

Preliminary

AUTONOMY of the Church

Terminology: Lit. 'self-law' = self governed – The government of the church is within itself (independents)

[1689 BCF, xxvi.7] – “To *each of these churches* thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his Word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power”

Biblical Presentation: Mt 18:17-20; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; 2 Cor 2:6-8

Note: Local church's autonomy does not mean that a local church is not to maintain and cultivate fellowship with other local churches

- Local churches during the apostolic era did have fellowship with one another... Rom 16:16
Col 4:14-16 = Churches exchange letters with one another – has an awareness of the concerns of another church.

Point: Local church should not live in isolation from other local churches.

- It does not mean that a local church is never to engage in some cooperative efforts with other churches... 2 Cor 8:1-5, 16-20

Challenge: Churches should engage in some cooperative efforts that are within the boundaries of the teachings of God's word...

Example: Missions, benevolence work, translation work, publishing work, the training of men for the ministry, etc.

- A local church should not try to selfishly confine its gifts only to itself... Rom 16:1-5
- Local church's autonomy does not mean that a local church is never to seek the help or counsel of another church or group of Churches... Pro 24:6; 11:14 = *in abundance of counselors there is victory*.
- When the need arises, a church should seek to engage in cooperative efforts with other churches.
- The idea of a church stonewalling and not commending herself to the consciences of other churches is not biblical!

[Outline of the Study of Doctrinal Distinctives, 144] – “No local church, or group of local churches, or bodies created by churches, or ministers from other churches, has any authority over another local church. But each local church has an equal and separate sphere of authority, each governs herself according to the teachings of Christ, and each is directly answerable to Christ... The gifts of one church should not be confined to only one local church. And in difficult matters, a church may seek the advice of another church. However, each local is autonomous.”

Biblical Presentation of Local Church's Autonomy

1. Significance for Church Government

(a) The Lord Jesus Christ is the absolute authority in His Church

[1689 BCF, xxvi.4] – “The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner” – [Col 1:18; Eph 4:11-16; 1:20-23; 5:23-32; 1 Cor 12:27-28; Jn 17:1-3; Mt. 28:18-20; Act 5:31; Jn 10:14f]

Note: Christ is the Supreme Ruler of the Church... He is to One who directs and rules the church.

Point: This implies that the church, above all else, must be subject to Christ... Eph 5:24

- Any teaching and any practice that is not in line with the will of Christ should be rejected.

Question: Christ is no longer here on earth where His church is. He is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven. So how does Christ exercise His authority and headship over the church?

Answer: Christ exercises His authority and Headship through God the Holy Spirit and through His human representatives.

- God the Holy Spirit is Christ's Vicar on Earth and certainly not the Pope
 - Gk: ἄλλον (*allon*) = another of the same kind... Jn 14:16-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-13; Act 16:6-10; 2 Cor 3:17-18
- [OSDD, 145] – “Holy Spirit took the place of Christ as helper of His people, teaching, directing, guiding, sanctifying, empowering, equipping, and comforting Christ's disciples. He is the Vicar of Christ on earth.”

(b) Church Government Through Human Agency

Ephesians 4:11-13 = *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...*

i. **Apostles:** They were the pastors not just of one local church but of all the local churches of Christ or of the church's universal... 2 Cor 11:28 = *daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches* (πασῶν τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν)

Note: To them was given the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit... Jn 14:25-26; 16:12-15

- The apostolic directives were binding to *all* the churches... Act 16:4-6; 1 Cor 7:17; 14:33-34; 16:1-2; 1 Tim 2:11-12

Question: Are there still living Apostles? Answer: No. there is no living apostles today!

Qualification: Must be one who has seen the risen Christ, and Paul was the last one to have seen the risen Christ...

Biblical Presentation: 1 Cor 9:1; 15:1-11; 1 Jn 1:1-4

Point: Although, now, we do not have living apostles, but we still have the teachings of the Apostles preserved in the Scripture and churches are still to be regulated by this apostolic teachings.

ii. **Prophets:** They spoke infallible God's message by direct revelation from God – mouthpiece of God... Deut 18:9-23

Note: The Apostolic teaching was still the standard by which the genuineness of a prophet was tested... 1 Cor 14:37f

Question: Are there now living prophets? Answer: There are now no living prophets, for God has made His final revelation to men during the apostolic era – Heb 1:1-3a; Jud 3

iii. **Evangelist:** They were apostolic delegates who acted as their helps and delegates... Eph 4:11; Act 21:8; 2 Tim 4:5

- Since the apostles had the care of all the churches and since they could not visit all of them at once, they needed certain men who could help them and act as their representatives... 2 Cor 1:1; 11:28; 1 Cor 4:17

Qualification: Each evangelist was personally appointed by the apostles

[James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, v.2, 235] – “They (evangelists) are exhibited to us in the Scripture narrative as the attendants upon the Apostles in their journeys, and their assistants in planting and establishing the Churches, acting under them as their delegates, and carrying out their instructions.”

Question: In the strict Biblical sense, are there still living evangelists? Answer: No. there are now no more living evangelists!

Rectification: The title as evangelist is no longer exists, but this has become the pattern of the present churches to provide missionaries according to the order of the great commission. However, every Christian is a preacher of the gospel, therefore, every believer must practice evangelism... Mt 28:19, 20

- iv. **Pastors –Teachers:** The terms pastors, teachers, elders, overseers refer to the same office [more on ‘The rule of elders’ discussion]... Acts 20:17, 28

Note: The universal/local church structure during the apostolic era is basically the same now as then. The only real difference is that now we do not have living apostles, prophets, and evangelists.

(c) Local churches autonomy during the apostolic era

Note 1: This is clear from Christ’s letter to the seven churches in Asia.

- i. Church in Ephesus: Rev 2:4-5, 7a = Christ did not envision a denominational or associational board or whatever to censure the church
- He speaks here to the church by way of an apostolic letter and warns the church that if they do not repent of their sins, He will deal with the church directly by destroying it.
- ii. Church in Pergamum and Thyatira: Rev 2:14-17a; Rev 2:20-23, 29a = Christ did not envision a denominational or associational board to censure the church for its doctrinal and moral deviations.
- He speaks here to the church by way of an apostolic letter and warns the church that if they will not discipline the guilty members, and then He will deal directly with them.
- iii. Church in Sardis: Rev. 3:1b-3, 6 = Christ did not envision a associational board to censure the church
- He speaks here to the church by way of an apostolic letter and warns those who are guilty of spiritual hypocrisy that He will deal with them directly unless they repent.
- iv. Church of Laodicea: Rev. 3:15-16, 19, 22 = Christ did not envision a denominational or associational board to censure the church for its lukewarmness.
- If the church will not repent, then Christ Himself is the One who will spit the church out of His mouth – to excommunicate them from the church’s universal.

Note 2: This is also indicated from the way Paul dealt with issues of the church’s finances.

- v. Phil 1:1 cf 4:15-17 = Although churches were under apostolic oversight, the apostles could not require churches to make contributions to mission work.

Point: Each local church was given freedom to determine whether they would or not. Therefore, the idea that a body can require that churches make compulsory contribution is to go beyond apostolic teaching and practice.

- vi. 2 Cor 8:1-12 = This has to do with the benevolence work for the needy believers in Jerusalem.

Note: Although churches were under apostolic oversight, Paul did not compel the churches to take part in this ministry.

- What he is simply urging the Church in Corinth to do is to complete the work that it desired to do and initiated.
- No coercion or compulsion was involved. So even under apostolic oversight, the churches were still autonomous.

Note 3: Each church is endowed with the ability to judge doctrinal teachings

- vii. Gal 1:1, 2, 8, 9 = The letter is written to the ‘churches’ as a whole not merely to the leadership within the church

- The apostle gave authority to this congregation to stand in judgment over apostolic or even angelic messenger who teaches anything other than what they received.

[Mark Dever, *God’s Glory*, 53-54] – “He (Paul) doesn’t write merely to the pastors, to the presbytery, to the bishop or the conference, to the convention, or to the seminary. He writes to the Christians who compose the churches, and he makes it quite clear that not only are they competent to sit in judgement on what claims to be the gospel, but that they must! They have an inescapable duty to judge those who claim to be messengers of the Good News of Jesus Christ according to the consistency of their new claims with what these Galatian Christians already knew to be the gospel”

Rectification: The message of letters to seven churches and the teaching of the apostles regarding church’s autonomy is not confine only during their times, but to all the churches in every generation.

2. The importance of adhering to local Church’s autonomy

Note: Failure to adhere to local church autonomy will result into confusion, chaos, and carnal politicking.

Point: Introducing a denominational structure into the universal church, then you will have to create positions or offices that are nowhere to be found in the Bible... i.e. RCC as a warning = Pope now claims to be the vicar of Christ

[*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 882] – “The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter’s successor, ‘is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful.’ For the Roman Pontiff. By reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered”

Conclusion: Let us hold fast to the biblical teaching of local church’s autonomy.

- Each church must be judged within itself, and not primarily with its associations (connections)
- No church may impose itself on another church on grounds of superiority
- Church autonomy must not erode into isolationism
- Those who reject the teaching and authority of such a church are actually rejecting the teaching and authority of Jesus Christ.