

AUTONOMOUS CHURCHES

God created the church just as he wanted her to be. He designed her government in a way that would best serve her across the ages.

* He appointed Christ to be head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22). This appointment will last until the Lord delivers the kingdom up to the Father following the resurrection (I Cor. 15:24-28). Thus there is no place for popes, patriarchs, presidents, general secretaries, presiding bishops or any other human ruler over Christ's church.

* He ordained that each local congregation be independent and self-governing, amenable only to Christ the founder, head of the church. This is the meaning of "autonomous." Thus no provision is made for an umbrella organization to oversee the affairs of multiple congregations. There is no authority for synods, presbyteries, conventions, associations, councils or any other governing body beyond the local church, whether city or county-wide, regional, national or international.

* God's plan is that each congregation have its own leaders. Paul and Barnabas "appointed for them elders in every church" (Acts 14:23).

* Each congregation selects its own leaders (Acts 6:3-6). Standards for the kind of leaders God wants for his church are provided in I Timothy 3:1-9 and Titus 1:5-9.

* Elders oversee only the flock of God which is among them (I Pet. 5:2). They have no authority to intervene in the affairs of any other congregation. As good shepherds they are expected to lead the flock and feed them as God has directed in his Word (Acts 20:27-28). Thus they must be men "holding to the faithful word, according to the teaching" (Tit. 1:9).

WHAT AUTONOMY MEANS IN THE DAILY LIFE OF A CONGREGATION

* Each congregation chooses her own preacher with the guidance of her elders. They have the exclusive right to employ him or dismiss him when they judge it to be in the best interest of the church.

* They alone decide how their contributions will be spent; what projects they will or will not support and when or if they will cease to support something.

* They will chose the kind of meeting house they will have and where it will be located. Whether it is plain or fine is of no one else's concern.

* They have full authority to decide whom they will invite to speak for their congregation.

* They determine whom they will or will not fellowship.

* No other body of Christians can make financial assessments on them. They are subject to no decrees issued by others.

* One church cannot interfere in the internal affairs of another congregation.

* When a strong church helps a mission church, they will not try to exert control over its affairs after it is launched.

* Autonomy implies the right to make your own decisions even if they are wrong. A congregation and its leaders answer only to God for their choices (Rom. 14:4).

* No one can ban or disqualify the minister of another congregation. Only their elders can do so.

* This is fundamental is often neglected by Christians who are tempted to inject themselves into the affairs of sister churches. For example, another congregation's choice for their preacher, what they pay him, whom they select for their eldership, special speakers they invite, their participation in some brotherhood event we disapprove of. When some heresy arises, some demand that other elders sign a statement opposing it. Even if we are correct in our judgments, we are wrong for being meddlers in other men's matters (I Pet. 4:15).

THE WISDOM OF GOD'S PLAN FOR AUTONOMOUS CHURCHES

* Where there is an overarching governing authority, Satan needs only to capture the head and he will have control of the entire body of the church. With local autonomy he may capture one church, but the rest can refuse to follow. Since each congregation stands alone and charts its own course, they can protect themselves against the error.

* With congregational autonomy, error can easily be quarantined and left to die out.

WHAT AUTONOMY DOES NOT FORBID

* We do not violate autonomy when we share information with other churches or when we encourage them to do the

right thing and reject error.

* Autonomy does not prohibit congregations from cooperating together. The churches in Macedonia and Achaia cooperated in assisting the church in Jerusalem (II Cor. 9:1-2). JHW

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