

The Autonomy Of The Local Church

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Introduction:

- A. It is becoming more and more apparent that people as a general rule are getting fed up with the concept of denominationalism and the ideas that go along with it:
 1. More and more “denominational” churches are removing their traditional signs with their traditional names and replacing them with non-denominational titles
 - a. This is often referred to as being “the community church movement”
 - b. Names like “The church at Montgomery,” “_____ community church,” or simply “Christians meet here” are standing where familiar denom. names once stood
 - c. This is even becoming more and more prevalent in congregations who would label themselves a “church of Christ”
 2. People are seemingly beginning to see the problems that the large system of interrelated churches that make up a denomination can bring:
 - a. It seems that some are starting to understand that this isn’t what the Lord intended
 - b. Because of this people are looking for something else and many churches are changing to meet their desires
- B. The Bible teaches that churches are to be autonomous – completely independent of one another
 1. This fact is something that distinguishes this congregation from many others, even those who might wear a similar name
 2. It was this issue that was one of the core issues that caused the great debates and divisions around the years of the 50’s and 60’s
 3. Like with ever other doctrinal issue we need to examine what we believe and practice:
 - a. Every generation and every individual must decide for themselves what they believe on such matters! We cannot ride through on our parents faith
 - b. We must make sure that what we practice here at this congregation is according to the pattern laid out in God’s word – if not, we must change!
 - c. We must make certain that we are acting by the authority of Christ (**Col. 3:17**)

I. Before We Look At Church Autonomy We Need To Make Sure We Are On The Same Page About What The Church Is:

- A. **Understand that the New Testament use the word “church” in two distinct ways:**
 1. We read about “local churches” and what some have termed “the universal church”
 2. Understanding the distinction and limitations of these two groups is vital to understanding and applying what the Bible says about church autonomy
- B. **First let’s look at what the “universal church” is: (**Matthew 16:18-19**)**
 1. Someone once defined the universal church as, “All the saved, of all nations, of all time”
 - a. The universal church is comprised of Moses, Elijah, Nehemiah, Peter, John, Timothy, and all of the other faithful we read about in the pages of the Bible
 - b. It is comprised of Christians who have since walked this earth and passed on – People from America, Europe, China, Africa, and other countries
 - c. It is comprised of anyone alive today who is faithfully serving the Lord no matter where they may be located at
 2. It is to this body of that people are added when they become Christians:
 - a. The Jews on Pentecost (**Acts 2:47**)
 - b. There is no man or group of people who have anything to do with your acceptance to this group – you become a member when the Lord adds you!
 - c. If you are a Christian, regardless of whether or not you are part of any local work, you are a member of this body of people!

3. Because of the nature of this group, the body of Christ, it is impossible to undertake anything that would activate the “universal church”
 - a. Some have attempted to do things outside of the realm of a local church and tried to justify it by saying it was the “universal church” doing it
 - b. You cannot involve the universal church in a work nor organize it in some structure because it involves people who saved that are now before the throne of God!
 - c. The Hebrew writer drew a beautiful picture of this body (**Heb. 12:22-23, 28**)

C. The New Testament also talks about churches on the local level:

1. The apostles, doing the will of the Lord, went from city to city establishing local congregations:
 - a. Paul’s First Journey: Asia Minor established churches! (**Acts 14:20-23**)
 - b. When Paul wrote he often wrote to local congregations: (**Eph. 1:1; Phil 1:1; etc**)
2. One becomes a member of a local church not by using their baptistry or that it’s the nearest location to the town creek but becomes a member by association:
 - a. Saul trying to join the Jerusalem congregation (**Acts 9:26-28**)
 - b. Someone does not automatically become a member at Perry Hill simply by being baptized here! They do so by agreeing to work with us in serving the Lord!
3. These local churches were autonomous in regards to one another:
 - a. **Defined:** “Independence; The quality or state of being self-governing” (*Websters*)
 - b. This does not mean that a congregation has a right to decide for itself what is true and what it will teach and practice → The Bible establishes these things!
 - c. There is NO AUTHORITY for local congregations to work together in such a way that one comes under the rule of another or one does the work for another

II. The Local Church Is Autonomous In Its Leadership:

A. We should appreciate the simplicity with which the Lord set up local congregations:

1. In our age of “mega-businesses” and complicated corporate systems, there are some who would think the same would be good in the church:
 - a. We see “headquarters” for certain groups & complicated denominational structures
 - b. Even in churches that are independent there are complicated offices in the congregation that you never read of in the Bible!
2. The “organization” the Lord desires for local churches is very simple! (**Eph 4:11-12**)

B. Elders do not have any authority to exercise leadership over any church aside from the one with which they are affiliated:

1. God’s plan is for every church to have its own elders – It’s God’s Wisdom! (**Acts 14:23**)
2. Elders are limited in their oversight: (**I Peter 5:2-3**)
 - a. They are told to “shepherd the flock which is among you”
 - b. Elders are limited to one flock! (**Acts. 20:17, 28**)
3. There is no authority for elders acting outside of their local congregations in respect to leadership, nor does it make sense!
 - a. Elders from one church cannot make decisions about evangelism, benevolence, or church discipline in a congregation that they are not actively a part of
 - b. Just as shepherds cannot lead a flock they are not with, elders cannot lead a congregation where they are not themselves members!
4. **Chart → Bible concept of church leadership**

C Having Seen What The Pattern Is For Local Churches In The NT, Notice Some Perversions:

1. In the second century – a hundred years or so after Christ – Churches slowly began to lose the same look that they had when the apostles walked this earth: **CHART**
 - a. Elders for a group of churches began meeting together; eventually a few of these elders began to take preeminence over the other elders
 - b. Soon they became bishops, overseeing the groups of churches underneath them

- c. Eventually among these “bishops” – archbishops arose and then came the pope
2. In the last two hundred years we have seen another perversion from the pattern: **CHART**
 - a. There have been places in an area (small or large) where there is a large congregation with elders & smaller congregations without elders (or as many)
 - b. Occasionally what we have seen is those smaller congregations submitting to the oversight of the larger congregation’s elders
 - c. The smaller congregation would send their collection to the larger congregation who would take care of their financial needs, make decisions for them, and even decide who would preach and what the classes would study
3. **Illustration: Dad at Hamilton** → Woman is withdrawn from and she goes off to another congregation... that congregation calls and says that the church where dad is at needs to submit the problem to the nearest congregation that has elders.

III. The Local Church Is Autonomous In Its Work:

A. Churches that want to follow the N.T. will be autonomous in its work of benevolence:

1. The Christians written about in the First Century were very concerned with benevolence:
 - a. It seems that whenever and wherever there was a need they gladly helped!
 - b. Notice the extent to which they went: **(Acts 5:34-35)**
2. As Christians were scattered and the gospel was taken to various places there began to be many congregations in many different areas:
 - a. Need for benevolence did not lessen as this took place – May have gotten worse
 - b. There were famines, persecution, and people leaving jobs & family to follow Christ
 - c. There were even instances where even whole congregations were in great need!
3. Notice how churches under the direction of the apostles took care of such needs:
 - a. Paul instructed the Corinthian brethren to take up a collection: **(1 Cor. 16:1-3)**
 - 1) They were to have their own collection for doing their own work!
 - 2) This collection was supposed to go STRAIGHT to Jerusalem!
 - b. Churches in Macedonia and Achaia sent directly to Jerusalem **(Rom. 15:25)**
 - 1) There is not mention of any organization or church they went through
 - 2) In Acts 21 Paul and others from these churches deliver this assistance to the elders of the Jerusalem church!
4. **CHART → PATTERN OF NT BENEVOLENCE**

B. If our aim is to follow the scriptures we will also be autonomous in evangelism:

1. There are a couple of references Paul makes that show how evangelism was supported:
 - a. He told the Corinthians how he was supported to preach to them **(2 Cor. 11:8-9)**
 - 1) Paul makes it clear that the Corinthian church played no role in his support
 - 2) There were other churches who were sending Paul support, not through the Corinthian elders or brethren, but DIRECTLY to Paul
 - b. Philippi was a very generous church who supported Paul **(Phil. 4:15-18)**
 - 1) There is no “middle-man” organization or church – its sent directly to Paul
 - 2) Epaphroditus, one of their own, personally delivered it to Paul
2. **CHART → PATTERN OF NT EVANGELISM**

C. Now, having noticed the pattern for work as a local church let’s see some perversions:

1. The use of church sponsored institutions is one of the ways people go against the NT pattern → The major area of debate and controversy in the 50’s and 60’s: **(CHARTS)**
 - a. Several different churches would take and send finances to an institutional board they in turn would see that a particular work was carried out
 - b. This takes the form of orphan homes, widow services, hospitals, & even colleges
 - c. The same principle can be applied to churches sending finances to another congregation & they (usually with elders) carries out the benevolent work
2. The same basic thing has taken place in realm of evangelism: **(CHARTS)**

- a. There are some churches who contribute a certain amount of money every so often to a missions board who divvies it out to various evangelists
- b. Like with benevolence, this can also be done by a church contributing funds to another congregation (with elders) who takes care of the work being done
- c. There are many churches around here who would deny that they do this very thing; however, when you look closely they do (**Illustration: TV Program**)

“If a particular work a church wants to undertake is not possible on its own, then that congregation has no business trying to carry it out!” – Bill Hall (Paraphrase)

IV. Benefits To Autonomy In Regards To A Local Church:

A. Churches maintaining their autonomy in regards to leadership helps promote the spiritual well-being of its own members:

1. What a congregation is not led by men who are part of that work?
 - a. They do not know the people, the sheep, they are working with; therefore, they cannot really be there for them when they need them
 - b. They are not in the midst of the sheep to feed and lead them by example
2. This is why it is so vital that churches have their own elders (**I Pet. 5:2-3**)

B. Another wonderful benefit to following church autonomy is that if one church falls into error, sin, or a lack of care then other churches do not have to be affected:

1. What if a group of churches are tied together by an institution or by a board of people that oversee what goes on in each congregation?
 - a. As goes the institution or board, so goes the church!
 - b. God’s plan for the independence of local churches prevents this from happening!
2. We can clearly see this in the seven churches of Asia mentioned on **Revelation 2-3**:
 - a. Keep in mind that all of these churches are in the same general area – Asia Minor
 - b. The churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia seem to be going great!
 - c. Nothing is said about the size of the congregations, but by description it seems that Sardis and Laodicea would be the biggest of the churches → What if they were a sponsoring church, where would Smyrna and Philadelphia be?
 - d. Each church is addressed differently and told to repent for different reasons!
3. **ILLUSTRATION: Church Autonomy Is Like A Six Pane Window**

V. While Each Church Is Autonomous, No Christian Or Congregation Is An Island:

A. It is possible that in an attempt to draw a clear distinction or oppose those who do not follow the NT picture of church autonomy that we take things to an extreme:

1. I have heard some people and preachers make the comment, “I do not care what goes on over at others congregations – we are our own congregation.”
2. While every congregation that wants to be what we read of in the Bible will insist on being independent, we must remember that no church is an island nor is any Christian!

B. Need to be aware of other congregations because of doctrinal error that could be taught:

1. We do not need to be ignorant of false doctrine that is being spread and people that are spreading it in other congregations:
 - a. Doctrinal error is rarely limited to one congregation... it often spreads
 - b. People move from church to church, bulletins spread, and books are read!
2. Paul told Timothy about some and named them by name! (**I Tim 1:19-20**)
3. While we must always have the right motives... there is a time and place for naming names and what is being taught!

C. As I read my Bible I am impressed by the fact that while congregations were autonomous, they were greatly intertwined with one another:

1. They were not knit together by organization or by leadership but by their love for the Lord!

2. Christians in one place know about and greatly loved Christians in other places – this is especially clear in the writings of Paul:
 - a. At the end of many of his letters he sent greetings from certain Christians to the Christians who would be receiving the letter: **(I Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:21)**
 - b. Christians seem to have visited from place to place for various reasons and they knew each other!
3. People went from city to city bringing funds for benevolence to churches or preaching the word and quickly they had family everywhere!
4. They understand that the Lord had provided them with family a hundred fold!

D. Finally, we must be aware of other congregations because of the need for benevolence

1. We have already talked about the fact that congregations did share with other congregations in times of need:
 - a. This is not just something “nice” but it was a responsibility they had!
 - b. In order to carry out these acts of benevolence churches had to know other churches and what was going on there!
2. Take note and copy the attitude and actions of the Macedonians **(2 Cor. 8:1-5)**

Conclusion:

A. Review of points:

1. There are two levels of the way the NT uses the word church:
 - a. Universal church cannot be activated in any specific work now, but will in eternity
 - b. The local church is restricted in its action and leadership by its autonomy
2. No authorization in scripture for a group of elders to rule over a church they are not part of
3. There is no authorization in scripture for churches to do works of benevolence together through an institutional board or a larger church with elders
4. There is no authorization for churches to carry out evangelism by going through a missionary society or a larger church – went straight to preachers!
5. Maintaining church autonomy benefits by the growth of Christians, keeping other churches from dying when another does, and keeping out false doctrine
6. We need to make sure that in maintaining church autonomy that we do not go overboard
 → No church or Christian is an island!

B. What’s the big deal about church autonomy – Let’s let Jesus answer that **(Matt. 7:21-23)**