

# EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

"...FOR THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF SERVICE..." ~ EPHESIANS 4:12

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## THE WISDOM OF LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY

By Andrew Dow

The New Testament implies that each local church of God's people should be autonomous—i.e., self-governed or independent. This is evident in the instructions given concerning each church's leadership. Elders (also known as shepherds, pastors, or bishops) are to be appointed in each local church (Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23). Furthermore, these leaders are to **"shepherd the flock of God among"** them (1 Pet 5:2; cf. Acts 20:28). The implication is simple: elders of church A, do not interfere with the work of church B, instead tend to you own work. In the same way, the elders of church B are not to interfere with the work of church A. Local churches are to be separate, independent bodies.

Could we not be more effective, however, if we banded together under some kind of external organization or parent church structure? Would it not be easier on smaller churches if they allowed the elders of a larger church to oversee their church as well? Would churches not be able to do more if they all pooled their resources and sent them to some kind of headquarters or sponsoring church? These observations (and others like them) may be true to some degree. After all, this is the prevailing organizational structure in the religious world (e.g., see baptist churches' relationships to the Southern Baptist Convention and satellite churches' relationships to various megachurches).

There must be some reason why these churches are doing well—numerically, at least. These organizations and structures, however, are not found in the Bible. Why not?

I would like to suggest that there is great wisdom in maintaining autonomy between local churches. The following observations do not comprise an argument for autonomy, but these show that God's instructions are not without benefits. How does local church autonomy exhibit God's wisdom?

**First, local church autonomy acts as a safeguard against widespread apostasy.** By submitting herself to an external organization or parent church a local church puts herself in a position of dependence. This may be a mutually beneficial relationship, but what happens when the parent church or external organization makes a decision that is contrary to Scripture? Each church will be forced to either follow suit or jump ship. There is wisdom in refusing to be put in this situation. I have often heard this first observation discussed in sermons and articles, but consider also the other side of this issue.

**Second, local church autonomy allows a single church to flourish without being held back by a stagnate whole.** It may be generally observed that the larger an organization becomes the slower it becomes (e.g., look no further than our sloth-like federal government). By maintaining autonomy a local church ensures that it will not be restricted by the bureaucracy that comes with a large organization.

**Third, local church autonomy maintains the integrity of individual churches when other churches fall prey to sin and scandal.** To illustrate this point, it

wasn't long ago that catholic churches were trying to recover from sexual abuse scandals. I would venture a guess that the majority of catholic churches were innocent in these debacles, but by associating themselves with the larger catholic church structure (i.e., Pope, Vatican, etc.) all of the local catholic churches were viewed as suspect. Local churches can maintain their integrity as churches by maintaining their independence from others.

**Fourth, local church autonomy forces each church to handle its God-given responsibilities.** God has instructed churches to spread the Gospel (cf. Acts 13) and discipline errant saints (cf. Matt 18; 1 Cor 5) among other things. However, what often happens—whether under the guise of stewardship or from a genuine attempt to be a better steward—is that these responsibilities are deferred to another congregation or external organization. When each church is autonomous it is forced to work out its own issues and obligations.

**Fifth, local church autonomy ensures that each church is being the most effective church it can be.** What studies and expediences will most effectively edify the saints in a particular location? What methods and interactions will most effectively reach the lost in a particular location? It is far more effective to allow each church to govern itself independently than to have a board in Houston, New York, or Rome make these decisions.

Each church should maintain its independence from other congregations and organizations. This should be done primarily because it is the pattern revealed in Scripture. This pattern, however, is not without benefits. We would do well to follow God's wise counsel in this area.

## RIGHTEOUS VS. WICKED: WEALTH

By Andrew Dow

Solomon's proverbs seek to show us how to be wise and, consequently, righteous. Much of Proverbs 10 focuses on our words, but a cluster of proverbs here (10:15–17) address wealth and poverty:

**“The rich man's wealth is his fortress,  
The ruin of the poor is their poverty.**

**The wages of the righteous is life,  
The income of the wicked, punishment.**

**He is on the path of life who heeds instruction,  
But he who ignores reproof goes astray.”**

We often group people together like the first couplet here does: the rich possess an impenetrable fortress while the poor are to be pitied. Rather than looking at one's wealth or poverty we should consider his righteousness or wickedness. Whether rich or poor, the righteous have life. Whether rich or poor, the wicked have punishment. The final lines show us how to be righteous and receive life: **“heed instruction.”** Put another way, *wisdom leads to life.*

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**AM LESSON:**

Speaking the  
Truth in Love

**PM LESSON:**

The Christian and  
Environmentalism

**“GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES...”  
(MATTHEW 28:19-20)**