

Final Report

The last few days of my time in Malawi were spent in Nchota-Kota, which is also near the shores of Lake Malawi. About 50 elders, preachers and leaders from a large number of congregations in that district had assembled to learn as much as possible in the time we would spend together. These were intensive classes on the subjects of church organization, work of elders, worship, church history and other timely subjects. Several of these classes stretched out to over two hours as they had many questions. I felt like it was the most productive portion of the trip. I hope that what they learned from these classes will help them become great blessing to the congregations they work with. We were doing exactly what Paul had told Timothy: *"And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."* 2Tim. 2:2-3

How Jesus controls His church

Another topic that is frequently requested is about how Jesus organized His church. Generally when they ask about this, it centers on two lines of inquiry. First, when a need arises that is greater than a single congregation can perform, they want to know how churches can work together. Also, when false teaching or immorality arises in a church, and no one within that church has the wisdom to properly handle it, has Jesus given an office of authority to monitor all the churches and then step in and force them to correct any problem that arises?

Since Israel had a king watching over the entire congregation and resolving these problems, did the apostles reveal a similar office for the churches? While many other churches have created such an office, there is no Scripture in the New Covenant to justify it.

Even Israel's asking for a king was an act of rebellion against their true king. Israel was clearly seeking a solution to the same problems described above. *"We will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."* (1Sam. 8:19-20). But they had to set God aside in order to get this organization. *"They have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt."* (1Sam. 8:6-9). *"You have today rejected your God, who Himself saved you from all your adversities and your tribulations; and you have said to Him, 'No, set a king over us!'"* (1Sam. 10:19) *"He will send thunder and rain, that you may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking a king for yourselves"* (1Sam. 12:17).

All one needs to do is look at the subsequent history of Israel and Judah to see the folly of putting a man between God and His people. Much more harm was done through their wicked kings than all the good that was done by righteous ones. Saul was not a good leader, and while David was, Solomon's apostasy led to ten tribes being given to Jeroboam who led them into an apostasy they never recovered from. *"Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them commit a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight,"* (2Kings 17:21-23)

God's true feelings toward this form of government is set forth in the book of Hosea just before Israel was taken to Assyria. *"Where now is your king That he may save you in all your cities, And your judges of whom you requested, "Give me a king and princes"? 11 I gave you a king in My anger And took him away in My wrath.* (Hos. 13:10-11).

Yet many today seek this same power over the churches that Israel had in their king. The Catholics have a pope, the Greek Orthodox Church has a patriarch, and many denominations have some means of organizing all their churches either to discipline them or coordinate them for some good work. They are all required to follow the teachings of these leaders and any personal study of the Scriptures that leads them to a different conclusion is not tolerated.

Peter couldn't have been more clear in His first sermon, *"He would raise up the Christ to sit on*

his (David's) throne." (Acts 2:30-31). As God had promised, *"I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion."* (Ps. 2:6). Jesus is the *"one Lord"* (Eph. 4:4-6). In every figure, parable and analogy, this truth is clearly set forth. *"Jesus is the head over all things to the church which is his body* (Eph 1:22-23)." He is *"the vine and we are the branches"* (Jn. 15:1-8), He is *"the chief shepherd"* over all the *shepherds* in all His churches (1Pet 5:1-4).

Since God has already placed His only begotten Son on the throne of David as He had promised, is there any room for another? Can we have the equivalent of Israel's king between the churches and Jesus without the same anger from God and the same terrible consequences to His people. This question becomes easy to answer once we see how the Scriptures reveal the church was guided and protected in the days of the apostles.

As Paul preached and established churches on his first evangelistic journey, he *"appointed elders in every church"* (Acts 14:22). Paul later *"called for the elders of the church"* at Ephesus and *"when they had come he said to them"* that they were to *"take heed to themselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit made you overseers (bishops in the KJV/ASV)."* These **elders** who were the **bishops/overseers** were also told to *"shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."* (Acts 20:17-29). It is obvious that these three words, elder, bishop/overseer and shepherd are all descriptions of a single office. These are not three separate offices where the bishop is over many churches, the elders over individual churches and the preacher doing the work of a shepherd (pastor). The truth is clear! Paul called only the elders and only the elders came. He told these elders they were the bishops/overseers and that they were the ones to shepherd the flock.

Peter said exactly the same thing while writing his letter to at least 10-20 different churches (1Pet 1:1-2). To all those churches, Peter said, *"The elders who are among you I exhort," "shepherd the flock of God which is among you," "serving as overseers (bishops ASV; KJV)"* (1Pet. 5:1-4). Hence Peter also affirmed that the same men who were *elders* were to serve as *bishops/overseers* and that they were also the *shepherds* of the church. He concluded with the important truth that *"when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away"* (1Pet. 5:4).

Hence the only office of leadership in the church after the death of the last of the apostles and prophets were the elders who are also shepherds, serving as bishops/overseers, and shepherding the church. Nowhere in Scripture is there any man above the elders.

Well, what about making some of these elders into people who police the entire church or function as the king did in Israel? That can't happen because both Paul and Peter limited the authority and work of these men to a single church. Peter said the extent of their work and authority is *"the flock of God among you."* The same church that appointed them as elders is the only church where they have the authority as elders. This *"flock of God among you"* is also the *"charge allotted/entrusted to you."* Remember Paul *"appointed elders in every church."* Each church that appointed elders is the only church where those men are elders. They are elders over the flock among them and this is the only charge allotted to them. Paul also told the elders at Ephesus that the church at Ephesus was *"the flock among whom the Holy Spirit made you bishops/overseers."* Hence the office of elder/bishop/shepherd is limited to the single flock/church that they had been appointed to serve within. They are therefore elders, bishops and shepherds when they are among the flock that appointed them as elders, but if they visit another church they are not elders in that church, just brethren and they have no authority as elders.

This compels those who are bound by Scripture to limit the reach of those in authority to the flock in which they serve and leaves no room for them to seek authority over any more than the church.

When problems arise in another congregation, an elder could go as a wise man and give suggestions, but he could not come as an elder and use that authority in another church. Paul

gave the evangelists the duty of setting in order the things that are wanting. But evangelists, like the prophets of old are only messengers bringing God's word. There is no authority to force a church to do what is right other than the Scriptures.

While man often sees this as a weakness, we only have to look at the nation of Israel to see that while it appears to be a weakness, it is actually a strength. When every church has its own elders and does its own work, it is insulated from the errors of other churches. What Jeroboam did to Israel can never happen today because of this safeguard.