

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Church Autonomy

By Joe R. Price

The New Testament shows how local churches organize and function. The New Testament churches of Christ were independent groups of saints (Rom. 16:16). Each congregation, overseen by elders and served by deacons, worshiped and worked under the authority of Christ (Acts 14:23; 20:28-32; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:2). These independent churches did not have a worldwide organization directing and controlling them. One church did not govern other churches, nor did one church “sponsor” another church. Each church independently governed itself under the authority of Christ (Acts 2:42; Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 3:17). Church autonomy involves independence, freedom from the control of any other church, centralized power, ruling hierarchy, or denominational organization.

Church Autonomy Means...

1. ...each church selects its own leadership. For instance, elders were appointed in “*every church*,” according to God’s pattern (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). One church does not make such decisions for another church.
2. ...each church makes its own decisions about its work. Each church is independent to make decisions about its work of benevolence, edification and evangelism (Acts 6:1-6; 11:22, 27-30; 13:1-3; 20:20-32; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; 11:8; Phil. 4:14-16; 1 Cor. 5:4-5).
3. ...each church is ruled by the authority of Christ. Each church governs itself by the authority of Christ, which was revealed by His apostles (1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:4, 6-7).
4. ...each church is subject to its own elders. Members of each church “*obey those who rule over*” them (Heb. 13:17). The rule of elders does not extend beyond the local church of which they are members (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 14:23). Elders who oversee additional churches violate the Scriptural pattern of the local rule of elders.

Church Autonomy Does Not Mean...

1. ...each church settles truth for itself. This troubling and unscriptural view of church autonomy has once again reared its ugly head. While it is true that autonomy means the right of self-governance, autonomy does not mean each church establishes its own truth. Divine revelation establishes truth, not congregational autonomy (Eph. 3:3-5; Jude 3-4). Truth is settled in heaven, and it has been revealed to mankind (Psa. 119:89; Matt. 16:19; 1 Cor. 2:7-13).
2. ...each church is immune from “outside” examination, teaching, reproof, rebuke and correction over what it teaches and practices. Making its own decisions does not exempt a church from inspection by others (cf. the seven churches of Asia, Rev. 2-3). Imagine for a moment, the teaching that went out from Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:8). According to this immunity view of autonomy, when the church in Berea heard what Thessalonica was teaching, it would not be allowed to “*search the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11). Furthermore, the Bereans would not be allowed to send someone to Thessalonica in the event they heard false teaching coming from there. They would have to say, “*We don’t have to worry about what is going on in Thessalonica. They are autonomous. It doesn’t matter what’s happening there.*” That is simply unscriptural. Paul sent to know of their faithfulness (1 Thess. 3:5). Berea could follow his example. So can we, without violating autonomy.

Consider what happened when the Jerusalem church heard about conversions in Antioch. That church sent Barnabas to Antioch, without violating Antioch’s autonomy. (Did Barnabas interfere where he was not invited? No.) Then, this “outsider” from Jerusalem got an “outsider” from Tarsus (Saul) to join him, and for a whole year they met with the Antioch church and taught a great many people, all without violating autonomy (Acts 11:22-26). As another example, did Paul violate Corinth’s autonomy concerning the sin of its member in 1 Corinthians 5? Did he violate autonomy when he rebuked their factiousness (1 Cor. 1-4; 11:17-22)? Was Paul trying to control the Corin-

thian church? No. He was teaching and rebuking them so they would repent and walk in truth. We can imitate Barnabas and Paul in such gospel work, without violating autonomy (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1).

Some say to do as described above is being a “watchdog,” and, “a watchdog mentality destroys autonomy.” Well, we certainly do not need “*dumb dogs*” and “*greedy dogs*” who do not “*bark*” to warn of spiritual danger (Isa. 56:10-11)! But, Zion does need watchmen who sound God’s warnings and “*never hold their peace day or night*” – Watchmen who are not intimidated into silence by false charges of violating autonomy when they warn of immorality and error... wherever it is (Isa. 62:6; 2 Tim. 4:2-5). Each church will make its own decision whether to follow the truth. But, teaching and warning of sin wherever it is does not violate church autonomy.

3. ...each church has a shield to hide behind when it teaches and practices error. This misunderstanding of autonomy occurred last century during the institutional controversies. Protests were made against naming churches involved in unauthorized work. Now, we hear similar protests from non-institutional brethren when questioned about their teachings and practices. We are told we cannot name false teachers, or identify churches that harbor error. I wonder, do we really mean it when we ask visitors to question what we preach from the pulpit and practice as a church? If so, why refuse to answer when one does, as if it is a sin to ask the question? Yet, questions about a church’s teaching and practice are rejected as a violation of autonomy. Those who do so ought to be ashamed. — *The Spirit’s Sword*, August 27, 2017. ■

Regrets at Death

By Bill Crews

I have never heard and I never expect to hear of one who, when about to die:

- Regrets that he became a Christian.
- Regrets that he tried earnestly to live as a Christian.
- Regrets that he gave so much time to prayer and study of the Bible.
- Regrets that he gave a generous portion of his money to do the Lord’s work.
- Regrets that he tried to reach others who were lost in sin around him.
- Regrets that he assembled conscientiously and regularly with the brethren for worship, exhortation and edification.

But I have heard of many and expect to hear of more who, when about to die:

- Regretted not becoming a child of the King.
- Regretted not trying earnestly to live as a Christian.
- Regretted that they had not given much time to prayer and study of the Bible.
- Regretted they had not given a generous portion of their money to do the Lord’s work.
- Regretted they had not tried to reach others around them who were lost in sin.
- Regretted they had not assembled conscientiously and regularly with their brethren for worship, exhortation and edification.

What about you? When you are facing death, as each of us will one day, will you have any regrets? Do not wait until it is too late to set your priorities straight. What is important is what you can take with you into eternity. Anything else has to be of much less value. — *Collegevue Church of Christ Bulletin*, April 2, 2017. ■

“Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Lk. 16:27-31).

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Tommy Glendol McClure, Editor and Evangelist - 925-759-4357

Web Site: www.lodiCAchurchofchrist.com - Email: lodicachurchofchrist@gmail.com - Phone: 209-365-9250