

Church Autonomy

3-22-15 AM

Recently, the Presbyterian Church USA made the decision that they would endorse and perform homosexual weddings. While many members voiced their dissent (that it was sinful), in the end, because they are a denomination, they will have no choice but to accept this decision within their local congregation. One of the wonderful parts of the pattern of the Lord's church is the pattern of autonomy. Autonomy means "self-rule" and in the church refers to the idea that no one congregation has leadership authority over another congregation (nor may congregations share in their works). Thus a situation such as the one just mentioned need not cause problems in the Lord's church.

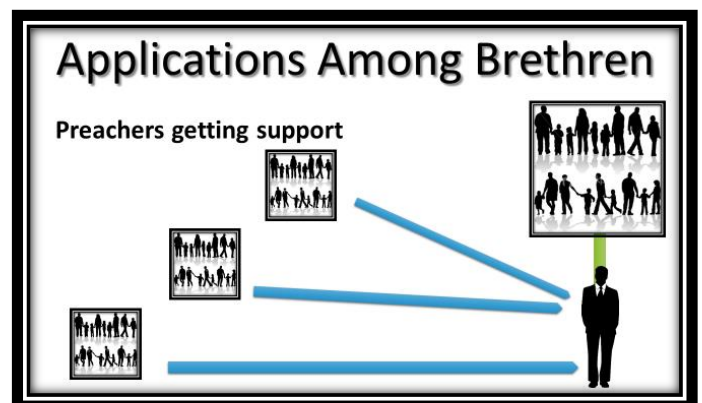
When we speak about autonomy, we note that the term is absent Scripture. It is the idea that is present by necessary inference. We find it expressed in the pattern of the eldership (Acts 20:28 and Titus 1:5), where we are told clearly that elders/overseers/shepherds oversee ONLY their congregations. As well, we see it in the absence of multi-church oversight in places such as Revelation 2-3, where John did not instruct any of the seven churches to assist in the restoration of one another. Each church was clearly liable to restore and maintain itself. This is the doctrine of autonomy. We can even deduce the purpose of the doctrine, which is to quarantine error (II John 9-10).

What many brethren struggle over is to understand what autonomy does NOT mean. For example, autonomy does not mean that churches have no communication with one another (Colossians 4:15-16 I Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:5). It also does not mean that Churches offer no aid to other Saints (Acts 11:28-30 w/ Galatians 2:1-10, II Corinthians 11:8). We note that in these examples aid was offered ONLY AFTER it was understood that the need exceeded the resources of the local church. Another place where autonomy is not present is in church reputations (I Corinthians 1:11, 5:1, Revelation 2-3, 3 John 3-10). Sometimes brethren attempt to assert church autonomy to prevent their reputations for error being communicated, yet it is clear in the NT that congregations had reputations (both good and bad) that were known among other brethren. Finally, we need to know that we are personally NOT in the same category as congregations in autonomy. Many examples exist in the New Testament of interactions between brethren and between brethren and other congregations that would not be permitted between congregations.

Real Life Applications of Autonomy

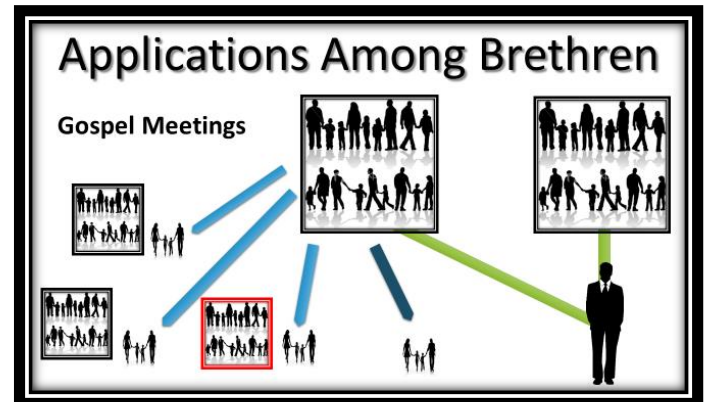
1. Preachers and support

A preacher may not be able to be supported by the congregation of which he is a member. He has authority (II Corinthians 11:8) to solicit personally, as an individual Christian, to other congregations for their support in his work. They do not support his congregation, but his work in that or other congregations.



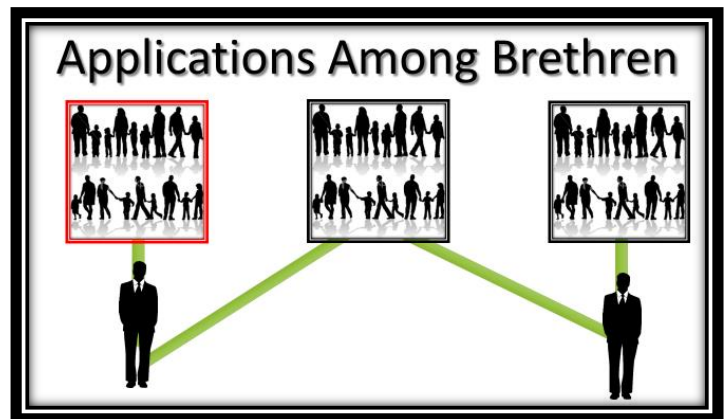
2. Gospel Meetings

A congregation may solicit a preacher as an individual Christian to work with them on a temporary basis. They then communicate with other congregations to extend invitations to the individual members of those congregations to be exhorted, edified or admonished by this work. They may extend these invitations to unsound congregations so that those members may hear lessons on authority, doctrine, etc. They may invited non-believers to hear messages on the Gospel itself. Their invitations would vary based on the intent and purpose of the meeting.



3. Lectureship (an immediate application)

Our evangelist has recently been invited to participate in a lectureship (a meeting with various speakers on a particular subject) by another congregation. However, one of the speakers works with a congregation with a reputation for not adhering to II John 9-10. In this case, the evangelist from that congregation does not have the same reputation in preaching. Our evangelist must make a personal determination if this would be a violation of Ephesians 5:11 or II John 9-10. Then, our elders (have) determined if this is something of which they want to make our members aware. Finally, each individual member must decide if they want to attend.



Summary:

The pattern of church autonomy preserves congregational soundness when it is appropriately applied. However, the church does not oversee your associations with the same autonomy, and you must make a determination personally if you believe that associations you have violate II John 9-10 or Ephesians 5:11. A recent area lectureship has tested our application of autonomy, and our individual members must make appropriate decisions as to their participation in this opportunity.