

# Biblical Blueprint

## God's Design for Church Autonomy

**Introduction.** The Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News broke the story on February 10, 2019 that roughly 380 clergy, lay leaders, and volunteers had faced allegations of sexual misconduct, leaving behind over 700 victims since 1998 in the Southern Baptist Convention of churches.

This episode, combined with the controversy over women pastors, have led to the expulsion of large megachurches such as Saddleback Church, Elevation Church, and Fern Creek Baptist Church. To date, thousands of churches have left the SBC.

While membership in the Southern Baptist Convention has been declining since 2007, the denomination has lost 1.5 million members since 2018 and is currently at its lowest membership level since the late 1970s.

“Autonomy” means self-governing. Local church autonomy is how the church of Christ is organized. There’s no universal organization. Local churches have elders (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:17), but Jesus Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). There’s no universal head (no pope, president, council, or board of directors). Each local church worships together and does its business together without the interference of any other local church.

Local church autonomy is one of the most basic doctrines about the church of Christ. It’s what divides us from the denominational way of working. Denominationalism is the ultimate breakdown of God’s design. Sectarians like to talk about “sister churches” or “sister campuses,” but this indicates that they’ve decided on an arrangement that’s at variance from the plan of God. There’s no authority in the Bible for one church to oversee or superintend the affairs of another church.

Local church autonomy is one of the wisest things that Jesus instituted for His people. Yet, it’s one of the most unsatisfying things for some Christians. People yearn for a connection between churches and Christians which goes beyond what the New Testament allows. If we understand and accept denominationalism to be wrong in organization and practice, then we shouldn’t be arranging churches like them.

### ***I. The Work Churches of Christ Do***

- A. The work of the church is spelled out very clearly in the New Testament:
  - 1. Evangelism (1 Timothy 3:15).
  - 2. Edification (Ephesians 4:11-16).
  - 3. Limited benevolence (Acts 11:29-30; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:4; Romans 15:25-26; 2 Corinthians 9:1).
  - 4. Worship (Acts 2:42; 20:7; John 4:24).
  - 5. Discipline (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6).
- B. The work of the church is to be done equally by all congregations (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:13-14).
- C. Unfortunately, brethren in Christ have grown weary of waiting on the Lord, and have decided to “punch up” the Bible pattern for church work.

1. Cooperation is the key, they say. We must pool our resources. No church can do much with its resources alone. But who said that the success of a church is measured by how much it can do?
2. They say we must have the wisest possible men oversee our work, so a board of directors (missionary society/benevolent society) must be chosen from across the brotherhood to oversee our esteemed and God-given work. Otherwise it won't be successful. Since I've been affiliated with my African brethren, I've seen this with the World Bible School and the Bear Valley School of Preaching.
3. They sometimes suggest that a separate entity or board is unnecessary, but the need of wisest and best persists, so we must give the brotherhood's work to one of the larger, better-funded churches (sponsoring church).
  - a) In 1951, when the Herald of Truth radio program was being promoted to churches, the young men who were spearheading it told brethren that the world could only be won for Christ through the Herald of Truth.
  - b) It would take such a collective program to get the job done. Here we are in 2024, and the world is still mostly non-Christian. What happened?

## ***II. How Churches of Christ Relate to One Another***

- A. Local churches definitely relate to one another, but they're also independent of one another.
  1. They're near one another in location, but not the same location. Local churches of Christ don't exist in a vacuum.
    - a) There's knowledge of one another in different churches to a degree, and there's concern among Christians wherever they may worship (Acts 11:29; 13:1-3; 15:1-2; Romans 15:26; 16:1).
    - b) How many times in this very assembly have we mentioned about the sickness or death of a Christian in another congregation? So, we know of one another, and yet, we worship separately.
      - (1) Being a few miles away from one another used to be a big barrier when people had to walk or ride horses or covered wagons to worship. But the barrier no longer exists. We worship 5-10 minutes away from several other congregations.
      - (2) Family members can worship in their home congregations in the morning, and meet one another for lunch at a restaurant in another town, visit for a few hours, and then adjourn to their places of worship again in the evening.
  2. They're alike in work, worship, and organization, but each has its own business to attend to.
- B. I'll admit that the preceding facts can make the concept of autonomy hard for some Christians to understand and relate to, but there were very important traits of each church in the New Testament:
  1. Local oversight of elders (Acts 20:20).
  2. Local treasury (Acts 4:38; 5:1-2; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4).
  3. Local discipline (Acts 5:3-5; 7-11).

### **III. Unity and Cooperation Among Churches of Christ**

- A. God's Word requires all Christians and churches to be alike.
  - 1. There's a divine pattern to make this possible (Romans 12:16; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:2; 3:16; 1 John 1:5-11; Jude 3).
  - 2. However, where men are involved there are going to be divisions (1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:1-3; 11:18).
- B. Brethren try to solve the division problem by swinging too far to the other side and force cooperation where it's not allowed, or in the way it isn't allowed.
  - 1. They'll compromise on doctrine in order to be "one." But, as we have learned, our unity has to be based on each of us believing and practicing the truth, and by everyone walking in the light.
  - 2. All of the schemes of brethren are attempts at activating and organizing what God gave no mission to or which He didn't structure: the universal church.
    - a) No universal head: How is a "society" not a de facto head?
    - b) No universal structure: How is the sponsoring church not a de facto man-made structure?
- C. Proper cooperation exists among Christians and churches when we simply follow the Lord's rules.
  - 1. First-century churches didn't need a society or separate organization to accomplish this work (1 Corinthians 16:3-4; 2 Corinthians 8:19).
  - 2. They were in cooperation when they each helped Paul and others preach the gospel (Acts 18:2-3; Romans 16:1, 3; 2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:15-16).

### **IV. The Wisdom of Church Autonomy on Display**

- A. The New Testament churches demonstrate the value and wisdom of autonomy.
  - 1. The Corinthian church.
    - a) There were divisions among them (1:10).
    - b) They had their favorite preachers and followed them more than Christ (1:12).
    - c) They were sectarian in their thinking (3:1-4).
    - d) They harbored a fornicator in their midst (5:1-8).
    - e) They abused one another in Gentile courts (6:1-11).
    - f) They violated the conscience of the weak (8:1-13).
    - g) They abused the Lord's Supper (11:17-29).
    - h) They abused spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40).
  - 2. The seven churches of Asia.
    - a) The church in Sardis had a name, a reputation of life, but they were dead (3:1-2). This didn't mean the whole church of our Lord was affected.
    - b) The church in Laodicea was lukewarm, but other churches around the world were on fire and zealous (3:14-16).
- B. Every church is accountable to God of itself. If one sinks into sin, the whole body of Christ doesn't.
  - 1. Suppose an area church has a preacher who's divorcing his wife while committing adultery with another woman.

- a) Events like this almost always become widely known. And because we're friends (and possibly family), there would be sadness and grief.
  - b) However, the moral and spiritual collapse of one church doesn't spread to others when autonomy is practiced.
2. We've mentioned some issues and deviations from the past, such as the World Bible Society and the Herald of Truth. But there are other issues now that threaten to sweep away many churches of Christ, including the inclusion of LGBTQ+ believers, women in church leadership, and instrumental music.
  3. Trends affect humans, and humans comprise the makeup of local churches of Christ. This means that some churches are likely to be overcome by the world, while others will prove their loyalty to God even when the trends come and go.
- C. Jesus is the determining factor.
1. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, so our headship is perfect, healthy, and whole. All we have to do is live how our head dictates.
  2. Every local church follows the Lord on its own accord. The elders of the local churches all watch for and rule that local church and none other.
  3. But, if we were a denomination, then anything wrong with "the head" would be wrong with every part of that denominational body.
  4. Jesus Christ designed His church to be autonomous. He didn't intend for us to band together in a worldwide body. He wants all Christians and all churches to follow healthy doctrine and make disciples the right way.

**Conclusion.** Some would say that autonomy isn't a compelling or inspiring doctrine to preach about. It doesn't draw in the crowds. But when we neglect it for too long, we risk our younger people drifting into the ways of the religious world.

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