The Autonomy of the Local Church

The meaning of "autonomy" is independent or self-governing. The church we read about in the New Testament is made up of autonomous congregations. The word "church" means "the called out." It is used to describe God's people who have been called by the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). They have been called out of the world and into the service of Christ.

The word "church" is used in the New Testament in only two senses. First, it refers to the called out people of Christ in all the world. This is the **universal** sense. When Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18: *"upon this rock I will build my church,"* He was including all believers in all the world in His church. Thus, He was speaking of the universal church.

Second, the word "church" is used in the **local** sense. When Paul addressed the First Corinthian letter to *"the church of God which is at Corinth,"* he was speaking to a group of Christians in Corinth who met together to worship and serve God (1 Corinthians 1:2). The universal church is made up of all the local congregations everywhere. Paul referred to this when he said: *"All the churches of Christ salute you"* (Romans 16:16).

The word "church" is never used in the Bible in a **denominational** sense. A denomination, by its own claims, is not the universal church. Most denominations claim to be a part of the universal church along with all the other denominations. Therefore, a denomination is smaller than the universal church. But most denominations are made up of many congregations. Therefore, a denomination is larger than the local church. An organization smaller than the universal church but larger than the local church is not found in the Word of God! Denominations were established by men. They exist without the blessing of God for they are completely unknown in God's Word!

Churches of Christ are **autonomous** in government. Each one is independent of all others. Each one has its own leadership. We read in the New Testament of churches in a district such as *"the churches of Galatia"* (Galatians 1:2). However, there was no district organization. Each of the churches in Galatia was self-governing.

It is easy to see that God's plan for His church was for each church in each place to be self-governing. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, they again visited the churches they had established. They *"appointed for them elders in every church"* (Acts 14:23). Every church had its own eldership. When Paul wrote to the church of Christ in Philippi, he addressed his letter to *"the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops* [elders] *and deacons"* (Philippians 1:1). The apostle Peter commanded elders to *"Tend the flock of God which is among you"* (1 Peter 5:2). They were not to feed other flocks, but they were to shepherd the flock which was among them. This is the local congregation where they were members.

Paul wrote to Titus: *"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in **every city**, as I gave thee charge"* (Titus 1:5). The Lord told John to write letters to each of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (Revelation, chapters 2 and 3). The church at Jerusalem had its own elders (Acts 15:4). The church in Ephesus had its own elders (Acts 20:17). The church at Philippi had its own elders too (Philippians 1:1).

Always, in each local church, we read of more than one elder. Paul and Barnabas *"appointed for them **elders** in every church"* (Acts 14:23). Never do we read in the New Testament of a church having only one elder! In order to serve as an elder, a man must have the qualifications God has given in His Word (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). It is wrong to appoint men to serve as elders who are not qualified!

Congregations can cooperate with one another in doing the Lord's work. We have examples of this in the New Testament. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to help the church in Antioch (Acts 11:22-26). The congregation in Antioch sent help to the churches of Judea when they were in need (Acts 11:27-30). Paul received

support from other churches in order to be able to preach the Gospel to the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:8). Titus and another brother were chosen by the churches to take a contribution from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). These churches cooperated with one another to do the Lord's work. However, they did not form a separate organization apart from the local church. There was no city, province, state, or regional organization.

God's wisdom is seen in the way He has organized His church. If a window is made of a single piece of glass, just one stone hitting the glass will break the whole window. If the window is made up of several panes of glass, a stone hitting one pane will break only that one pane. The rest of the window will not be broken. The same thing is true of God's church. If there is a central organization of all the churches, and false teachers come in, all the churches will be led astray. If there is no central organization, then false teachers might lead one congregation astray, but the others will not be harmed.

God's way is best! The church belongs to the Lord. He purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Often men are not happy with the way God has organized His church. They think they can improve upon it. They must understand they have no right to change what God has done (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John 9; Revelation 22:18-19). If they change the organization,

name, worship, or work of the Lord's church, they are disobeying God, not man. Let us be content to do the things God has told us to do. Let us do them in the way God has told us to do them. Let us call them by the names God has given in His Word. When we do this, we can be sure we are pleasing the Lord (John 14:15).

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