

RETHINKING CONGREGATIONAL AUTONOMY

Overview of Congregational Autonomy

“Each church is *the church*—full and complete in itself. Each local church is the universal church in miniature. It is a manifestation of the whole. Thus Paul can address the ‘church of God which is at Corinth’ (1 Corinthians 1:2). This is the church of God as it has its manifestation at one place. The local church is not a ‘part’ of the whole as if it were incomplete in itself and in need of more. Each local manifestation of the church is sufficient for its spiritual work. The church is always a visible body in the New Testament. The largest and only permanent visible organization of the church provided for in the New Testament is congregational. Thus no congregation or group of men can exercise control over another (this is a prerogative which belongs to the Christ). Also, no one is ‘member at large’; he belongs to some local group of Christians.”¹

“Autonomy means self-government, or the right of self-government. We all agree that the fact that God’s revealed will has specified the pattern of church government (elders or bishops over the local congregation, which necessarily infers local church autonomy) automatically *excludes* any form of church government that differs from local church autonomy. Everyone on both sides of the issue recognizes the above *definition* as true, and fully recognizes that no form of church government can be accepted as scriptural which contradicts or violates the autonomy of the local church.”²

Congregational Autonomy in Restoration Movement History

“When Campbell applied the restoration principle to church government, he concluded that the New Testament did not authorize any organization but the local church; and on this basis he denounced Baptist associations, Presbyterian presbyteries and synods, and all episcopal systems. He believed that the New Testament pattern required that each local church be independent and that it be under the oversight of elders (bishops) and served by deacons.”³

¹Everett Ferguson, *The New Testament Church*, Revised Edition (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1968), 82.

²J. D. Thomas, *We Be Brethren: A Study in Biblical Interpretation* (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1958), 132.

³Bill Humble, *The Story of the Restoration* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1969), 23; compare pages 37-43.

“The rapid increase of the churches generally, but especially in Kentucky, where the membership was already estimated at forty thousand, impressed Mr. Campbell more and more with the responsibilities of his position, and with the vast importance of a clear understanding on the part of the churches in regard to the whole subject of organization and co-operation.

. . . He, at this period, in common with many other intelligent Reformers, was fearful of a tendency in the Church to extreme views of independency, and was much alive to the great need of proper co-operation. ‘The New Testament,’ says he, ‘teaches itself, both by precept and example, the necessity of connected and concentrated action in the advancement of the kingdom. It lays down some great principles and applies them to the emergencies that arose in the primitive times. First, it inculcates the necessity of co-operation, and specifies instances. Second, it inculcates the necessity of two distinct classes of officers in every particular community. Third, it indicates the necessity of a third class of public functionaries, and gives examples of diverse ministries. Fourth, it exemplifies the utility and the need for special deliberations and of conventions in peculiar emergencies. Fifth, it allows not persons to send themselves or to ordain themselves to office, but everywhere intimates the necessity of choice, selection, mission, and ordination. Sixth, it inculcates a general superintendency of districts and cities by those who preside over the churches in those districts; that is, it makes it the duty of a Christian ministry, by whatever name it may be called, to take care of the common interests of the kingdom in those places and districts in which it is located and resident. Seventh, it claims for every functionary the concurrence of those portions of the community in which he labors, and holds him responsible to those who send, appoint, or ordain him to office.’”⁴

“The early history of the various restoration movements reflects a consistent fear of ecclesiastical organization. The O’Kelly movement burned its annual minutes. Jones was fearful of the power of Baptist associations. The Springfield Presbytery dissolved itself. Western Christians feared what Joseph Badger represented. The Campbells resented the abuse of power in the Chartiers Presbytery, as well as the Redstone Association. In 1823, Campbell emphasized that the early Christians existed only as a church, and, in 1830, the Mahoning Association dissolved itself.

The western Christians had state and regional conferences by 1826, but no mention is made of them after the union with the Disciples. Perhaps they did not survive the merger intact. Certainly there was still fellowship among loyal churches, but there also was a growing feeling that something more was needed. In 1831, Disciples around New Lisbon, Ohio, met to discuss means to implement a cooperative plan to spread the gospel, even proposing the churches be organized by counties. In 1832, Campbell gave his influence through the Bethany church to aid the churches in his area in sending out an evangelist. Churches in several counties in Indiana, in 1833, agreed to support an evangelist on a cooperative basis. Churches in Illinois, in 1835, met in Springfield to organize a state-wide evangelistic program to support a man full-time.

⁴Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, Reprint of 1897 Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Religious Book Service, n.d.), Volume II, 493, 496-497.

The first really successful step came in June of 1839 in Indiana with a state-wide meeting in Indianapolis. Fifty ministers were present, including B. W. Stone. A list of churches was compiled that showed 115 congregations with 7,701 members. Reprinting the statistics, Campbell stated that a meeting in a central area of each state would be a great help to the prosperity of the movement by reciting the statistics. He added, ‘Cooperation and combination of effort is the great secret of success.’ Many objected to Campbell’s stand in these particulars and referred to his 1823 pronouncement against societies. He replied that it was the abuses, not the proper use, that he was attacking at the time.”⁵

Critique of Congregational Autonomy

“Three basic reasons have been given for the lack of involvement [in foreign missions, DWF]. The Restoration theology pointed to an urgent need to teach the existing denominational churches in America ‘the way of the Lord more perfectly’. An often repeated phrase which expressed the general sentiment was, ‘We need to work on the heathens at home first.’ . . . The second and third reasons are closely linked. . . . The smallness of the churches made it more difficult for them to support a missionary fully. By the time they paid the local minister’s salary and constructed a building, the funds for other concerns were very limited. Also, the great majority of these churches, especially in earlier years, were in small rural communities.

. . . In addition to most of the congregations being small, rural, relatively new and meager in finances, they held to a very rigid concept of congregational autonomy. This rigidity made these churches very reluctant to participate in any cooperative venture to support a missionary. Therefore, they were not usually big enough to take on the ideal (full support for a missionary), and they were not flexible enough to cooperate readily with other congregations. This accounts to a large extent for the non-participation of most churches in the foreign mission enterprise. Consequently, the ideal (local congregations taking the responsibility for initiating mission efforts) was not the usual practice. Practically all of the early missionaries ‘volunteered’ their services and took the initiative in asking churches to support them.”⁶

“Around the turn of the century, when the Holiness and Pentecostal revivals were flourishing, still another expansive form of conservative Protestantism differentiated itself from its more accommodating parent denomination. The Churches of Christ, which at their request were counted separately in the federal religious census of 1906, were related to the Disciples of Christ much as the Holiness churches were to Methodism. Indeed, they considered themselves the only true restorers of the New Testament Church, and the only faithful followers of Thomas and Alexander Campbell, who had inaugurated the Restoration movement a century before.

⁵James B. North, Class Notes, “Modern Church History: Restoration Movement” (Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Christian Seminary, Fall 1979).

⁶Phillip Wayne Elkins, *Church-Sponsored Missions: An Evaluation of Churches of Christ* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1974), 9.

The state of affairs formally documented by this religious census had been slowly developing for a half-century, with Alexander Campbell's opposition to missionary societies and instrumental music nearly always the ostensible points of contention. Underlying these tensions, however, were economic and social cleavages. Conservatives were most numerous in the poor rural areas of the South where rustic forms of church life remained, and where a piano was a snobbish luxury. They were unspoiled by either middle-class manners or a seminary-educated clergy. In some broad sense these dissenters were Fundamentalists, especially on the question of biblical inerrancy and closely related issues, but for the rest, they were immured behind a Campbellian wall, going their own way without cooperation, consultation, or coordination with anyone but themselves, and as a result, they were relatively insulated from millennialism, perfectionism, and glossolalia. Most of their controversies and doctrinal questions involved points that only other Restorationists could understand. [This is not an innocent or hasty assertion. Despite their persistent demand for unity, the Disciples have found it very difficult to participate in ecumenical discussions unless they abandon their 'landmarks'. This applies with special force to the ultraconservative Churches of Christ. Of the nine critical issues that cause dissension within the Churches of Christ and separate them from other conservative Disciples, few if any have any important place in the controversies of other Christian churches, Catholic or Evangelical.] So radically congregational were they, moreover, and so opposed to hierarchies and human creeds, that they could make their secession official only by publishing lists of local churches which were in fellowship—or by a statistic in the Census Report. So it was that literal allegiance to Alexander Campbell's program for transcending Christian division resulted in one of America's most robust examples of rigorous exclusivism."⁷

Congregational Interdependency: An Alternative to Autonomy

“Any inquiry as to what the New Testament means by the church (*ekklesia*) cannot be biblically conducted without taking into account the Old Testament background and preparation.

The Hebrew term corresponding to the Greek term is *qahal*, and this Hebrew term is regularly, though not uniformly, rendered by *ekklesia*. Perhaps the most pivotal passages in the Old Testament are Deuteronomy 9.1; 10.4; 18.16, which speak of ‘the day of the assembly’ (*yom qahal* equals *hemera ekklesias*). The assembly is the covenant people of God gathered before him (cf. Exodus 19.5-25; 1 Kings 8.14, 22, 55, 65; 1 Chronicles 13.2, 4; 28.8; 29.1, 10, 20; 2 Chronicles 6.3, 12, 13; 7.8). It is this concept of assembly summoned before God as God's ‘own possession from among all peoples . . . a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19.5, 6), ‘the people which I formed for myself, that they might set forth my praise’ (Isaiah 43.21; cf. Hosea 1.6, 9; 2.1). It is precisely these same terms that Peter takes over when he describes the church, but does not use the term (1 Peter 2.9, 10).

The assembly of God's people was not a passing phase of Israel's history. It was a permanent feature of Israel's identity (cf. Psalms 22.22, 25; 35.18; 40.9; 89.5; 107.32; 149.1; Joel

⁷Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 822-823.

2.16; Micah 2.5). The tabernacle was the focus of the assembly and of the worship. Exodus 29.42-46 is the one passage that enunciates more than any other what the tabernacle signified, and epitomizes what were any central features of the covenant relation. God meets with his people and speaks to them. He dwells among his people. Both are signified and certified by the Shekinah glory. God is their God. We cannot but see the expression here of what is central in the covenant blessing throughout its whole history, and coming to its consummation in the new covenant, 'I will be your God, and ye shall be my people' (cf. Revelation 21.3).

Passing on to the New Testament usage respecting the church, it becomes apparent that the notion of assembly or congregation is in the forefront. There is the non-ecclesiastical use in Acts 19.32, 39, 40, where this meaning is obvious. In the sacred use there are the frequent instances of particularization such as the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8.1; 11.22), at Antioch (Acts 11.26; 14.27; 15.3), at Ephesus (Acts 20.17, 28), at Cenchrea (Romans 16.1), at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.2), in Laodicea (Colossians 4.16), in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1.1), and those mentioned in Revelation 2.1, 8, 12, 18; 3.1, 7, 14. In accordance with this particularization we have manifold references to the churches of Galatia (1 Corinthians 16.1; Galatians 1.2), the churches of Asia (1 Corinthians 16.19), the churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8.1), the churches of Judea (Galatians 1.22; 1 Thessalonians 2.14), and the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 1.4, 20). Not only so, but Paul can speak inclusively in the plural and speak of 'all the churches of the Gentiles' (Romans 16.4), 'all the churches of Christ' (Romans 16.16), 'the churches of God' (1 Corinthians 11.16; 2 Thessalonians 1.4), 'all the churches of the saints' (1 Corinthians 14.33). The particularization becomes most accentuated where Paul speaks of the church in a house (Romans 16.5; 1 Corinthians 16.19; Colossians 4.15; Philemon 2). Here, therefore, is plurality, and all that is comprised in the church of God, denotatively considered, can be spoken of as the churches of God, or of Christ, or of the saints.

But now we must also take account of the inclusive use of the word 'church' in the New Testament. No passage is more significant than Matthew 16.18. One particular, localized assembly could not measure up the role assigned to Peter, and the stewardship of the kingdom of heaven, in terms of which the administration of the affairs of the church is defined. When Jesus speaks of 'my church', he is thinking of those gathered and knit together after the pattern provided by the Old Testament as the people for his possession, as the community which he is to constitute, and which stands in a relation to him comparable to the congregation of the Lord in the Old Testament.

The other instance (Matthew 18.17) is particularly interesting in this connection, because there is particularization. It shows that in Jesus' own teaching we find the particular and inclusive uses of the term.

Paul, as we found, speaks of particular churches and uses the plural quite frequently. But Paul uses the singular in the inclusive sense. When we are introduced to Paul we are told that 'he laid waste the church' (Acts 8.3), and he uses similar terms in his own confessions: 'I persecuted the church of God' (1 Corinthians 15.9; cf. Galatians 1.13; Philippians 3.6). We see already in this use that there is a universalizing, so that unity as well as plurality applies to the church of God and of Christ. This is also strikingly illustrated in Acts 9.31. For, although we read of the churches of Judea (Galatians 1.22), here we read that 'the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified'. Similar use appears in 1 Corinthians 12.28 (cf. 1 Corinthians 10.32).

While, however, we may not fail to take account of the corporate unity which the inclusive use of the word ‘church’ implies, yet, on the other hand, and with equal emphasis, we must recognize that, wherever believers are gathered together in accordance with Christ’s institution and in his name, there is the church of God, and to that church of God belong all the functions, prerogatives, and promises which God has accorded to the church. Where two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, he is in the midst of them (cf. Matthew 18.20 in relation to the preceding context respecting discipline, supplication, intercession). The localized assembly is the body of which Christ is the head. And thus we must speak, not only of the church universal, but of the churches of God throughout the world; that is to say, of the plurality of the church of God. The local church is ‘the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth’ (1 Timothy 3.15); it is ‘the fulness of him that filleth all in all’ (Ephesians 1.23).

What needs to be observed is that, whether the church is viewed as the broader communion of the saints or as the unit or assembly of believers in a home or town or city, it is always a visible observable entity. The people of God do come together, in accordance with Christ’s institution and prescription, for purposes of collective worship and testimony, for the administration of divinely instituted ordinances, for mutual edification, and for the exercise of government and discipline. Hence visible association and organization are necessary to the church. There are institutions to be administered and government exercised.”⁸

⁸Iain H. Murray, compiler, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1937-1966*, Volume Two, Select Lectures in Systematic Theology (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 321-326.