

## Local Autonomy (1)

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Congregational autonomy is a unique feature of the Lord's church. Only a few mainstream denominations even give lip-service to the Bible's model of church organization – and those that do are often not applying it consistently. It is a very distinguishing feature of the church that Christ established. But why is it such a big deal? Why should we maintain such a strict understanding of the autonomy of each local church? And what is the benefit of respecting God's design for total autonomy?

Perhaps it is beneficial to begin with a revealing case-in-point of the problems of denominational affiliation. On April 27, 2014, University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan voted overwhelmingly to leave the Reformed Church In America denomination and seek affiliation with the Presbyterian Church In America. According to their announcement, the church membership and its leadership could not accept the direction that the RCA was moving, specifically noting the denomination's growing acceptance of homosexuality as a morally acceptable lifestyle. Writes Kevin Deyoung, senior pastor:

For the past three years, our church has wrestled with our place in the Reformed Church in America. We have prayed, studied, strategized, spoke, listened, prayed, asked questions, explored options, tried to discern what is in the best interest of the Kingdom, and prayed some more. We did not come to this decision lightly... Let me simply say at this point that our reason for seeking to leave the RCA is not one thing, but many things... The denomination has moved away from churches like ours. Our request is that we may be able to move too. We are hopeful that our brothers and sisters in the classis will conduct a fair process and seek with us "how Christ's Kingdom may best be served in this matter"

Isn't it interesting that this congregation cannot see the problem of trading out one denomination for another? I appreciate and respect their prayerful approach, as well as their honest recognition that their denomination has changed for the worst, but how do they know the PCA will not be just as bad in another twenty years? Should they just hop from denomination to denomination? When does it end? Total church autonomy should be their goal, rather than continued affiliation with a superstructure that may or may not continue obeying God and following the Bible. In this article we will look at the Bible's model for total church autonomy, beginning with the individual and ending with how far congregational leadership can be extended.

### Autonomy Starts With The Individual

- *"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Baptism is an initiation into Christ, who is the head of the body, the church.*
- *"For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5).*
- *"We are members of His body" (Ephesians 5:30).*
- *"Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).*

How do I fit into God's kingdom? That is an essential question that must be asked of every believer. Am I a part of His church because of my affiliation with a denomination? Or does God add me to the kingdom when I am saved through belief and baptism? It should be noted that this is exactly the model given in **Acts 2:47**. I am added to the church by God. This is an amazing and liberating idea because it means that I am beholden to God first and foremost. I am His child, by His power, welcomed into His one church through one baptism (**Ephesians 4:1-7**). I do not believe what I do because I saw it in a denominational creed book, a confessional, or a convention manual, but because I came to an understanding of the gospel (**Romans 1:16**). I am given everything I need to know for life and godliness by the apostles' literature (**2 Peter 1:3**), and scripture alone teaches me how to be adequate and equipped for every good work (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**). I can use my own brain to do my own studying in order to learn about Christ's one, true church.