

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

B0604 – January 29, 2006 – Major Bible Themes
Chapter 38 – The Church: Her Organization & Ordinances

When you study the church you have to realize there are two aspects of the church. On one hand you have what some call the universal or invisible church and on the other hand you have the local or visible church. So far, Dick and I have been teaching primarily about the universal or invisible church. The universal church is “the body of Christ”, and includes “every Christian joined to Christ as the head of the body by the baptism of the Spirit” from the Day of Pentecost until the present. As the body of Christ it is likened to an organism and “is ordered on the same principle as the human body, for each part relates to each other part and the whole body relates to the head directing the body.”ⁱ The universal church is also likened to a building and as such is being built up stone by stone upon the bedrock foundation of Jesus Christ Himself. This building will be completed at the pre-trib Rapture when those still alive will be snatched out of the world and taken to heaven to be with those who have gone before us. Beyond this there is no organization of the universal church.

In distinction from this we have the local or visible church. What is a local church?” A popular trend right now among young people is to rebel against the traditional forms and claim that any gathering of believers constitutes a church (e.g. a gathering for bible study, prayer, singing, etc...). This is simply not true. A “local church” defined biblically “is an assembly of professing believers in Christ who have been baptized and who are organized to carry out God’s will.”ⁱⁱⁱ This definition has four important aspects.

1. A profession of faith must be made. The profession may not be genuine but it must be made.
2. Without debating the mode of water baptism, it is a fact that the NT knows nothing of an unbaptized member of a local church.
3. A church has to have some kind of organization.
4. A church must have as its purpose—to do God’s will.

This definition includes several things; the church must open its doors to those of all ages who make professions of faith. It cannot be limited to youth or the elderly, etc...It must observe the ordinances regularly. It must be a gathering of worship in all its forms; preaching, teaching, praying, and the exercising of spiritual gifts. Now that we have defined a local church let's take a closer look at the organization of the church. In the local church, however, some organization seems necessary so that everything can be done properly and in an orderly manner (1 Cor 14:40).

I. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

Historically there have been three basic forms of church government. They are 1) *Hierarchical* which you will find in its mildest form in the Methodist Church, in its moderate form in the Episcopal Church, and in its extreme form in the Roman Catholic Church. 2) *Congregational* which you will find primarily in certain Baptist Churches and Congregational Churches. 3) *Federal* which you will find in the Presbyterian, Reformed, and Independent Bible Churches).

A. Hierarchical

Pope
Cardinals
Archbishops
Bishops
Priests

This form of church government has a ruling body of clergy who are organized in ranks, each of which is subordinate to the one above it. This is a very dangerous and unbiblical form of government. It leads to tyranny and oppression. As history attests, this form of government led to new terminology ranking the 'clergy' and separating them from the 'laity'. Such terms themselves are an example. This form of government found its mildest form in Methodism, a moderate form in Episcopalianism, and an extreme form in Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism developed all sorts of ranks among the clergy, none of which are biblical.

For example, 'Bishop' is a biblical word but is simply another term for elder or overseer. 'Priest' is also a biblical word but all believers are priests, not just a special class who can absolve sin. These ranks did nothing but separate the clergy from the people. The clergy became their own society; a society that did not engage in secular business or marriage.

This form of Church government reigned until the Protestant Reformation when Luther, Calvin, and others said, 'We will not lay down to Church authority. We are subject to God's authority'. Both these men fought the hierarchy of the Papacy till the day they died. They fought it because it was tyrannical and oppressive and the Scriptures teach that Christ has first place in the Church, not priests, popes, cardinals or bishops. Out of the Protestant Reformation two forms of Church Government developed.

B. Congregational

Christ

Congregation → Deacons → Pastor

This form of government locates ultimate authority in the members of the local church. This does not mean that the whole congregation votes on every decision. Congregational churches often delegate responsibility to a group of leaders. But when the whole congregation votes each member has only one vote. Congregational churches are independent, that is, they are not connected to any other individual or organization above them except Christ the Head. Two aspects of congregationalism have biblical support. First, early congregations did have involvement the nomination of deacons in Acts 6.

Acts 6:2-6 ² So the twelve [apostolic elders] summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select [choose, nominate] from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we [apostles acting as elders] may put in charge of [appoint to] this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

This is what we call a Practice of the early church. It is not a precept. Precepts are commands that must be followed but Practices are examples that we may follow but do not have to follow. I have various opinions on which Practices we should follow in the NT Scriptures. In this case I think we should follow them. I suggest that there are at least two reasons the apostles involved the whole congregation in the nomination of deacons; First, verse 1 indicates that whoever is chosen needs to be widely known among the church body as individuals that will not discriminate. Second, verse 4 indicates that they did not want

to take the time to nominate the deacons. Even though the apostles, who were serving as the elders of the church, involved the congregation in the nomination, they were the one's who actually appointed those who were nominated (v. 3). So, the procedure was that the whole congregation nominated deacons and then the elders appointed certain one's from that group. In this case all seven nominated were appointed. What would have happened if one of the seven men nominated by the congregation was not approved of by the apostolic elders? Presumably such a person would not have been allowed to serve in this capacity.

Secondly, the early congregations were involved in selecting missionaries in Acts 15:22.

Acts 15:22 ²² Then it seemed good to the apostles [itinerant] and the elders [local]ⁱⁱⁱ, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

So, there were two Practices of the early church which involved the entire church congregation; 1) nominating deacons and 2) choosing of missionaries to support or send out.

So, Congregationalism has some biblical support in the area of these two decisions. But it must always be remembered that these are Practices and not Precepts. If they were Precepts then we would have to follow them. Since they are Practices we are at liberty to either follow them or not. At present this church does not follow these Precepts but we have the liberty to do so if led by the Spirit to do so.

Having said those words in favor of congregationalism, there are also some elements do not have biblical support. For example, they normally do not have a plurality of deacons and elders. Most often they have the office of pastor, which is unknown in the NT, and deacons. This is out of step with the word of God which teaches a plurality of elders and deacons (1 Tim 3; Phil 1:1). Some people argue for this type of government on the basis of the priesthood of the believer. Since all Christians are indwelled by the Spirit of God and all are priests then all should be involved in making the decisions for the church. The problems with this are three-fold. 1) It is a deductive rather than inductive argument. The Bible never argues that all Christians should make the decisions. 2) While all believers are *indwelled* by the Spirit not all are *filled* by the Spirit. That's an important distinction. To be *filled* with the Spirit is to be *controlled* by the Spirit. What if carnal or immature believers show up just to make a vote to kick out the pastor? Is that really a good idea? 3)

Most who hold that all should vote because all Christians are indwelt by the Spirit do not let children who are believers vote? So, they have a contradiction in their argument.

C. Elder (Federal)

Christ

Elders → Deacons → Congregation

In this form of government the individuals in the church give up their authority to a group of elders in the church. In the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, since they are connected to a denomination, they give up some of their autonomy to the higher organizational structure. In Independent Bible Churches, like this one, federalism is limited to the local church and is not connected to any higher organization structure but Christ is pure Head. Local independent churches are the biblical norm.

Federalism uses Hebrews 13:17 to show that authority is located in the leaders of the church and not in every member.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account [notice the responsibility of the leaders. If you're not a leader then you don't have to give an account for this. What do you have to give an account for? Whether you willingly obeyed and submitted to the leaders in your church!]. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Members are commanded to obey and submit to their leaders. To be sure, leadership is not dictatorship. Leadership is careful guidance and the members are responsible to this leadership. Both sides have a responsibility; the leadership to lead with authority, the members to respond with obedience and submission.

Who are the leaders in the church? The “elders” and “deacons”. We’ve already discussed the “deacons” but how are the elders put into office? Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 show clearly that elders are appointed to office.

Acts 14:23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here we have the apostles who were serving in the office of elder appointing elders. There is no congregational involvement in this decision. This decision needs to be made solely by the mature elders in the church.

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

Here we have Titus doing the appointing of elders. The apostles appointed some as elders who were then to go and appoint elders in other churches. In a local church once this system is put in place the church becomes self-propagating as elders appoint other elders.

Finally, what is the biblical form of church government? Although a pure Federal Church government is biblical, it seems to me that it is best to have a blend/hybrid between Congregational and Federal government, limited to the local level. I would make eight points:

1. There should be a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28-30; 1 Tim 3:1-7).
2. Elders are appointed by other elders (Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5).
3. There should be a plurality of deacons (Acts 6:1-6; Phil 1:1).
4. Deacons may be nominated by the congregation and must be appointed by the elders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 3:8-13).
5. The congregation was involved in choosing missionaries (Acts 15:22). In this case the whole church should be of one mind (Acts 15:25).

As per responsibilities,

6. Elders should shepherd/pastor the flock of God, should exercise oversight voluntarily, according to the will of God, not for gain but with eagerness, not in a lording/dictatorial fashion, but as good examples to the flock so that they will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pt 5:1-4).
7. The deacons' responsibilities are decided by the elders. Whatever the elders delegate to the deacons is their responsibility (Acts 6:1-6).
8. The congregations responsibility is to obey and submit to their leaders so that their work will be a joy (Heb 13:17).

II. THE ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH

Most groups recognize only two ordinances; the Lord's Supper and Water Baptism. However, certain groups also practice foot washing in following Jesus' example in John 13. The Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments. Although ordinance and sacrament

are synonyms in the dictionary they mean something different. Sacraments convey grace to the individual partaker while ordinances merely symbolize the spiritual reality.

A. Water Baptism

The subject of water baptism have unfortunately caused major divisions in church history. If they understood that salvation was by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone then these divisions would not have occurred. The arguments are over three issues. First, whether water baptism is a ritual baptism or a real baptism. Second, the mode of baptism, whether it is by immersion or by sprinkling/pouring. Third, whether baptism is for infants or believer's only.

1. Is Water Baptism Real or Ritual?

Those who hold that water baptism is a *real* baptism believe that some measure of grace is bestowed upon the person being baptized. Some believe that it is in the water that one is regenerated. This is called baptismal regeneration. Others believe that water baptism imparts grace that inclines one toward more faith and obedience. Neither of these views is biblical. Both are a distortion of grace. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone and as such water baptism is not necessary for salvation. Rather, the act of baptizing is an act of obedience for the one baptizing and an outward symbol of the baptized of his salvation.

Those who hold that water baptism is a *ritual* baptism believe that it represents a spiritual truth but is not the cause of any supernatural grace being bestowed upon the baptized. It simply represents that the person being baptized has been spiritually identified with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection. As such, it is a picture of the baptism of the Spirit. This ordinance is provided only for those who have already believed in Christ and been saved.

2. Is Water Baptism by Immersion or Sprinkling?

The question is relatively unimportant for those who reject baptismal regeneration. Undue emphasis has been placed on the mode of baptism. What should be emphasized is whether the individual has believed in Christ. Nevertheless, the issue has divided a great number of people. To me, this is a very carnal thing to argue about and not worthy of much attention. It was such a debate that when the Greek word *baptizo* and its derivatives were taken into the English it was transliterated "baptize" so that the mode was left up to the baptizer. The Greek word means "to dip" and is never used for water baptism. It was used to refer to the

dying of fabrics. Thus, the primary meaning of the word is “dip” or “immerse”. Passages in favor of “immersion” include the baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water and the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 8:38-39 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water,

Passages used to support sprinkling or pouring include the baptism of 3,000 on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about *three thousand souls*.

The argument is that there simply wasn't enough time or water to baptize so many people by immersion in this case so it must have been by sprinkling or pouring.

3. Is Baptism for Infants or Believer's Only?

This is a difficulty only for those who see baptism as regenerative or conferring grace. No one immerses infants so those who baptize infants almost always consider the proper mode to be sprinkling or pouring. Normally they think of infant baptism as a ceremonial cleansing or initiatory rite. For example, Rome says that in water baptism original sin is removed and the infant becomes a member of the Roman Catholic Church. For those who hold that immersion is the proper mode believer's baptism following faith in Christ is usually followed.

I believe the following:

1. Water baptism is ritual not real
2. Water baptism is performed by man not God
3. Water baptism does not confer any grace on the individual
4. Water baptism does not regenerate the individual
5. Water baptism is by immersion (though the mode is not worth dividing over)
6. Water baptism is representative of Spirit baptism
7. Water baptism is for believers only

8. Water baptism is not essential for salvation

B. Lord's Supper

This ordinance was instituted on the night before Christ's crucifixion as a symbolic presentation of the believer's participation in the benefits of His death. As such it superseded the Jewish Passover which the Jews have celebrated ever since their deliverance from Egypt.

There have been three views of the Lord's Supper. First, the view of the Roman Catholic Church is that of "transubstantiation". This view states that the "The Holy Mass is the sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus Christ really present on the altar and under the appearance of bread and wine,". The priest is endowed with power from the bishop to change the bread and wine into the literal living body and blood of Christ so that He is on the altar offering Himself as an unbloody sacrifice. His body is said to be there down to the last eyelash and toenail even though the elements do not literally taste like flesh and blood. This view makes the partaking of the Lord's Supper cannibalism. This view fails to take into account that Jesus was speaking figuratively of the spiritual participation in His death.

The second view is that popularized by Luther and carried into the Lutheran Church called "consubstantiation". This view claims that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine but the presence of the body of Christ is in both elements. This view is also called "Real Presence". Thus, when one partakes of the elements they partake of Christ's body.

The third view is the Memorial view, popularized by Zwingli who argued against Luther. This view says that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ's death on the cross. The body and blood are not there because Christ is there but because Christ is absent! We are doing this in remembrance of Him until He comes.

It is called the Lord's Supper because it was a Supper and as such it was probably held in the evening in the early church. They would often have a Love Feast which is probably what is being condemned by Paul in 1 Cor 11:18ff. As such people were eating out of turn and others were getting drunk. Thus, they were not rightly partaking of the Lord's Supper. It was to be a time of intense concentration and remembrance of Christ's death, partaken of frequently, and until He comes.

Questions regarding the Lord's Supper are answered by simple exegesis of 1 Cor 11:18-34. There are two elements; bread and wine. The bread represents Christ's body which was

broken for us on the cross. The wine represents the blood of the new covenant which was shed on the cross. The focus of the Lord's Supper is Christ's death on the cross. The purpose of the Lord's Supper is to remember Christ. Because of the sobriety of the occasion we should take the Lord's Supper in a worthy and orderly manner. The Lord's Supper should be observed until He comes.

How often should the Lord's Supper be observed? The Scriptures are silent on this point. There is some indication that early churches observed it each week. Since there is no prescription for this it should be left up to the elders of the church to decide how often it is observed. We observe it monthly which is quite common among churches today.

What requirements must be met in order to partake? First, all partakers must be believers. Second, the believer must be in good standing with his local church. Those who are under discipline were excluded from the Lord's Supper. Third, the partaker should partake in a worthy and orderly manner.

ⁱ Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 266.

ⁱⁱ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 469.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the early development of the Church the apostles originally functioned as the elders. Acts 1:8 began to be fulfilled when the gospel moved out of Jerusalem to Samaritans in Acts 8 and to Gentiles in Acts 10. At this point (cf. Acts 11:30) the apostles took a more itinerant role, moving outside of Jerusalem into these areas. To replace their functions in Jerusalem they appointed elders who were more local (Acts 11:30). As they moved from city to city they appointed elders to carry on ministry (cf. Acts 14:23).

[Back To The Top](#)

Click [Here](#) to return to other lessons.

[Return to Fredericksburg Bible Church Web Site](#)