

Congregational Autonomy Does Not Equal Congregational Authority by Alex Brown

One of the unique realities regarding Christ's church (i.e. the church of Christ- Romans 16:16), that differentiates her from every other religious group in existence, is the lack of a central government or headquarters, located anywhere on earth (unlike the Roman Catholic church, for example, who claim Rome as their denominational headquarters). Another unique reality about Christ's church, is the lack of an earthly, denominational "chain of command," consisting of arch-bishops, cardinals, council's of bishops, vicar's, pope's and so on. When compared to all the man made denominations in the world, many are astonished that Christ's church has survived so long, since it does not match the pattern of "all the denominations around her" (1st Samuel 8:20).

Some believe that the absence of such an earthly, denominational, command structure makes Christ's church weak. Let's get that taken care of right off the bat. Christ's church is not weak because she doesn't have a man-made hierarchy. Christ's church does not have an earthly, centralized, man-made governmental structure like all the denominations around her because **she's not supposed to be like all the denominations around her!** We don't need a "vicar of Christ" because we have the very words, will, and Spirit of Christ Himself (John 14:15-23, Acts 2:38, 5:29-32) in the pages of Holy Scripture!

Sadly, many in the brotherhood today use this lack of centralized, earthly, denominational headquarters and denominational leadership structure, to perpetuate the idea of "congregational authority based on congregational autonomy." This idea, spreading throughout the brotherhood like the plague, says that since each congregation is autonomous (does not answer to any central, earthly, denominational headquarters with a man-made, denominational leadership/hierarchy), no one, be it an individual person or congregation, has the right to tell any other person or congregation of the Lord's church, what to do, what to practice or what to preach, even if the instruction is based on the Word of God.

Interestingly enough, while the idea of congregational autonomy is present in the Bible (each congregation being ruled by a plurality of elders or overseers – Titus 1:5), the word “autonomy,” never appears in the Scriptures. What does this mean for Christ’s church? If there is no “vicar of Christ” alive today (all the apostles, who were given authority to speak on behalf of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20, John 20:23), having died) and there is no central, earthly, denominational headquarters to officiate the church, then who governs and rules the church of Christ?

The simplest way to answer that question is to turn to God’s Word. We know from Scripture, that the writings of the apostles and prophets of the Bible were inspired of God (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). The Greek phrase “θεόπνευστος” (transliterated as theopneustos¹), which we translate in English as, “God breathed or breathed out by God,” signifies, in laymen’s terms, that as “God breathed” out the words of the Scripture, they appeared on the page. Biblical writers were not given license to edit the Scriptures as they saw fit, but penned the words as they were spoken.

Also, if we were to turn to 2nd Peter 1:20-21, we would find it even more emphatically stated; that nothing appearing in the written Word of God is of human origin; rather it is from God. We see again the idea that the writers were unable to alter the precepts preserved for us through God’s Word, but recorded them as they were spoken. The reason these apostles and prophets were unable to alter the very words of God is **they lacked the authority to do so (2 Corinthians 4:2)**. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, “**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**” (*emboldening mine – AB*). That He, Jesus, has **all authority**, which was given Him by the Father (John 17:1-2), **indicates a lack of extra authority left over to be exercised by someone else**. When it comes to the Word of God and the church of Christ, this plays a critical role in the above stated question regarding the leadership and rule of the church.

When we talk about the church, or churches (individual congregations of Christ’s church – Romans 16:16) of Christ, and their human leadership we must

¹ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

always return to the Bible for guidance and instruction. When it comes to the Biblical pattern for earthly leadership, it is the Lord's will that each congregation of the Lord's church be led, overseen, ruled and shepherded by, a plurality of Elders, with deacons serving under them (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). These men must meet stringent, God ordained qualifications (1st Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5-9). We see many examples of God instructing these men, through the apostles, to "shepherd, rule, oversee and tend" "the flock of God" (Acts 20:28, 1st Timothy 5:17, 1st Peter 5:1-4). It is to these men that the precious Word of God (Titus 1:9) and the watch-keeping of the souls of the saints (Ezekiel 3:16-21, Hebrews 13:17), has been entrusted.

So long as there are qualified men to fill this servant role, there must be Elders. Any congregation that does not have and/or is not led by Elders, has not yet fulfilled the complete, God ordained plan, regarding human leadership at the congregational level. While it is true that within the local congregation the elders or shepherds, are the ultimate level of human authority to which we are commanded by God to submit (1st Peter 5:5; so long as they are following His Word), even the shepherds are subject to the Chief Shepherd (Psalm 80:1, 1st Peter 5:4).

Many people today are under strong delusions of godliness. This should come as no surprise. These days, people will believe anything any religious speaker says so long as he or she: wears a nice suit; is a dynamic speaker; and can tickle ears with soothing, seemingly God-filled messages (As is evidenced by the continual popularity of Max Lucado, Rubel Shelly, and their contemporaries). People will believe men like this despite their lack of Biblical accuracy and their ever present, Satan supporting, false teaching (For anything that differs from the Words of Christ and the apostles is by definition false teaching – 2nd Thessalonians 2:1-11, 2nd Peter 2, 2nd Timothy 4:3-4).

While men like these advance the idea that Christ's church and her doctrine can be changed on a whim to suit the appetites of their followers (as indicated by their actions to that effect), and by their actions teach that individual congregations of the Lord's church are free from regulations governing her

doctrine, worship and etc... (Except perhaps those regulations initiated by popular vote of the majority of the congregation), God says otherwise. And one wonders, what will these do when the end comes who do such things now (Jeremiah 5:31)?

The Bible says that Christ alone is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). We know that Christ is not only above all other power and authority in Heaven and on earth (Ephesians 1:19-21), but He is also the “head over all things to the church which is His body (Ephesians 1:22-23).” While there are many members or parts of the body (i.e. many Christians in churches of Christ all across the country and the world), there is only one body (which is the church – Ephesians 4:4, Colossians 1:18). If one is in Christ, one is in the body of Christ.

All congregations of the Lord’s church are bound together in Christ, through the Word, just as a physical body is joined together by joints and ligaments and skin (1st Corinthians 12:12-27). When one congregation succumbs to apostasy, the entire body is hurt. Those who would use the principle of congregational autonomy as a means to invent for themselves authority other than that which Christ has and has placed in His Word, and would use it to separate themselves from the rest of the body to “do their own thing,” are like those who would cut off their own hand and expect it to continue living without commands and nerve impulses from the brain/head. And God in His infinite wisdom once again in the Scripture tells us exactly why those who would thus separate themselves will choose to do so (Proverbs 18:1-2).

The simple fact of the matter is, that if we are “one body” as Scripture says and so many say, then “congregational autonomy” cannot be allowed as an acceptable excuse to stop a member of one local congregation from correcting another member of the same “one body” simply because they live in a different geographic location as a member of another local congregation of that same “one body” elsewhere; nor from stepping in to correct error if it is allowed there on a congregational level either. It certainly didn’t stop Paul, did it (1 Corinthians 5)?

But the church is not just the body; the church is also the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19), where Christ reigns as King (1st Timothy 6:14-16). The Greek

word for kingdom “βασιλεία” (transliterated as basileia)² means: “rule, reign, authority, or power.” The Kingdom is defined by the “rule, reign, authority, or power” of God (Matthew 12:28 and Luke 17:20-21). For a kingdom to be a kingdom it must have: A King; the church has One (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Timothy 6:13-16); Subjects; the church’s subjects are those in Christ (John 17:20-26); Territory; the church is made up of all races (Daniel 7:14; Mark 16:15-16); King’s Edicts; Christ’s church obeys Christ’s commands (Matthew 4:4, John 14:15-23, 17:6-17; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5; 2 John 6-11)³.”

Unlike our American system of government, there is no such thing as “popular vote” in Christ’s kingdom (Although many believe otherwise). Christ’s kingdom is no democracy; it is a monarchy with Christ as King. He rules, and we as His subjects obey. There is no impeachment. There is no “vote of no-confidence.” There is only the King and His all-powerful, all-encompassing, divine will. **Those who would seek to override, overturn and overrule the decisions, edicts and commands of the King must show that they have 1) more authority; 2) more power; and 3) more approval from God the Father, than Christ does (Colossians 1:15-19).**

Not only does Christ rule His church, He has given implicit instructions, in His Word, regarding how His church is to function/behave. Anytime deviance from that divine plan occurs, whether it be individual deviance or congregational deviance, men of God, firmly grounded in the Scriptures, must “reprove, rebuke and exhort” those in error to return to the Truth (John 17:17) to save their souls (1st Corinthians 5:5). Throughout Scripture we have examples of this. Paul “reasoned or disputed (debated)” with the idolatrous Athenians regarding their idolatry (Acts 17:16-17). Paul rebuked Peter to his face “before them all,” for his hypocrisy which led others astray (Galatians 2:11-14). Elders who persist in sin are to be rebuked publically (1st Timothy 5:19-20). We are to “restore” the one who is “caught in transgression” (Galatians 6:1-2). We are to “save others by snatching them out of the fire” (Jude 1:22-23).

² Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

³ Borrowed from “The Church The Kingdom” written by brother Doug Dingley

Not only do we have these examples but let us examine the purpose of many of the New Testament writings. 1st Corinthians was written to “correct Corinthian chaos.” Jude was written to warn of false teachers infiltrating the church and call those brethren to arms. So were parts of 2nd Peter and 2nd John. 3rd John mentions Diotrephes and the trouble he was causing and Galatians 5 is full of instruction regarding the sinfulness of binding where God had not bound and correcting sins of the flesh. In 2nd Timothy 4:2a Paul told timothy to “...**preach the Word...**” He didn’t tell him to preach his opinions or what he thought, felt and believed. He told him to preach **the (signifying the one and only) Word. We must do the same!**

Brethren, considering the state many congregations of the Lord’s church are in today (Changing Christ’s worship, allowing sin to fester within the church, binding and loosening where God has not bound and loosened, seeking to divide the body {1st Corinthians 1:10-13} and etc...) we must ask the question, “**Have we forgotten who and whose we are? Are we really so cowardly and spineless, that we will try to hide behind “congregational autonomy,” in order to justify sinful actions and practices Christ did not authorize?**” Let us stop attempting to justify our actions when they are inconsistent with God’s Word and let us instead purpose to **repent, renew** and **return** to the Lamb who was sacrificed for us (Acts 20:28), the King who rules us (1st Timothy 6:13-16), and the pattern which was prepared for us (2nd Timothy 1:13).

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” Jude 1:24-25 (ESV)