

LESSON 198

ORGANIZED CHURCH GROWTH

Related Scripture: Colossians 2:6-19

KEY VERSE: "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus; throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."—Ephesians 3:21.

**Lesson Scripture: Acts 6:1-7;
Ephesians 4:7-16**

Introduction:

There are different kinds of organization and different kinds of growth, some normal and healthy, others abnormal and unhealthy. So in the history of Christianity there has been a great deal of abnormal and diseased growth resulting in religious deformities which have little resemblance to the Christianity of the New Testament. We need always to keep going back to our divinely provided guidebook, the Bible, to prune off religious excrescences and maintain wholesome spiritual growth.

Most of professing Christianity today and through most of its history has been grossly overorganized. It is always easier to multiply the complexities of organization, to set up another office, appoint another committee, or establish another hierarchy, than it is to draw near to God. The one and only organization on earth today (that is, the only kind of organization) that has New Testament authority is the New Testament church, and the necessary formalities of its organization are much simpler than most people imagine.

Yet some organization is necessary, and those Christian eccentrics who belittle Christ's organized churches need to reread their New Testaments.

Our lesson this week includes Acts 6:1-7, giving the account of the ordination of the first deacons to deal with a problem in the church at Jerusalem; and Ephesians 4:7-16, addressed to the church at Ephesus but teaching generally of Christ's provision for the growth of His church as an institution. In practical application, of course, this refers to each of His churches any time and everywhere. We may outline the lesson as follows:

1. Grumbling Grecians, Acts 6:1
2. Gracious Guidance, Acts 6:2-4
3. Growing Group, Acts 6:5-7
4. Glorious Giver, Eph. 4:7-10
5. Glorious Gifts, Eph. 4:11
6. Glorious Goals, Eph. 4:12-14
7. Glorious Growth, Eph. 4:15, 16

Notes on the Printed Text:

Grumbling Grecians, Acts 6:1.

"Grecians" here were Hellenized Jews; that is, they were Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture, perhaps partly as a result of intermarriage and partly from other influences. Naturally there was some prejudice between them and the "Hebrews," the Jews who clung to their own language and traditions. Their common faith in Christ did not entirely destroy the fleshly prejudices between these two classes of believers, though they were members of the same church.

Note that by this time the church at Jerusalem had many thousands of members, perhaps from 20 to 30 thousand. To the relatively small number of 120 (Acts 1:15) there were added 3,000 on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and later we read of 5,000 men in Acts 4:4, where the Greek word means men as distinguished from women. Besides these specific numbers, we read of "multitudes" being added. (Acts 5:14.)

Remember also that in this large church the apostles had been burdened with the administration of the common treasury for the support of the entire membership. (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37.) Sinners saved by grace are still sinners. It is not surprising that the apostles found it impossible to satisfy all the members, however sincerely they may have tried.

Gracious Guidance, Acts 6:2-4.

No doubt led by the Holy Spirit, the apostles asked to be relieved of details of business administration. The word for "reason" in verse 2 means "pleasing" or "acceptable." It was not pleasing or acceptable to themselves, to the church, or to God that the apostles called to feed men's souls with the bread of life should turn from this high and holy calling to wait on tables.

However, the apostles, as all Baptist pastors should, served as guides or leaders, not as church bosses. Whatever authority our Lord has given to His church (and it is administrative authority only), He has given to all its members; not just to the pastor, and certainly not to the deacons, who are no more than members and servants of the whole church.

Growing Group, Acts 6:5-7.

When pastors follow the Lord and churches follow their leading with the Lord, there will certainly be spiritual growth, and usually numerical growth. The right kind of church members will generally be pleased when their ministers give themselves "continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word"; the wrong kind need not pleasing, but teaching.

From the record here of the ordination of the first deacons, we learn that deacons, like pastors, elders, or bishops, are to be chosen or elected by "the whole multitude" of the church membership; but their ordination is the work of a presbytery or council of elders, with prayer and the laying on of hands.

Just as too many men have been ordained to the ministry who never gave any evidence of a divine calling, so too many churches have ordained too many deacons merely for the sake of having deacons, thus giving empty titles to men who refuse or neglect to serve in what would be their scriptural duties if they were qualified to serve. Qualified elders and qualified deacons (see v. 3 here and I Tim. 3:1-13) can be great instruments of blessing in churches that need them.

When the church at Jerusalem chose officers to perform useful services rather than to wear useless honors, "the word of God increased" in the hearts of His people and in the winning of more souls, and so "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

Glorious Giver, Ephesians 4:7-10.

In or out of a church, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (Jas. 1:17.) But within His church, Christ dispenses the spiritual gifts of God through the operation of the Holy Spirit. (I Cor. 12:4-11.) Our present text emphasizes the headship of Christ in His church. The measure of the grace given us is dependent on divine dispensation, not on human pretensions.

"Captivity" in verse 8, I believe, refers to the multitude of captives in sheol or hades, the Old Testament saints for whom the way to heaven was not opened until Christ opened it. Paradise then was transferred from hades to heaven, so that now when a child of God dies he goes immediately to be with the Lord. (II Cor. 5:6-8; Philip. 1:23.) The so-called apostles' creed, then, is in accord with the scriptures in saying that Christ descended into hades and ascended into heaven. In fact, this scripture says that He "ascended up far above all heavens," whatever this means.

Glorious Gifts, Ephesians 4:11.

Men with spiritual gifts from Christ are Christ's gifts to His churches. In the technical sense, there were only twelve apostles and a limited number of prophets, though it is true that the terms are sometimes used more loosely. Evangelists, pastors, and teachers, however, have a perpetual ministry, with replacements for each generation.

Glorious Goals, Ephesians 4:12-14.

Three objectives or goals in view are stated in verse 12. Saints individually need "perfecting"; the work of the ministry needs to be done by men qualified to do it; the church as a body of Christ needs to be edified or built up.

All these goals will not be attained "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 other words, till we all get to heaven.

Yet we need to attain some spiritual growth here and now (v. 14). God's people must not always be babes. We need to grow up and get enough spiritual sense to avoid being deceived by religious quacks and charlatans.

Glorious Growth, Ephesians 4:15, 16.

Wholesome spiritual growth does not produce either muddleheaded "liberals" or bigoted dogmatists, modern equivalents of the ancient Sadducees and Pharisees. We need to learn and know the truth, but we are to speak it in love.

Paraphrasing verse 16, the growth or increase of a church comes from its Head, and is accomplished by the whole body when it is "fitly joined together and compacted through the supply of every joint." This accomplishment is according to the "effectual working" or energy "in the measure of every part." In other words, under these conditions, the church builds itself up in love.

Would that all true churches might so build themselves up by drawing life and power from their Head!

Key Verse:

"Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."—Ephesians 3:21.

Translating more literally, we read: "Unto him (God) the glory in the church in Christ Jesus, unto all the generations of the age of the ages. Amen."

May we add our Amen to Paul's, and mean it!