

Local Autonomy (2)

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The church, as a universal entity of all saved people, has only one officer— Christ as head (**Ephesians 1:22-23**). All other passages of scripture deal with organizational structure at the local level. It is the local congregation which has elders and deacons:

- *“When they had appointed elders for them in every church” (**Acts 14:23**).*
- *“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church” (**Acts 20:17**).*
- *“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (**Philippians 1:1**).*
- *“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God **which is among you**, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (**1 Peter 5:1-3**).*

The elders in each congregation were to exercise authority only over the Christians who were “among them”, that is, in their own congregation. This is further illustrated in **Acts 20:28**. As one writer summed it up, *“Any boards, conventions, or even outside elders to which a congregation submits, either willingly or otherwise, is a violation of these teachings. Such additions place the congregational rule under someone or something beside the elders “among” them, and it will violate the autonomy that is to be enjoyed by “every church.” Since each congregation should be under the oversight and rule of its own elders, then each church must consequently, be absolutely independent of any other church or organizations”* (“Autonomy Of The Local Church”, Trevor Bowen, insearchoftruth.org).

Furthermore, every example above shows that no elder had authority that extended beyond his local congregation. He did not enjoy special or elevated status at any other church, or over any other elder. The elders from one church could not exercise their authority over the elders from another church. Christians from one congregation are not meant to be subject in any way to another group of Christians (whether a church or a convention or a governmental structure beyond the local level).

Christ Among Individual, Stand-Alone Lampstands

Observe the way that Christ dwells among the lampstands in the vision shown to John on Patmos (**Revelation 1:12-13, 16, 20, 2:1**). Each lampstand is on its own, totally unconnected to the others. The only thing that binds one church to another is their mutual submission to Christ, who holds the seven stars (the very essence and vitality of the seven churches) in His right hand. When you read about the various failures and successes of the seven churches in **Revelation 2-3**, as well as the unique conditions and problems found in all the New Testament epistles, one thing becomes abundantly clear: each local congregation stands alone before God, on its own two feet, without any other church to lean on or blame for its spiritual condition.

So does all of this mean that churches should never talk to each other, or share information about events, or always be suspicious of other groups? Of course not! The New Testament clearly shows churches acting in harmony to aid impoverished brethren (**1 Corinthians 16:1-4**). But even if multiple churches each contribute to some Biblically-approved benevolent activity, they are still not organizationally connected to each other. Corinth took up its own contribution and sent it to help the Christians in Jerusalem (the words “whoever you approve” and “bear your gift” indicate that they had complete control of their charitable contribution). The churches in Galatia took up theirs as well. No two churches consulted with each other in the matter or set up a board of directors for a para-church charity. Evangelism is the same way. Many churches might contribute to a missionary’s financial support, but that does not mean those churches are affiliated with each other or beholden to another’s authority. The problem with advocating church organization beyond the local level is that it creates a breeding ground for corruption, coercion, and manipulation. If one church accepts funds from another, then it is obligated (coerced) to obey the edicts of that “mother church” or sponsoring church. It is no longer autonomous, independent, and free to study the Bible and come to its own conclusions. If you want the money, you have to accept the terms, right? Going back to the example of the seven church in **Revelation 2-3** it becomes apparent that each church stands or falls on its own merits. It neither needs nor is helped by any structure or authority beyond Christ as head over all churches and elders who rule locally.