

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #6

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The church carries on the ministries of Jesus through various offices or functions. When searching for genuine Christianity, one should compare the organization of the modern church with that of the biblical churches.

The New Testament reveals a number of official workers in the church but also advocates that every Christian is to be a worker (Ephesians 2:10). While all disciples are to be busy in the Lord's kingdom, a few are singled out for special service. The apostle Paul gives us three listings consisting of both service and servers:

[1] Ephesians 4:11 - *"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers"*

[2] 1 Corinthians 12:28 - *"And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues."*

[3] Romans 12:6-8 - *"And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."*

In other passages, we find references to some of the same work or workers but with different terms being used. Beyond these that are listed, we might add three groups of workers found in other passages: [1] Deacons (see 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Philippians 1:1; and Acts 6:1-6); [2] Deaconesses (see 1 Timothy 3:11; and Romans 16:1); and [3] Widows (see 1 Timothy 5:9-14).

In analyzing all the biblical information, we may come to a number of conclusions about the organization of the early church. Some of these workers and their functions were only temporary (as the chosen apostles, inspired prophets, and gifts of the Holy Spirit), while others were permanent functions (as teachers, elders, and deacons). Some had world wide authority and function (as the apostles), while others were limited to one congregation (as elders or deacons). Some work was done by those who were in an official capacity of the church (as deacons) and these were required to meet certain qualifications (see 1 Timothy 3-5; Titus 1; Acts 6).

What may be most revealing about these listings is what is not included. There are a number of modern "church offices" not found in the New Testament. We will mention three of these in brief:

[1] Women leaders. The modern churches now utilize women in the position of leadership, especially in the teaching functions. We know of several denominational clergy who are female. However, the biblical restrictions upon women speaking in the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34) or teaching men (1 Timothy 2:12) reveal the error of this trend. While there were "prophetesses" in the New Testament (see Luke 2:36 and Acts 21:9), there is no evidence that these women used their divine gift in the public assembly.

There is strong indication that Christian women served in the capacity of "deaconess" (1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1) and "widows on the list" (see 1 Timothy 5:9f. where these widows are not those receiving financial assistance, but serving). Yet, these are serving functions and not leadership or authoritative functions.

Since an elder is to be a "husband" (1 Timothy 3:2), a woman would be eliminated from this function. There is a general tone in the New Testament writings that men, not women, are to be placed in the positions of leadership.

[2] Denominational hierarchy or "orders." Through the centuries since the first, there has developed a number of religious orders and positions of authority that are foreign to the teachings of the New Testament. Some of these have become more political than religious.

Although more than one sect has priestly orders, the New Testament speaks of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5). And, while some religious groups have leaders referred to as religious "fathers," Jesus

taught that we should call no man "father" in this sense (Matthew 23:9 - *"And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven."*).

Many protestant denominations have national conventions or councils that vote on faith decisions for their churches. These national organizations have the control over the individual congregations, for which there is no authority in Scripture. In like manner, many of these religions allow their "pastor" (a title biblically reserved for the position of elder) to exercise the authority over a local congregation. Several years ago, a denominational friend of mine called me for help with a problem his church was having. Their "senior pastor" was overruling their "board of deacons" in wanting to add taking control of the money to his own list of duties. This was going too far for the "deaconship" and they were looking for some guidance. This illustrates the problems we confront when we leave the paths charted by the New Testament.

[3] CEO's. For some time there has been a misconception within our fellowship as to the role of elders. While the Bible speaks of their work as "shepherding" (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28) and "overseeing" (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1) some have considered their work as merely decision makers. A number of elderships today seem to function more like a board of directors than shepherds of sheep.

While the role of elder does carry authority, we may have misplaced this sense of authority. Many see their task of overseer as overseeing the work of the church. Yet, Paul said, to the elders of Ephesus: *"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). In other words, it is the flock or the church, that is to be overseen. This means the people, not the work of the group. Paul is advocating an authority and responsibility for the souls of men. The Hebrew writer seems to echo this view of their work in the statement: *"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account..."* (Hebrews 13:17).

The original picture of the organization of Christianity may appear very different than the not-so-genuine pictures we have today. It included apostles and prophets who revealed God's divine will to man (Ephesians 3:1-7). These early positions among God's people required a supernatural power from the Holy Spirit in order to function. Therefore, these positions are no longer available because of the unique qualifications (see Acts 1:21,22) and because the age of spiritual gifts has ended (see 1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

Yet, within local congregations of the first century, there were positions of service that were designed to continue in all generations of Christians. These consisted of elders, preachers, teachers, deacons (and deaconesses), and widows on the list. These have written qualifications that instruct all generations as to who might fill these functions. Because there are required qualities that must be present within those accepting such positions, it is possible that congregations could not fill these functions until there are mature Christians who meet the New Testament qualifications. In other words, a congregation may be genuine without these positions being filled. Note that Paul established congregations without elders and then later returned to appoint elders (see Acts 14:23 and also Titus 1:5 where Titus was to appoint elders in the cities of Crete).

The apostle Peter seems to divide the work in a congregation into two broad categories: *"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies..."* (1 Peter 4:10,11). Teaching and service are two vital functions within a congregation.

Apparently, a congregation may select certain people to positions of service as they are needed without making these positions a permanent post. For example, the early church selected men to accompany Paul and the contribution that was sent to Judea (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

In like manner, there are a number of services that need rendering in a congregation and these may be filled by people selected by the congregations. Today we have "treasurers" to give an accounting of the funds of a congregation. We have "youth ministers," "associate ministers," "educational directors," "nursery coordinators," "song leaders," and even "greeters." These fill needed roles in serving the Christians in a given locale. These do not violate what we learn in Scripture and they are not binding as obligatory positions in order to be the church after the New Testament order.

The difference in these positions and those we deem improper within denominations have to do with the authority granted and the binding nature of the functions. Some denominations are identified by and could not operate without their human hierarchy. This is not the case with the service roles mentioned above.

If we desire to be genuine in our approach to Christianity, we need to pay heed to the differences between human organization and divine organization.

Next month, we will conclude our series on “The Search For Genuine Christianity” with a discussion of attitudes.