

IT IS SETTLED!

"Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13b)

By Howell Lasseter

One of the earliest departures from God's plan for the church was in the organization of congregations. Let's look at a brief overview of God's plan: 1-there were no councils, conferences, synods, etc., composed of representatives from many congregations. Each church stood alone; 2-God planned for each church to have elders. *"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee"* (Titus 1:5). Biblical passages show the terms "elders," "bishops," "overseers," "pastors," "presbyters" to be synonymous. God clearly spells out the qualifications of this group in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. "During a great portion of this century (the second), all churches continued to be, as at first, independent of each other, connected by no confederations" (Ecclesiastical History, Vol. I, pages 116,117). When you study the qualifications of elders, you will see each had to be a married man, with believing children. Peter tells us he was an elder (1 Peter 5:1), and the New Testament makes clear he was married (Matthew 8:14; Mark 1:30; Luke 4:38; 1 Corinthians 9:5). Although the name or names of his children are not recorded for us, we know he had children; otherwise, he would not have qualified to be an elder. The apostle Paul is never referred to as "elder," in the sense of one of the local congregation's group of appointed elders. And, we know Paul was not a married man.

The seemingly harmless practice of appointing one elder as the presiding officer for the elders' meetings, as they discussed the work of the local congregation, developed over time into this "chief elder" being elevated in honor above his fellow elders.. The next, again seemingly harmless, step away from God's plan was the meeting together of the "chief elders" from several congregations. The one coming from the church in the largest, or most prestigious, city, held a higher place than did the others. Out of this departure grew conventions of delegates, all "chief elders," from many churches; from these conventions came rules for all churches represented at the meeting. The Greeks called these meetings "synods," and the Latin name was "councils." The rules were called "canons." The first "creed," or body of man-made rules, appears in 325 A.D. The Nicene Creed formulated and imposed the rules agreed to by the "chief elders," by now called "bishops." Closely connected with the departure of elevating one elder above another came the concept of "clergy-laity," with the elevated elder/bishop taking on a higher "spiritual" position, and "ordinary" members relegated to an inferior place.

Most of today's column has been devoted to early history of some departures from God's plan for the church. Watch for other columns like this, for here is the lesson which must be learned in our time: There is no "small" change that can be practiced or tolerated, when it comes to God's Word. Do you know why your particular religious group practices and teaches some of the things it does? Do some research into the history of departures and changes. Perhaps you'll find where they began. Perhaps, as each of us determines to do only what God says, Jesus' prayer that we all be one, (John 17:20,21) will be answered!