

ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

What do you think? Is it reasonable to restore to the modern world the first century church of Christ? Do we have sufficient facts about the first century church to be able to restore it? I want to tell you today that it is possible to restore the first century church of Christ, and it is being done in our modern world!

Hello I'm Larry Murdock. I preach for the Gandy church of Christ.

When we read the history of Jesus' church we can easily detect the departure from the faith that was predicted by the Holy Spirit in the first century. There have been many departures from the faith once for all delivered to the saints, but the departure in organization was a big one! Jesus' apostle Paul wrote a letter to his traveling companion Timothy. Paul had left Timothy in the city of Ephesus where he was to "Charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." (1 Timothy 1:3-4 ESV) Paul wrote this letter to him so that Timothy could know how to "behave himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God...." (1 Timothy 3:15) In the course of writing Timothy instructions about the pure doctrine and the organization of the local churches, Paul learned from the Holy Spirit something about the future of the Lord's church. He shared that future with Timothy. Paul wrote that "The Spirit clearly says that in the last times some will turn away from what we believe. They will obey spirits that tell lies. And they will follow the teachings of demons. (2) Those teachings come through people who tell lies and trick others. These evil people cannot see what is right and what is wrong. It is like their conscience has been destroyed with a hot iron. (3) They say that it is wrong to marry. And they say that there are some foods that people must not eat. But God made these foods, and those who believe and who understand the truth can eat them with thanks." (1 Timothy 4:1-3 Easy-to-Read) The Holy Spirit predicted that many church members would "turn away" from the true faith.

The apostle Paul was talking with the elders of the church of Christ in Ephesus when he told them to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he [purchased, KJV] with his own blood. [Paul continued] I know that after

my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to [warn] every one with tears." ([Acts 20:28-31 ESV](#)) So the Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, was warning the elders of the church and its members about this great departure from the true faith.

In Paul's second letter to Timothy Paul further described this departure from the faith. "But understand this," Paul told Timothy, "that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. [And then Paul commanded] Avoid such people." ([2 Timothy 3:1-5 ESV](#))

Friends, as time would tell, (and as history records) the majority of Christians in the next three centuries did not "avoid such people," but rather began to mimic those who were practicing the doctrines of demons. Even elders were carried away with this departure. In fact, the Holy Spirit had already indicated that the apostasy would originate among the elders of the churches.

In the first century each church had men in the church who served the local congregation as elders. For instance, we read about the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:17. Earlier than that, we read about the elders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). When Paul planted four churches of Christ in modern-day Turkey on his first missionary journey, Paul "appointed elders for them in every church." (Acts 14:23) Notice that there was never just one elder! Paul appointed elders (plural) in each church. Furthermore, Paul instructed other preachers to appoint elders in every church. Paul once preached on the island of Crete and planted churches. But when Paul departed from the island he left a man named Titus to put in order the things that remained undone and "appoint elders in every town as I directed you—" ([Titus 1:5 ESV](#)) In the New Testament then, you will never read where a church had only one elder. As the apostasy progressed in later times, history shows us that elders of churches began to promote one elder above all others, and they called him "Bishop." This was the beginning of the religious hierarchies that we see in the world today.

What else do we see in the world today? We see world-wide organizations called churches or denominations that are under the control of powerful men in various kinds of pyramid-like systems. We see one man over a chain of command that controls the whole structure. Never in the New Testament do you read of such an organization. But in today's world, on a local level, we see the local church run by one man who is called the Pastor, or the Priest. The Pastor in some organizations answers to a Board or Council of men who are higher in the chain of command than the local Pastor. So the local Pastor is under the control of a Bishop or a council and may be moved from time to time at the direction of the Board that is above him. In other organizations we see that there is no one higher than the local Pastor. However, the local Pastors may meet together in conferences from time to time in order to lend their support to one another and to write or rewrite any man-made rules their organization may have. For instance, we see official papers or documents written by these conclaves of men who have come to some kind of an agreement on the issues of the day. Therefore, they publish their agreements and bind them on the people under them. So often, their agreements do not reflect the Word of God found in the Bible, but their agreements reflect popular opinion found in the world. Why would anyone wish to entrust their soul to a council of men, rather than the council of God found in the Bible? But, those men in control tell us we cannot understand our Bibles!

Friends the Bible is a trustworthy guide and you can understand it! It is a reasonable assumption that we can follow the New Testament pattern of church organization. The church of the New Testament is known for the simplicity and beauty of its organization. Elders were appointed by each church to oversee its own affairs (Acts 14:23). Elders were also called Bishops, for the word "Bishop" means "overseer." Those overseers were to answer to one Head, Jesus Christ. In the first century church, special servants were also selected to minister to the benevolent needs of the members, as well as spiritual needs. (For instance, Acts 6:1-6) Those special servants were later called Deacons (as in Philippians 1:1, and other places). The members of the local churches worked together by living, teaching, and caring for the souls of their fellowmen. All of the members of the local churches were "working out their own salvation" in their individual lives, being zealous of good works. Those multiple ministries built up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:16). Their individual lives were a glory to God just as Jesus had taught them, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and

glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) There was no ecclesiastical machinery outside the local church. There was no such thing as clergy and laity. There were no bishops that exercised authority over a multitude of churches in a given area. Jesus Christ was and is the head of His church; the only Head. Jesus gave authority and ability to His apostles to teach sinners the way of salvation. The apostles taught with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But the apostles died as do we all. However, those apostles teach even now succeeding generations the inspired Word of God. That's right! That Word of God is the blueprint for the church of Christ. The Word of God teaches us how to "behave in the house of God, which is the church of the living God." (1 Timothy 3:15)

Can the church of the living God be restored to its original organization in the world today? Indeed it can. When you believe the gospel, repent of your sins and confess your faith, you are then buried in a watery grave but only to be raised a new creature in Christ, Jesus Himself adds you to His church. He does not add you to a denomination or to a church with hierarchies made by men. When a person obeys the gospel he is a Christian, and where you find a Christian you have found a piece of the church of the living God. Jesus said "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20) And so the church assembles for worship and service. Of necessity, there will be a period of time when a church of Christ has no elders. That's right! After the apostle Paul had planted four churches in Galatia, he left them without appointing elders. Nevertheless they were churches of Christ. When after a period of time the apostle went back to those churches he laid his hands on certain men and appointed elders in every church. (Acts 14:23) The appointment of elders will take much longer in our day, because we have no apostles to lay hands on us and impart miraculous knowledge. Today we must study the Bible in order to learn inspiration. And that takes time. But eventually Christian men will arise who meet the Holy Spirit's qualifications that Paul gave to Timothy and Titus.

So what do you think? Is it reasonable to think that the organization of the church of Christ can be restored to its first century model? Churches of Christ around the world are practicing this model of organization. It is not always the easy way, but it is the Lord's way, and it is being accomplished by people who believe the Lord's way is the best way. Let us hurdle the accumulations of the ages, where men have tampered with the Lord's blueprint of church organization. Let us skip over the clutter of manmade organizations and return to the New

Testament pattern. Let us plant local churches where faithful local men, full of faith and courage, can oversee the affairs of the local flock. This is happening in the world even today. Will you obey the gospel and allow the Lord to plant his church where you live?