



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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Reflections on Congregational Autonomy

By

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There is a need to understand the local congregation and its relationship to the faith, and to the body of Christians who comprise the church of Christ. Problems abound when misunderstanding and misinformation is dispensed. Some assertions we hear may be summarized as follows: (1) Local autonomy is destroyed if one church withdraws fellowship from another church. A current affirmation of this is stated as follows: "One congregation having disciplinary [sic] authority over another congregation violates autonomy and is wrong. Each local church is to be self-governing." (2) We have also heard that, "We can mark and avoid a group espousing religious error but we may not withdraw fellowship from them." Question, how much fellowship may one have with those to be marked and avoided? (3) Again, we have heard some contend: "There is nothing in the Bible that addresses the subject of one congregation withdrawing from another congregation."

What does the Bible teach? (1) Does the Bible provide us with directions for congregational fellowship? (2) Is the local autonomy of a congregation destroyed when it is refused fellowship? Where are the passages that teach this assertion? Where is the argument presented that so affirms what is contended?

What do we mean by autonomy? "1: the quality or state of being self-governing; *esp.* the right of self-government 2: self-directing freedom and *esp.* moral independence 3: a self-governing state" (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, CD-ROM, 1994). When applied to religious matters, this means that an individual and/or a congregation has freedom from all others of analogous nature in the matters of judgment and self direction. However, this freedom and direction does NOT extended to doctrinal matters.

Autonomy and Doctrine

Does the Bible teach that there is one faith? Surely we must admit that it does (Eph. 4:5; Jude 3). Does the Bible teach that we are to be united in the same mind and judgment? May we deny explicit directives from the Bible (I Cor. 1:10)? Are we to walk by the same rule, or does the local congregation have a right to formulate its own set of doctrinal rules and "truth"? We must admit that there is but one way to walk, and that this way is by the faith once for all delivered by the inspired teachers of the past (Phil. 3:15-19; II John 4; I John 1:6-7; III John 3-4).

Does the one faith teach us that in the matter of liberty and judgment we are permitted the exercise of personal choices? Paul desired Apollos to go to Corinth, but Apollos did not will to do so (I Cor. 6:12). Paul could not force his wishes upon Apollos. Paul did not have the authority to decide when a man and his daughter should plan for the daughter to marry (I Cor. 7:36-38). Paul could provide his opinion (judgment), but the decision was not Paul's to make. Paul and Barnabas differed in judgment over John Mark traveling with them, did they not (Acts 15:36-40)? Autonomy does not permit a congregation to hide behind the autonomy issue and claim absolution from doctrinal matters. Paul rebuked Peter to his face when he was not following the faith (Gal. 2:11-14). In doctrine, and in judgments about doctrine, we are to be one and have no divisions among us (I Cor. 1:10; Jude 3; II John 9-11). There is but one faith, one doctrine, and those (individual or group) who go on and do not abide in that doctrine must not be extended fellowship (II John 9-11).

Autonomy and Discipline

It may be asserted that discipline destroys autonomy, but the facts will show otherwise. When has a

congregation of the churches of Christ lost her autonomy by joining the Christian Church? Her autonomy was vividly demonstrated when faithful brethren made every effort to alert them to the path of their journey, yet to no avail. Does not our past teach us that many congregations added mechanical instruments of music and the Missionary Society, and in doing so become a part of the Disciples of Christ and the Christian Church?

When did any congregation of the churches of Christ take up the false position of the "Anti" (an individual or group of individuals who oppose what the Bible authorizes) brethren, refuse to see the error of her way, and lose her autonomy? A sister congregation may become involved in an unauthorized action, become marked and avoided for doing so (disfellowshipped) by faithful brethren, but she still maintains her autonomy.

The case of discipline with a congregation and that of an individual, in principle, is the same; and the results are the same. May an individual be marked and avoided, withdrawn from, and still have individual autonomy? Who can deny it? Many have left the faith, received discipline, and refused to walk in the light as taught in the Bible. What are we to do with such? Admonish them as a brother, but refuse to fellowship

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them (II Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Rom. 16:17-18; II John 9-11).

The unscriptural discipline of an "Anti" can not destroy the autonomy of an individual or congregation. Did not Gaius support faithful preachers while Diotrephes refused assistance? Did not Diotrephes cast some from the church for doing what God authorized (III John 5-10)?

If I take the position that one can not withdraw fellowship from a congregation, I create other problems. (1) May I extend fellowship to another congregation? (2) How does my extension of such fellowship relate to autonomy? (3) "Anti" brethren affirm that we destroy local autonomy when we join together (fellowship) in the preaching of the gospel. They ("anti" brethren) withdraw fellowship from congregations that join together in supporting other congregations in preaching the gospel. Does the "Anti" withdrawal destroy our autonomy? No. If it did many congregations in Florida would have lost their autonomy years ago. Again, (4) If we can not withdraw fellowship from a congregation then are we in fellowship with error? Fellowship is forbidden those in error, and those who encourage error by fellowshiping they are guilty of sin and are to be refused fellowship by the faithful (II John 9-11).

Withholding Fellowship

vs

Excommunication

In the religious world there is the man-made doctrine of "excommunication." This is not the same thing as marking and avoiding a person who espouses religious error, or the action of refusing fellowship with one advocating religious error. The Encyclopaedia Britannica presents excommunication as a:

"form of ecclesiastical censure by which a person is excluded from the communion of believers, the rites or sacraments of a church, and the rights of church membership, but not necessarily from membership in the church as such. Some method of exclusion belongs to the administration of all Christian churches and denominations, indeed of all religious communities. Roman Catholicism distinguishes between two kinds of

excommunication, that which renders a person toleratus, tolerated, and that which renders him vitandus, one who is to be avoided. The second and more severe form requires--except for certain crimes that incur it automatically--that the culprit be announced by name in public as vitandus, in most cases by the Holy See itself; this is reserved for the gravest offenses. Both kinds of excommunication bar the excommunicated person from the sacraments of the church as well as from Christian burial. There is a specified list, set out in the Codex Juris Canonici, of actions that incur excommunication; the list was revised in January 1983 by Pope John Paul II to include abortion, violation of the confidentiality of confession, absolution by a priest of one who has committed a sin with the priest's assistance, profanation of the consecrated communion host, consecration of a bishop without Vatican approval, a physical attack on the pope, and heresy and "abandoning the faith." If an excommunicated person confesses his sin and undergoes penance for it, he is absolved; in some cases this absolution may come from any priest, but in many others it is reserved to the bishop or even to the Holy See alone, save in periculo mortis ("in danger of death"). Excommunication should be distinguished from two related forms of censure, suspension and interdict. Suspension applies only to clergy and denies them some or all of their rights; interdict does not exclude a believer from the communion of the faithful but forbids certain sacraments and sacred offices, sometimes to an entire area. Some churches do not use the term excommunication, preferring to speak of church discipline. Churches holding the Reformed order vest the authority for exercising discipline and, if need be, carrying out excommunication, in the session, which consists of the minister and the elders. The 30th article of the Westminster Confession of 1646 specified "admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and excommunication from the church" as the proper steps of discipline. The Lutheran tradition has followed Martin Luther's catechism in speaking of "the power of the keys" and in defining excommunication as the denial of the communion to public and obstinate sinners; the clergy and the congregation together have the right to exercise such discipline. In the Anglican Church the bishops have the right to excommunicate,

but this right is almost never exercised. Where a Congregational polity and the principle of "believers' Baptism" are observed, discipline is often very rigorous. In American denominations of the Free Church tradition the term "churching" a sinner refers to excommunication." (Encyclopaedia Britannica. CD-ROM. 1998).

Churches that hold the false position that they have the power to dispense or withhold grace, usually resident in a priesthood, practice excommunication. The Bible knows nothing of such powers. Therefore, excommunication and withdrawal of fellowship are not the same. In a religious system that is predicated upon the power of a special ecclesiastical priesthood or bishopric it may be possible to destroy the autonomy of an individual or a "church" but again, this is not the teaching of the Bible.

Conclusion

The Bible forbids us entering fellowship with error (Eph. 5:11). The Bible demands that if we find ourselves involved in religious error that we come out of it (Rev. 18:4-5). The Bible does not permit us to go on and abide not in the doctrine of Christ, and we are condemned if we encourage anyone in their religious error (II John 9-11).

That which an individual does that is wrong, and is to be withdrawn from for so acting, does not become right if a group joins with that individual. Wrong is wrong regardless of the number involved.

Autonomy of the individual or congregation is still unchanged, unbroken. The discipline process does not change this. If this were not true, an individual or congregation could not repent or correct the error of their way and return to faithfulness. Withdrawing from an individual or a congregation does not destroy autonomy.



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