

THE NEW TESTAMENT BASIS FOR THE NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH: THE HISTORICAL ARGUMENT

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The church is saved people serving in divine pattern. The body of Christ possesses essential oneness by virtue of individual unity with Christ and collective unity through Christ. This invisible oneness is manifest by a dynamic structure-function called the church. Functional unity in Christ combines with organizational unity under Christ to form this non-denominational entity that has a fivefold oneness of attitude, doctrine, fellowship, name, and organization.

As a first major concern the historical argument for non-denominationalism focuses particularly on the last of these elements: the organizational pattern of the church established under direct apostolic administration. Although the first four elements have probably never been fully present in the visible church, sufficient evidence is available to show that formal oneness did exist in the beginning.

In order to treat properly the subject of apostolic church structure, a distinction must be made between influence and authority and the compatibility of the two must be recognized. Those positions that operate only through personal influence may be called “functions.” Those that operate through legal authority may be called “offices.” Since the church is a voluntary society, it operates as much as possible through personal influence and then through legal right when necessary. Organization is essentially the pattern of authority flow.

A second useful distinction comes in marking the difference between local and general. The perceived basic unit of structure in the first century placed at the city level with household subunits comprising the church in larger cities. Elements of organization can then be described in terms of local vs. general and authoritative vs. purely functional.

With these two sets of variables in hand, data related to church pattern may be gathered and systematized. It is found that there were three authoritative offices and three formal functions. Lord, apostle, and elder were offices; evangelist, prophet, and deacon were functions. Lord, apostle, evangelist, and prophet were general while elder and deacon were local, elder being equated with bishop and pastor. Since organization means the pattern of authority flow, the basic structure of the first-century church was not elaborate. Christ exercised his lordship through the twelve apostles at the general level; elders held office at the local level. Evangelists and prophets functioned beyond the local church; deacons served within it, evangelists often working with apostles as perhaps extensions of the apostolic office.

The second major concern is to set forth facts and arguments showing the continuing normativeness of first-century basic structure. Its divine origin must be emphasized in connection with the principles of kingdom administration, which operates essentially from the top down. Christ established the church indirectly through the apostles, whom he had chosen for that purpose before the church was founded and begun to be built. They in turn became the channel through whom the ascended King appointed the other, subordinate offices and functions. Accordingly, Christ’s lordship is to be considered the key to normativeness in that the level of initiation is the level of amendment. The subjects do not alter the manner and form of kingdom administration.

The Lord intended to keep the essential pattern of the church. Since one universal form is exclusive of all other parallel possibilities, the basic structure of the apostolic church is normative until such time as Christ may reformulate the administration of the reign of God. In the absence of Christ and the apostles, the church becomes a series of congregations operating directly and only under the New Testament.

The conclusion for contemporary Christendom is that the church express visibly and universally the spirit of oneness that holds together the temple of God, that the churches dissolve super-congregational authority, and that the churches become the church. Inasmuch as organizational disunity indicates and reinforces more basic items of concern, the church is exhorted today to press on to perfection in the attitude of love, the orthodoxy of doctrine, and the fullness of fellowship.

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