

CONGREGATIONAL AUTONOMY

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TEXT:

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23).

INTRODUCTION:

1) The subject of this lesson is “Congregational Autonomy”.

(1) Want to consider with two aspects.

(2) Independence of the church, then cooperation of the local church with sister congregations

3) Brief outline of church autonomy:

(1) The government of the local church.

(2) The independence of the local church.

(3) The cooperation of the church.

I. THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH.

1) In order for any organization to operate successfully, must have some form of government.

(1) Our country; schools, colleges

(2) Absence of government results in anarchy & chaos.

2) Some misconceptions of church's government:

(1) We live in a democracy (vote, operate according to the people; change laws, etc.)

(2) The church of our Lord is not a democracy.

3) The church of Christ is a monarchy.

4) “And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

5) “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18).

6) “There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that

judgest another?" (James 4:12).

7) "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18).

8) There are two senses of the word "church." Universal, local

(1) Universal- "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18), (Jesus is the Head, no vicar or Bishop of the church!)

(2) Local - Corinth, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Colosse, etc.

(3) The local church when scripturally & fully organized has a plurality of men serving as elders & deacons.

(4) "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23).

(5) "Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:" (Philippians 1:1).

II. THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH.

1) "Autonomy" - "self-governing" (each congregation is self-governing under the direction of Christ - no metropolitan bishop, etc)

2) Each congregation is to have a plurality of qualified men serving as elders (bishops, pastors).

(1) "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17).

(2) "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

(3) "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23).

(4) "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:" (Titus 1:5).

3) These men are to serve as the "overseers" of the local congregation. "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;" (1Peter 5:2).

4) Their oversight (ruling, authority) is limited to the local congregation.

(1) "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (1Peter 5:1-3).

(2) Also for elders to remember that authority is in the eldership - not one elder.

(3) A local congregation in one location doesn't have authority over any other congregation.

III. COOPERATION OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

1) Does autonomy of the church rule out cooperation, fellowship with other congregations?

2) The answer is NO!

(1) "Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;"

(Acts 15:22-28).

(2) "Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account" (Philippians 4:15-17).

(3) "I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service" (2Corinthians 11:8), (note "**churches**").

(4) The great commission implies cooperation.

(5) "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen"

(Matthew 28:18-20).

(6) "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the

gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

3) The assistance that one church may give to another may involve physical needs and/or spiritual needs.

(1) “And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul”

(Acts 11:27-30).

(2) “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God” (2Corinthians 8:1-5).

(3) “And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them” (Acts 15:23-32).

(4) “I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service” (2Corinthians 11:8).

4) Does a church lose its autonomy because it transfers some funds to another?

(1) No; if so the church could not cooperate at all (Couldn't send money to a preacher, etc)

(2) The church in the 1st century did not lose its autonomy when transferred funds.

(3) “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their

joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God" (2Corinthians 8:1-5).

5) Someone says: What if they teach error? **Stop the support!** (Apply to local situation)

6) Can a false teacher hide under blanket of "autonomy?"

(1) NO!

(2) Does congregation have any right to oppose false teacher in another congregation!

(3) "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

(4) "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7:15).

(5) "Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." (Matthew 16:6).

(6) "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme" (1Timothy 1:19-20).

(7) Such gives false teacher free course:

(8) "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake" (Titus 1:9-11).

7) Sound congregations need to work together. "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building" (1Corinthians 3:9).

CONCLUSION:

1) The church of Christ is the greatest institution in the world.

(1) Planned of God, established by Christ,

(2) Contains the saved, headed to heaven

2) It is organized the way God wants it. Christ as the head, Locally - elders as overseers,

3) May we appreciate the wisdom in God's arrangement and then cooperate in

the wonderful work that God has given us to accomplish .