

Functions and Malfunctions of Church Autonomy

Introduction

1. It is important that we understand the intentionality of Christ's revelation and submit to its pattern to avoid hindering its divine objective.
 2. God's ways are always better – **Isaiah 55:8-9**
 3. We must lean on His ways – **Proverbs 3:5-8** – individually and congregationally.
 4. One important topic to consider from God's will is church organization and government. Christ designed and built His church with intentionality, and we must submit to His pattern.
- I. What is church autonomy?
- A. The Church – Universal and Local
 - a. **Universal** – **Acts 2:47** – all the saved.
 - i. Not comprised of churches.
 - ii. Comprised of saved individuals.
 - b. **Local** – **Romans 16:16** – plurality respective of location. (Local group of believers joined together to form a congregation.)
 - i. Paul planted churches – **Romans 15:20; 1 Corinthians 3:6, 10; 4:15**
 - ii. But Christ built the church (universal) – **Matthew 16:18**
 - c. **An understanding of the distinction between the universal church and local churches is important in the discussion of church organization.**
 - B. Church Organization is On the Local Level
 - a. The only organization for the universal church – **Ephesians 1:22-23** – singular head of singular body. (**cf. Matthew 28:18**)
 - b. **There is no universal organizational structure of the church on earth according to scripture – dioceses, synods, conferences, conventions, councils, etc.**
 - c. **Organization** – **Philippians 1:1** – all the saints in Philippi, bishops (elders, pastors), deacons.
 - C. Autonomy is Local Church Self-Government
 - a. **Autonomy** – from *autos* 'self' + *nomos* 'law' – the right or condition of self-government (New Oxford American Dictionary)
 - b. **Leadership** – **Acts 14:23** – elders appointed in every church.
 - i. Elders have the rule – **1 Timothy 3:5; 5:17; Hebrews 13:17**
 - ii. The rule is limited to the locality of the respective congregation – **Acts 20:17, 28**
 1. **"flock"** – i.e. complete and singular – of Ephesus.
 2. **"among which"** – i.e. the specific flock – the Holy Spirit made them overseers in the Ephesian church.
 3. **1 Peter 5:2** – the flock which is among you – limiting it to locality.
 - c. This is not "self-government" in the sense of entire freedom, but in exercising submission to the Chief Shepherd – **1 Peter 5:4**

- iii. While other Christians and churches become apostate, this church can remain faithful.
- b. The Lord's letters to the 7 churches in Asia demonstrates this point – **Revelation 2-3**
 - i. Out of the 7, only 2 are not admonished for wrong, but encouraged to remain faithful – **Smyrna (2:10)**, **Philadelphia (3:11-12)**
 - ii. **The other 5 are charged with and admonished for sin, and told to repent:**
 - 1. **Ephesus – 2:4-5** – left first love.
 - 2. **Pergamos – 2:14-16** – tolerant of false teachers, compromise.
 - 3. **Thyatira – 2:20-23** – tolerant of false teachers, idolatry.
 - 4. **Sardis – 3:2-3** – works not found perfect.
 - 5. **Laodicea – 3:15-16, 19** – lukewarm, complacent.
 - iii. **Smyrna was faithful – 2:9** – made the decision to not cave to pressure.
 - iv. **Philadelphia was faithful – 3:8, 10** – did not deny Jesus, but persevered.
- C. Glorifies Christ's Eternal Plan
 - a. Christ's eternal plan concerned the church – **Ephesians 3:10-12, 20-21**
 - i. His pattern for EVANGELISM – **Acts 13:1-3** – a local church sending forth men to preach the gospel.
 - ii. His pattern for EDIFICATION – **Ephesians 4:16** – parts of the body of a local church edifying itself.
 - iii. His pattern for BENEVOLENCE – **Romans 15:25-26** – respective congregations (Macedonia, Achaia) sending funds to Jerusalem.
 - b. Each local congregation is given the same work – **1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:1** – each congregation to adhere to the same pattern – no more, no less.
 - i. EQUALITY
 - c. Each local congregation is judged based on their own ability – **2 Corinthians 8:10-12**
 - i. Attempts at efforts beyond ability lead to problems.
 - ii. INDEPENDENCE
 - d. **Any other pattern fails to bring glory to Christ's eternal plan:**
 - i. **Sponsoring church** – larger congregation receiving funds from smaller congregations to do work that is too big for them to do themselves.
 - 1. **Surrender of autonomy** – they aren't over the decisions concerning the use of money.
 - 2. **Surrender of independence and equality** – now they become dependent, and unequal/insufficient.

- a. When this occurs, their fulfillment of Christ's command for evangelism or benevolence is truly farmed out to another congregation.
 - b. There cannot be a fulfillment of local congregational responsibility by proxy.
 - ii. **Human institutions** – missionary society, orphans' and widows' homes, etc.
 - iii. **ALL ADDITIONS TO THE PATTERN IMPLY THE INSUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST'S ORDER AND AUTHORITY TO ACCOMPLISH THE TASK HE GAVE THE LOCAL CHURCH – when we don't adhere to the way Christ revealed, it reflects poorly on our estimation of Him.**
- III. Malfunctions of Church Autonomy
 - A. Deciding Doctrine and Practice
 - a. While most would not concede the position that autonomy allows them the right to decide on doctrine and practice, it is nevertheless true that some churches/Christians have shown such position by the fruits they bear.
 - i. When it is decided they "aren't going to do it the way others are doing it," and justify such by autonomy, when "the way others are doing it" is based in scriptural, unalterable pattern.
 - ii. With many things there IS just ONE way of doing it.
 - b. The foundation is Christ and the apostles – **Ephesians 2:19-22** – they dictate doctrine and practice.
 - i. **Colossians 2:16-19** – not the teachings which have an earthly/human origin, but holding fast to the HEAD (authority).
 - ii. **Colossians 2:6-7** – established in the faith – objective standard.
 - c. Autonomy does not speak to uniqueness in every way – **1 Corinthians 14:33, 36-38**
 - i. His standards are the same for each local church (**cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1**).
 - ii. To reject this is to be rejected – **"But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized." (v. 38, NASB)**
 - d. The Holy Spirit revealed will of Christ is binding on ALL congregations – **Acts 15:28-31; 16:4-5** – letter concerning circumcision and Gentile position in Christ sent to multiple churches who were to submit.
 - B. Insulation from Criticism
 - a. Many brethren have appealed to church autonomy as they have cried out against criticism from others who cited scripture in disagreement with their doctrine and practices.
 - b. Some preachers and congregations have charged others with violating church autonomy who have publicly rebuked, admonished, and denounced the error of other preachers or congregations.

- c. Does autonomy prohibit outside individual Christians or congregations from rebuking, admonishing, and attempting to correct the error of other Christians or congregations?
- d. Was Paul violating autonomy? – **Colossians 2:1-10; 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15**
- e. Was John violating autonomy? – **2 John 9-11; 3 John 9-11**
- f. Was Barnabas violating autonomy? – **Acts 11:22-24**
- g. **THE PROCLAMATION OF TRUTH DOES NOT VIOLATE AUTONOMY – 2 Timothy 3:16-17** – because it is the King's decree.

Conclusion

1. As children of God, it is our duty to discover God's will for all things and submit to it.
2. We must not question the authority and wisdom behind God's design, but fully trust Him by submitting to it.
3. An accurate understanding of these truths (like autonomy) is extremely important, because a misunderstanding produces confusion, error and sinful practice.
4. Let us submit to God's ruling on local church autonomy without abusing it to suit ungodly agendas.