

Text: Various

Title: "Local Church Autonomy"

Time: 10/4/2026 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The autonomy of the local church refers to her right and responsibility of self-governance. From *autos* (*self*) and *nomos* (*law*), the autonomy of the local church is the conviction that she among men is God's decision-making authority on earth in matters pertaining to herself. Each local church is comprised of believers called of God to covenant together, so the word also refers to congregational church government. To say that a local church makes decisions for herself is also to say a congregation makes decisions for itself. So, in Baptist polity, the autonomy of the local church recognizes that every believer is responsible to be a voting member of a local church in obedience to the Word of God.

In 2016 a book appeared titled, *Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome*. Edited by Douglas Beaumont and published by Ignatius Press, the book contains the testimonials of ten former Southern Evangelical Seminary students, including the book's editor, who converted to Roman Catholicism. The book explains that twice as many examples of the same conversion experience could fill two additional volumes (209; fn. 1). The back cover of the book describes what truly can be labeled an "Evangelical Exodus," with its mention of dozens of SES students and faculty over a single decade who converted to Roman Catholicism.

One of the authors promotes the office of the Roman papacy in the book this way: "Although this [Roman Catholic Church] infallibility can and has been exercised though various means, there seems to remain a need for a single, infallible, apostolic office behind it all to provide an objective standard when necessary. Specific predictions and promises made to Peter, as well as the subsequent history of his successors,

point to the office of the Bishop of Rome as the best fit for the 'last line' of infallible doctrinal defense. Thus can the Church's infallibility be grounded in both theory and practice" (p. 246).

In his two-volume work on the history of theology, Baptist scholar David Beale notes one of the many details of church history not found in these testimonials, which undermines their confidence in both the unbroken apostolic succession of infallible bishops from Peter to Francis and the infallibility of the Church of Rome as a whole.

He explains, "Meanwhile, lack of leadership and extreme provincialism had turned Rome into an intellectual backwater, cut off from the depth and richness of the theological language and culture of the East. During the great creed-producing era of the seven ecumenical councils ([A.D.] 325-787), when Greek theologians were condemning heresies, affirming truth, and contributing definition and refinement to the Trinitarian and Christological discussions, not one bishop from Rome attended these councils. Roman delegates, when they were sent, often arrived late and seldom participated because they could not follow the discussions in Greek" (*Historical Theology in Depth: Themes and Contexts of Doctrinal Development since the First Century* (2013), 1:498).

Aren't you glad this morning that we can place our faith in an infallible Lord and His infallible Bible rather than searching for an infallible church? To have to rely on an infallible pope based on a long line of succession of infallible popes, which connects them to Peter, is an even more desperately indefensible reach for infallibility. When we use our infallible Bibles, we do not have to base our unity as believers on false claims to universal infallibility among men. We read nowhere in the Scripture about an infallible church or its infallible pope.

Instead, we read about the fallible Christian's need for communion with a fallible local church that is autonomous, just

like its sister churches whom she loves. Together they are flickering candlesticks in the hand of their infallible Lord, earthen vessels carrying gospel treasure. He alone knows their works and calls them to repentance and faithfulness. Unity within a local church and among sister churches is achieved through disciple-making, love, and forgiveness, not through adherence to a pope's false claim of infallibility.

So, using our Bibles this morning, I want to note three things simple facts about the autonomy of Jesus's fallible local churches and what that autonomy means for our lives.

I. Her relationship to Jesus's name makes a local church autonomous (Matt. 18:14-20).

Application: One of the shortcomings of the book I mentioned is that the word *church* never appears in the plural. Its authors fail to recognize that the Scripture often speaks of *churches* in the plural. Local churches in the plural are the visible expressions of the invisible universal church in the singular.

Acts 9:31, "Then had the *churches* rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

Acts 15:41, "And he [Paul] went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the *churches*."

Acts 16:5, "And so were the *churches* established in the faith, and increased in number daily."

Rom. 16:4, "Who [Pricilla and Aquila] have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the *churches* of the Gentiles."

Rom. 16:16, "Salute one another with an holy kiss. The *churches* of Christ salute you."

In all, a quick search found 36 times in the KJV in which the New Testament refers to *churches* in the plural. Two more have the phrase *every church*. The Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel in which the word *church* appears. It does so twice, and in both passages, it is in the singular. In Chapter 16 Jesus promises to build His church on the foundation of inspired apostles and prophets like Peter and that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. Similar to the invincibility of the Jewish race, the church of Jesus Christ has survived both its own apostacies and many attacks against her from the evil one. Jesus's church will not close its doors until she is raptured to be with Him (John 14:1-3). This is the universal church.

Chapter 18 is the second passage in which the word *church* appears in the Gospel of Matthew. It is in the singular, but we see from this context that the word need not be plural in order to refer to a local church in our New Testaments. It is clear that a local church is meant by our Lord, and that there would be many such churches needing to practice this same form of discipline in a localized way. An unrepentant sinning member must be cared for by the church, clearly a local assembly.

But note especially the wonderful promise Jesus makes to this kind of assembly (vv. 18-20). If there be but two or three gathered in the Lord's name, those two or three constitute God's decision-making authority on earth, because it is in the Lord's name that they have gathered. Where we find God's name, we find His presence ("there I am in their midst"). The Lord made a similar promise to Israel: "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen; in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee" (Exod. 20:24). In the same way, Jesus has put His name on His true local churches, his earthen vessels of worship.

This is true of the local gathering of believers because He has put His name on each believer, and He has promised that every local-church gathering of believers is a time when God's people meet with Him. What they decide on earth shall have been decided in heaven, because it is the local church that makes the work of heaven visible on earth. Bearing the authority of the name of Christ, He alone rules these sacred congregations. Their relationship to Jesus's name makes each of them autonomous or self-governing.

II. Her relationship to God's truth makes a local church autonomous (1 Tim. 3:14-16).

Illustration: The *Paths to Rome* book I mentioned earlier mentions this passage: "Furthermore, the Scriptures do not teach that the Bible is the pillar of truth; rather, the Church is called the 'pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tim 3:15)" (251).

Application: Comments like that remind me that it takes more than intelligence and diligence to understand the Scriptures. It takes the illumination of God's Spirit and good principles of hermeneutics as well. Can we really say that the Apostle Paul believed that the Bible was not the pillar of truth? Did this author ever read 2 Tim. 3:16-17? Even here, Paul writes Scripture (1 Tim. 3:14-15) so that the church can be what it should be. He does not go to church to find out what Scripture should be.

In addition, the conclusion that Scripture is not the pillar of truth is taken out of context, an important principle of good hermeneutics. Whatever we conclude about *church* in this passage, we must recognize that Paul is writing about a local church, not the universal church. It is the local church that the context in verse 5 mentions, the assembly of God's house that a qualified pastor and a qualified deacon are called to serve. So Paul is not saying that the Roman Catholic Church is the pillar of truth instead of the Bible. He is saying that every local church is both the pillar and ground of the truth.

What Paul has in mind as he writes about pillars and grounds of God's house is the courtyard fencing of the tabernacle. You may remember that this fencing included 56 pillars and sockets or groundings for the pillars. The pillars and groundings held up curtains that pointed would-be entrants to the one permitted entrance into the presence of God – the gate.

Each local church is a pillar and ground of truth because it is the mission of each to point to the only gate to heaven. Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes unto the Father but by me." Jesus is the mysterious truth to whom we point (1 Tim. 3:16), and each of our local churches, autonomous from one another much like the pillars and grounds of the tabernacle, is individually responsible to point every would-be entrant to heaven's kingdom to Christ, the only way in. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus holds each church autonomously responsible for the completion of their common mission.

III. Her relationship to her members makes a local church autonomous (2 Cor. 2:4-11).

Illustration: There is a sense in which each of our physical, individual bodies are autonomous. If I want you to raise your hands, for instance, I have to ask each of you to do so. I cannot simply send a brain wave to your arm the way I can to my own. In this sense, our bodies are individually autonomous.

Application: In the New Testament, local churches are compared to bodies with connected members. 1 Corinthians 12 is one such passage: "That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (vv. 25-27). The *ye* of that passage is the local church of Corinth. Paul does not say that they are a part of the body of Christ. He says they are Christ's body, and then he

says that the individual Corinthians are the members of this body. God designed the local church to function autonomously, much like He did for each of our physical bodies. This passage and others direct us to do so in some specific ways.

1. The local church exercises authority to discipline members through majority vote (2 Cor. 2:6). Verse 6 in our KJV uses the word *many* to translate the comparative form of this substantive adjective. Instead of *many*, Paul meant *the more* or *the majority*. The local church of the New Testament disciplined its membership by majority vote.

2. The local church exercises authority to choose leaders (Acts 6:1-7). God qualifies a man, and then the whole multitude of the local church recognized that calling and chose these leaders. These were commissioned in prayer by the apostles for ministry after the Jerusalem church had made their choice. The happy result of the blessing of godly leaders recognized by the church and commissioned by fellow leaders was multiplication of disciples.

3. The local church exercises authority to reproduce herself and to stay true to the faith. In Acts 13 and 14 she sends out leaders to plant other churches, and in Acts 15 she settles theological disputes in fellowship with other sister churches.

Conclusion: So, the Bible clearly teaches that each local church is autonomous before her Savior who rules her as Lord, meets with her for worship as her God, and commissions her to a disciple-making task as her King through His infallible Word.

What could possibly cause scores of seminarians to miss this truth? Let me read you their answer to this question. The comments of the book's editor, Douglas Beaumont, are representative: "Moreover, I was finding that the Bible-alone approach I had been taught generated more disunity than I realized. . . .Christian disunity is clearly sinful according to Scripture. Alt-

though there are only a few biblical examples or principles concerning 'proper' division, there are numerous exhortations to maintain unity from several authors The issue of division bothered Jesus so much that he specifically prayed for unity in his last major prayer" (31; a reference to John 17). Beaumont goes on to criticize Protestantism (and he would put us Baptists in this category) as this bothersome form of division: "Division has been (and remains) the causal factor behind Protestant denominations (each one convinced that it has Christianity right)" (34).

Our hymnbook is evidence of the essential unity of Protestantism. Certainly, joining a false church is not the answer to unwarranted division. But do we have a testimony of unity? Jesus told his disciples, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). What do all men know about our autonomous local church? Because we are an autonomous local church, this is a question each one of us is responsible before the Lord to answer.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching