



**"And the Government  
Shall Be Upon  
His Shoulder"  
(Isaiah 9:6)**

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Much has been said and written on church government. However, most of this has only succeeded in creating more confusion in the minds of men. It seems very hard for many people to clear their minds of prevailing ideas of humanly-organized, governed groups and let the Scriptures and the example of the early church answer the question.

Many have taken the attitude (and these numbers are not small, nor are they confined to sectarian groups) that in any group, as numbers grow, human organization is inevitable for proper and continued existence. As an illustration of this theory, here is a quotation from A. J. Thatcher's *History of the Apostolic Church*: "Officers were soon found to be necessary, and government of some kind had to be invented, for societies cannot exist without some kind of government."

This is a prevailing belief among many and even among those who profess to be of the New Testament Church of God, but it at once denies that God ever provided a government for His church and that man must provide one. Others advance the theory that the early preachers were Monarchal Bishops and decrees that there were humanly-appointed officers in the church. They go so far as to say the Apostles were a duly appointed committee, which is as far from the truth as day is from night.

It will not be necessary here to say much concerning the divine origin of the church, for that fact is clear in the minds of most. The holy institution that came fully into being at Pentecost as the result of Calvary and the coming of the Holy Ghost was definitely and fully divine. I shall therefore speak more fully of her divine leadership and government. It has

always been the will of God that He should be the Supreme Ruler of His people, both in the Old Testament and in the New.

For many years God led Israel as much as they would permit Him to do so. He gave them laws and precepts, fought their battles, and gave them leaders and judges who were definitely led by God Himself. The time came when they were not satisfied with divine guidance and desired to be like other nations.

"But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:6-7). Concerning the time when God should send Christ into the world and He should "build" His church, the Prophet Isaiah was inspired to say, "And the government shall be upon his shoulder" (Isaiah 9:6). Paul stated in Colossians 1:18, "He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."

Some may ask, "Did the early church not have officers with ecclesiastical powers, and did not the Apostles exercise such powers? Was not Paul a bishop over a number of congregations?" In the modern sense of ecclesiastical officers, it is not true. There is no hint of such authority in the New Testament, and Paul was in no sense a modern bishop over congregations. Yet, some may ask, "But does not God put human authority over His people?" In Ephesians 4:11-13 are these words: "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 man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

In Acts Paul spoke of overseers, but let us note what kind of authority this was. It was in no case the authority of office, for it grew out of the very nature of the case and not from any dogmatic arrangement. Never were any of them formally elected to any office. The only authority they had grew out of the divine gifts of the Spirit.

First Corinthians 12:4-13 and 18 sets forth very clearly the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Again, Ephesians 4:8-12 also shows the same thing. Paul wrote, "(For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles)" (Galatians 2:8). This is a very clear statement by Paul. The authority that was exercised by himself and Peter was the authority given directly from God Himself, and that is the only authority that God has ever desired to be exercised by anyone in His church. The authority of office may be exercised by anyone who may be elected to that office, whether he is a good man or a rascal. But the authority of the gifts of the Holy Spirit when lost from the heart also ceases to have any authority over the saints.

In the early church, it was the Holy Ghost who bestowed upon ones the gifts that gave them their places in the church. Spirit-filled people recognized these gifts and were submissive unto them. Those men were shepherds of the flock of God and bore rule only by virtue of their divine gifts and not because they had been appointed to office.

The divine gifts fitted them for various types of ministries. Some had apostolic gifts, such as Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-4). This very gift gave Paul a fatherly oversight of some congregations that he had been instrumental in raising up. However, that oversight was only for a short time and grew out of the divine gifts. Had he lost that, he would have lost his influence with the saints also.

How different it would have been had Paul been appointed as a bishop by some human authority. In such a case, if he had lost his power with God, his authority as a bishop would have remained until some formal action displaced him and appointed someone else. In Galatians 1:1 he told us plainly where he received his authority: "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.)" In verse 12 we read, "For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." There are also the pastoral gifts, such as are mentioned in Acts 20:28.

### **No Thought of Formal Organization**

The early church did not bother itself with the thought of formal organization. To them the church was a divinely organized body, moving forward by the inherent life of the Holy Spirit within and not from some human source. They had a very strong consciousness of the indwelling presence of the Holy Ghost who had placed the organs in the body as it pleased Him. Neither did they spend time trying to form some complicated church machinery, which would require more time in running it than anything else. Instead, they put the emphasis on a personal experience of Bible holiness. When people had their hearts full of God and were grounded in the whole truth, there was no need of human ecclesiasticism or human setups.

Each congregation of that early church was completely autonomous, or self-governing. Nowhere can we find that they were under the domination of any outside regulatory authority or body. As such, the local congregation was the largest unit mentioned in the New Testament. Their cooperation with others was purely voluntary and on the basis of their fellowship in Christ. They had no conception of a corporate body composed of local churches, such as men like to form in these days to make a great showing in the world. They knew no organizations larger than the local church. The only inter-congregational authority they knew was that of the Apostles whose only authority was that of the spiritual father in Christ.

### **Church History Supports This Contention**

It might be well to examine some of the writings of church historians to see what their impressions were of the working of the early church, which church is the only example to which we may turn for guidance.

"The earliest Gentile churches had no officers in the strict sense. Paul's letters to the Galatians, Corinthians, and Romans make no mention of local officers. Those to the Corinthians could hardly have avoided some allusion, had such officers existed. Their nearest approach is only an exhortation to be in subjection to such as Stephanas, and does not imply that he held office.

"The allusion in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 to those that 'are over you in the Lord', is, at best, very obscure. Paul's earlier Epistles show that all ministries in the church, of whatever sort, were looked upon as the direct gift of the Spirit, who inspires each severally for the service of the congregation. It is fair to conclude that these bearers of the gifts of the Spirit might be different at different times, and many in the church might equally become vehicles of the charismatic inspiration. Paul, however, specified three classes of leaders in particular as having the gift of the Spirit—apostles,

prophets, teachers. He himself regarded his Apostolate as charismatic" (*History of the Christian Church* by William Walker).

Again, O. J. Thatcher, in his book *The Apostolic Church and Governments*, after speaking of the individual Christian being possessed of the Holy Spirit, said, "From this point of view it is not difficult to say a few plain words about the government of the early church. It was a gift and not an office."

Again, quoting from *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, by Shaft-Herzog, we read, "No definite difference in authority was provided between them and other disciples. Nowhere did he sum up such activities as are thus indicated into the terms of a fixed and limited office, or prescribe the manner in which any person was to be appointed. The word *office* is generally applied more strictly to functions committed to a particular man, whether by church or state. The New Testament has no word for office in this sense. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 is the clearest proof that the charismata are the decisive factors."

Again, Shaft-Herzog says, "Association of the various local communities into one church was not expressed by any formal constitution, but by the free communion of fraternal love. At the close of the Apostolic period, the Epistle of John, while insisting strongly on the necessity of this loving union, laid down no rules governing external unity and said nothing of ecclesiastical forms." Professor P. C. Baker, in the *Pulpit Commentary*, said (speaking on Acts 13:1), "The local church appears as the ecclesiastical unit. In regard to the sending of Paul and Barnabas, it indicates that it is the point of departure, condescendingly recognized by heaven itself, by the church and by the Spirit. Wherever the church, it is the living center. No metropolitan center of officialism, ever existed then. It purports to be and is ordained to be a living fountain head."

Acts 13:4 states, "They, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost ..." Shaft-Herzog states: "Have we not here for all time the true principle of appointment to sacred office?" These quotations are given to show what other men have found as they studied the workings and government of the early church, and it is to this church we must turn for our example if we are not to go astray.

### **The Glory of the Early Church**

With all the power and glory of the early church, it looked as if nothing could stop its progress. Yet, Paul, with his keen spiritual perception, told the Thessalonians that there would be a falling away and that "the mystery of iniquity doth already work" (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

There are always those who are ambitious to hold the reins in their own hands and John told of one: "Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. . . . neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church" (3 John 9-10). When John wrote the Book of Revelation, toward the close of the first century, apostasy had crept into the congregations until he said the church at Ephesus had "left thy first love." Thyatira was plagued with immorality. Sardis had a name to live and was dead. Laodicea had become "lukewarm."

### **Paul's Warning**

Paul had warned of such an apostasy. Second Thessalonians 2:1-7, which came early in the history of the church, shows this "falling away" consisted in the loss of definite doctrines of truth. Instead of the simple preaching of the great truths that changed men's lives and made them holy and Christ-like, men began to substitute forms of religion in the place of real experiences. Instead of that keen, sure sense of the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost guiding and governing the people of God, human church machinery was substituted, exalting men to office and bringing the church and ministry into subjection to the dictates and rule of the machine. This was the full development of the "mystery of iniquity" Paul spoke of. No longer were the gifts of the Spirit recognized as sufficient to govern God's people. Authority now was all positional and human.

No longer was there that primitive equality. Jesus taught them that some "love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matthew 23:6-8). But now men were exalted to position with various degrees of authority and titles.

The various reformations and revivals of religion since the sixteenth century have restored much truth, yet every such movement has either failed to entirely restore the Word and Spirit of God to their rightful place, or have not for long granted that rightful place to them as full governors of the people of God. Men seem to think that after such a group gets to be of some size, there must be human machinery set up to put the "new wine into old bottles" (Matthew 9:17).

Jesus was answering the disciples of John who had just asked Him, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?" After saying to them that after He, the Bridegroom, was gone away they would fast, He then said, "No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment . . . Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:16-17). He was saying that the Gospel could not be made to fit into the old forms of Judaism. How many even now feel the Gospel cannot prosper unless in some way they can get it into the old ecclesiastical bottles of human rule?

### **A People Who Will Be Free**

The time has come when God is going to have a people who will be free from all the entanglements of human machinery and every sectarian bondage—a people who will be humble enough that the Word and Spirit will be able to once again take their rightful place of full authority in the church and where Christ again will be restored to preeminence in all things (Colossians 1:18).

There can be no formal binding together of a group of congregations without creating a denominational conscience and emphasis. There is one basis of unity and that is a definite experience in Christ and full conformity to His revealed Word. That is the only center to which Christians can be brought and the only center to which we, as Christian ministers, have a right to try to bring God's people.

Herein lies the danger of any secular or semi-secular projects being under-taken in the name of the church. Every such project must have support. Thus, immediately group loyalty is sought to back it and to support it. When such loyalty is given, it at once becomes denominational, or sectarian. The reason is in the fact that no matter what the merits of the projects themselves are, there will always be just as good people as we, who will not see nor feel like giving their support nor cooperation. Then the tendency is to bring bad feelings and in the end a lack of recognition.

No amount of ministerial voting can obligate the conscience, or compel support of a human program. The ministry may demand unity in Christ and His Word, but outside of that there is no right nor ground for demanding man's full loyalty. If such loyalty were to be had, it could not possibly be accepted by all God's people and thus it becomes a sect. When emphasis is shifted to constitutions, boards, committees, and human setups of any kind, the true center of unity has been lost and consequently cannot be the church of the New Testament. Isaiah 33:20-22 states: "Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king, he will save us."

Note: The subject here is "Zion," the church. A prophecy of a time when she will no more be removed or torn down is here referred to. Verse 21 states, "There the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams." It is the Lord Himself who, figuratively of course, becomes the great river and streams for the church.

On this river "shall go no galley with oars." As we know, oars are man's means of propelling his "galley." The Lord was not to become a lake, but a "river." Rivers have currents. On a river there is a need for oars. They are for the purpose of going counter to the current. However, the current in this river is the Holy Spirit, and the time was to come, and is here now, when he who launches on this stream, which is the Lord, will not have any humanly propelled "galley," for God intends to have a people who will go with the current of His divine leadership and not be dependent on humanly- formed boards, committees, etc.

"Neither shall gallant ship pass thereby." Here are the great "Centralized Setups of Human Church Machinery." They shall not be there. In verse 22 we find the reason for not needing these self-propelled conveyances. The verse begins with the word *for*, which connects this thought definitely with the preceding verse. "For the LORD is our judge." Here is the judicial branch of government. "The LORD is our law-giver." Here is the legislative branch. "The LORD is our king." Here is the executive branch.

Here are all three branches of government, and all three are definitely stated to be in God's hands, so what reason is there for any man-propelled boats on this stream? Church, there is nothing left for us, but to keep humble and low at His feet and be willing to go with the current of this great stream, which is Holy Ghost leadership. "But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

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