

GLAD TIDINGS

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Local church autonomy

By :

While the word “autonomy” does not appear in our New Testaments, the concept is clearly revealed. The word has two components essential to its meaning. “Auto”, meaning “self”, and “nomy” meaning “law” or “rule”. Therefore, when speaking of autonomy, we are speaking of self-rule.

Such concept can be seen in God’s design for the local church. Elders, who serve the Lord’s church as overseers (bishops) and shepherds (pastors), are restricted in their particular work to the local church of which they are a member. Peter emphasizes this when he writes, “Tend the flock of God *which is among you*, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God...” (I Peter 5:2). While these qualified men were appointed in “every church” (Acts 14:23), their sphere of overseeing, thus making decisions affecting the church, is limited to the local group of Christians among them. Apostasy from this pattern has led to unscriptural organization structures of both Catholicism and Denominationalism.

Each local church is to be

self-ruling, but a local church must make sure its exercise of “autonomy” is properly founded in order to remain a sound church. Let us point out two Scriptural principles that will help in this area.

First, no church has the *autonomy* to do that which it does not have the *authority* to do. “And whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17). God never designed the local church to make up its own rules for fellowship. The name or authority of the Lord must first be established.

For example, no local church has the autonomy to give God’s speed to a false teacher. John writes, “If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works” (2 John 10-11). Elders may overlook the false teaching of a preacher, encouraging the local brethren to receive him. But they do not have the autonomy to do so, and remain a healthy church before God. If so, then a new definition of sound-

ness has been autonomously invented: local brethren partaking in evil works! Self rule of the local church must first be established upon the universal rule of God’s authoritative Word.

Secondly, preaching the truth never violates any local church’s autonomy. “Righteousness and holiness of truth” is the foundation upon which our new life in Christ is based (Ephesians 4:24). While Paul honored local church autonomy (I Corinthians 16:3-4), he exposed the error of the same local church for not disciplining a brother who had his father’s wife (I Corinthians 5:1-13). Preachers today can take the same truth Paul preached and expose the error of churches having fellowship with those who are living in adulterous relationships, without violating any church’s autonomy (2 Thessalonians 2:15). There is no rightful claim of autonomy apart from the truth of the Gospel

Some today are using local church autonomy to try to silence the voices of truth - The truth that they themselves are not willing to preach and/or apply in the local church of which they are a member.