

It Is Written

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Consequences of Autonomy

By Dan Gatlin

The New Testament teaches us that God desires “every church” to have elders (Acts 14:23). Church in this context refers to a local congregation of God’s people. Of course, those elders must meet the qualifications given in 1 Timothy and Titus, and if there are no men that do then the church must be “scripturally unorganized.”

“Autonomy” is defined as “the right of self-government, independence” (Oxford Reference Dictionary). God intended local churches to be autonomous, self-governing. This can be seen in statements such as “*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you*” (1 Pet. 5:2), and “*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*” (Acts 20:28). Elderships, which rule local congregations (Heb. 13:7, 17), are limited only to the congregations which they serve. Many have given lip service to autonomy, but then engage in unscriptural practices such as the sponsoring church arrangement. The wisdom of autonomy can easily be seen upon reflection.

Error cannot “trickle down.” One observable danger of a denominational hierarchy is that the pronouncements made by the leaders are eventually accepted by the individual congregations. If a synod, board, or pope proclaim that some “alternative lifestyle” is to be accepted by “the church,” then, generally, that denomination will accept whatever they are told. There may be a period of discussion or there may be a consequential division, but the denomination will believe what they are told.

With the scriptural plan of congregational self-government, sin is unlikely to spread much further. Its growth will be slowed and influence limited. This gives sound brethren time to study the issue and prepare a response.

Human organizations larger than local congregations are the breeding ground for parties which carry an influence beyond the local congregation. For example, the editorial staff of some “brotherhood paper” may decide for themselves which doctrines are to be accepted, tolerated, or opposed. They use their collective influence to pressure other preachers, elders, and congregations to see things their way. Any who resist are “written up,” preachers have meetings cancelled, and churches are marked as unsound. Despite words to the contrary, such organizations stand opposed to congregational autonomy.

Elders cannot become “brotherhood Lords.” Some elders, when traveling, follow their introduction by saying, “I’m an elder at such-and-such church of Christ.” The truth is that only has significance in the congregation in which they serve, it’s near meaningless anywhere else. There are no “brotherhood elders.” A study of early church history will show that, over time, congregations placed one elder on a higher plane than the others. Soon these elevated elders (“bishops”) banded together to form councils, and on it goes. All such elevations of men are without New Testament authority.

An elder in one church may not qualify in another. There are many reasons why this may be. God has given us the qualifications in His word, but, right or wrong, men understand them differently. There are some qualifications where judgment is required (example: how do we apply “given to hospitality?”). It may be that the man was not even close to meeting the qualifications in the previous congregation, and they just took “the best we’ve got.” Perhaps he will eventually qualify once he and the congregation get to know each other better. The point is that each congregation must make up their own minds on who is qualified based on their understanding and application of the Scriptures.

Churches can deal with issues peculiar to them. In some denominations (Jehovah’s Witness, Catholic, etc.), the “higher ups” dictate what is to be preached on any given date. Sermons are sent out with the expectations the they will be presented to every congregation under their control. There is to be no deviating from the plan without special permission. But in an autonomous congregation the elders and/or the preacher are free to address issues as they arise.

Each church determines its own fellowship. Fellowship is primarily a local concern. Churches have

the responsibility to discipline unruly members (1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6-15) and to refuse membership to those who might threaten the peace and unity of the church (Acts 9:26-27). At the same time, one disciplined elsewhere might be an excellent addition. It depends on the circumstance. John wrote, *"I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church"* (3 Jn. 9-10). In this case, it was Diotrephes who put men "out of the church" (local congregation), men whom John implies are in fellowship with God. It may be that the church is wrong and the one disciplined is right. Discipline is not binding from one congregation to another. It must be viewed on a case by case basis.

Autonomy is a reflection of God's wisdom. God wants His children dependant on Him and His word, not on the proclamations of men who have taken authority that rightly belongs to His Son.

If Baptism Is Optional . . .

By Dan S. Shipley

That water baptism is a part of NT teaching cannot be denied. Christ taught it. The apostles and other inspired men taught it and sinners submitted to it. However, many (including those who practice it) minimize the importance of baptism in claiming it not essential to one's salvation. To them, it is an OPTIONAL thing, to be received or rejected without eternal consequences one way or the other. If they are right, then certain other things must necessarily follow.

If baptism is optional, then observing the teaching of Christ is optional because He teaches that "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16). If one could be saved without doing what Jesus says about baptism, then what of the faith required in the same verse? Remember, God says, "hear ye Him" (Matt. 17:5); and "to Him shall ye hearken in all things" (Acts 3:22). However, if observing and abiding in the teaching of Christ (2 Jn. 9) cannot be optional, then neither can the baptism contained in His teaching.

Further, Jesus plainly tells the apostles to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you..." (Matt. 28:19,20). His instructions include teaching and baptism. Which is optional? Also, note that the apostles were to teach men to observe what Christ commanded. The apostles taught baptism, therefore it was among those things commanded by Christ. (comp. Acts 2:38; 10:48; Rom. 6:3-ff; 1 Pet. 3:21; Gal. 3:27). If baptism is optional, then keeping the commandments of Christ is optional! Recall in Jn. 14:15 Jesus says, "If you love me, ye will keep my commandments". Is it possible to show love for Christ while regarding His commandments as optional and not keeping His word (v. 23)?

Again, if baptism is optional, then obeying truth is optional. Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all the truth (Jn. 16:13). What the apostles and other inspired men set forth concerning baptism was a part of that gospel truth. Among other things, this truth teaches that men put on Christ in baptism (Gal. 3:27) and that newness of life begins at baptism (Jn. 3:3-5; Rom. 6:4. THAT'S THE GOSPEL TRUTH! Can men please God without newness of life and without putting on Christ? — are these optional matters? To reject this truth is to reject the God who gives it (1 Thess. 4:8) and Paul depicts the fate of all who do not obey it (2 Thess. 1:8, 9).

Finally, if it makes no difference whether one is baptized, then it makes no difference whether one receives forgiveness of sins. Through Peter, God shows that remission of sins follows repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38). Acts 22:16 teaches that sins are washed away in baptism. Christ himself shows that being saved (forgiven) comes after faith expresses itself in baptism (Mk. 16:16). This is why God says that baptism saves as (1 Pet. 3:21). Nothing necessary to the salvation of man can be optional. God, in many ways, says baptism is needful. Will you receive it?