

## What does the Bible say about church organization?

As illustrated by Acts 14:23 and Phil. 1:1, each congregation of the Lord's church is to have local leaders known as "elders" (these men are also referred to as bishops, presbyters, pastors, overseers, shepherds. Each of these words describes a different aspect of an elder's work). Paul described the qualifications for these men in 1 Tim. 3:1-5 and he said elders "take care of" (they are the rulers for and in) a local congregation (1 Tim. 3:5). Titus referred to "elders" in Tit. 1:5 and then described them as "bishops" in Tit. 1:7.

We read of elders in Judaea (Acts 11:29-30), southern Galatia (Acts 14:23), Jerusalem (Acts 15:6), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), and Asia Minor (1 Pet. 5:1). There are implied references to them in 1 Thess. 5:12 and Heb. 13:17. In Tit. 1:5 we learn that elders were needed throughout the island of Crete ("every city").

Although God's pattern for church leadership does not extend beyond the local congregation, a high percentage of religious groups have a leadership structure that goes outside the local church (religious groups have a "church headquarters" in a well known city or another country, or there is some type of regional, national or world-wide board). Although these arrangements are common, they are contrary to God's pattern. Church organization is just one more way to separate Christ's church from the imitations built by men.

Jesus is the head of the church, elders are the local leaders, and Jesus' church has special servants known as "deacons" (Phil. 1:1). The church of Christ also has men who serve as preachers. Paul and Timothy were two first century ministers and these men are referred to as "servants" in Phil. 1:1. Unlike the churches built by men where preachers are the leaders and often the most important people in the congregation, the Bible says the preachers in Christ's church are *servants*. The remaining members in Jesus' church of the New Testament are simply called "saints."

The New Testament pattern for church organization described in the preceding paragraphs stands in stark contrast to the "clergy-laity" system found in many denominations. In fact, in many man-made churches there must be an "official person" to baptize people or help with worship. God's pattern for Christianity says all the saved are "priests" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Instead of dividing people into "clergy and laity," Jesus said "all are brethren" (Mt. 23:8). Paul illustrated this point by noting how several of the Corinthians helped in and with worship (1 Cor. 14:26). The Corinthians knew their worship did not need to be carried out by a special priest or some type of "holy person" because all Christians are "priests" (Rev. 1:6; 5:10) and all Christians are considered to be "holy" (1 Pet. 1:15).

The only restriction when it comes to having a leading role in worship is a person's gender. Stated another way, women are not allowed to take a leading role in the assembly if men are present (1 Cor. 14:34-35 and compare 1 Tim. 2:8-13). In the church of Christ, any Christian male can help with worship, teach or preach. Churches that have women preachers are most definitely counterfeit churches because they violate what Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:8-13. God has given a "pattern" for the New Testament church (2 Tim. 1:13) and all need to use this pattern to identify and work with the "church of Christ" in their community.

Have we found and are we a part of the one church built by Christ? If the "church of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) does not exist in our community, we can start one and practice New Testament Christianity (i.e. do things just as the New Testament describes). We can begin a congregation in our home (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phile. 2) or use a rented space to start "worshipping in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:24). We certainly do not want to be part of the counterfeit groups that

*“leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” (Mk. 7:8). Remember, “All the churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16).*