

Congregation Autonomy

Intro; The Episcopal church in the news

- A. Talked about that this morning...
 - 1. They have approved of Gay church leaders (Bishops) and 'same-sex' marriages
 - 2. Caused some dissention ...
 - a. May split with Catholic church
 - b. May split with Anglican church
 - c. May split American Episcopal churches...
- B. This is a problem of 'organized religion'
 - 1. Organized beyond the N.T. level of each church being local, self-governing and autonomous...
 - 2. One church going astray or many churches going astray is not that big a problem with N.T. churches and their autonomy...
- C. Tonight – 'Congregational Autonomy'

1. Congregational Autonomy

- A. History demonstrates that the first radical departure from The Faith resulted in the breach of the autonomy of individual churches.
 - 1. The smaller churches were swallowed (in a sense) by the larger churches.
 - 2. The end result was some early form of diocesan oversight by a single bishop.
 - 3. Elders – Head Elders – Bishop – and so forth...
 - 4. -- churches organizing got bigger and bigger;
 - 5. 5 Head churches; Rome, Constantiople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexander...
 - 6. This is a clear example of the perversion of the organization of the church as revealed in the pages of inspiration.
- B. If one church submits itself to the oversight of another church, the **superior church** (superior because of the unlawful subordination of the other church) has become the active representative of that church.

II. AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

- A. One of the principles of the New Testament that is grossly misunderstood by many is the autonomy of the local church.
 - 1. Some -- Each local church being an **island to itself**, having nothing to do whatsoever with Christians in other local churches.
 - 2. Some -- Even go to the extent of asserting that congregational autonomy confer on each local church the **right to bind and loose** anything under the sun.
- B. On the other hand, there are those who consider the **congregational autonomy** as not only unbiblical, but also divisive and therefore, devilish.
 - 1. These views are wrong!
 - 2. We must see what the Bible says on this, and every other, Bible topic.

III. What is Congregational Autonomy?

- A. Autonomy is derived from two Greek words, namely, **AUTO** and **NOMY**.

1. "Auto" means **self**, while "nomy" is **law**. That is, autonomy has to do with the **quality or state of being self-governing**.
 2. Hence, when we talk of congregational autonomy, we are expressing the idea that each congregation is self-governing and is independent of every other.
- B. Autonomy is defined as
1. The condition or quality of being autonomous; independence.
 2. a. Self-government or the right of self-government; self-determination. b. Self-government with respect to local or internal affairs: granted autonomy to a national minority.
 3. A self-governing state, community, or group." *The American Heritage Dictionary*.
- C. Congregational autonomy does not mean each local church can make laws for itself.
1. We have only **one lawgiver** who is Jesus Christ
 2. *James 4:12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?*
 3. He is the head of the church and the king of the kingdom.
 4. *Eph 1:22-23 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*
 5. *1 Tim 6:15 which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords,*
 6. Autonomy of the local church simply means that each local church reserves the right to make decisions as to what **expediencies** it will employ in **executing God's laws**.
- D. Let us illustrate: In Hebrews 10:25, we read:
1. *Heb 10:25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is: but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." The direct command here is "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together."*
 2. Implicit in this command is the **need for a time and place of meeting**. It is inconceivable that there can be a meeting without a specific time and place.
 3. This is where congregational autonomy comes in. Each local church has the right to decide at what **time it is going to meet, how many times in the week, who is to do the preaching, for how long...**
- E. Autonomy of each local church does not mean a congregation could decide to make a 25 year old, unmarried preacher an elder.
1. The Lord states in His word that an elder must be the husband of one wife and have believing children (**Titus 1:6**).
 2. A local church cannot decide on which day to eat the Lord's supper. The Lord has decided that -- the first day of the week (**Acts 20:7**). To break bread on any other day is to transgress the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11).
 3. The Lord has specified the elements of the Lord's Table -- unleavened bread and fruit of the vine (Matt. 26:17, 26-29). **To eat pizza and drink Coke at the Lord's Supper, in the name of congregational autonomy, is to eat and drink damnation** (1 Cor. 11:29).
 4. The Lord has given the method we should follow in giving of our means to support the work of the church (1 Cor. 16:1,2; 2 Cor. 9:6-8).
 5. Any other method is to go beyond that which is written (1 Cor. 4:6).
 6. *1 Cor 4:6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.*
- F. **CONGREGATIONAL AUTONOMY IS A NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT.**
1. After Paul and Barnabas had preached and established churches in several cities on their first journey, they came back to appoint elders for each of these churches (Acts 14:23).
Acts 14:23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.
 2. That elders were appointed in every church in apostolic times underscores two principles which form the basis of the concept of congregational autonomy.
 - a. One, the independence of each local church.

- b. Two, the equality of all the churches.
- G. Let us keep in mind that Barnabas and Saul were sent out by a local church - Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).
1. Having accomplished their task, they returned and gave report to the same local church.
 2. *Acts 14:26-27 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. 27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.*
 3. The church at Antioch did not oversee these local churches in spite of the fact that it (Antioch) was responsible for the sending out of the preachers who established the churches.
- H. In the New Testament, there was nothing like "mother church" or "supervising congregation".
1. Every church was independent and all the local churches were on the same footing -- equal before God -- in spite of size and, or, location.
 2. The principle of congregational autonomy is also seen in the limitation of the autonomy of the elders.
 3. Elders in the New Testament period were local officers, not state or provincial or national officers. **Each church had its own elders.**
 4. What was the jurisdiction of these elders? Paul, addressing the Ephesian elders charged them to...
 5. *Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*
 6. That is how it should be today. The jurisdiction of elders should not extend beyond the congregation where they are appointed.
 7. *1 Pet 5:1-3 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;*
 8. That conclusively shows the limit and extent of the authority of the elders.
 9. The elders of a large congregation cannot oversee the work of another nearby, small church.
- I. The New Testament teaches that each congregation did its own work under its own elders.
1. The church at Jerusalem, for example, sent out Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11: 22).
Acts 11:22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.
 2. The church at Antioch on the other hand sent out Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1- 4).
Acts 13:1-3 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.
 3. There was no centralized, inter-congregational pooling of funds. The church at Jerusalem relieved its own needy members (Acts 2:44,45; 4:32-37).
Acts 4:32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.
 4. When the need became greater than the ability of the Jerusalem church, other churches like Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia sent benevolence to "the poor saints at Jerusalem" (1 Cor. 16:1-4).
Rom 15:25-26 But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. 26 For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.
 5. Every church made a decision as to how much to send. And each church chose its own messengers
1 Cor 16:1-4 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. 3 And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. 4 But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me.
 6. While Paul was working at Corinth, he was supported by many churches (2 Cor. 11:8).
2 Cor 11:18 Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast.
 7. How was this done? It was not done through any committee or board or agency. Each church sent directly to Paul through its own chosen messenger (**Phil. 4:15-18**).
 8. This is the principle set forth in the New Testament for the Lord's church.

J. AUTONOMY AND JERUSALEM "CONFERENCE".

1. It has been argued by some that the meeting held at Jerusalem in Acts 15 to consider the matter of circumcision was a precedent for inter-congregational organization.
2. It is asserted that since the church at Antioch sent "Paul and Barnabas and certain other of them" to Jerusalem, that is a veritable proof that today, local churches can send representatives to an organization, or a board or a committee for "the work of God." That is just not so!
3. In the first place, the meeting at Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 was a **one time event**.
4. It was not a regular or a **"continuing conference"** arrangement.
5. Secondly, it was not composed of **representatives from various congregations of a state or a country**, but of members of just one congregation (Acts 15:2).
6. Thirdly, it was occasioned by a question of doctrine **which nobody could answer except the apostles** who constituted the repository of divine revelation at that time (Acts 15:28).
7. Fourthly, it featured the apostles of Christ who had special qualifications and special authority and had no successors.

K. ABUSE OF CONGREGATIONAL AUTONOMY.

1. Like every other arrangement ordained of God, we have seen and heard of instances where the principle of congregational autonomy has been abused.
2. We have heard of some of our preachers shouting "autonomy, autonomy" to the high heavens **when their sins were about to be exposed**.
To such we would appeal that they repent before their sins find them out (Num. 32:23).
3. Others, like Diotrefes, love preeminence and lord it over God's heritage and invoke the **principle of autonomy to cast people out of the church** (3 John 9,10; 1 Pet. 5:1-3).
4. The apostle Paul admonished, *"Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility, for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time"* (1 Pet. 5:5,6).
5. Congregational autonomy is not, and should not be used as a cover for the sin of any Christian or any preacher.
6. It is not a cloak for false teaching. Rather, it is a divine arrangement whereby the Lord protects His church from wholesale apostasy.

L. Some brethren have decided that God's pattern is insufficient. They have gone about to establish their own righteousness by creating what is called a **sponsoring church.**

1. This is where one or more local churches send funds to a centralized sponsoring local church for the purpose of performing a work.
2. This type of collective action of local churches contradicts Paul and Peter's instructions to elders.
3. Hence, the sponsoring church type arrangement is an unscriptural alliance of local churches, which allows an eldership from one local church, a sponsoring church, to oversee a work for other local churches.

M. It doesn't matter how good the intentions, the violation of God's pattern is a sin.

1. To argue that it is a good work that is too large for one local church serves only to confuse the issue.
2. Can something be good which is unscriptural in organization?
3. The answer is no!

Conclusion; Each local church needs to take care of its own business.

- A. Each local church needs to abide within its personal abilities and not rely upon other local churches to prop it up.
- B. Autonomy of local churches demands it.