

Where is the True Church?

WHERE is the true church? WHAT is the church? Should you *belong* to a church? Will you be lost if you do not? Why are there so *many* different churches? Can they *all* be part of the chosen body of Christ? What is the *work* of the church?

To millions, churchgoing is an essential part of life—a long-remembered, traditional custom. To millions more, churchgoing is tedious, boring, time-consuming and unnecessary. But many of those who drive by the crowded parking lots of churches on Sunday, en route to the golf course or the lake, experience little twinges of conscience. They have tiny doubts that nag at the corner of their minds, wondering if, just possibly, they might be better off when this life is over if they would just stop, park and go inside.

There are thousands of church buildings and hundreds of denominations. There are hundreds of ads in the Saturday church pages of big city newspapers, including locations of buildings belonging to the larger denominations. There are Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Christian Scientists, Lutherans, Quakers, Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and many, many more. Then there are the so-called "sects" and "cults." And, according to the large, mainstream denominations, even some of those listed above would qualify as a "sect" or "cult."

Each claims to have the truth.

Every one of the churches, including the many differing, divided, arguing, hostile divisions of the mainstream denominations, believe they have the truth, the right system of belief and worship.

But, with such a dizzying array, the average layman is faced with a choice not unlike that of the housewife shopping the supermarkets for bargains. If the housewife is to believe *all* the ads, she is left with total perplexity, a completely insoluble dilemma. Consider soap and detergent ads.

All week she sees dozens of ads over television, in magazines and newspapers, and perhaps receives gift certificates and soap ads or samples in the mail.

Each one of these claims to get Mrs. Housewife's clothes sparkling clean. Some

claim hypersuperlative performance which is totally impossible, such as “cleaner than clean”. As the years pass, the housewife is told that the marvelous product she was using last year, advertised as the very most effective, is now obsolete, since the company has brought out a “new improved” version of the same detergent.

Religious claims are much like these soap ads.

Each church claims to have the inside track to eternal rewards, happiness, success, solutions to problems, spiritual understanding and the salvation of the soul. If all truly deliver all they claim, then it really makes no *difference whatever* which one you join, since all do the same thing: a marvelous job of getting your spiritual life “cleaner than clean.” If such were true, then people would choose a church in much the same way they choose a detergent. They like the packaging: the buildings, the stained glass, the organist and the choir and the accessibility of the parking lot. Or they like the way it is *advertised*, the preacher or the evangelist, the attractiveness of the literature and the doctrines.

Does It Really Make Any Difference?

All churches have a fair amount of truth; many are quite similar in certain broad categories. So, since there are such similarities, does it really matter *which* church one chooses?

Yes, it does.

If “choosing” a church were as casual as choosing a soap, there would be nowhere near so much internecine squabbling, bickering, arguing, fighting, dissension and division. Is there *any* church body in modern times that has survived more than two decades without a major split over doctrine, policy, leadership or how the money was being spent?

Choosing a church affiliation is done with great caution by most people. And, once done, breaking with the church is painful and traumatic. Some may say, “I’ve never been inside a church, but I feel I am as good a Christian as anyone else!” But most professing Christians feel church membership and attendance are obligatory.

What about you? Do you attend a church? If so, which one? *Why*? Have you carefully *proved* to yourself, from the pages of the Bible, whether the church you

are attending is the right one or not?

What Is a Church?

Actually, the word “church” is mostly misused today. Millions think of a church as a *building*, a place where people meet. Many think of it as a human organization, a corporation or denomination. Others know Jesus said it was a body of believers!

“I will build *my* church!” said Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18). The word Jesus used was a Greek word, *ekhlesia*, meaning “called-out ones.” It comes from a root word meaning “to call out” or to separate. Also to assemble.

The church Jesus said He would establish was intended to be a group of especially called-out persons, a body of believers in the true gospel of Jesus Christ, and is called “Christ’s body.”

The church, or group of people who believe Jesus Christ and who are submissive to His government, was established by Jesus Christ on the first day of Pentecost, after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, probably in June, A.D. 31. By sending the Holy Spirit to empower His original disciples and give them the charge of apostleship, Jesus *built* His Church, just as He said.

Paul wrote, “By one Spirit are we all baptized into *one body*, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Corinthians 12:13, 14).

He said, “Now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

But in our modern society this concept of Jesus Christ, *of calling* a specially prepared group of converted people to *do His work*, has largely been lost.

Today most believe a church is a large, man-made organization of buildings and facilities, with thousands or millions of members and with all the trappings of huge corporate structures, businesses or even governments.

The Catholic Church is like a *state*, a completely separate *government* on this earth with its own government headquarters. Its leader, the pope, is called a “head of state” by his followers. He consorts with the kings of the world (Revelation 17:2), and major nations send ambassadors to the Vatican. The

Catholic Church wields vast power through its millions of members, huge assets, tens of thousands of priests and other officials and its spiritual influence in the lives of whole populations of many countries.

The major Protestant denominations are dissimilar in many ways and similar in others. Some are *state* religions, in a sense. The British church is “Anglican,” and the head of the church is, technically, the queen of England. In Germany the official religion in the north is Lutheran, and in Bavaria it is Catholic.

The Dutch Reformed Church is prominent in South Africa, and other major Western religions, such as the Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians and the Church of Christ, wield certain political, cultural, social and legislative powers.

Though the American system of government is supposedly founded on the concept of the separation of church and state, many states still have “blue laws” wherein Sabbatarians are penalized in running their businesses by being required to remain closed on Sundays while their religious beliefs require their closing on Saturdays, thus losing *two* business days each week (Saturday oftentimes being the *busiest* of all in many communities) to the Sunday keeper’s *one*. The political power of denominations which eschew the use of alcoholic beverages and vote in various “dry” states or counties is well known.

So churches today appear to be *quite different* from what Jesus had in mind! Christ said, “You have not chosen me, but *I have chosen you*” (John 15:16).

Today people *choose* a church of “their choice.” When a large evangelistic campaign comes to their city, the evangelist may be cooperating with any number of other churches in an interdenominational sense, and members of many denominations may be urged to attend with their whole congregations.

At the conclusion of an impassioned appeal, the evangelist may invite believers to come forward as a profession of their faith and to “receive Christ.” Thus the believers today are usually led to believe it is *up to them* to “choose Christ,” and not up to *Him* to “choose *them*”!

Present at the altar call, or perhaps occupying booths in the auditorium or tent, would be representatives of several different denominations. Thus the believers are led to assume that, even though they believe they are “receiving Christ” and becoming Christians, it is perfectly right and normal to “choose the church of

their choice” following such an experience.

But Jesus did not describe His church as *many* differing denominations. He inspired Paul to write, “There is *one body*, and one Spirit, even as you are 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).

Jesus described that body as a “little flock” and said, “If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are *not of the world*, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you ...If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also” (John 15:18-20).

He said, “It is through much tribulation that you shall enter the Kingdom of God,” and warned, “They shall *put you out* of the synagogues: yes, the time comes, that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service” (John 16:2).

Do *any* of these descriptions of the church Jesus said He would build really *fit* all the various churches of this world today?

Notice further! Jesus said, “In the world you shall

have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33). In His final prayer to His Father just before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed, “I have given them your word; and the world has hated them, because they are *not of the world*, even as *I am not of the world*. I pray not that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17:14-16).

Jesus said His true church would be a *little* flock, having but little strength (Revelation 3:8); that it would be continually *persecuted*, despised by the world and the powers of the world, but that it would be empowered by the very Holy Spirit of God!

If you are going to find that true church, you will have to look in the Bible for the *description* Jesus gave it-for the kind of church it would be; the doctrines and policies it would follow; the programs and objectives it would try to accomplish; the way it would be *governed*; and the whole “flavor” and spirit of that “body of

Christ" that He established.

Remember! Somewhere, somehow, that church *does exist*. It is *here*, on this good green earth, *right now*! It is doing the same *work* Jesus commissioned it to accomplish. And it will have the same spirit, the same attitude, the same goals and objectives as the early apostles!

Jesus said, ". . . I will build my church; and the gates of hell [*hades*, meaning the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

He said, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." And in giving His *great commission* to His church, He said, "Go you therefore, and *teach all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and, lo, *I am with you always*, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19,20).

At the conclusion of his Gospel, Mark said, "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the *Lord working with them*, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen" (Mark 16:20).

Jesus continued *working with* His early New Testament church and directing the 12 apostles! He placed *His government* within His church. And, when you find that church, you must find *that government* at work!

Who Is the Leader of the Church?

Jesus said, "I will build *my church*!" The most oft-repeated descriptions of the *name* of the true church in the Bible include the words "the *Church of God*"! Yes, there are other references, but the *majority* of times the name is "the Church of God."

Jesus Christ told Peter that he, Peter, was a *petros*, a little pebble or stone. Then He said, "And upon this *rock* [*Petra*: large *rock*] I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18).

The Catholic Church believes Christ *relinquished* leadership over the church and gave that leadership into the hands of Peter, whom they say was the "chief apostle" or the first "pope" of the Roman Catholic Church.

This “chief apostle” theory led to the “Petrine doctrine” of the Catholic Church, or “primacy of Peter,” and resulted, finally, in the declaration of “papal *infallibility*.” Thus the Catholic doctrine states that as the result of an election a *man*, a human being like all the rest of us, can become “infallible,” when speaking *ex cathedra* (from his throne).

But was Peter really the “head” of the church? Was he even the second in command *under* Christ and *over* all the other apostles?

When Jesus said “upon this *rock* I will build my church,” He was referring *to Himself!*

He was that “Rock” which symbolically followed the Israelites in the journey through Sinai. Paul wrote, “And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

He is referred to as the “Rock” of our salvation by David in the Psalms.

“He only is my Rock and my salvation; he is my defence; I shall not be greatly moved” (Psalms 62:2).

“He only is my Rock and my salvation; he is my defence; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory: the Rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God” (Psalms 62:6, 7).

“You are my Rock and my fortress” (Psalms 71:3).

“He is my Rock” (Psalms 92:15).

“But the Eternal is my defence; and my God is the Rock of my refuge” (Psalms 94:22).

“O come, let us sing unto the Eternal: let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our salvation” (Psalms 95:1).

Jesus Himself referred to one of David’s analogies of Christ as the Rock. “Did you never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?” (Matthew 21:42).

David had said, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner" (Psalms 118:22).

This was reference to Christ's headship over the church. Peter knew this, and Peter *never* claimed any "one and only apostle" theory, even though Jesus Christ spoke His famous passage of Matthew 16:18 *directly to Peter!* Peter said, "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner!" (1 Peter 2:7).

Christ is referred to as this *Rock* that was to become the "Chief Corner Stone" of His church in Deuteronomy 32:4, 15,18 and 30.

Paul said, "And he [Jesus Christ, not Peter or any other apostle] is the *head of the body*, the church" (Colossians 1:18).

Paul also wrote, "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23), and, in speaking of the church, said, ". . . May grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

Jesus Christ *only* retained the headship-the leadership-over God's church. He and *He alone* is called "the Apostle and High Priest of our profession" (Hebrews 3:1).

Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the *living Head* of His true church. He rules over it in tenderness, compassion, meekness, gentleness, goodness and, when necessary, in loving firmness. But He *never* rules His flock by lording it over them.

He said, "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion [lord it over] over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But *it shall not be so among you*; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-27).

The *kind of government* Jesus established in His church was government from the spirit of *love*, the spirit of gentleness, goodness, meekness and forgiveness! At *no* time did Jesus intend His ministry to *carry out the punishments for sin* or

exact *vengeance*, for “vengeance is mine, *I* will repay, saith the Lord.”

They were to become “helpers of their joy,” not “policemen over their faith.”

But did Jesus Christ delegate any authority to *one* apostle over another or over all of them? Was Peter really given the “primacy,” as the Catholic Church claims?

Peter the Apostle

Peter was never aware of any special “primacy” over other apostles. He humbly acknowledged Jesus’ supreme rulership in his life and His position as the living Head of the church! “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,” he wrote, introducing himself in his first letter. Notice, “*an* apostle,” not “The Only Apostle” or “The Chief Apostle,” but the simple and humble statement “an apostle” (1 Peter 1:1).

Later Peter made it plain how he felt. One can see the spirit of meekness and humility with which Peter accepted the responsibilities of his life’s work. “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God. . . Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the *chief* Shepherd [Christ, not Peter!] shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away” (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Peter knew Jesus Christ was the “chief shepherd” and that he, Peter, was merely *another of many* apostles. He knew an apostle was “*one sent*,” and he recognized that *those who did the sending* included other *apostles, prophets and brethren* in unanimous and harmonious agreement.

We will soon see just *how* the apostles were “sent.” The very *meaning* of the term “apostle” merely means *one sent* for the purpose of preaching the gospel, and never carried the connotation of “rank” in the sense of “outranking” all other ministers. Rather it had to do *with function* and with *service*.

Notice Peter called himself an *elder*. This was a more experienced person spiritually, usually an “older” person in physical years as well as being more experienced in knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

Peter applied to *himself* the designation of “elder” (1 Peter 5:1). Notice whether he felt superior in any way toward the other elders: “Likewise, you younger

[elders], submit yourselves unto the elder [elders]. Yes, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5).

That meant Peter, too, was willing to *be subject* to all the others, “preferring one another” before himself. Peter never tried to “lord it over” the other apostles. It never entered his mind that others would come along centuries later and take to themselves great, swelling, egotistical “offices” on the false, pompous claim that *Peter* was the “chief apostle” over all others.

“*Never* did Peter, or any of the other apostles, claim to be the only ones to “set doctrine,” or to finalize every decision, or to give orders to the others. Peter was *subject* to the others from the very beginning!

Notice: “Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, *they sent* unto them Peter and John” (Acts 8:14).

Several other apostles, not named, were at Jerusalem. They *probably* included at least two of Christ’s own half brothers, James and Jude. They may have included others of the original 12 who had not yet left the area because of persecutions.

Was Peter in charge? Did he have the “primacy”? No. That Holy Word of God says “*they*,” several unnamed apostles, *sent* Peter and John. Peter was *taking orders from others* in a united, brotherly effort to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Deacons and How They Were Selected

But let’s backtrack a little and investigate the circumstances that brought about the decision of these apostles to send Peter and John to Samaria; back to some of the cities Jesus had visited during His ministry.

Read the first 13 verses of Acts 8.

Saul (who became Paul the apostle) was persecuting the church. And “. . . *they* [the *church*, including lay members!] were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, *except the apostles*” (Acts 8:1). Notice verse 4! “Therefore *they that were scattered abroad* went everywhere *preaching the word*.”

What? How did they *dare*? Your Bible says plainly the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem, but that “they,” the *church*, including those of the *diakonate*, who had been ordained as “*deacons*,” were scattered abroad and began preaching the Word.

Philip was such a deacon.

“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and *preached Christ* unto them” (Acts 8:5). But Philip was no apostle, and he was never ordained to any so-called “rank” which connoted the responsibility of preaching. Still, he *preached*!

Let’s backtrack still further.

Philip was ordained as a “deacon” (*diakonos*). When a problem arose over the neglect of the widows in the “daily ministration,” the 12 apostles called all the remainder of the original 120 that had been with Jesus and said, “It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, *look you out from among you* seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom *we may appoint* over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

In this initial flush of growth, there had been no time to establish outlying congregations as yet. These events took place as a part of that continuing burst of growth and excitement that had begun on the Day of Pentecost a short time before. *All* the apostles, and all the original disciples, were still in Jerusalem. There were no churches in Asia, in Greece or in Italy-only this excited, zealous, growing group of newly converted Christians *in Jerusalem*.

Notice that the *diakonate*, or those original men ordained as “deacons,” came from among the “multitude of the disciples,” and notice, too, the method of selection.

“Wherefore, brethren, look you out among you seven men of honest report,” said the unnamed spokesman of the 12 equal apostles. *How?* How were these many disciples of Christ to “look out from among themselves” only *seven*?

Let’s be honest with God’s Word. You cannot find any indication of some head disciple calling out the names of seven he and he alone had chosen. There simply *had* to be some system for such “looking out from among them” these

seven men.

Perhaps all 120 were asked to submit a name orally or in writing. Perhaps a committee of 12, or some other number, was chosen by mutual agreement to make the selections. Perhaps some men even *volunteered* for the responsibilities, and the others agreed. But, in whatever fashion it occurred, there had to be some method that was far more “democratic” in form than a dictatorial selection by *one man*.

After this mutual search for seven candidates, the whole group of 12 equal apostles said *they*, all of them, would appoint these seven.

“. . . Whom *we* [all 12 men] may appoint over this business. But *we* will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

“And the saying pleased the whole multitude [of the disciples]: and *they chose* [by some method of making their preferences known] Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

Whom *they* [all 120 of them] set before the apostles [all 12 of them]: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:1-6).

Though these men were originally ordained to see to it the needs of the widows were not neglected, a persecution soon occurred which caused them to be scattered!

God then added to their spiritual gifts, and, *without* any further “ordinations” or “advancement in rank” (since the concept of rank is *not found* among Christ’s ministry), these men, like Stephen and Philip, *began to speak*. Stephen began performing many wonderful miracles, so a conspiracy of the “Libertines” in the synagogue arose, and those from Cyrene, Alexandria and Cilicia and Asia paid false witnesses to try to have them killed. His inspired sermon can be read in Acts 7, and ends in his death.

Stephen was ordained, probably, as a “deacon.”

Yet he was preaching about Jesus Christ! He began *doing the work of an evangelist* though there is no record of his being “ordained” to the “rank” of an evangelist.

Here was no narrow hierarchical structure with *one man*, as a dictator, bearing rule and authority over all the others.

Did Philip find himself crossways with “authority” because he dared to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unbelievers? Was he somehow “unauthorized” to preach? Did he lack “credentials”?

No.

Remember, there were about 120 disciples who companied with Jesus throughout His ministry. Though a large number defected after His statement about His flesh and blood (John 6:44-59), others were later added, bringing the number back to about 120.

Probably Philip was among one of those two groups. However, the language of Acts 6:1 is also instructive. Remember, a part of the great commission Jesus gave (Matthew 28:19, 20) was to “make disciples of” those who believed.

The term “disciple” means one who is a learner, a follower or a student, a *believer* in the doctrines of the teacher. Those who repented and came to Christ were not differentiated from any others. All were called, equally, “disciples.”

You have seen that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the Living Head of the true church, and that He never relinquished that authority to any other person.

You have seen the biblical proof that there was *not* one apostle who was the “Chief Apostle” who gave orders to all the others. You have seen the fact that the 12 were “subject to one another,” and even the *diakonate* and local *lay members* were involved in determining the needs of the church in those days.

Jesus Himself claims the title “God’s Apostle” (Hebrews 3:1), and it is blasphemy against the sacred Word of God for any fallible human being to make such claims. All other apostles were merely “an apostle,” as Peter said, and as Paul wrote. They claimed no lofty titles.

You have seen that Peter felt humbly equal with the other apostles and urged all of them to be “subject one to another.” Yet we know there were some of the apostles who were called “the very chiefest” (note *the plural* word) among them, as Paul referred to James, Peter and John. This was not “rank” in a vertical sense, as if designated by Jesus Christ, but the natural consequence of differing degrees

of gifts, speaking ability, personality, experience, zeal and administrative ability. In any collection of different human beings with different personalities and different backgrounds, there is not true “equality” in the sense that some of them will tend to defer to the natural leadership of another.

But *Peter claimed no primacy!*

Paul showed they were equals in their calling. He even stood up to Peter in public. Peter is mentioned *behind* James. Does that make *James*, then, the “chief apostle” over Peter? Apparently not. But the other apostles deferred to Jesus’ half brother, now converted and an apostle in Jerusalem. James made the final decision at the Jerusalem conference, and Paul said Peter “came from James.”

The apostles were different individuals. They received different gifts and different callings. Peter went to the Jews; Paul to the gentiles. Peter was married; Paul had “no necessity.” Paul wrote much and traveled much, and apparently Peter traveled little and wrote much less.

Neither was “over” the other. Actually, they each *complemented* the other by their different areas of responsibility!

Next let’s consider Paul’s apostleship-and especially Paul’s relationship with Peter!

“Paul, an Apostle”

Never in his lifetime did Paul refer to himself as “God’s Apostle,” or attempt to take authority over the other apostles.

On the other hand neither did he submit to other apostles, including Peter, when they were clearly in the wrong spiritually.

At the introduction of each of his letters, he generally referred to himself as “Paul, an apostle,” or simply as “Paul” without any title as in 1 Thessalonians 1:1).

Paul went to great lengths to prove *equality* with Peter and with the other so-called “chiefest” apostles. But Paul didn’t really appreciate the idea of various ministers allowing themselves to be held in esteem by the lay membership *above* others.

Further, Paul's reference to the "chiefest" apostles might have been as much mild sarcasm-a gentle lampooning of the whole concept of one apostle being "chief" over another- as it was Paul's own idea of how the various apostles related to each other!

The most outstanding example of Paul's complete equality with all the other apostles *and* the proof that Peter was *not* in a position of "primacy" over the others is found in the book of Galatians.

Paul begins the second chapter by saying, "Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain."

Notice that Paul went up "by revelation"! He was not "summoned" by Peter or some "higher authority" but somehow, either in a dream or vision, or perhaps because one of the prophets had told him something-Paul had it revealed that he should go to Jerusalem.

Barnabas was also *an apostle*, and, because of Paul's prominent mention of Sylvanus so often, even in salutatory portions of his letters to major churches, many scholars have believed Sylvanus was also an apostle. Therefore there were as many as 15 or 17 or *more* who were called "an apostle." For example, see also Philippians 2:25, "Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus. . . your *messenger* [same word in the Greek as apostle], and he that ministered to my wants."

Remember, there were the 12 original disciples. Judas Iscariot was replaced by Matthias. Yet, later, we see at least two of Jesus' half brothers, James and Jude, with an apostleship. That makes 14. Paul and Barnabas make 16. Sylvanus makes 17.

Some were martyred, and so the number may have remained closer to 12, but there was no restriction on the number of apostles in the church ever revealed.

Paul and his fellows came among the leaders in Jerusalem and found controversy and politics. Notice: "But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares

brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Galatians 2:3, 4).

Paul saw immediately there was a movement within the church in Jerusalem to *enforce circumcision* again. He knew this would be a terrible stumbling block to the *gentiles* who were beginning to come into the knowledge of God’s truth, and among whom he and the others with him had been teaching.

Though discussions took place, and Paul was placed under *pressure* from some of these men to have Titus circumcised (or he wouldn’t have mentioned it), he said, “To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Galatians 2:5).

No, Paul did not submit to this pressure. And he did not docily place himself in “subjection” to these others in Jerusalem.

Notice how the evil politics were becoming obvious, and Paul’s reaction to such. “But of these who *seemed to be somewhat*, (whatsoever they were, it makes no matter to me: God accepts no man’s person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat *in conference* [meaning they had ‘conferred’ or were in an association together, were in agreement in their opinions] added nothing to me: But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:)” (Galatians 2:6-8).

Notice again that Paul said these people who pretended to have some important office-false brethren in league together to enforce circumcision-added nothing to him; he didn’t care one way or the other for their politicking, and it made no difference to him.

“And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision” (Galatians 2:9).

Were James, Peter and John among those who “seemed to be somewhat”? Perhaps. At least, so far as Paul was concerned, it was for *them* to discern what God had given *him*, *Paul*-not for Paul to recognize their “authority” over him.

Notice the order in which he lists the names!

"James, Cephas, and John," wrote Paul.

God places names in order for a purpose, usually. Even in the order of the books of the Bible, God saw to it that Peter's book was *many books after* those written by Paul, and then used the *same* order revealed here, "James, Peter and John," in arranging the "general epistles" following those of Paul. Paul said James, Peter and John "seemed to be pillars" when writing to the Galatian churches. He had earlier used the phrase "seemed to be somewhat" concerning "false brethren." His *purpose* in explaining the politics of the situation he encountered in Jerusalem is plain. He didn't want the Galatian people to be enamored of "rank," or be bedazzled with the other apostles from Jerusalem, having their heads turned with doctrines that were *not true*.

Peter was wrong!

He had allowed his own natural prejudices against gentiles to creep into his mind and had allowed others to help influence him. Therefore Paul is subtly using the phrase "seemed to be pillars" and yet establishing his own *absolute equality* with those three.

Notice how Paul stood up to Peter!

"But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain *came from James*, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision" (Galatians 2:11, 12).

We learn much in this brief statement. First, we learn that another apostle, Paul, who came along *many years* after the original 12 [it had been *14 years* since Paul had seen Christ personally], could stand up *in public* before the church and openly disagree with Peter.

We *know* by this that Peter had no "primacy" among the other apostles, that he was not the "chief apostle," and that Jesus Christ did not relinquish the headship of His church to any one man.

Notice that James *sent* Peter. "For before that certain [Peter] *came from James*" (verse 12). There was no other reason implicit in Paul's including this

statement than Paul's own desire to show Peter was one *under* the apostle who was presently in Jerusalem, *James*. It was James who was the half brother of Jesus, who wrote the book of James and who gave the final decision, or summarization, at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:19).

You will also notice that there is no mention of any response from Peter.

Peter may not have entirely *agreed* with Paul on the subject at that point in time, but he *did not* answer back. Paul was in the right, and he stood up to his *equal*, Peter, and told him so.

This is the very essence of "let each of you be subject one to another," as Peter was to write later.

Peter didn't "mark" Paul, or embark on a hate campaign to "get" him and have him removed from his calling, blackballed before the church and excommunicated. Later he was to write about his "beloved brother Paul" and speak of his writings as on a par with Scripture.

Bible proof *abounds* showing Paul, though coming along much later, was an absolute *equal* with Peter and the other apostles. Yet Paul felt *humble* about his great calling and did not vaunt himself:

"And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:8, 9). Yet, Paul explained, it was by God's grace, and by no merit of his own, that he became an apostle. He then said, ". . . But I laboured more abundantly than they all" (verse 10), meaning he *worked harder* than the other apostles.

Paul had serious problems with the gentile converts in Corinth. Not the least of these was their innate suspicion of Paul himself and of his desire that they should support the work of the ministry financially.

Paul was faced with the problem of combating the influence of other teachers who were turning the heads of the Corinthian church.

Consequently he was forced to defend his own calling and position as a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ. Read all of 2 Corinthians 11. It is the core of this difficulty. Note especially verses 4 and 5! "For if he that comes preaches another Jesus,

whom we have not preached, or if you receive another spirit, which you have not received, or another gospel, which you have not accepted, you might well bear with him. For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles."

Then there were *several* apostles whom the membership thought of as "the chiefest." This is *plural* term; No one ever used the description "chief apostle" or "only apostle" or any other swelling, egotistical terms for claims to high office.

Paul says he was not a whit behind these "chiefest" apostles. probably meaning the same ones he had identified *in order* to the Galatian churches: James, Peter and John.

Paul. then, claims *complete equality* with these *several* apostles. who were viewed as the "chiefest" among all the other apostles. The commentators acknowledge Paul was speaking ironically of those who decried him, that their words "chiefest apostles" were not acknowledgment from Paul that they were "chiefest;" but an ironic "put-down" of those who would so pose.

The Catholic Church claims Peter had the "primacy" and that he was the first pope-in Rome. Yet when Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, writes to the church in Rome, he *never* even *mentions Peter's name*. This not only proves the church at Rome was not "under" Peter it indicates they didn't even know him!

Notice Romans 16. It contains many personal salutations at the close of this important letter! "I commend unto you Phebe our sister," Paul begins, mentioning a woman *first*. Then comes mention of many persons prominent among the brethren. Priscilla and Aquila, Epaphroditus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Amplias, Urbane, Stachys, Apelles. Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Olympas, and then many others, like Timothy, Lucius, Jason and more!

Here are all these Greek and Roman names, and not a breath or whisper of Peter. What? If Peter were the "chief" apostle, if he were the "first pope" in Rome, then he would have been the leader of the church there.

Yet, in Paul's lengthy letter to the church in Rome, he never even mentions Peter's name and does not include him in the salutations at the end of the letter. Peter was *not* the "chief apostle," and he *was not* in Rome!

Remember, Peter never claimed any “primacy” for himself, but made it plain he was *equal* with the other elders and apostles. Paul claimed complete equality with all others and said he was not a “whit behind” them!

Paul withstood Peter publicly, and Peter never even answered back because he was in the wrong.

Those who make great, swelling claims of “Peter’s primacy” today are twisting the sacred Word of God, which will judge them, in order to make great claims *for themselves*.

There was no “rank” among the apostles. But notice that Paul, albeit using sarcasm perhaps, talked of the “chiefest” apostles. No doubt Peter was quicker to speak and to act than some others. Paul was apparently more conservative, more in control of himself. Each of these men was a different personality. They affected the people differently.

The *people* would naturally tend to favor one man over another; perhaps prefer to hear one man speak, or teach, than another; go to one man for solutions to a problem above another. That is a *natural* result of people “relating to” different people, striking a chord of mutual understanding.

It is normal and to be expected. The problem is not so much the tendency of the people to look up to this or that human leader above another, but the tendency of the various “officials” in the church to “lord it over” the people or each other.

Christ said he that is greatest is the *servant* of all.

We have seen that the church Jesus built was built on Jesus Christ *himself* as the “chief corner stone,” the foundational *Rock* upon which the church was built.

But that foundation consisted of many other *equal* apostles, all below Christ, who worked with them and directed them, each “subject to the others in spirit-led humility.”

The foundation of the church included both Old and New Testament *prophets*, as well as all the apostles.

Notice: “. . . And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

Imagine each of the apostles and the prophets (such as Agabus and others who are not named-Acts 11:27, 13:1) as analogous to a one foot cube of solid granite. They are all exactly the same size, showing *equality* in forming a part of *the foundation* of God's church. You lay them out along the ground as the platform upon which the building is to be built. But you very carefully avoid placing any *one* of these equal, one foot cubed stones *atop another*. In the spiritual organism that is the church, there was to be *no* "chief apostle" lording it over all others, shouting commands, demanding instant, absolute, quavering, servile obedience under the threat of "heading straight toward the lake of fire" if there was the slightest hesitancy.

In the true Church of God, that spiritual organism that is analogous to the "Body of Christ," there *is no such office*.

Now, with all of your *equal* one foot cubed stones lying conformably *side by side*, you place the beautiful *corner* stone at the "head of the corner," a large, flawless, white block of marble or other expensive stone. *That* is the analogy used by the Word of God, *not* a vertical structure, like a tower.

Is There No "Government"?

Does this *equality* of the original apostles, and Paul and Barnabas, who came along later, mean there was no government in the church, no system or method for keeping order, deciding doctrinal questions, administering the affairs of the local churches or *doing the work*?

Definitely there *was government*.

Notice! "And God hath set some in the church, *first* apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, *governments*, diversities of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28).

God is responsible for setting various functions within His church. It is not the lay membership or the men themselves who created the functions and set them in His church.

He had set, *first*, the 12 equal apostles! Together with the Old and New Testament prophets, they formed the *foundation* of the "church, with Christ as the chief corner stone."

Secondly, the prophets were acknowledged as serving God's people by *either* the inspired foretelling of events (as in the case of Agabus), *or* by inspired *preaching*. The orderly exercise of their gifts for inspired preaching is defined in 1 Corinthians 14:

"Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace. For you [prophets] may all prophesy [preach, or foretell events] one by one [one after another, in orderly fashion], that all may learn. . . For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:29-33).

The "teachers" defined in 1 Corinthians 12:28 are further explained by Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "And he [Christ] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ . . ." (Ephesians 4:11, 12).

"Pastors and teachers" are the same. An ordained minister of Jesus Christ who is shepherding a flock *is a pastor*. "Pastor" is not a rank between "evangelist" and "elder," but is a *function*, an assignment or *responsibility* to "feed the flock." When Peter wrote to the other elders, he exhorted them to "feed the flock of God which is among you," and even referred to *himself as* an elder (1 Peter 5:1), as did the apostle John (2 John 1, 3 John 1).

Since an older, more mature man who is ordained is called an "elder" (1 Timothy 5:17), we see that the term "elder" was *never* intended to connote "rank," such as an ordained person inferior to pastors and evangelists but above deacons. Since apostles are also elders, and pastors of churches are elders, and there were those who were not required to preach, but were to be "apt to teach," we see the term "elder" is a descriptive word used of *older, more mature ministers universally*. It can apply to apostles, or it can apply to older, ordained men.

Originally the "elders" were those of the Sanhedrin. When the church swelled by thousands in only days following Pentecost, some of these older leaders among the Jews were converted and baptized.

The very first time the word is used in the *Christian church* is found in Acts 11:30: "Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul."

The Greek word used is *presbuteros*, from which “presbytery” comes.

Luke uses this word to *include the apostles*, even as Peter and John both referred to themselves as “elders.”

The elders who met with the apostles (Acts 15:6) were older, mature men who were no doubt elders even prior to their conversion, and the term naturally found its way into the new Christian church, which recognized their age, maturity and wisdom.

They were given the honor of sitting with the apostles in considering the question of circumcision. When the decision was finally made, the elders were included. “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, and the whole church” (Acts 15:22).

When the decrees were sent out, they wrote, “The apostles and elders and brethren send greetings... ” (Acts 15:23).

It is obvious that elder was *not a rank* in the ministry, since it included apostles and other ministers with other functions.

Whether people were ordained “to the office of elder,” or whether men who *were already elders* were *ordained*, should be studied. Paul wrote to Titus, “For this cause I left you, in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.”

Paul was not instructing Titus to ordain men of whatever age or maturity *to the “office”* of an “elder”! He is instructing him to ordain *elders* -men of maturity, experience and wisdom-*to the ministry*. These men *were already elders*, in the sense that, in any given local congregation, there would have been older, more mature, wiser and more experienced men, men of stature in their community and with the respect of the others in the congregation who were “elders.” These men were to be *ordained* to the ministry.

Then, *depending on function*, not depending on “rank,” they became either “bishops” (or “overseers”) of several churches, “pastors” (or teachers) of an individual flock, or, failing any specific pastoral responsibilities, simply ordained men who were referred to as “elders.”

That elders and “bishops” of the flock are one and the same is made very clear in God’s Word. Notice this. “And from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus, and called

the elders [*presbuteros*] of the church" (Acts 20:17).

Read the warnings Paul issued to these ordained leaders of the big church in Ephesus in the succeeding verses. Finally, Paul says, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* [*episkopos*, elsewhere translated "bishops"] to *feed the church of God*, which he has purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

These "elders" (*presbuteros*) were all ordained ministers and were considered the spiritual elders of the Ephesian church. But their *function*, or their *office*, in the church was that of *episkopos*, a bishop or "overseer" of the church.

This was no pyramid structure of "pecking order" or "rank" in the ministry, but a group of spirit-filled, spirit led *equals*, dedicated to the common cause of preaching the great, exciting, fabulous truth that *Jesus Christ of Nazareth was alive*, that through Him we can have our filthy sins washed away, that He can *save* our lives from destruction.

An older, more experienced man may not be able to preach or to be sent out before the general public. He has not been given that gift. But he is to be respected as an "elder," and honored by the other ministers, not looked down upon because of inferior speaking ability. The early church had to feel their way along, with the help of Christ directly, appointing men to fulfill various responsibilities *as those needs became evident*.

At first, there was no need for the *diakonate*. But, by reading Acts 6, we see the development of, *the need* and then the provision of officials to *satisfy that need*.

Read the whole chapter. The widows were being neglected, and, as was covered extensively earlier, the entire group of new "disciples" chose out from among themselves seven men with the required qualifications. Those seven were ordained by the 12.

Why seven? Because it took seven men to *care for the number of widows*. A larger number of widows might have required them to ordain 20 or 30 or 50.

When these men were ordained, they were "appointed over" what was called "this business," or this *function*, of seeing to the physical needs of widows. But the ordination of such men as Philip and Stephen was not to a specific "rank," and it

was not a “limited” ordination, in the sense of locking these men into some purely “physical” office.

These men were not ordained merely to become parking lot attendants for those wealthy enough to drive chariots, to set up chairs, wait on tables and assist elderly ladies up and down stairs.

Notice that both Philip and Stephen *began to preach*. God added the *spiritual gifts* to the qualifications already present in these men who were ordained to the *diakonate*. The *diakonos* is not limited to one ordained to assist in physical ministrations only, but is used in a broad sense to *include the ministry*.

The word is *even used of Jesus Christ* (see Romans 15:8, “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister (*diakonos*) of the circumcision for the truth of God”).

Diakonos means minister or servant. It had no limitations concerning function. One appointed to minister to another might serve in many different ways. That method of service, or area of responsibility, could be defined by other descriptions (helps, governments, teachers, etc.), but one who was among the *diakonate* was really a minister.

The word *diakonos* appears eight times in the Gospels and is translated “servant” six times and “minister” twice (see Matthew 20:26 and Mark 10:43). It appears 22 times in Paul’s writings and is translated “minister” nearly every time, except in Romans 16:1 (“servant”), and in Philippians 1:1,1 Timothy 3:8 and 3:12 (“deacon”).

The word *diakonos* certainly connotes an ordained function in the church, either that of a minister, or servant in some other fashion, but it was never *limited* to physical function alone.

Timothy is referred to as a *diakonos*. and the word in one form is used as the “service rendered” by a *diakonos* and is even translated “ministration” or “relief,” in one instance.

When the original seven were “appointed over this business” they were ordained to the service of the church. There is no set office or official title that is used in the account in Acts 6.

We must wait for the government of God in His true church to *develop* various

“offices” *within* the *diakonate* (servants, or those who “ministered” in various ways to others) as the needs arise.

By the time of Paul’s pastoral epistles, it becomes evident that Paul prefers using the term *diakonos* to refer to an office or function that was that of *episkopos* or “bishop.”

Read 1 Timothy 3. First, Paul described the qualifications for those functioning as “bishops,” or overseers,” of the flock. Next, he discussed those who must “first be proved, then let them use the office of a deacon [*diakonos*], being found blameless” (1 Timothy 3:10).

The bishops, or overseers, could have been *pastors* in function, or, if not designated as the pastor of a local congregation, merely an “elder,” an ordained minister (*episkopos*) who carried the wisdom and understanding of maturity and spiritual growth.

There *was definitely church government* functioning in the early church, as there has been church government from that time to this. But the needs of the church have varied, and the *functions* have necessarily had to vary.

Several important points should be noted here.

1. An *apostle* was never an office of absolute, dictatorial authority over all other apostles, but was “one sent” to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to a large area. As such, it was a *calling* and a *commission* to do God’s work, not a *lofty rank*. Peter, an apostle, was also an “elder.” So was John.
2. *Prophets* were either inspired foretellers of events (such as Agabus) or powerful preachers who could preach and teach within the church (1 Corinthians 14).
3. *Evangelists* were ministers who preached *to the unbelievers*, while prophets apparently preached mostly *to the believers*. An “evangelist” was a minister who had been given the special gifts of inspired preaching of the gospel, and who was under an apostle. Timothy was such an evangelist, and it is obvious that he was subject to Paul, who was a kind, loving, easy-to-be-entreated, fatherlike figure to Timothy, a kind of “mentor” who gently instructed, admonished and encouraged the younger man in his duties.
4. *Pastors* were shepherds of the flock. They could have come from the *episkopos* or the *diakonate*. Paul began using the term *episkopos* to connote a “bishop” who

could be over one, or several, churches. Deacons worked under the pastors and served in various ways-not limited to “physical” duties only.

5. *Teachers* were those who were “apt to teach.” Paul had linked the description of “pastors and teachers” together, as if the function was performed by the same man.

6. *Elders* usually meant an older person physically as well as more mature spiritually, and, though used in reference to *all* the ministry, including apostles, was later used by Paul to connote those among the congregation *who were already elders* and who should now be ordained in recognition of such.

7. *Deacons* were servants of the church who could help in many ways not limited whatsoever by “rank,” but only by the gifts of God’s Spirit. Philip, though one of the *diakonate*, became an evangelist, not through a subsequent ordination to “higher rank,” but by the added power of God’s Holy Spirit and God’s special gifts.

8. *Deaconesses* were the wives of the *diakonate* (as Priscilla) and served in the church among the women.

There was a vast difference in the organization of God’s true church as it began and the various forms and organizations of branches of the 20th century church.

Doctrinal questions were solved in open forums, including the presence of the “elders” and even local lay members as well as apostles (read Acts 15).

One apostle could openly disagree with another apostle without fear of retaliation or being “put out.” Paul rebuked Peter. Paul and Barnabas disagreed over a personnel choice and split up in anger, yet the work got done and neither tried to “put out” the other (Acts 15.39, 40).

The evangelists, such as Timothy, Titus, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, and others, usually labored under the instructions and authority of the apostles. The classic example of this is found in Paul’s encouraging and instructional correspondence with young Timothy.

Pastors of churches were ordained from among the elders of the congregations, and were called “bishops” or “overseers” (*episkopos*) as well as “elders” (*prebuteros*) (Acts 20:17).

Yes, there was government, but the governmental aspects of the ministry emphasized *service* more than command; *gentle encouragement* more than

rebuke; being “helpers of their joy” more than policemen over their faith; visiting, counseling, anointing, encouraging more than criticizing or condemning; seeking those who were straying rather than threatening the weak with excommunication; building up faith, not instilling fear.

Never did the ministry of Jesus Christ assume its responsibility was to *administer the penalties for sin*.

The ministry of the church was seen as a lifetime *calling*, a profession which God placed upon a person. It was *God* who “set some in the church,” not any man.

There were apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, elders and deacons-but not always necessary in that order.

An ordained minister who served as a *pastor*, for example, was a pastor as long as he continued to function in that capacity. If he became too old for the duties, or moved away, he was still in the *presbutero* or the *diakonate*, he was *still an ordained minister*, but would now be referred to as an “elder,” rather than “pastor.” The various “titles” were *not* decorative, to connote rank, but *descriptions of functions*.

During this exciting period of *beginnings* in God’s work, when the first apostles were zealously preaching the fabulous miracle of Christ’s resurrection, some of the people were amazed at the power with which they spoke, the miracles and fabulous signs and wonders being accomplished.

Some were excited beyond words about the way the *people reacted*.

Many of the people began to *look up* to the apostles. They quickly began to espouse various points of view, choose favorite men to follow, talk endlessly about which personality, which appearance, which mannerism appealed to them the most.

Many wanted to have an active role in this new organization rapidly springing up, some through a sincere desire to serve and some through the lust for capturing those adoring looks of the people-promoting *themselves*, catapulting *themselves* into a “position” of power and authority so the masses of people would *follow them!*

Paul saw this developing in many areas, especially Corinth and Iconium, Lystra

and Derbe. He wrote, "For it has been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you says, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas [Peter]; and I of Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:11, 12).

Those who purported to reject *human* leadership, and claimed to be "of Christ," *are lumped together with those who claimed to be followers of men*. Why? Because even such a statement as "I am of Christ" was being used in a *divisive* sense. It was being used in *argument*, as a "posture," not in humble, gentle sincerity.

Paul then asked, "Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

The letters to the churches in Revelation reveal *many* different teachers, including one woman, Jezebel, that were drawing away disciples after themselves and after their spurious doctrinal ideas.

The New Testament *abounds* in warnings about false Christs, false apostles, false teachers, false doctrines. Paul warned Timothy about the people who "have itching ears," and warned the Ephesian elders about men arising "also of your own selves" (Acts 20:28-30) to lead away people after them.

Why?

Vanity. Ego. Greed. Desire for recognition, for vindication-a completely carnal, self-centered, pompous desire within different ones to have the limelight, to be the "leader," to be "in authority."

But nowhere else in New Testament literature is so blatant, crass, downright mercenary example of a lust for this power and authority made plain as in the case of Simon the Magician (Acts 8).

Simon the Magician

Prior to Philip's arrival at Samaria, Simon was enjoying a vast and glowing reputation. He was continually talking about himself, bragging about his powers of divination and perception and his ability to use sorcery.

People continually talked of Simon. They called him by the title "This man is the 'power of God' that is called 'great' "!"It is not often when a human being is so

revered in his own lifetime that duped people use the very titles that belong to God and apply them to a man in pompous blasphemy.

Notice. "But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of *Samaria*, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries" (Acts 8:9-11).

Simon was basking in the adoration of the mob. He *loved* the admiring looks, the greetings in the public places, the cloying, sidelong glances of the women, the importance, the pomp, the glamour. He was making a comfortable living, was a household name in the city.

And then one day his little world was shattered!

Here came Philip, newly ordained to the *diakonate*, apparently, and "preached Christ unto them."

But Philip did more than speak powerfully. He backed up the word with great miracles. "For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:7,8).

Suddenly Simon's luster had dimmed. He was thunderstruck. *He* had been the one receiving acclaim in the local area. *He* was the most respected, famous, admired worker of signs and wonders.

Simon looked on and shook his head in wonderment.

He couldn't gainsay the miracles. He knew, deep down inside, that Philip had a *genuine gift of God*. He knew, in the depths of his heart, that he could not duplicate them, even as Jannes and Jambres had to tell Pharaoh at the miracles of Moses and Aaron, "This is the finger of God!" Simon watched the people *flocking* to hear Philip, saw the people clamoring to be *baptized*. Here was something *new*. Here was something *exciting*, an opportunity to *be involved* in something that was growing like wildfire.

So Simon himself "believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done" (Acts

8:13).

For days, perhaps weeks, the powerful preaching continued. Flocks of people came. People had time to get loved ones and relatives and bring their friends to be healed. Many were being baptized.

At length the apostles arrived from headquarters in Jerusalem-the apostles there decided to send Peter and John to Samaria when they heard of Philip's great success (verse 14).

Philip's knowledge was limited. He had not known he should lay hands on the people after baptism, knowing only that he should baptize the people when they repented and confessed Jesus Christ as their Savior.

But now the two apostles from Jerusalem began laying hands on the people and praying. The people were rejoicing, some praying, and others being given the gifts of healing and of working miracles.

When Simon saw that the apostles' prayer and the ceremony of the laying on of hands resulted in this newfound confidence and power, he said, "Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit" (verse 19).

But Simon *was not converted*. Oh, he *believed* Philip. That is, he was convinced Philip was *not faking* the miracles. He believed Philip's message, but his *heart* was not right. He didn't want to humbly repent of his own filthy past and ask for forgiveness so the power of God's Spirit could cleanse him in the sight of God. No, he wanted a "partnership" with the apostles. He wanted "a piece of the action."

To Simon's carnal, power-hungry mind, these glowing faces, these excited people, these sincere believers rejoicing in love represented the audience of Simon's own private stage. *They* were his idol, his lust, his desire. To have their adoration, their admiring looks, their respect, and even fear-that was the thing!

He coveted the "position" of being the "leader" among them!

When Philip showed up, Simon's own livelihood *was virtually wiped away*; his black magic and demonic trickery were "kid stuff" compared with the wondrous miracle of instant healing. He was suddenly in the shadows, and there was Philip,

and now Peter and John, out there before the people, getting all the kudos, the applause and the respect.

Thinking they were men like himself-plotters, politicians, power-hungry promoters whose goal was “office” and the admiration of people-Simon tried to go about it in the only way he knew. He offered them a *bribe*.

“And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit” (verses 18, 19).

But Peter had the power of discernment. With the Holy Spirit now in his mind, Peter could *see through* the rotten greed, the petty vanities, carnal lust and swelling ego.

Peter said, “Your money perish with you, because you have thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. You have neither *part nor lot* in this matter. for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity!”

Peter saw Simon was “posturing.” He had been “continuing with Philip” for those many days. He had been up there in front, trying to be noticed. His “body English” and his manner were very plain: He wanted a “piece of the action.”

He was, in effect, trying to *buy an apostleship*. Otherwise Peter would not have said he had neither part nor lot with them. “Part” would have meant he had not been chosen by Christ, and “lot” meant he was not one of those selected afterward, and then chosen by lot, as was Matthias. Peter was referring to the methods used in selecting the apostles- and showing Simon his pretentious claims to “high office” were nothing but ego and vanity.

When Simon heard Peter’s rebuke, he could only rage inside.

But he had to pretend to be “Christian” to the others, so he said, “Pray you to the Lord for me, that none of these things which you have spoken come upon me.”

Translated? That meant, really, “Oh, poor me. Look, people, at the way this terrible man, Peter, is misunderstanding me, mistreating me. *He* is in the wrong.

Here I am, only trying to help, offering to serve and to help God's people, and Peter is threatening me. I'll ask him to pray to God that none of his jealousy and his hatred toward me -asking God to punish me-could ever happen, so all the people will get the message. They'll see Peter as a person threatening *violence* and *harm* to me, and see me as the humble, gentle, forgiving Christian in this exchange."

Simon was not a bit repentant. His heart was wrong. But he knew how to "posture" and *to pretend* to be Christian. He assumed the posture of the hurt, bewildered, misunderstood martyr, hoping it impressed Peter and the people.

Yes, there are those who see a church congregation as an actor sees an audience, as an insurance salesman sees 100 live contacts, as a politician sees votes, as a burglar sees an unlocked window. It is their opportunity, their chance for glory, for the "leadership" and for the power and authority.

The entire history of God's church, even in the early New Testament, was one of power struggles, false brethren, false ministers, false apostles and false doctrines. And sometimes the false ones *remained on the inside* and the genuine ones were "*put out.*"

John wrote about such a person: "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, *who loves to have the preeminence among them*, receives us not."

What did this man love? He loved the "position" among this local congregation. John said, "Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbids them that would, and *casts them out of the church.*"

This man was totally corrupt, devoid of the genuine meekness and humility of Christ. He only wanted the power and authority, the respect and admiration of other human beings. So he *threw out* of the church those who "would," who really wanted to be humble Christians, and *kept inside* the church those who would continue to bow to his dictatorial leadership.

The church continued its drift into apostasy in that first century. And church literature at the time is the record of that apostasy. Apostates aren't accidents. They were plotters who are devoid of the true spirit of meekness, goodness,

gentleness and faith; devoid of the *love* of the Holy Spirit; possessed instead with avarice, greed, cunning and ego.

Jude wrote of these same men, saying, "Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities . . . These speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves. Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Korah. These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruits withers, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 8-13).

Greed, desire for position and "title," lust for authority and pomp: These are the drives and motives of such men. Jude said, "These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaks great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of [in order to gain] advantage!" (verse 16).

Favoritism, party spirit, politics: These were the nature of Simon the Magician. Since *he* would have taken a bribe-because power and sway over people were his motive and he had no special conscience as to the manner in which he achieved it-he tried to bribe Peter and the others.

Since *he* was totally corrupt and dishonest, he could only assume others in a position of admiration and authority were the same.

Simon epitomizes the attitude of those who see God's people and God's church as something to be exploited: a ready-made group of "dumb sheep" who will plod along after some great leader if only they can capture their love, admiration and loyalty.

No wonder God's Word warns those who would be ministers: "My brethren, become not many of you masters, or teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment" (James 3:1, paraphrased)

Simon is dead, but his attitude and spirit live on in the minds of other men who would seek to exploit God's people only to satisfy their incredible ego.

The Purpose for God's Government

Yes, there *is government* in God's true church, but it is not a dictatorship of harsh, brutal, unthinking authority that threatens to smash your eternal life, consign you to Gehenna fire at the slightest intimation that you are not blindly following a human leader.

Never would the true ministers of God claim Paul's statement, "Follow me as I follow Christ," *is not good* enough!

But when will people come to see the difference between the *spiritual organism* that is the church and the *human organization* that must function as the vehicle to fulfill the great commission?

Today the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God must be done by the means of the *mass media*: through radio, television and evangelistic campaigns; through booklets, periodicals and magazines; through Bible study courses and cassette tapes. All of this takes *organization*. And, as in *any* organization, *someone has to be in charge*.

There is nothing evil whatsoever about organization and nothing evil in an organizational structure which plainly shows who is "over" whom for the purpose of getting a great work done. It is the *abuse* of authority, the *abuse* of power, the *abuse* of office, the *abuse* of God's people that is the shame.

Why should there be organization and church government?

Let God answer.

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the *work* of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [mature] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The ministry exists for the perfecting of the saints *and* for accomplishing the *work* of the ministry.

That *work* is the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness unto all nations, baptizing those who believe and teaching them to

observe all things Jesus Christ taught His disciples.

To do that great job, there must be organization. There must be government. But let that government be the very government of God Almighty, who “gently leads those that are with young” and who is “easy to be entreated” and who is filled with “goodness, meekness, gentleness, faith,” and who has unbounded, unlimited, perfect *love* toward those being governed.

“He is governed best who is governed least” is a true statement.

God is self-governed. He rules Himself. He will not *let* Himself sin, or “miss the mark,” or stray from His great purpose. The church Jesus Christ built *failed* to capture and maintain that perfect government in the first century. Another phase or branch of God’s church has allowed that beautiful kind of church government to disintegrate into calloused brute force, heartless, unthinking, uncaring threats-rule through fear! God says, “Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat, and you clothe you with the wool, you kill them that are fed: but you feed not the flock. The diseased have you not strengthened, neither have you healed that which was sick, neither have you bound up that which was broken, neither have you brought again that which was driven away, neither have you sought that which was lost; but with force and cruelty have you ruled them. And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. . . Thus saith the Lord Eternal; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them” (Ezekiel 34:2-10).

But the government God is now establishing with this branch of His church is *not that kind*. Its greatest desire is to *do the work of God-and to feed the flock!*

Its hope and desire is to be “helpers of their joy,” and to serve the people of God as Christ directed.

The organization that God is building within The Intercontinental Church of God, is one of *fellow* laborers, *partners* in the faith, dedicated, converted, Spirit-led men and women who stand shoulder to shoulder, side by side, and who unitedly look up to Jesus Christ of Nazareth for His leadership in their lives.

This branch of the Church of God is *alive*. It is *growing*. A work is being done, and that work is growing every day. Thank God Jesus Christ said, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you," and that He promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

That *same* Jesus Christ administers His tender love and mercy, His admonition and correction, His teaching and example *every single day* within His work!

Remember, Jesus Christ said He would build *His* group, His "called-out ones." He then *commissioned* those He had called out of this world to *do a work*. He said, "Go ye therefore, and *teach* all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Jesus' intention clearly showed He constituted *His* group (*ekklesia*, meaning "church" or a body of those who believe in Jesus and believe in doing *His work*) for a *purpose*.

That purpose was to fulfill His charge, His commission!

"And that *repentance* and remission of sins should be preached *in his name* [and, *if His name* is omitted, it cannot be the true gospel of Christ] among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

Jesus built His "church" to be far more of an "association" or an "organization" to conduct the work of *evangelism*, of *preaching the gospel* to the world, than He did to merely establish a group of local congregations enjoying weekly fellowship!

The work of Jesus' *ekklesia* is *preaching the gospel*.

Then, when people who hear the gospel *repent*, a *secondary* part of that work is to "feed the sheep"! How ironic that some of those who were *converted* as a result of hearing the *work of God* being done turn back and want to sink down into a small local group and not be involved in *doing the work* -the very work by which they themselves were *called*! But those whose hearts are fully set on Christ Himself will be faithfully striving to *do His work*! *That is why the church exists!*

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