

Title: A Change In Local Church Organization

Author: Allen Dvorak

File name: church history shorts 1.doc

In the New Testament we learn that congregations of God's people were led by men known as elders. Writing toward the end of his life, the apostle Paul instructed both Timothy and Titus regarding the qualifications of such men, but Luke records that the Jerusalem church had elders as early as Acts 11:30 (i.e., even before Paul's first missionary journey). In the context of Paul's first missionary journey, elders were appointed in the new congregations in Pisidia (Antioch), Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:23).

We read again about the elders of the church at Jerusalem in such passages as Acts 15 and 21. The church at Ephesus had elders who met with Paul on the return leg of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:17). In short, the organization of a local congregation with a plurality of elders as overseers was not peculiar to Jerusalem nor confined to the earliest days of the church (see also Philippians 1:1).

By the time of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), however, it was commonplace for each congregation to have a bishop who was superior in authority to a group of elders. The organization of local churches and the universal church would change even more with time, but how did this basic change take place?

There were several innocuous steps leading to this change in local church organization. Apparently, in many early congregations it was common for the elders of the congregation to select one of themselves to preside over their meetings. This elder was sometimes called the "president" in the writings of early Christians and would also preside over the worship of the congregation (e.g., Justin Martyr [c. A.D. 150], *Apology I*, p. 67; cited by Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, p. 81). It also seems that, over time, the term "bishop" with its etymological emphasis on "oversight" began to be applied more exclusively to this "chairman." It is also easy to understand how one elder, due to his leadership qualities or dominant personality, might take on this role on a more permanent basis.

In approximately A.D. 150, Ignatius of Antioch wrote a series of letters to churches as he was being transported to Rome where he would subsequently be martyred. In these letters he encouraged the "elders" of local congregations to submit to "the bishop." It is possible that Ignatius was describing the organization he favored rather than what was common in local churches in his day, but the tendency of churches was to move that way. Ignatius seemed to think that false teaching could be confronted more effectively with such an arrangement.

In the New Testament, the words "bishop" and "elder" were applied to the same men with no distinction in their role (see Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1-2). Gradually, men moved away from this truth, perhaps with praiseworthy motivation (to

effectively resist error) and for expedient purposes, but one can never successfully serve God by altering the divine pattern for the local church!