

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

(Jerry Fite)

While the word “autonomy” does not appear in the New Testament, 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 a concept is 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 oversight to the particular 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...*” (1 Peter 5:2). While these qualified men are appointed in “every church” (Acts 14:23), their sphere of overseeing in making decisions affecting the church is limited to the local group of Christians among them.

Apostasy from this pattern has led to an unscriptural organization structure of Catholicism. The church, beginning in the second century, soon made a distinction between “elders” and “bishops”. In the New Testament, “elders,” “bishops” and “shepherds (pastors)” were the same group of men (cf. Acts 20:17,28). Ignoring this New Testament pattern, bishops soon possessed authority over elders, and the recog-

nized bishops, in A.D. 606, designated one from among them with the authority over the church. We know him today as the “Pope”.

Each local church is to be self-ruled. 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 from God’s Word.

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 authority to do so, and such a group will not 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! Again, “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 (1 Corinthians 16:3-4), he exposed the error of the same local church for not disciplining a brother who had his father’s wife (1 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 use local church autonomy 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. Some churches of Christ are introducing mechanical instruments of music into their worship, while labeling voices of truth as factious, when they are establishing “singing” as the type of music God has authorized in Christ through His Word (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16). Truth does not violate autonomy; and autonomy does not ignore truth.