

Subject: Autonomy  
Text: Ephesians 4:11-16  
Method: Textual

Title: **Self-governing Under Christ**

General Purpose: Instruct concerning Christ's plan for congregational administration.

Specific Purpose: Consider the texts relating to congregational autonomy.

Thesis Sentence: In the absence of New Testament provision for external leadership offices or roles to exist between the local elders and Jesus Christ, each individual congregation is to have its own local leadership so as to be accountable for its own work.

**Introduction:**

- A. The nature and pattern of church government is Christ ordained, planned from eternity and revealed in the New Testament
- B. The local church is to be a free, autonomous unit with its own leaders who are answerable to Christ

**I. The nature of church government**

- A. The church does not govern, it is governed (Eph. 1:20-23)
  - 1. All concerning the church was fully planned from eternity (Eph. 3:11-12; Acts 15:18)
  - 2. Jesus has been chosen by the Father to head the church
- B. Christ is the absolute monarch who may organize the administration of His kingdom as He wills (Col. 1:18) (cf. Acts 2:36 - both Lord and Christ)
- C. Christ gave (made provision for) the administration of His will in the church (Eph. 4:11-16)
  - 1. Of all the offices listed, only pastors (*poimeinas*) are elsewhere referred to as having an overseeing, supervisory, role and are always spoken of as a plurality
    - a. Acts 20:17 - Paul sent for the "elders" who are called "overseers" in v. 28
    - b. Tit. 1:5 - Titus is instructed to appoint elders, "...if a man is blameless", "...a bishop must be blameless," using "elder" and "bishop" interchangeably
    - c. 1 Pet. 5:1-4 - "elders" are to feed the flock of God and oversee it in view of the coming Chief Shepherd, implying that elders are undershepherd, or shepherds under Christ
    - d. The same word translated "shepherd" in 1 Pet. 5:4 is translated "pastor" in Eph. 4:11
  - 2. The New Testament nowhere recognizes a man or group of men as having oversight of Christians except in their own congregations (see 1 Pet. 5:2 "...the flock of God which is among you")

**II. The local church is a free, autonomous unit "Autonomy: the right of self-government"**

- A. After the conversion of Cornelius' household a developing pattern of church leadership is seen as the church spreads
  - 1. A responsible church grew in Antioch of Syria where disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26)
    - a. They sent Saul and Barnabas on the first evangelistic journey (Acts 13:1-3)
    - b. Churches were established in the Galatian cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe
    - c. On their follow-up visit, after the stoning of Saul, they ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23)

2. The pattern of appointing elders became the customary procedure where qualified men were present, or to be developed (cf. Titus 1:5-9)
- B. The church at Philippi also serves as an example (Phil. 1:1-2)
1. Paul is addressing a "full grown" church with:
    - a. elders present to feed and oversee the flock and
    - b. deacons to serve under the oversight of the elders
  2. This emphasizes the divine, yet simple, pattern the Lord provided for the administration of His church

### III. **Autonomy safeguards against spreading apostasy (1 Pet. 5:2)**

- A. In the absence of qualified, scriptural, local leadership there has been an historical tendency to consolidate oversight responsibility in a dominant personality, or in one dominant "central," or "mother," church to which others were subservient, or a combination of both
- B. This gave rise to the development of the Roman Catholic system and to other more modern heresies
- C. Local Christians are warned to guard against external and internal corruption (2 Pet. 2; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; Acts 20:30)
- D. Local elders are to "watch for your souls" (Heb. 13:17)
  1. "...refute those who contradict (Tit. 1:9-11)
  2. "...take heed to yourselves (Acts 20:28)
  3. feed and oversee the flock "which is among you (1 Pet. 5:2)," which implies a present, immediate, local charge only
  4. Elders are not to oversee any flock which is not present, immediate and local

### **Conclusion:**

- A. The nature and pattern for church government is Christ ordained and revealed in the New Testament
- B. The local church is to be a free, autonomous unit with its own leaders who are answerable to Christ
- C. Christ has revealed no organic relationship, or common leadership organization, between separate congregations
- D. Christ has revealed a definite order of organization which is expected to be found in each congregation (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5; Phil. 1:1-2)
- E. Following this Biblical pattern of autonomy will safeguard against spreading apostasy by providing for an independent, self-contained, Christ directed, locally administrated church

Randall F. Matheny