

## What Does Autonomy Really Mean As It Relates To The Church of Christ?

### Defining our term:

- A. **Polity** – It is the system by which the Church is governed.
- B. **Local autonomy** is – a congregation in a particular address having the right to rule itself. “Local” speaks of the neighborhood that the congregation exists in, and “autonomy” in Greek is *autonomos* – “*auto*” means self and “*nomos*” means law or rule. Autonomy means a congregation exercising the right of self-rule.

Where does our Lord fit into the life of the local congregation since He has all authority (Matt. 28:18)? “All authority has been giving to Me...”

Paul also encourages the brethren in Corinth, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1Cor. 11:1).

The question for our discussion is important for this reason: Since each congregation of the Lord’s people follow the inspired teaching of the apostle, in what area of its life does a congregation can exercise self-rule?

Although the Lord expects each congregation of faithful followers to reach its highest level of church organization, self-rule is a byproduct of the form of government that the local congregation seeks to follow. Self-rule is quite different from church organization in that a congregation can be scripturally organized, but at the same time is not self-ruled.

Three of the most prevailing forms of church government are:

### 1. **Episcopal**

This form of church government takes its name from the Greek word *episkopos* which means bishop, or overseer. In the Episcopal church, however, this is two separate offices.

- A. Elders are those who work with the local congregation.
- B. A bishop or a group of bishops on the other hand are those persons who exercise oversight over a group of congregations called a diocese. In some denominations there is still a higher level where an archbishop has the authority over those bishops...

1. Roman Catholicism follows this pattern of church government:
  - a. Pope → Archbishops → Bishops in a given area → bishops over Priests in his diocese with each priest supervising his local congregation.
2. The Anglican/Church of England and the Episcopal Church follow this pattern of government.

Here, self-rule in a local setting is nonexistent. The rule is from top down and all properties belong to the head Roman church.

## II. Presbyterian

The Presbyterian system of church government is different from the Episcopal in two ways. First, no distinction is made between bishop and elders. The oversight of the local congregation is the responsibility of the elders. Second, the elders are chosen by the local congregation. The elders chosen are called “Sessions” who are the ruling body of that local congregation. Presbyterianism breaks down their eldership into:

- A. “Ruling Elders” are those who govern the various activities of their church.
- B. “Teaching Elders” are made up of the ordained minister who carry out the teaching aspect of the congregation.
- C. From these two groups... a selected body of men is given a higher authority that is called the “Presbytery.” This group has the ruling authority over all the congregations in its care. The local congregation does not own the church property.
- D. Above the Presbytery are appointed “representative authority” such as the **Synods** and the **General Assemblies** which are courts of appeal when decisions at the lower level cannot be finalized.

Presbyterianism takes its form of church government from Acts 15. When the local congregations round about could not agree upon the question of Gentile circumcision, they appealed to the higher court of the apostles.

Question: what is wrong with the appeal to Acts 15 as proof text for their form of church government?

### III. Congregationalism

Congregationalism takes a bottom up approach in church government. It is the responsibility of each congregation to choose elders and deacons to serve the local body of worshippers. These elders taking the oversight, and with the help of the deacons carry out the duties for which they are appointed. A key concept in this form of church government is *local autonomy* or self-rule.

No governing board is appointed to tell the local congregations what to do. The local congregation owns its properties, elect its elders, choose its ministries and generally speaking make its own decisions. What scriptural is this group appealing to? Acts 14:23; 20:17; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1-5; 1Peter 5:1-2.

The Church of Christ is not the only group who practice this form of church polity. The Christian Church, some Baptist churches, Disciples of Christ, Congregationalist and other outlying assemblies who have no connections with major groups of denominations.

1. What is also at the heart of the question of local autonomy is this: Does God have a pattern for His Church as we examine local congregations in their present setting?
  - A. The answer to the above question is yes – Romans 6:17; 2Timothy 1:13.

While a local congregation will exercise the right of self-rule in matters of expediency. Divine law, however, supersedes self-rule in matters that are regulated by the word of God (the organization of the church, entrance into the church, the worship... ). Autonomy means self-rule, not isolation from other congregation, and local is not license for congregation apostasy.