

WHAT IS AUTONOMY?

Ed Dye

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The fact that my topic is in the form of a question may suggest there is disagreement among brethren on this matter which, of course, is a fact.
2. Disagreement, not over the definition of the term autonomy, but over its application in and among local churches of Christ.
3. Therefore, we shall not only define the term but deal with the matter of application as it pertains to the work and worship of local churches of Christ and how it may be violated, which is necessary in order to fully understand what autonomy is.

II. DISCUSSION

A. DEFINITION OF TERMS

1. The adjective “autonomous” is defined by Webster’s New World Dict., Third College Edition, 1988, as: “independent, from Gr. *autos*, self + *nomos*, law. 1. of or having to do with an autonomy. 2a, having self-government, b) functioning independently without control by others.”
 - a. Webster’s New Collegiate Dict., 1960 edition, adds: “without outside control.”
2. The noun “autonomy” is defined by Webster’s New World Dict., Third College Edition, 1988, as: “the fact or condition of being autonomous; self-government; independence.”
3. Though neither the word “autonomous” nor “autonomy” is a word found in the N.T. Scriptures, the principle of autonomy is with reference to the very nature and function of local churches of Christ in their work and worship, for which there is an abundance, a myriad of Scriptural evidence.

B. CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING AS SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY.

1. To help understand this we take note of two uses of the term “church” used in the N.T.
 - a. The term “church” is used in the universal, comprehensive sense including all the saved of the earth (i.e., all of those who have

- heard, believed and obeyed the gospel of Christ), as in Mt.16:18; Eph.1:22,23; 5:25-27; Col.1:18,24; 1Tim.3:15.
- b. The term “church” is also used in the local sense, or in the limited sense, referring to local, individual churches of Christ, or to God’s people, those saved people in one community, or one location, joined together for work and worship, as in 1Cor.1:2; 2Cor.1:1; Rom.16:16; Ac.14:23; 5:11; 11:22; 13:1; Gal.1:1; Col.4:15,16.
 - c. The church in its universal sense is only a spiritual relationship. It is not a functioning organization with a work assigned. In its universal sense it is not an autonomous, self-governed body; it is a monarchy; it is a group of baptized believers or citizens who have completely, voluntarily subjected their will to that of the king, Jesus Christ.
 - d. The church in its local sense is not only a spiritual relationship with Christ as its head but also an organic, functioning body – or an organization made up of elders, deacons and saints, with each one organizationally and functionally independent of the others; as indicated in Phil.1:1; Ac.14:23; Tit.1:5; Ac.20:28-30; 1Pet.5:1-3.
2. Each independent local church had (and is to have) its own plurality of scripturally qualified men known as elders or bishops or pastors to oversee the local congregation (Ac.14:23; Tit.1:5; Ac.20:28; 1Th.5:12,13; Heb.13:17; 1Pet.5:1-3; 1Tim.3:1-7; Tit.1:5-9), as well as deacons to serve under the elders (1Tim.3:8-10).
 3. The oversight and authority of the eldership of each local church was ***limited*** to the church over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers to feed that church, Ac.20:28; 1Pet.5:1,2.
 4. The work God assigned to each independent local church refers to its collective responsibility and action, not that of its individual members separate and apart from such collective action, and is as follows:
 - a. Each local church in its collective action and in recognition of its action is to engage in the work of evangelism, or converting the lost to Christ, for which we have:
 - (1) Authority by direct statement, 1Tim.3:14,15.
 - (a) She is the “pillar and ground of the truth.”
 - (b) The foundation and support of the truth.
 - (c) She holds up and displays the saving gospel to the lost and dying world.
 - (d) She is to propagate the truth; this is a part of her God-ordained work.

- (2) Authority by approved apostolic example.
 - (a) The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch for this purpose, Ac.11:19-26.
 - (b) The church at Philippi had fellowship with Paul in the gospel, Phil.1:3-5; 4:15,16.
 - (c) The church at Thessalonica “sounded out the word of the Lord,” 1Th.1:6-8.
 - (3) In its evangelistic work the local church, according to N.T. record, always sent directly to the gospel preacher, never to or through another local church or a separate organization of any kind!
- b. Each local church in its collective action and in recognition of its action is to engage in the work of edification; that is, of teaching, establishing, and bringing to spiritual maturity those evangelized, for which we have:
- (1) Authority by direct statement, Ac.20:28-32; 1Cor.14:26 (cf. Vv.5,12); Eph.4:11-16; 2Tim.2:1,2; Tit.2:1-15; 1Cor.3:1ff; Heb.5:11-14.
 - (2) Authority by approved apostolic example, Ac.2:42; 14:21,22; 11:25,26; 1Cor.14:1-26.
 - (a) Although 1Cor.14 concerned the proper, lawful use of spiritual gifts in the assembly of the saints, still all things were to be done unto the edifying of all present, 1Cor.14:26.
 - (b) Improper use of certain spiritual gifts were forbidden on the grounds that such would not edify the saints assembled, 1Cor.14:27,28,33.
 - (3) Again, according to N.T. record, each local church was and, therefore, is sufficient to perform its own God-ordained edification work, with no authority to shift any part of its responsibility to another church or another organization of any kind. If so, where?
- c. Each local church in its collective action and in recognition of its action is to engage in benevolent work among the saints, its own needy saints, and needy saints in other local churches under certain circumstances, for which we have:
- (1) Authority by direct statement, 1Tim.5:16; 1Cor.16:1-3.
 - (2) Authority by approved apostolic example.
 - (a) The Jerusalem church cared for its own needy, Ac.6:1-8.

- (b) The church in Antioch sent “relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea,” Ac.11:27-30.
 - (c) The churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia sent benevolent aid for the needy saints at Jerusalem, years after that of the Antioch “relief” to the brethren dwelling in Judea, 1Cor.16:1-3; 2Cor.8:1-5; 2Cor.9:1-5; Rom.15:25-27.
- (3) There are three scriptural possibilities for benevolent work in which the local church is to engage, all of which indicate and recognize local church autonomy.
- (a) **The first possibility**: The local church may have its own needy saints for which it must care when it is able to do so; such as Ac.6:1-8.
 - (1) The Jerusalem church was commanded to care for its needy widows.
 - (2) Men from among them were appointed over this business.
 - (3) This local church in its congregational capacity supplied the three things necessary for this work of benevolence: Place, Provisions, and Personnel.
 - (4) For its work of benevolence it was the **WHO** that supplied the **MEANS** or took care of the **HOW**.
 - (5) Neither this church nor these men appointed over this business for this church became overseers of a brotherhood project of benevolent work for the needy either of local churches or the needy of the world around them. Neither were they authorized to do so!
 - (b) **The second possibility**: One church, or one group of saints, may send to a plurality of local churches to supply the needs of their needy saints, when the local churches where the needy saints are located are financially unable to supply their needs, Ac.11:26-30.
 - (1) Note **who** sent **what** to **whom** and **where** by **whom** and for what **purpose**.
 - (2) This “relief” for the needy brethren which dwelt in Judea was sent neither to a sponsoring-church eldership, nor to some

benevolent institution separate and apart from the local churches.

(c) **The third possibility**: Many local churches sending to one local church to supply the benevolent needs of its saints, where the churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia were divinely directed to send benevolent aid for the poor saints at Jerusalem, 1Cor.16:1-3; 2Co.8:1-5; 9:1,2; Rom.15:25-27.

(1) The reason for the sending is plain.

(2) How it was done is also evident.

(3) Once again God has shown us the **who**, the **how**, and the **why**!

C. WHAT LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY DOES NOT MEAN.

1. It doesn't mean that the local church is autonomous in the realm of faith, with the scriptural right to formulate its own laws or to decide its own work and worship plan.
2. It does not mean the local church has the scriptural right to change God's word and/or God's ordained work for the local church in any area or on any subject matter.
3. It does not mean one local church has the scriptural right to so arrange its self and its work so as to make decisions for, become the agent for, and/or direct any part of the affairs of another congregation's work, or to voluntarily surrender any part of its own work and/or oversight of its work to another congregation or separate institution.
4. It does not mean that the local church violates its autonomy or the autonomy of any other local church when engaging in trying to reach and teach brethren the error of their way where ever they are found when they are engaged in false teaching and in unscriptural practices.
5. It does not mean the local church has a scriptural right to appeal to "autonomy" as its defense when it is engaged in false teaching an sinful practice when such is being challenged by brethren, even by other local churches of Christ!
6. It does not mean its autonomy is violate when the local church finds it necessary to purchase the services of a separate body, a human institution, a business organization; such as: a power company; a transportation company; a construction company; a grocery company, even the services of a hospital association, etc.

D. WHEN LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY IS VIOLATED, OR LOST, OR VOLUNTARILY SURRENDERED.

1. When one local church becomes the agent of another local church of churches.
 - a. Because agency cannot exist among local churches without subordination – for the one is working through another to perform a part of its own work.
 - (1) In the matter of agency one church is subordinated to another; the one through which it is working.
 - (2) Either the contributing church tells the receiving church what to do, or the receiving church is authorized to act on its own as the agent for the contributing church.
 - (3) Equality, complete independence, and/or local church autonomy does not and cannot exist either way.
 - (4) The claim that it is voluntary rather than a case of usurpation or of forced or of unlawful seizure still doesn't mean that autonomy hasn't been surrendered, and that without divine authority!
 - b. The Sponsoring Church arrangement for congregational cooperation is an example of one church becoming the agent for another in violation of local church autonomy.
 - (1) According to Ac.20:28 and 1:et.5:1-3, elders are limited in their oversight to the church where they are elders.
 - (2) Therefore it is a violation of scriptural authority for elders of one local church to surrender any part of their oversight in the work of the church that they oversee, or to extend their oversight to any part of the work of another church were they are not overseers.
2. When human Evangelistic Societies, such as The American Christian Missionary Society, separate and apart from local churches, were set up as means of congregational cooperation, which divided brethren in years past.
 - a. Because there was and is no divine authority for N.T. churches to build and maintain such human organizations through which to do any part of their work.
 - b. The local church is the **WHO** ordained by God to do the work God assigned it. It is God's missionary society. It must, of course, use all necessary means and methods in doing its work. But it is the **WHO**.

- c. Human missionary societies become another WHO, an unauthorized WHO, using means and methods. Thus is not simply an authorized AID, but an ADDITION!
3. When a so-called “mission” church is established with the elders of another local church (the “mother” church) assuming its oversight.
 - a. Because such an arrangement violates the authority, oversight, and work of the eldership of the local church as specified in Ac.20:28; 1Pet.5:1-3.
4. When Benevolent Societies such as The Southern Christian Home, Morrilton, Ark. are built and maintained through which local churches may function in performing benevolent work.

III. CONCLUSION

1. We have thus defined our terms.
2. We have offered scriptural evidence for the matter of local church autonomy.
3. We have noted what local church autonomy does not mean.
4. We have made application of these scriptural principles by suggesting ways and means whereby local church autonomy is violated, or lost, or voluntarily surrendered.
5. It is never scriptural and or sinless when local church autonomy is violated, even if voluntarily surrendered!