

The Autonomy of the Lord's church

Although the word "autonomy" is not found in the New Testament, the principle of congregational autonomy is plainly taught there. In fact, no principle is more basic to the New Testament pattern for the organization of the church than that of the independence of the local church. The term "autonomy" means, according to the Webster Dictionary, "The quality or state of being independent, free, and self-directing."

The autonomy of the local church belongs completely to the oversight of that church's elders and is not to be surrendered, partial or completely, to any outside control. Elders are to be appointed within each local church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). These elders are to "shepherd the flock of God among you...nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-4). No passage of scripture broadens their authority. The elders of the local church have no right to oversee anything than the work of the local church where they are members. There is no authority to allow any man, group of men, or organization outside the local church, to oversee all or any part of its function.

Congregational autonomy protects the church of Christ. When Paul met with the elders from Ephesus, he told them, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Paul was correct when centuries later, all known local churches in Western Europe were tied together under the papacy. Because of this, false doctrines and practices that were introduced, immediately spread to all. Historically, the first step into general apostasy in the Lord's church has been the destruction of the independence of the local congregations and their own elders.

When a local congregation gives control of any part of its work or decision making to an outside organization, whether the organization be a human institution or local church, that church has surrendered its autonomy. When the churches of Christ surrender the oversight of their work of evangelism to a sponsoring church, they give control of their work to the oversight of another eldership.

Local churches may certainly keep each other informed about their own affairs without violating the independence of the local church. The church in Jerusalem had a keen interest in the church in Antioch, and exchanged news with each other (Acts 11:19-30). Furthermore, a local church may invite members of other congregations to come study the Bible with them. The church in Jerusalem welcomed Barnabas and Paul from Antioch to consider the question over circumcision and the keeping of the law (Acts 15:1-22). A local church may send scriptural teaching to any person or group of people anywhere (1 Thessalonians 1:8). When a local church sends a teaching paper to other churches, or pays a preacher to hold gospel meeting for a small congregation, this is scriptural congregational cooperation.