of the little parable to Christendom is painfully obvious. Many of us have seen the nakedness of the institutional church and been too timid to admit it. We assumed

that such an admission would brand us as irreligious or incompetent. Thus we have stared at the ground and held our tongues, while the naked church is on parade.

The "modus operandi" of accumulated traditions is often so insane and absurd that it leads me to believe that the very existence of the church in our day is a strong testimony to its divine origin. It is hard for me to see how anything else could have survived the outrageous and unreasonable procedures which have become a sacred and integral part of our most holy traditions.

The Scriptural Farm

Perhaps I can illustrate a little of what I mean by a brief reference to an unpublished satire called "The Scriptural Farm."

The fictitious story is about a man named Frederick Randolph Perch who inherited 160 acres of rich farm land. Being a new Christian he determined to pattern his farming operation after the church and thus run it "Scripturally."

With the help of the chairman of the Board of the local church, he selected seven board members to run the farm . . . not one of them was a farmer or had ever been instrumental in running a successful farming operation. Some of them were so totally disinterested in the project that they had to be talked into serving. Each, however, lived in the vicinity of farms, or had been raised on a farm years before, and therefore felt competent to vote his convictions in the acid test of how the farm would be managed.

Next they traveled across the state to hire a farmer. Fresh from agricultural college he too had the disadvantage of never having been associated with a successful farming operation. But he did have a head full of ideas and a desire to work. After a trial "plow'n," an annual wage was agreed upon and he moved his young family into an abandoned old farm house.

The farmer was instructed to make regular reports upon his activities and intentions and not to do anything without board approval. Several problems immediately appeared. Seven chiefs and one Indian always makes for confusion. The farmer's every suggestion was turned down or tabled and a nostalgic page from the past assumed its place. But this was only the beginning of sorrows.

Next came the committees! There was the Weed Committee,

and the Seed Committee, the Tractor Committee, and the Harvest Committee, etc., etc. All committee reports and recommendations were channeled through the official board (just like the church) and anything the board had not heard of before or which cost money was turned down (just like the church). Thus there was no hybrid seed, no herbicide, not enough fertilizer, and naturally not much of a harvest.

By the time controversial decisions had been tabled and prayed over they were late for planting, late for cultivation, and did not harvest the crops until February.

Tempers flared in the wake of marathon meetings and special sessions and when the books revealed that they were operating in the red they decided it was time to start looking for another farmer.

Wise as Serpents

It is indeed surprising to discover that the Bible does not provide us with specific details regarding how the work of Christ is to be accomplished. Apparently we are given a great deal of freedom to be creative.

Upon one occasion Jesus sent out His disciples with no gold, silver or brass in their purses. They were to take no bag to hold provisions, no extra coat or shoes, and were to survive like sheep in the midst of wolves. Sheep in the midst of wolves need to stay very close to the shepherd. They need to listen to His voice and rely upon His divine protection. There is also a sense, however, in which the sheep are partially responsible for their own well being. Jesus said "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) They were not told exactly "how" they were to evangelize and survive in a hostile territory, but there is at least a strong implication that they were to use a measure of shrewdness and common sense.

The serpent survives by stealth. In the absence of speed and mobility he has to be extremely clever. The Scriptures refer to the devil as a serpent and generally we think of serpents in very negative terms, but there is at least something about the serpent that Christians are to imitate. We are to be as wise and clever as the serpent is, but we are to avoid his treachery and remain as harmless as doves.

Soccer Ball Strategy

The November, 1977 *Reader's Digest* carried an article entitled, "All Quiet on the Western Front." The article was about fallen soldiers who died in Europe. One quotation from that article literally etched itself into my mind.

" . . . On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916, some 60,000 British troops were killed. They were walking across no man's land in neat rows, *led by an officer kicking a soccer ball.* And they died and are buried in the same neat rows . . ."

Those who are history buffs will remember that the major German offensive was directed at the French Fortress of Verdun. The battle began on February 21, 1916 and was to continue for many months. The Germans gained four miles of territory but at a frightful cost. The casualties of the battle numbered over one million.

The Battle of the Somme was intended to be a diversionary tactic to relieve the pressure at Verdun. The attack was led by an officer kicking a soccer ball. 60,000 troops died in a single day.

Forgive me if my comments upon this betray an ignorance of military strategy and history. I do not know why a British officer would kick a soccer ball across a field that was riddled by machine gun fire but I assume it was a time honored tradition in the British military. I assume it was the same type of screwy thinking that caused them to lose the Revolutionary War. Don't you remember the Battle of Bunker Hill? Row after row of Red Coats advanced upon a handful of revolutionaries who were told not to fire until they saw the whites of British eyes. The strategy was apparently to overwhelm the opponents by sheer force of numbers. With the old muzzle loading rifles only a few shots per rifle could be fired before you were engaged in hand to hand combat.

Even then it would have made more sense to me for the British soldiers to have worn dingy uniforms which would have blended with the terrain instead of the traditional "red coats" which showed up like a bull's-eye in the center of a target. If I were going to have to march across "no man's land" with someone shooting at me I would select something like the William Tell overture, instead of the slow and monotonous drone of the drums. But tradition holds a sacred sway over the minds of men and somehow we would rather die kicking

a soccer ball at a machine gun nest than to break with our traditional ties with the past.

Common Sense

Mr. Average American exists and survives in a complex and competitive society. All week long he strives for a cheaper, easier, cleaner, and more efficient operation. If he employs others he will undoubtedly seek to utilize every man hour in the most efficient manner. His eye is on the "bottom line" and he knows that bankruptcy is just a few stupid decisions away.

The very same businessman, however, comes to a board meeting with a totally different mentality. Men who spent thousands of dollars of their own money before 4:30 in the afternoon will now gather to debate a fifty dollar expenditure of the "Lord's money" until 11:15 in the night. This is the way we have always done it and to suggest otherwise is to run the risk of being deemed irreligious or incompetent. It would all be comical if it were not so tragic. The world goes to hell in the shadow of the church building while our keenest minds are trapped in a board meeting discussing some sort of trivia which the custodian of the local church could have handled all by himself if someone would have only asked him to.

I spoke to a church some time ago that was deeply involved in missions. Their missionary existed on a meager personal salary but was entrusted with over \$1,000 every month to invest in outreach and evangelism. This "service link" money was his to use as he saw fit. He was wise and competent and never betrayed the trust of his supporters. The same missionary, however, should he return to the United States to labor, would immediately lose his "service link" and be destined to work in a ridiculous system of boards and committees which would strangle his creativity and cancel his effectiveness.

The situation has become so severe that large numbers of individuals have for all intents and purposes "left the church," and created a wide variety of institutions to do the work which it was impossible to accomplish in the traditional framework of their own denominations.

The Biblical Pattern

For many years I labored under the illusion that there was in the Bible a divine pattern which provided a blueprint for the structure of the local congregation. A careful study of the

Scriptures has convinced me that this is not the case. There are five different Greek words that are either translated as "pattern" or which have a similar meaning. Not one of them is used in the Bible to refer to the governmental structure of the church.

Certainly the early church continued steadfastly in the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and in prayers, but the specific details of how these functions were carried on is not revealed.

The fact that the Jerusalem church set apart seven men to serve tables does not at all imply that they constituted an "official board" or that they ever "voted" on anything. Because we live in a society dominated by corporations it is easy for us to read into the Bible our American way of doing things.

Perhaps a personal illustration may provide insight. It has been my privilege to serve as a "deacon" in a mid-western congregation. Our little church had an attendance of only 250-300 people. Invariably during the course of the year someone would come to us asking for physical or financial assistance. If the need was urgent a special meeting would be called, otherwise the matter would be handled at a regular monthly meeting. In either instance the case would be presented to the board for discussion and each board member would vote his convictions on whether or not he deemed the person "worthy" of the Lord's money. At the present time that church has seventeen deacons.

The Jerusalem church, by contrast, numbered into the thousands. Some have estimated that by the time seven men were set aside to serve tables they may have numbered in excess of 20,000 people. The sheer volume of people needing help would have precluded our system. Our little church never dealt with over a dozen cases of benevolence in a year, but they must have handled hundreds every day. They could not possibly have indulged themselves in the luxury of marathon board meetings over a \$35 expenditure. As risky as it may seem to us they had to trust these men with vast sums of money. The magnitude of their responsibility made it incumbent for them to have tremendous freedom to operate. They may have employed literally dozens of people to help them expedite the volume of work to be done. Seven doctors, or seven plumbers could operate indefinitely out of the same office and never vote on anything, and these seven men could have done the same.

Let me give you another example. A small mid-western church decided that to get people involved in the Lord's work they would combine the elders and deacons and all interested church members in a steering committee to help give the church direction. For over three years this steering committee discussed the pros and cons of owning their own riding lawn mower. At last it was decided to purchase a riding lawn mower, but because the expenditure involved over \$500 it was necessary to bring the matter before the whole congregation for a vote. The necessary details were worked out and the favorable vote was received. At the very next meeting of the steering committee the decision was reversed. Now it was decided that the best thing to do would be to contract the yard work done and not to buy a mower at all. Remember that the steering committee was composed of all the elders, all the deacons, and all interested church members. The keenest minds in the church were trapped in these endless hours of trivia. If each steering committee member had been paid the minimum wage for the time spent in meetings, they could probably have purchased two new mowers with money to spare. The irony of this situation is compounded by the fact that high salaried executives were present at virtually every meeting. These were men so honest and capable that their employers would trust them with literally hundreds of thousands of dollars. The church, by contrast, wouldn't trust anybody. We add to our by-laws, enlarge our committees, multiply our safeguards until the soldiers of the cross in our generation have been likened unto men hunting rabbits in a tank. We have thought little, dreamed little, planned little, and fished close to shore.

How should the church be organized? The Scriptures do not give us detailed answers to this question. We must remember that the church is the body of which Christ is the Head. We must remain sensitive to His Word and His will, but surely there is a place for common sense. Certainly we are not compelled to be bogged down by centuries of accumulated tradition. The time has come for us to open the windows and let in a little fresh air and light.

The distinguishing mark of the New Testament Church was not weekly Bible study and elders and deacons who met high qualifications. The Jewish synagogue had all of this. The distinguishing mark of the Christian was love. It is the one divine "pattern" which can be safely surperimposed on every

gathering of Christians in the first century without doing violence to the evidence which is available.

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Seven

1. What is the difference between an organization and an organism?
2. Is it wrong to speak critically of the Church since it is the Bride of Christ?
3. Is there any Biblical evidence that the elders and deacons of Bible churches ever met to vote on anything?
4. Is the committee concept efficient, or inefficient?
5. Would you like to run your business, or your home, like your church is run?
6. Why is change so difficult to achieve in the church?
7. How can we prevent a campaign for common sense from making us disrespectful of God's authority?
8. Does a church have to have elders and deacons in order to be a church?
9. While Paul was alive he visited many congregations, and directed the lives of many Christian workers like Timothy, Titus, Aquila, and Priscilla. Did anyone do this after Paul died?
10. How does your denomination determine someone who is loyal to Jesus?