



ISSUE

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April 26, 2020

Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon

Ryan Ferguson

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McNear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Kevin Wise

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

The Challenges of Congregational Autonomy

By Kyle Pope

The Bible teaches that Jesus came to earth to build His church (Matt. 16:18). This was accomplished on the day of Pentecost when those who obeyed the gospel at the preaching of the apostles were added to the church (Acts 2:47). Having all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18) Jesus acts as **“Head over all things to the church”** (Eph. 1:22). Individual congregations of believers recognize the headship of Jesus, yet are governed by a plurality of leaders chosen from the congregation based on qualifications revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; Acts 20:28). These leaders are called **“bishops”** or **“overseers”** (Gr. *episcopos*); **“pastors”** or **“shepherds”** (Gr. *poimen*); and **“elders”** or **“presbyters”** (Gr. *presbyteros*) but all these names represent the same position of leadership over a local congregation (see 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Scripture teaches no organization or leadership higher than the eldership of a local congregation yet lower than the headship of Christ.

Those who seek to follow the Scriptural pattern of church organization through the years have correctly rejected all human efforts to impose upon the church any superstructure which attempts to control local congregations. The Biblical pattern of congregational independence is clear. Although the Bible never uses the term **“autonomous”** to describe this independence, the principle is inferred by the very silence of Scripture regarding any structure higher than the local church, as well as the charge given to the elders of local congregations to **“shepherd the church of God which is among you”** (1 Pet. 5:2). While the autonomy of the local church is a Biblical principle, it is not without its challenges. Let’s consider a few such challenges:

Autonomy is not self-legislation.

The word “autonomy” is derived from the Greek words *auto* meaning “self, or same” and *nomos* meaning “law”—thus the idea is “a law unto themselves” (or “self-governing”). This term might give us the wrong impression. It might lead us to imagine that each congregation is left to *govern themselves*. Certainly in matters of judgment this is true. Yet this doesn’t mean that each congregation may decide for itself what it should teach or how it should function—that is determined by the Head—Jesus. He governs through what is revealed in Scripture. This is what Jesus described after His teaching on discipline when He declared, literally “**whatever you bind on earth WILL HAVE BEEN BOUND in Heaven**” (Matt. 18:18, emphasis and translation mine). While no human being has the right to tell a congregation what it should do, Jesus Christ does have that right. Our efforts to seek truth must lead us to conform to His will, not to imagine we can set the rules for ourselves.

Individual efforts may parallel the work of the church.

The Scriptural pattern of congregational independence means not only that congregations must never surrender control to another organization (i.e. a convention, synod, diocese, etc.), but also that it must not surrender its work and responsibility to another organization (i.e. missionary society, school, children’s home, etc.). Brethren since early in the last century have correctly opposed the denominational moves of many congregations to financially support human institutions. Such support is unscriptural and reflects a move away from the pattern of Scripture. If something is the work of the church—the church must carry it out. If it is not—the church has no business being involved in it!

The challenge comes when efforts carried out by individuals parallel work for which the church is also responsible. In matters of benevolence this seems a little clearer to us. For example, although the church is authorized to support qualified widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16), we understand that it does not rob the church of its glory if a widow can support herself. In matters of teaching this becomes a little harder for us to see. Must all efforts to teach the gospel be under the control and oversight of the local church? I’m not talking about rejecting the authority of the elders, but let’s just say that an opportunity arises to teach in our workplace or some other venue—most of us would recognize that this is not in conflict with the work of the church if I engage in a private Bible study which I have organized. What if this opportunity involved some other Christians in the same venue? Does the fact that a group of individual Christians teach mean that the local church must assume oversight of this for it to be Scriptural?

We have correctly argued through the years that members of the church acting as individuals in things that are not the work of the church does not constitute the church taking action. As a result, Christians as individuals may have a potluck, play a ball game, or go fishing together—even though the church collectively has no right to build a kitchen, sponsor a ball game, or plan a fishing trip. Why doesn’t the same thing hold true for



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those works which both the church and the individual share? For example, Lois and Eunice taught Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5). They did so in their responsibility to him as family. Would this have been a rejection of the work of the church? Of course not. Autonomy doesn't mean that our rights and responsibilities to teach the truth are limited to only what can be done in and through the local church.

Production of Bible study tools. The role of the church as the **"pillar and ground of the truth"** (1 Tim. 3:15) grants to it the authority to provide the tools necessary to teach the Bible. Many local churches fulfill this role by writing and printing their own handouts, Bible class material, bulletins, or other tools. Does that mean that all literature must be produced by the local church? Do individuals or groups of individual Christians have the right to produce Bible study tools?

A number of years ago a brother who was considering worshiping where I preached expressed concern over efforts made by Christians acting together as individuals to produce Bible study literature. He worried that this represented an effort to exercise control over individual congregations. I understand his concern. Many denominations have created superstructures and publishing houses which regulate literature used by their denomination (e.g. Watchtower Society, Southern Baptist Convention, etc.). However, there is a difference between a human institution presuming to mandate what literature churches must use (with local churches then accepting that mandate) and brethren as individuals making literature available to churches or individuals.

Consider an example—I know of no local church which undertakes the work and expense of printing its own Bibles. Instead, they purchase Bibles from publishing houses which are often denominational if not secular in nature. Is that a rejection of church autonomy? No. We understand that not all churches could manage the expense, time demands, expertise, and equipment necessary to carry out such an effort. Now, if the time came in America when Bibles were not available or reliable, then churches would have to assume that work—but at present that is not necessary. If we understand this, why is it any different if individual Christians provide study tools? It does not compromise autonomy if brethren as individuals help in a work which the church shares. What is ironic is the fact that brethren who

might take issue with the efforts of Christians to produce Bible study literature think nothing about purchasing Bibles, reference books, or literature from denominational bookstores at the mall or down the street. Does it somehow preserve autonomy to rely on sources subject to denominational error but then oppose efforts made by sound brethren to teach the truth? If we are going to accept the principle of church autonomy we must also recognize that it does not compromise this autonomy for Christians as individuals to do what is necessary (and within the bounds of Scriptural limitations) to provide brethren with tools that are sound and Scriptural.

Independence is not isolation. It is not the business or right of any other congregation to meddle in the affairs of another congregation nor to try and dictate its behavior. However, being children of God means something. John teaches that those who have fellowship with God the Father, are in fellowship with others in fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3). In Christ, we are brethren. We must **"love the brotherhood"** (1 Pet. 2:17). Congregational independence doesn't mean that we ignore the spiritual well-being of our brethren in other places. Paul didn't do that. When the churches in Galatia began to give way to error, he wrote to them (Gal. 1:6-9). Jesus led John to write to seven



different churches of vastly different strengths and weaknesses at a time when John himself was exiled on Patmos (Rev. 1-3). Someone might argue, “yes, but they were apostles.” That’s true, but does that mean we should close our eyes and ears to the needs of our brethren?

Imagine a situation in which a brother in Christ gave way to sin and became a drunkard, a thief, a drug abuser, a rapist, a child-molester, or

even a murderer. In spite of the best efforts of the brethren in his congregation, he refused to repent but then chose to leave and identify with another congregation. Does autonomy mean that his brethren should ignore his unrepentance and close their eyes to the danger to his own soul, or even the physical well-being of those in the congregation to which he has moved? In some cases, in the types of sins mentioned, criminal law itself would count it as complicity to remain silent. Would it not constitute spiritual complicity

in sin to fail to help our brethren restore such a one, or guard themselves against the physical or spiritual damage such a one might cause? This is not to say that brethren and elderships should become private detectives, talebearers, backbiters, or gossips. Certainly, the conditions would be different if such a brother or sister was repentant. However, the point is that if carried too far we can allow an extreme concept of autonomy to lead us to “walk by on the other side” while our brethren lie in the ditch of error, hardship, and sin (cf. Luke 10:25-37). That is not love. That is not the Biblical pattern.



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