

# **The Autonomy Of The Local Church**

To have the proper background to enable us to understand the "autonomy of the local church," we must have an understanding of the New Testament uses of the word "church." By an investigation of the word of the Lord it will become evident that the word "church" is used in two senses by divine writers. First, it is used in what may be called the "universal" sense. This simply means that the word "church" is used to include all of the saved in all of the world. When Jesus said, in Matthew 16:18, "Upon this rock I will build my church," he certainly did not refer to any particular local congregation, for if he did, then all other congregations would be without divine origin. The word was used in the institutional, or universal, sense. The same is true of the statement made by Paul in Ephesians 5:25, as well as in many other New Testament references. However, in the second place, the word is used in a "local" sense. By this use of the word reference is made to all the saved in some particular locality, as "the church of God" at Corinth (I Cor. 1:1, 2), or "the church of the Thessalonians" (I Thess. 1:1). The "local" sense of the word is also found in such expressions as "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2), "the churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22), and "the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4). The first, or "universal," sense of the word refers to the people of God in the aggregate, but the second, or "local," sense of the word has to do with "local congregations." With this proper meaning of the word in mind, as used by New Testament writers, let us consider the "autonomy of the local church."

## **I. God's Government For His Church Is Congregational**

Through many years of the past gospel preachers have contended that any organization to do the work of the church that is larger than a local congregation is too large to be a scriptural organization, and that any organization to do such work that is smaller than a local congregation is too small to be a scriptural organization. This position is eminently scriptural for the word of the Lord has never authorized any organization to do the work of the church except the local congregation. To establish and maintain an organization, such as a Missionary Society or a Benevolent Society, through which a number of churches may perform their work of evangelism or benevolence, is therefore an unscriptural set-up, for such an organization, through which a plurality of churches function, is larger than a local congregation. On the other hand, if within a local congregation we should set up a Young People's League or a Dorcas Society to perform certain functions of the local church, we have

organizations that are smaller than a local congregation. Such has always been regarded as an unscriptural practice. Of course, any of these organizations, whether larger or smaller than a local church, is unscriptural because it is a human organization. But that is not the principal point to be considered in this article.

When God set up the organization of the local church he ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23) in every city (Titus 1:5) if men were found who possessed the necessary qualifications. He did not authorize one elder for a number of congregations, or even one elder for one congregation. Nor did he authorize one group of elders for a number of congregations. The divine authority requires a plurality of elders for each congregation. According to this arrangement each congregation would be independent of every other congregation, and such an arrangement establishes what we call the "autonomy of the local church." It makes the government of the church congregational.

## **II. The Meaning of Autonomy**

If you are not familiar with the word "autonomy," a brief study of its significance will be helpful. It is derived from the Greek words "autos" and "nomos." The word "autos" means "self," and the word "nomos" means "law." Hence, a combination of the terms autos nomos, which gives existence to our word "autonomy," simply means "self-law." Or, putting it another way, it means "self-rule" or "self-government." And this may be expanded into the expression, "the right of self-government." The "autonomy of the local church" means, therefore, "the right of a local church to govern itself." This government of the church is exercised, of course, through the elders that God has ordained for each local congregation (Acts 14:23; 20:28).

Autonomy, or self-government, by the elders of a local congregation does not mean that such elders have the right to legislate or to enact laws to govern the church in which they are elders. We have but "one law-giver, who is able to save and destroy" and that lawgiver is Christ (James 4:12). No uninspired man has any right to establish laws to regulate the church of the Lord. Such is not the "self-government" that God has given to local congregations. The authority of elders in any congregation is limited to the judicial and executive realms--to judge, and to put into execution the laws that Jesus gave approximately 1900 years ago. They are not to "judge" in any way that would set aside divine requirements, as such judging is condemned in James 4:11, but they are to make decisions relative to the progress and work of the church--but not as

lords over God's heritage--as divine revelation is put into execution in the hearts and lives of the members of the congregation. Compare I Corinthians 5:12. The independence of each congregation is, therefore, maintained when the government of the church is held to the elders of each congregation.

### **III. Points Involved In Church Autonomy**

With no intention of presenting an exhaustive outline of local church autonomy, the following points are presented as illustrative of the jurisdiction of elders relative to the congregation of which they have the oversight. In other words, the congregation has the right of self-government in the following respects.

1. It has the right to discipline its own members when they become unruly. Paul, in the fifth chapter of First Corinthians, gives us an example of this matter. A member of the Corinthian church was guilty of fornication--such as was not even named among the Gentiles--in that he had taken his father's wife. Relative to the action to take in this matter, Paul made the following declaration: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be staved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:4, 5). Thus it was that discipline was to be administered to the disorderly member. But you will notice that this disciplinary action was to be taken by the Corinthian church. No authority was given for some other congregation to exercise such corrective measures in the church at Corinth. It was purely a local affair to be looked after by that particular local congregation. It was a matter of autonomy belonging to it and to it only. No other congregation--nor the elders of any other congregation--had any right to take the necessary steps of discipline in the matter.

2. Each congregation has the right to manage its own affairs in matters of judgment and expediency. In sending a contribution for the poor saints at Jerusalem there were matters of judgment and expediency involved. In the absence of a postal system, such as we have today, it was necessary that messengers be used to transport the funds to the point of destination. But each church was to choose its own messengers (2 Cor. 8:19). Paul told the Corinthian church: "Whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality to Jerusalem" (1 Cor. 16:3). No other congregation had the right to make Corinth's selection--it was a matter of autonomy that belonged solely to her.

3. The right to oversee its own work belongs to each congregation. The charge Paul gave to the Ephesian elders is a definite proof of this. He said: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). These elders had the oversight of "all the flock" in the church at Ephesus. They were given no right to oversee the flock at any other place--nor was any other church given the authority to oversee the Ephesian church. It was a matter of local church autonomy.

4. It has the right to control its own resources. Money contributed by the members of a congregation is to be spent by that congregation. The Philippian church, while Paul was in Thessalonica, "sent once and again" to his necessity. And when he "departed from Macedonia" no church "communicated" with him "concerning giving and receiving" but the Philippian church (Phil. 4:15, 16). The congregation had charge of its own resources and spent the money as was its scriptural right to do. Its contributions were not turned to some other church to use according to its discretion, but money was sent by the church to Paul as he engaged in the proclamation of the gospel. It was exercising its autonomy and maintaining its independence in these matters. Such should be true with every other congregation.

5. Providing for the needy among its own members to the extent of its ability is the right of every congregation. When the Grecian "widows were neglected in the daily ministrations" steps were taken by the apostles at Jerusalem to have the church there to look after the needs of such widows. The church exercised its right of self-government by taking the necessary steps to make provision for the neglected widows. It will not change the matter to argue that this was the only congregation in existence at that time and that no other church could have had any control over it, for every other church established by inspired men subsequent to this was set up exactly like the church at Jerusalem. If the Jerusalem church was able to manage its own affairs in things of this kind, other congregations, when they were established, were given the same right that the Jerusalem church had. It would be foolish to argue, since the Jerusalem church was the only one in existence when it "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42), that other congregations did not also do the same. All congregations were established after the same pattern, and when a second one was formed the independency of the first one was not changed.

#### **IV. A Congregation May Lose Its Autonomy**

When a congregation's right of self-government, as it pertains to discipline, to matters of expediency, to its own resources, to its work, to its relief programs, or to any other matter, is taken over by another congregation, the autonomy of the first congregation is violated. Every one will admit that no congregation can scripturally force its way into another congregation and seize the management of the affairs of that congregation. Such would be a violation of local church autonomy. But do not get the idea that a church never loses its autonomy unless such is taken by force by some outside group, whether it is a human organization or another congregation. A church may willingly surrender its autonomy to a human organization or to another church, and when it does so, it just as definitely loses such autonomy as if it were seized by another group. Since, in the matter of self-government, a church has the right to discipline its own members, this, as has been shown, is a part of its autonomy. But suppose that church willingly turns over the disciplining of its members to another congregation. When any of them becomes unruly or disorderly it takes no steps whatever toward correcting the situation, but allows another congregation to have charge of such matters. Has it not lost its autonomy in that particular field? The fact that it willingly surrendered such does not change it in the least. When we say that such congregation has lost its autonomy, we do not mean that it has lost its autonomy in every field of endeavor, but it has surrendered its autonomy concerning that particular point.

The same holds true concerning other matters involved in local church autonomy. If it willingly surrenders its right to manage its own affairs in matters of expediency and judgment, it loses its autonomy in that field. If another congregation, or another group makes the decisions relative to such things that should be made by the first congregation, then the autonomy of the first congregation has been violated, regardless of how willingly it may have been surrendered. Or, if a congregation surrenders the oversight of its work, or any portion of it, to another congregation, the same principle obtains. It may retain its autonomy relative to local evangelism, but surrender its autonomy relative to foreign evangelism to another congregation; it may retain its right of self-government in the edification of its members, but surrenders such right to another congregation in the field of radio preaching. If it surrenders the control of its resources or of its funds to another congregation to do a work to which both are equally related, the right of self-government has been violated. It may spend its own money for one phase of work that is its responsibility but turn money to another church to spend for another

phase of its work. When we say that a congregation thus loses its autonomy, we do not mean that it has surrendered all right of self-government. It may retain its autonomy concerning many things that affect the local congregation, but it has lost its autonomy on that portion of its resources, used to discharge its own responsibility, but placed in the hands and under the oversight of the elders of another congregation.

How willingly a church may turn its work to another, or the fact that it can discontinue such practice when it so determines, does not prove that it in no wise loses its autonomy. A hundred years ago when churches placed their funds and their work in the hands of a Missionary Society the autonomy of the church was violated. They were not forced into such an arrangement, but willingly accepted such a program of work. Furthermore, they could discontinue the practice when they chose to do so. But this did not change the fact that they had lost their autonomy while the program was in operation. The same thing is just as true concerning our "brotherhood projects" today.

## **V. The Local Congregation Is The Only Medium Through Which The Church Functions**

Attention has been called to the two uses of the word "church" in the New Testament--the "universal" sense and the "local" sense. But God gave no organization to the "church universal." The only sense in which the church universal can act is for every local congregation to act. But each congregation would have to act in its local capacity. No super-organization or centralized agency has ever been provided by the Lord for inter-congregational action. There were no inter-congregational alliances ever authorized. No group of elders ever became, by New Testament authority, "brotherhood elders." Each congregation, as has been already shown, had its own elders. Any number of congregations could help another congregation that was in need--that was an object of charity--to relieve distress among its own members when that church was unable to care for its own. But no church was ever set aside by divine authority to become a brotherhood agency through which all churches could do a work to which all were equally related. Each congregation maintained its independence. The only organization ever authorized by the Lord through which the church is to function is the local congregation. The New Testament reveals no other organization for such work. And each congregation is ordained to carry on its own work in its congregational capacity. No one congregation can scripturally become a medium through which the whole brotherhood can function in accomplishing the work of all the congregations. Such has no

resemblance to the simplicity of the divine arrangement revealed in the word of the Lord.

## **VI. God's Wisdom Shown In Local Autonomy**

We can easily see the wisdom of God manifested in the autonomy of the local church. If all the congregations were joined by some sort of "inter-congregational alliance" or "organizational federation," the dangers of apostasy would be greatly increased. If one congregation in the "alliance" should turn to apostasy, there would be a distinct danger of every other congregation in the "alliance" becoming affected. Or if one group of elders were given the right to oversee many congregations, and they should go into apostasy, every congregation under their oversight would likely be led into the same apostasy. But when each congregation is an independent and autonomous body this is not true. One congregation or one group of elders may go into apostasy without affecting all of the others. Any congregation, of course, through false teaching, may be led into apostasy, but we should recognize and respect the greater degree of safety that is found in the autonomy and independence of the local church. God arranged it that way. Let us strive to keep it that way. Man's "brotherhood projects" are not an improvement upon the divine system of operation.

W. Curtis Porter

### **Editor's Comments:**

The autonomy of the local congregation is a lesson that must be taught again and again. We need to know the truth on this matter as we deal with our denominational friends, whose religious organizations know practically nothing about the Spirit's teaching on autonomy. Likewise, as the article pointed out, autonomy is a vital issue with some erring brethren. We have only a small amount to add to the author's words.

The debate over autonomy has taken a new turn in recent years. Some brethren are now claiming that autonomy gives them the authority to do what they want without outside criticism. That is, if they want to accept an adulterous couple in their membership, no one has the right to say anything unfavorable about it, because the local church has the right to self-government. As the author pointed out, NO ONE has the authority to alter the law of the Lord. As one man put it, autonomy only goes as far as authority.

Perhaps the loudest cry for autonomy has come over the issue of who holds a meeting for a congregation. There have been occasions when a church invites a man who is known (to one and all) for teaching error on one or more points. When his use in a meeting is condemned by others, the church protests saying their autonomy is being violated, or an attempt was made to do so, by such criticism. How ridiculous! To our knowledge, no church has been forced or voluntarily given up its self-rule.

We wonder, why do those who complain about violations of autonomy in the face of negative comments not also raise their voice when positive comments are made? If it works for one, it works for the other.

Brethren, let us have a healthy respect for the autonomy of the local church, not departing to the left hand or the right.

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