

## The Autonomy of the Local Church

### Introduction

A. Many religious leaders claim to believe in local church autonomy.

1. Baptists: “Each church is an autonomous, spiritual democracy” (**Broadman Church Manual**. 147).

2. Institutional Brethren:

*We are all in agreement that each local church is separate and independent in organization from all other local churches. All of us are opposed to the destruction of autonomy.* (Lewis G. Hale, **How Churches Can Cooperate**. 77)

B. But these same leaders espouse practices that destroy local church autonomy.

1. Baptists: “Churches furnish the financial and leadership resources by which extensive work can be carried out by denominational bodies” (**Broadman Church Manual**. 148).

2. Institutional Brethren:

*There are hundreds of churches which send financial aid to help keep the program on the air (Herald of Truth - KS). They have no part in the management of the program. They have no part in the selection of the preacher, singers, nor sermon topics. Their part is solely that of financial assistance.* (Hale. 2)

C. How can each local church of Christ maintain its autonomy?

I. What is “autonomy”?

A. definition: “autonomy” - “the quality or state of being independent, free, and self-directing: individual or group freedom” (**Webster’s Third New International Dictionary**, unabridged. 148).

B. How does this principle apply to local churches of Christ?

1. NOT in legislative power (law making ability), for Christ is the sole head of the church and its only law giver. - Ephesians 1:22-23; James 4:12

2. Rather, it means the oversight of the execution of the will of Christ belongs within the local congregation and is not to be surrendered to outside control.

a. Elders are to be appointed in every church. - Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5

b. The elders have the oversight of and only of the work of the church of which they are members. - Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4

II. Why is autonomy important?

A. It is part of the New Testament pattern. - Colossians 3:17; 2 Timothy 1:13; Hebrews 8:4-5; 2 John 9-11

B. It protects the church from general apostasy. - Revelation 2:1-3,12-16; e.g., apples in barrel

C. Local people understand local problems and needs - e.g., selection of subject matter for radio program

### III. How is the autonomy of the local church maintained?

#### A. Each church is to independently do its own work.

1. preaching the gospel - Philippians 4:15-16
2. edifying its members - Acts 11:25-26
3. disciplining its own unruly members - 1 Corinthians 5:4-5
4. assembling to worship - Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:18
5. relieving its own needy - Acts 2:44-45

#### B. Local churches of Christ may engage in concurrent cooperation.

##### 1. Benevolence

###### a. The Judean Relief - Acts 11:27-30

- (1) condition: poverty in receiving churches - Acts 11:27-29
- (2) purpose: relief of needy brethren - Ibid
- (3) arrangement: contributing church sent directly to needy churches (no human organization or sponsoring congregation between) - Acts 11:29-30

###### b. The Great Collection for Jerusalem - Galatians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9; Romans 15:25-28; Acts 24:17

- (1) condition: deep poverty in receiving church - Galatians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2,13-14
- (2) purposes:
  - (a) relief of needy brethren - Romans 15:26
  - (b) equality between churches (each church to have the resources to meet its own benevolent needs) - 2 Corinthians 8:13-14
- (3) arrangement: Each contributing church sent directly to the needy church (no human organization or sponsoring congregation between) - 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:23

##### 2. Evangelism

###### a. A congregation may send teaching to another congregation. - Acts 11:22-23

###### b. A church may act alone in supporting a preacher working with another congregation. - Philippians 4:15-16

###### c. Several churches may independently and directly send wages to a preacher working with another congregation. - 2 Corinthians 11:8

##### 3. The New Testament pattern of congregational cooperation is concurrence (no pooling of resources by various congregations with common oversight).

###### a. No congregation acted as an agent for another congregation (Agency necessitates subordination).

###### b. No congregation assumed the oversight of any part of the work of another congregation or congregations.

###### c. Congregations did not pool resources under common oversight of either a board or an eldership.

###### d. The only reason one church sent funds to another church was for the relief of needy brethren in the receiving congregation.

###### e. The equality of each congregation relative to oversight was maintained.

#### IV. How can this autonomy be violated or destroyed?

##### A. Autonomy can be surrendered:

1. by force - e.g., Iraq invading Kuwait
2. voluntarily - e.g., various states forming United States of America

##### B. Many churches today have voluntarily sacrificed autonomy by:

1. setting up synods, conferences, conventions, or associations of churches
2. contributing to human organizations
3. contributing to sponsoring church arrangements such as “One Nation Under God”

#### Conclusion:

##### A. The principle of congregational autonomy is a vital part of the New Testament pattern for the church of Christ which we must carefully maintain.

*A congregation has no right to build anything larger than it is able to support. It has no right whatever to bind any other congregation to any program of work of its own selection. Each congregation must maintain its autonomy. Any effort that destroys the independence of the local congregation runs straight toward sectarianism, if not Romanism (E.R. Harper, “The Sponsoring Church,” 1939).*

##### B. The Lord in His great, divine wisdom made each local congregation of His people independent of every other congregation.

##### C. Congregational support of human organizations and the sponsoring church arrangement:

1. destroy the autonomy of local congregations,
2. are the same in principle as denominational synods, conferences, conventions, and associations, and
3. thus are the first giant steps in creating a “Church of Christ” denomination.

##### D. Let us determine to follow the divine pattern of congregational autonomy.