

The Autonomy of the Local Church

Introduction:

- A. One area that sharply distinguishes the Lord's church from the various denominations that exist, is its organization. The church is the organization through which God's wisdom is made known (Eph 3:9-11). It is a product of that wisdom and is organized by God. The head of the church is Jesus (Eph 1:18-23). Jesus then gave duties in turn (Ephesians 4:7, 11-13).
- B. The apostles and prophets were the foundation of church (Eph 2:19-22). The apostle's brought the teaching of God to the church (1 Thess 2:13). The church was expected to follow the teachings of the apostles (2 Thess 2:15). Their teachings were spread throughout all the churches (the local congregations) (1 Cor 4:17).
- C. Evangelists, also known as ministers or preachers, worked with local congregation strengthening the members and bringing new members into the fold. They also established new congregations. It does not require an evangelist to do these duties. Any male member of the church can accomplish these things, but the evangelist had made this his life's occupation (1 Cor 9:14). The preacher's purpose is to teach God's Word to people (1 Tim 1:3-8). They also see to the proper organization of the local church (Titus 1:5). While working with a specific congregation at a time, they may and often do, travel between congregations.
- D. Pastors, also known as elders or bishops, watch over the members of a local congregation (Acts 20:28). Their selection and oversight is local (Acts 14:23).
- E. Teachers are also charged with the instruction of members of a church

I. The Only Organized Entity Found In The New Testament Is The Local Church

- A. The apostles gave instructions to the church, but often fulfilled their duties while working with individual congregations.
- B. We can see the local church mentioned in 1 Cor 1:2
- C. Some letters show the organization - Phil 1:1
- D. All Christians are expected to join with a local congregation to fulfill their duties
 - 1. Saul was a member of the church in Damascus - Acts 9:19-20
 - 2. When he moved to Jerusalem, he joined the church there - Acts 9:26-28
- E. There are duties Christians must carry out as a part of a local group
 - 1. Christians come together to worship on the first day of the week - Acts 20:7
 - 2. They gather to partake of the Lord's Supper - 1 Cor 11:17-22
 - 3. The collection for a common treasury is taken on the first day of the week - 1 Cor 16:1-2
 - 4. It is important for Christians not to avoid the assembly times - Heb 10:25
 - 5. We work together, each using his best talents, for the church - Rom 12:3-8

II. Each Church Is Autonomous

- A. Apostles were the only ones given the authority to tell churches what to do.
- B. Elders are only over a single church
 - 1. Appointed in every church - Acts 14:23
 - 2. They had a certain flock they were responsible for - Acts 20:28
 - 3. They lived and worked among that flock - 1 Pet 5:2
- C. Each church was responsible for its own work
 - 1. Churches might send and support preachers to other locations
 - a. Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to help build the church there - Acts 11:22
 - b. The church in Philippi did what other churches did not do. They sent funds to support the Apostle Paul in his work - Phil 4:15-16
 - c. Other churches supported Paul while he worked in Corinth - 2 Cor 11:8
 - 2. Local churches cared for its members - Acts 4:32-37
 - a. When the work became too much for the apostles to handle, local men were selected to tend to the work - Acts 6:3

3. Local churches also selected local men to be messengers in sending benevolence to other churches whose members were in need.
 - a. The church was to pick their messenger - 1 Cor 16:1-4
 - b. The actual sending of funds - 2 Cor 8:1-6, 16-24
 - c. Note that the only time a church sent funds to another church was when the local church was unable to care for its needy. Even then the autonomy of the churches was maintained. The funds were delivered to the hands of the local elders who then determined the distribution of the funds. - Acts 11:27-30
- D. Many brethren talk about local autonomy, but don't practice it.
 1. Members of one congregation have no right in getting involved in the work of another congregation.
 - a. Yet large congregations will nobly offer to help a small work. They build or repair the building for them. They hire a preacher for them. They set the advertising budget and even send the ads.
 - b. In many ways the decisions are done by the distant congregation and not by the local group.
 2. A form of this is sometimes referred to as a sponsoring church arrangement. One church will decide to create TV and radio ads, so they ask other churches to send them funds, then they will create the ads and even pay for having them broadcasted in the other churches' areas.
 - a. Notice though the local group has given up say in the contents of the ads, where they are broadcasted, and when they are broadcasted.
 - b. They are no longer autonomous
 3. Another method is to set up an organization independent of the church, but whose board happens to be made up of the elders of a local church. This organization then solicits funds from other churches to do such work as
 - a. Disaster relief
 - b. The sending of preachers to other parts of the world
 - c. Care for abandoned children or the elderly.
 - d. These are not bad works, but the organization is not the local church, nor does the local churches control the use of their funds.

III. *But Didn't The Church In Jerusalem Tell The Other Churches What To Believe?*

- A. It was not a conference of churches
 1. Antioch had problems with men from Judea teaching false doctrine - Acts 15:1
 2. That church sent representatives to the source of the problem (Jerusalem) - Acts 15:2-4
 3. This was not a conference of churches but one church dealing with a problem caused by members of another church.
- B. It was the local church who considered the matter - Acts 15:6
- C. The local church (singular) decided to send out a letter - Acts 15:22
 1. They chose as messengers two of the men from Antioch as well as two of their own members.
 2. The letter addresses the fact that the false teachers were not going out by the authority of the church in Jerusalem - Acts 15:23-24
 3. The men sent were to verify the truth of the letter - Acts 15:25-27
 4. They clarified their teaching - Acts 15:28-29
 - a. You could say this was telling the other churches what to believe.
 - b. Since the Apostles were a part of the writing and delivering of the letter, they had the right to do so.
 - c. But without apostles to back them, no church can do so today.
 5. It was received as a letter of encouragement - Acts 15:30-35
- D. This doesn't even come close to the religious conferences in the denominations today.

1. Here representatives come from various congregation in different regions to consider matters that are brought up for a vote.
2. Proclamations are issued as to the denominations official stance on the issues addressed.
3. Member churches are expected to follow the decision or leave the association.

Conclusion:

- A. The organization of the church was established by the wisdom of God. Man might think he can improve on it, but God knew what He was doing.
- B. For example, the autonomy of the local churches prevents Satan from corrupting all the churches at once. There is no way for Satan to get all the churches to be told that abortion is allowable, or that homosexual marriages will be permitted, or that women don't have to submit to their husbands.
- C. Many churches might get caught up in false doctrine, but not all.