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Theme

***Hold On To The Pattern of*
SOUND TEACHING**

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DEFENDER OF TRUTH

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EDITORIAL

The Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy—“*Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching you have heard from me, with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*” (2 Timothy 1:13)—serves as the cornerstone of this edition. While the world may celebrate novelty and self-determined truth, the gospel calls us back to the bedrock of unalterable principles, revealed through Scripture and exemplified by Jesus Christ and His Apostles. This is a summons to live out a faith that is both doctrinally pure and practically transformative.

The enemy of truth is subtle, often arriving not in blatant rebellion but in small, seemingly harmless compromises. Today, we see how these compromises multiply, whether through the watering down of biblical teachings to appeal to human desires or the growing trend of redefining Scriptural standards to align with cultural expectations. Such erosion threatens the very foundation of our faith, leading many away from the truth of the gospel.

Sound teaching is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is spiritual nourishment. Scripture reminds us that “*faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17). When the purity of this Word is tainted, the faith it produces is weakened. The need, therefore, to guard this treasure—“*with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us*” (2 Timothy 1:14)—is paramount.

As you journey through this edition, we urge you not just to read but to reflect, not just ponder but to practice. The truths presented here are not new; they are as old as eternity and as relevant as ever. Yet, their transformative power lies in their application. As James 1:22 exhorts, “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Otherwise, you are deceiving yourselves*”

We remain committed to equipping you with resources that edify. We are also excited to remind you that past editions of Defender of Truth, along with articles, books, and audio sermons, remain available on our website at www.defenderoftruth.com.ng. May these resources serve as additional tools to strengthen your walk of faith.

In closing, we trust that this edition will encourage you to hold resolutely to the pattern of sound teaching, allowing it to shape your life and faith. May we all, like Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to us, so that the gospel shines brightly, not only in our generation but for generations to come.

HOLD ON TO THE PATTERN OF SOUND TEACHING

by **Afolabi A. Akinyemi**

Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching you have heard from me, with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

Paul the Apostle, here commands Timothy to **hold** (to hold one's self to a thing, to lay hold of a thing, to adhere or cling toⁱ) on to the **pattern** (an outline, sketch, brief and summary expositionⁱⁱ, a particular way in which something is done, organized, or happensⁱⁱⁱ) of **sound** (to have sound health, i.e. be well (in the body); figuratively, to be uncorrupt (true in doctrine): — be in health, (be safe and) sound, (be) wholesome^{iv}) teaching. This makes clear that Timothy was taught a particular way, which is uncorrupted, to teach the word of God, and he was commanded to adhere to it. This command is not only to Timothy but to all believers.

Anyone who runs ahead without remaining in the

teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever remains in His teaching has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 1:9)

The Bible passage above illustrates the dire consequences of failing to abide by Christ's teachings. Also, failure to comply with the doctrine of Christ results in vain worship (Matt. 15:9). The doctrine of Christ is revealed in the New Testament. Jesus referred to His words as spirit and life (John 6:63).

CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE ALIKE?

A common claim by many believers is that it is not possible to understand the Bible alike; hence, all are free to



interpret the Bible as they deem fit, teach, and practice conflicting doctrines.

A closer look at some Bible passages reveals that this notion is wrong. Paul the Apostle urged the Corinthian church to speak the same thing and be perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgement (1 Cor. 1:10-13). Heeding this admonition will be a panacea for division. It is impossible to speak the same thing and be joined together in the same mind and judgment without a common understanding of the Scriptures.

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle told them that when they read what he wrote, they would understand it.

*"Surely you have heard about the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already **written** briefly. In reading this, then, **you will be able to understand** my insight into the mystery of Christ"* (Ephesians 3:2-4)

Instead of asserting that it is impossible to understand the Scriptures alike, the word of Scripture in 2 Tim. 2:15 should be heeded by all lovers of the truth.

*"Make every effort to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman who **accurately handles the word of truth**"*

ACCURATELY HANDLING THE WORD OF TRUTH

One of the most important aspects of correctly handling God's word is knowing how to discern what God commands Christians to do. God reveals His will for man in the New Testament by commands, examples and necessary inferences.

COMMANDS

There is broad agreement that clear commands of God are binding on men. Obedience to commands is commanded in the New Testament.

"By this, we can be sure that we have come to know Him: if we keep His commandments. If anyone says, 'I know Him,' but does not keep His commandments, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4)

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15)

Commands can take the form of direct statements such as *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"* in Mark 16:16, positive commands such as *"This is My body, given for you; do this in remembrance of Me"* in Luke 22:19, restrictions such as *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* in 1 John 2:15 and exhortations such as *"Beloved, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from the desires of the flesh, which war against your soul. Conduct yourselves with such honor among the Gentiles that, though they slander you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us"* in 1 Peter 2:11-12.

EXAMPLES

Examples include actions taken by Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and the early church, which we are commanded to follow.

"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His footsteps" (1 Peter 2:21)

"You are to imitate me, just as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1)

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me, put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9)

"Join one another in following my example, brothers, and carefully observe those who walk according to the pattern we set for you" (Philippians 3:17)

Despite these commands, there have been many objections to the use of examples to determine the will of God. Let us consider some of these objections.

1. It is impossible to obey all examples; therefore, examples cannot be used to determine the will of God.

Firstly, the New Testament does not command that all examples must be obeyed. We are urged to imitate good things. *"Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God"* (3 John 1:11). This is why examples to be obeyed are commonly referred to as

approved examples.

Secondly, just as not all examples are to be obeyed, not all commands are to be obeyed, yet no one argues that all commands should be discarded. In the same way, we are required to discern the commands to be obeyed, we are also required to discern the examples to be obeyed. For instance, no one insists on the command of Jesus Christ, that His disciples should wash one another's feet (John 13:12-15), nor that Christians must greet one another with a kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12), be obeyed.

2. Christians are never commanded to imitate the methodologies of the apostles but to emulate their behavioural conduct as they go about the work of evangelism, education, and benevolence.

In dealing with this objection or position, it is necessary to examine how the Apostles used examples in the New Testament.

"The Jerusalem conference shows us how the apostles regarded examples. When there had been much discussion of the issue of circumcision, Peter said, "Brethren, ye know that a good while ago God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us; and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:7-9). **The Spirit could have had Peter issue a command for the Judaizers to quit binding circumcision, but he did not. He used an example of Gentiles being accepted without circumcision and concluded that this revealed God's will on the matter.** Paul and Barnabas also gave some examples of the same fact, which are not enumerated (Acts 15:12)".^v

In Philippians 4:14-18, Paul the Apostle commends the church at Philippi for their generosity in partnering with him in evangelism and expresses the method by which they did so. It was a direct partnership between Paul and the church in Philippi. Please note that preceding this in verse 9, he had said, *"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me, put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"* This example includes conduct and method!

3. Examples are not binding except there is a command on the same matter.

This position relegates examples. It means that commands are superior to examples. The apostles never made this order of importance in their commands to follow examples. The command in Philippians 4:9 speaks of putting into practice what Christians had learned, received or heard referring to teaching and what they had seen in him, referring to example. This position is the same as teaching that examples are not binding.

WHEN ARE EXAMPLES BINDING?

There are a substantial number of people who object to this question and feel studying the principles that determine whether an example is binding or not is tantamount to adding to God's word or setting up man-made rules. It must be mentioned in this regard that God expects us to use our reasoning to understand His word. Human reasoning is necessary to determine which commands apply to Christians. Reasoning ability is needed to determine that we are not bound to keep the Sabbath, burn incense, offer animal sacrifices, as well as wash one another's feet or greet with holy kisses.

The principles enumerated herein apply not only to examples but to commands as well. For an example to be binding, there must be:

1. Uniformity: This means that the Bible doesn't contradict itself and must be interpreted harmoniously.
2. Relevant: Not every example in the Bible is relevant and applicable to us. David made animal sacrifices and worshipped God with instruments of music, but these are not relevant to Christians. The old covenant has been nailed to the cross of Christ (Col.2:14).
3. Pertinent: it must be material to fulfilling the will of God. For instance, water is essential for baptism (John 3:23; Acts 8:36-38) but running water is not pertinent; partaking in the Lord's supper on the first day of the week is essential, but doing it in an upper room is not pertinent (Acts 20:7-8).

INFERENCE

Inferences are necessary or inevitable conclusions reached from facts. Jesus Christ taught by inference. In Matt. 22:23-29 he rebuked the Sadducees for not making a necessary inference from the scriptures on the issue of resurrection. He told them *"You are mistaken because*



you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. In the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. Instead, they will be like the angels in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what God said to you: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? **He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.**" He expected them to infer that fact of resurrection because God said I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The frequency of observing the Lord's Supper can be inferred from Acts 20:7. Every week has a first day, therefore the example that the disciples gathered to break bread on the first day of the week means that they gathered to break bread every first day of the week. God simply commanded the Israelites "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8), and they knew they were obligated to keep every Sabbath day holy.

Some people argue that we should not rely on necessary inference to understand what the Bible teaches us today. The fact is that there no way we can know that God's commands apply to us today without necessary inference. The commands to baptize were given to the apostles, and the instructions to be baptized were directed at people living thousands of years ago, in a different land, speaking a different language. Yet, I was baptized—because I understood, through necessary inference, that those commands still apply to me today.

This is how people in Nigeria, in 2025, can respond to a gospel first preached in Jerusalem in the first century. We infer from Scripture that the gospel is for *all nations*, for *all time*, and for *every person*. That's why we preach, obey, and live out the gospel. Without necessary inference, how would someone in Lagos or Enugu or Kaduna know that the Bible's message is meant for them? If we can't draw that connection from the examples and teachings of Scripture, then how do we explain the relevance of the gospel today?

THE SILENCE OF THE SCRIPTURES

This refers to the fact that we must have positive authority either by command, example or inference for all we do in Christianity. The Bible does not authorize by listing everything that must not be done. The authorized elements for the Lord's supper are unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine (Luke 22:18-20). All other elements; water, coke etc are unauthorised. The Bible is silent about

them.

This principle is also illustrated in Heb. 7:11-14. Moses spoke about priests being appointed from the tribe of Levi but said **nothing** (he was silent) about priests being appointed from the tribe of Judah. Therefore under the Old Testament law, it was not authorized that priests be appointed from Judah.

CONCLUSION

The consequence of failing to hold onto the pattern of sound teaching is dire. Some brethren claim that examples and inference are not to be used to determine God's will. These claims mean that there is no law governing Bible baptism being water baptism (Acts 8:38), day and frequency of partaking in the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7), day of worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2), autonomy of the local church (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:2) etc. Ignoring the commands, examples, and necessary inferences which authorize Christian practice is perilous.

ⁱ Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

^{iv} Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

^v Frank Jameson, *The Apostles and Hermeneutics*, *Guardian of Truth* XXXIV: 18, pp. 545, 565

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THE NECESSITY AND PURPOSE OF BAPTISM

by Opemipo Olusola

Maintaining the sanctity of the word of God, or keeping the form of the first-century faith is a sacred duty upon every servant of Christ. This is a serious challenge in the presence of modern denominational doctrines regarding “baptism”.

In this article, we intend to examine the importance and purpose of baptism and expose some denominational errors concerning baptism. There are different types of baptism mentioned in the Bible. e.g. Baptism of John, Baptism of suffering, Baptism of the Holy Spirit, Baptism of Christ, and Baptism of fire, but we shall zero in on water baptism in Christ's authority.

DEFINITION OF BAPTISM

The word “Baptism” comes from the Greek word “Baptisma” (Noun form), consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from bapto, “to dip”). It is used for “John's Baptism”, also used of Christian “Baptism”, etc.

The verb form of baptism in Greek is “baptizo” which means to “baptize”, to dip, to submerge, to overwhelm. It was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, etc. (Vine Expository Dictionary)

THE PURPOSE OF BAPTISM

1. Baptism saves: Baptism is a command to be obeyed. The authority for baptism is read in the great commission during our Lord's ascension to heaven.

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matt.28:18-20).

The Hebrew writer says of Christ in Heb 5:9, *“And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obeyed Him”.*

Jesus saves only those who obey Him. In other words, those who reject His authority regarding baptism shall miss His salvation. In Peter's words of exhortation, he reminded Christians of what happened in the days of Noah, how the disobedient perished and eight souls were saved by water. He likened the symbolic water that floated the ark of Noah then, to baptism which now saves us, granting salvation to the obedient hearts. *“...In which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an*

antitype which now saves us – baptism... “(1Pet.3:20-21). Christ says “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk 16:16)

2. Baptism is for the remission of sins: On Pentecost day, after the people were pricked in their hearts through the preaching of the gospel, they asked Peter and the rest of the Apostles, *“What shall we do?”* Inspired Peter responded: *“Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).* Sin is the barrier between God and men (Isa.59:1-2). The barrier is removed only through water baptism in the authority of Christ. *“And now, why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16)*
3. Baptism unites men with Christ (Rom.6:3-5): God calls us into fellowship with Christ, His Son (1 Cor 1:9). At baptism, we answer this divine calling to be united with Christ. Baptism means union with Christ. Paul writes in Romans 6:3 that we are baptized into Jesus Christ—or, as the Modern Language Bible puts it, *“we are baptized into union with Christ Jesus.”*

In Galatians 3:27, Paul concludes, *“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ...”*

Entrance into Christ, and all that it implies (Romans 8:1; Ephesians 1:7), is achieved in the act of baptism. We share in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ through our water baptism.

“For if we have been united in the likeness of his death, we will be united also in the likeness of his resurrection” (Rom.6:5)

4. Baptism puts men into the one body of Christ.

“For with one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slave or free and have all been given to drink into one Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:13) Jesus Christ is the Savior of this one body (Eph.5:23).

The Bible teaches that there is one body. Eph.4:4. That one body is not Denominational. Christ is the Head of the body, the church, Col.1:18.

5. Baptism leads to a newness of life.

Baptism is closely involved in the process of the new Birth.



(John 3.3, 5.) *"Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly I say to you unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"*

The word of God and water baptism are the two elements involved in sinners' conversion (Mk.16:15-16; Jhn.. 6:63; 1Pet.1:23). We are raised from baptism to *"walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6.4.) Baptism is not an ending; it is a beginning. It is the starting point of the Christian life. It is in the act of baptism that we are born again!

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. Old things have passed away. See, all things have become new!" (2Cor.5:17).

THE NECESSITY OF BAPTISM

The fact that baptism is mentioned more than 100 times in the New Testament leaves no doubt as to its importance. The things connected with it show its absolute necessity.

The necessity of baptism is seen in the baptising of those three thousand souls who were convicted of their sins on the same day of Pentecost. If the baptism is not necessary, why would Philip stop the chariot during the conversion of the Eunuch of Ethiopia? (Acts 8:36-38).

DENOMINATIONAL DOCTRINES ON BAPTISM

Satan, the Father of Lies (John 8:44), is always on his destructive mission towards the sons of men by distracting them from the plain truth about God's guidelines for obtaining forgiveness of sins, (Acts 2:38, 2Pet 2:1-3).

Below are some doctrinal errors on the subject of baptism and the scriptural answers to them.

1. "Christian water baptism is an outward symbol that one being baptized has made a complete, unreserved, and unconditional dedication through Jesus Christ to the will of Jehovah God". (Baptism: Reasoning from the scriptures, Pg 54).

Scriptural response: While it is true that a baptized person is required to live a crucified life, a life of commitment, of self-denial, of unconditional dedication to God's will (Gal 2:20), reducing water baptism to "an outward symbol" is heretic and it is strange to the Apostles' teachings. Such a position counts baptism as a formal ritual that has nothing to do with man's salvation or his forgiveness of sins. The Bible teaches that baptism saves (1Pet 3:21), He that

believes and is baptised shall be saved.

2. "Water baptism was stated to the Jews who shared responsibility for the death of Christ..., Only by their doing this could their sins be forgiven". (Baptism: Reasoning from the scriptures, Pg. 55 & 56)

Jesus Christ charged the Apostles to teach all nations, and to preach the gospel to every creature. Take note that the non-Jewish nations are included in that command (Matt 28 19-20; Mk 16:15-16). He that believes and is baptized shall be saved. Baptism is a command to everyone who desires salvation irrespective of their nation and tribe since all men have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23).

All the cases of conversion in the book of Acts of the Apostles ended in baptism, including the case of the first non-Jewish family to be converted to Christianity i.e. the family of Cornelius in Acts 10.

3. Baptism is administered on an infant's forehead and breast which are signed with the cross, the symbol of redemption. (The catechism of the council of Trent). The Roman Catholic doctrine of original sin, that is, infants are born with the guilt of Adamic sins and inherent evil spirits; hence, infant baptism and exorcism are administered on the infants by the priest at the request of the sponsors (i.e. parents of such children).

Jesus taught that children are innocent (Matt. 19:14). Sins cannot be inherited from parents just as righteousness is not transferable (Ezek 18:20). Thus, baptism is administered only to those who recognize their sinful state, who believe the gospel preached, who can confess their faith in Christ as the Son of God, (Acts 2:37-41, 8:35-38, 16:25-29, 22:16).

No exorcism was performed on Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8; he was preached to, believed the kingdom messages, and was baptized along with other Samaritans (Acts 8:5-13). Deliverance from the power of darkness occurs at the point of obeying the gospel of Christ in water baptism (Col 1:13).

4. Baptism is a symbolic act and is a requirement for church membership, and it does not impart God's grace or salvation.

Baptism is a divine condition for pardon from sins. Jesus Christ instructed His disciples to preach to every creature,

he who believes and is baptized shall be saved. (Mk 16:15-16). The account of Acts chapter 2 ended with this phrase: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). The saved are those who repented of their sins and were baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38-42).

Thus, verse 47 implies that the church is made up of those who are marked down for eternal salvation. The addition is made by the Lord Jesus Christ himself as people yield to the provisions of the gospel (Acts 2:37-41). Therefore, the claim that baptism has nothing to do with salvation is a false teaching. The Bible teaches that faith without works is dead (Jam 2:26). Faith alone does not save. *"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."* (Jam.2:24)

5. Baptism can be done by sprinkling or pouring water on a person:

This practice is strange to the accounts of conversion in the book of Acts of the Apostles. The Bible teaches that baptism is a burial. Col. 2:12 says, *"Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

The Greek word for baptism is "baptizo" means to immerse, submerge, to be overwhelmed. Jesus came out of the water during his baptism at River Jordan (Matt 3:16). Philip and the Eunuch of Ethiopia went down into the water, and they came up out of the water (Acts 8:38-39). Therefore, sprinkling and pouring is a tradition of men (Matt.15:8-9).

CONCLUSION

Baptism is an eternal plan of God to save mankind. We have also studied the errors of men regarding the subject of baptism, and the importance or purpose of being baptized.

It is not too late for you to repent and accept the undiluted doctrine of Christ which requires that everyone who hears the pure gospel, believes it, repent of all their sins, confess Christ as the Son of the Living God and be baptized by immersion into the New Testament church where you will be guided to abide in the doctrine of Christ today. Let us hold fast to this Apostolic pattern to ensure the unity of believers and the purity of first-century faith towards the salvation of our souls.

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THE CHURCH AND HUMAN ORGANIZATIONS

by Osamagbe Lesley Egharevba

The issues of human organizations doing the work of the local church as well as churches establishing and supporting these organizations, have continued to be a matter of concern among churches of Christ. Questions such as whether it is scriptural for churches of Christ to work with or through human organizations in carrying out their work and whether these institutions even have the right to exist have always been answered differently. As with every other Biblical issue, we must study the Bible carefully to understand what is God's will on the matter. In this writing, we will look at the New Testament to answer these questions.

Defining The Terms

Before we continue, it is important to define the terms in our topic to understand what we are talking about. The church refers to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18) and specifically in its local sense (Acts 13:1; Romans 16:16). The local church is saddled with the responsibility of preaching the gospel (Ephesians 4:11-12), grooming members of the church (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Corinthians 14:26) as well as helping the needy members of the church (1 Timothy 5:16; Romans 15:25-26).

A human organization, on the other hand, according to Hailey (1956, p.22) is defined as "a body formed by man, governed by man, apart from divine origin or authority" (Cited in Cogdill 1984, p. 52). In this context, we are looking at institutions that are set up and operated or supported by individuals solely to accomplish the work of evangelism, edification and benevolence. Some examples of these human organizations would include Bible colleges established by men to train preachers and teachers for the church, orphanages established by men to take care of orphans, and various forums established by men to do the work of teaching the brethren.

God Specified The Church In Doing The Work of Evangelism, Edification And Benevolence

Let us begin with a simple explanation of the concepts of generic and specific authority. When something is specified in a command, the instruction is limited to what is specified and excludes other things that are not specified. For example, suppose you sent someone to get you some fruits and he comes back with some apples, has he obeyed your instruction? Definitely yes! But suppose you sent him to get you some bananas and he comes back with some oranges, would that be obedience to

what you have sent him? Not at all for you have specified what he needed to buy. In the first instance, "fruits" is generic and gives the messenger a choice to get anything under the umbrella of what is called fruits but in the second example, the banana is specific in the instruction and excludes every other kind of fruit.

Similarly, we notice in Genesis 6:14 that God gave the command to build the ark. God did not give a generic term: 'wood.' God gave a specific term: 'gopher wood.' And so, when God said, 'gopher wood,' that ruled out other kinds of wood. In 2 Kings 5:10, God's servant told Naaman to go wash seven times in Jordan. God did not simply have his servant say, 'in water,' but he said, 'in Jordan.' That meant 'in Jordan,' not some other body of water. In Leviticus 14:10-32, we notice that God said, "Offer a lamb." Had God simply said, 'Offer an animal,' any animal would have been sufficient. But God specified the lamb; ruling out all other kinds of animals. We notice in John 9:7, that Jesus said, "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." That would rule out other bodies of water.

We notice also, with respect to the work of the church, in Ephesians 3:10 and 1 Thessalonians 1:8, showing how the church is to preach the gospel. It is to evangelize. Had God simply said, 'organizations,' we could not rule out the Bible colleges and other kinds of human institutions, but God specified 'the church,' the local congregation being God's organization for His people to work in an organized capacity. That rules out other organizations.

The same thing is applicable with respect to edifying. In Ephesians 4:16, we notice that God says that "it," (the church), might edify itself in love. If God had simply said 'organizations,' then an organization would have been sufficient. But God specified the church, that is, the local congregation to do that, ruling out other organizations.

In 1 Timothy 5:16 we notice that Paul says that "it," (the church), might "relieve them that are widows indeed." Acts 6 shows how the church did relieve some widows. If God had simply said 'organizations,' then human benevolent organizations might have been alright, but God did not say that. God specified the church, the congregation; therefore, that rules out benevolent human organizations.

There's no authority for human institutions to do any work of the church. When God specifies a thing, others are eliminated. And so, we see that God specified the church in evangelism, the church in edification, and the church in

benevolence.

Can The Church Work With Or Through Human Organizations?

For every organization, there is a mission. A university is set up to educate people. A hospital is built by people for the purpose of taking care of the sick ones. Also, the church is set up, designed and licensed by God to glorify Him (Ephesians 3:21) via true worship (John 4:24, Philippians 3:3) and by performing the functions of evangelism as well as edification and benevolence (cf. Ephesians 4:11-12). It was designed by the wisdom of God and was built by the Lord in fulfilment of God's eternal purpose to declare His manifold wisdom (Ephesians 3:10-11). Each local church is the pillar and ground of truth in its community, not any human organization (1 Timothy 3:15), the word of the Lord is to sound out from each congregation via its evangelists and/or members (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8, Romans 10:14-15, Acts 8:1-4). Any group of individuals cannot just lump themselves together and set up a university without meeting the criteria and being given the license to start and/or operate a university by the appropriate government/authority. Similarly, God has not given any human organization the license to do the work of the church and no human organization even meets the criteria as the local church, and they have no authority to do such work.

If one reads the Bible carefully, can one imagine that there was any human organization apart from the local church that performed the work of evangelism? Certainly not! The churches in the New Testament did its work of evangelism by sending out evangelists (Acts 11:22; 13:1-5) and supporting a gospel preacher (Philippians 4:18). The congregation was the only medium through which the New Testament church functioned in the performance of its mission as each did its work under the supervision of its own elders. There was no room for collaboration with a human organization. To allow a human organization to plan evangelism for a local church and dictate for her or for a local church to support a human organization is to surrender its right of doing a God-given assignment and forfeit the blessings therein; thereby destroying the autonomy of the church. Such a church has buried its talent. Christ authorized His disciples (followers) to preach the word (Matthew 28:18-20) and He allows them to do so first as officers of his established kingdom (Acts 1:4-8, Ephesians 4:11-12) and secondarily as individual members of his church (Acts 8:1-5). Jesus has neither mandated nor endorsed any human organization to

preach His gospel.

Is The Church Collaboration With Human Organizations Methods Of Fulfilling The Mission Of The Church?

In discussions surrounding church support of Bible colleges, a common defence is the claim that a Bible college is "just a method" of teaching the Bible — and therefore permissible. However, this argument fails to make a necessary and biblical distinction between **methods** and **institutions using methods**. When Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 "I will build My church", was He in any way suggesting that he was going to establish a method? The church is an institution just like any other institution but while the church is a divine one, the others are human. So, if human institutions are methods of doing God's work, would the church also be said to be a method? If not why not?

A method refers to a means or way of accomplishing something. For example, a method of teaching might be writing, or using audio-visual aids. Methods are tools that may be used by individuals or local congregations to carry out divinely authorized work. Just as we earlier pointed out, the church, for instance, is authorized to teach, and it may use various scriptural methods to do so — such as Bible classes, literature, or sermons. An institution, by contrast, is a separate organized body — often with its leadership, structure, funding, and mission. A Bible college, for example, is an organization, typically incorporated, that owns property, hires staff, sets a curriculum, collects tuition, and issues degrees or certificates. It is not simply a method of teaching; it is a man-made organization that employs a wide range of methods.

This distinction is critical because the New Testament reveals **the local church** — not human institutions — as the organization through which God intended His work to be carried out. When a Bible college is supported or funded by a church, that church is effectively outsourcing its God-given work to a man-made institution. This is not equivalent to a local congregation using a method like printed literature or a public hall. Instead, it is forming a parallel organization, unauthorized in Scripture, to do the work that belongs exclusively to the church — namely, the spiritual education and edification of saints.



Do Human Organizations Have A Right To Exist?

There is nothing inherently wrong with human organisations operating in secular or private religious contexts. The issue is not whether these organizations can exist, but whether the local church is authorized to fund, endorse, or partner with them in doing the work God assigned to the church. There is a difference between what individual Christians may do in their private capacity and what the local church, acting as a collective body, is authorized by Scripture to do. For example, two or three brethren may come together to help resolve a conflict without necessarily telling or involving the church (Matthew 18:15-18). Two brethren having the same widowed parent or grandparent may come together to relieve them without placing the burden on the church (I Timothy 5:4, 16). A group of individual brethren may decide to go “everywhere preaching the word” on their own without necessarily being sent by the church (Acts 8:4; 11:19). All of these actions, even though not done by the church are scriptural. What is unscriptural is not the existence of human organizations, but their financial or operational support from the church treasury. Such support assumes that the church can transfer its assigned work to another body and that man-made institutions can serve as intermediaries between the church and its work as well as the fact that such arrangements are acceptable despite the silence of the Scriptures on such practices as earlier explained.

An individual Christian may start a private orphanage. This is not sinful in itself. But when that orphanage is organized as a separate corporation and then receives funds from church treasuries to carry out benevolence work on behalf of the churches, this becomes unscriptural. The local church is fully capable and responsible to do its benevolent work directly, as we see in Acts 6; Acts 11:27-20 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-4. Same thing applies to evangelism. Nothing prohibits brethren from behaving like those in Acts 8:4 and Acts 11:19 who “went everywhere preaching the word” even when the church did not directly send them out. But nowhere in the New Testament do we read of a church outsourcing or delegating its responsibilities to a man-made organization, regardless of the purpose or efficiency of such an arrangement.

There is no biblical objection to human institutions existing so long as they are not funded by church treasuries; they

do not do the work assigned to the church for her; and they are not represented as extensions of the church. Human organizations or private Christian endeavors such as publishing houses, colleges, etc. may operate under individual ownership and responsibility, and Christians may choose to support them from their personal means, as long as they do not attempt to serve as the organized function of the church. They may exist but **not as substitutes or auxiliaries of the Lord's church, and not with the financial support of local churches.** To authorize such would be to go beyond the doctrine of Christ (II John 9), and to substitute human wisdom for divine instruction. This is consistent with New Testament principles and preserves the autonomy and divine structure of the local church.

Conclusion

Church support of human institutions violates the independence of the local church. In many human organizations supported by churches to do the Lord's work, the management of such organization (sometimes Board of Trustees or directors as the case may be) supervised the work of evangelism in which all the contributing churches participated. The elders of the contributing churches surrendered their oversight of that work to the Board of Directors of a human institution. This violates local church independence (I Peter 5:1-2). We must respect the silence of the Scriptures in organizational matters, and uphold the autonomy and sufficiency of the local church as God's designed vehicle for spiritual work. The pattern in the New Testament is clear: the local church operates independently, doing its own teaching and supporting its own workers. When churches begin funding a college, they are not just choosing a "method." They are supporting a separate institution with its own goals and oversight. This fundamentally alters the organization and function of the local church.

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IS THE CONCEPT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH SCRIPTURAL?

by Jobalo Oshikanlu

Bible Gems: “Unto **the church of God which is at Corinth**” (1 Corinthians 1:2 KJV). “And the tidings came to the ears of **the church that was at Jerusalem**, touching these things: and they sent Barnabas...” (Acts 11:22 DRA)ⁱ

Introduction

The word “church” is used in 3 distinct senses in the New Testament:

- First, to denote the universal assembly of people called out of the world into fellowship with God (Matthew 16:18). This is the one body that one is baptized into (1 Corinthians 12:13) when we are baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27). It is not an organized body but a spiritual relationship entered into (Hebrews 12:22-24) when we commence the walk in the light of His word (1 John 1:7). Therefore being “in Christ” equates to being in that “one body”, the universal church.
- Second, denoting the local congregation (1 Corinthians 1:2). The local church is the only organization in the New Testament given for the Lord's work and service. It is a group of Christians in a given locality who agree to worship together and to do God's work together through pooled resources and on a regular basis.
- Third (which relates to the second above), denoting the public worship gathering of the local congregation (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:34).

The Local Church

The New Testament authorizes only one organization, i.e. body politic, to be in any way a part of or attached to the Lord's Church. That organization is the local congregation (1 Corinthians 1:2). If local churches fail to perform their scriptural responsibilities, there is no scriptural, organized activity within the Lord's body. In New Testament times, all Christians became members of local congregations, and the idea of “free-floating Christians” where disciples drift back and forth between congregations, with no obligation or firm commitment to any one of them, was unknown. This truth is demonstrated by several examples. As soon as the Lord's Church was established, the first citizens of the kingdom formed a local congregation. They worshipped together on a permanent basis and had a treasury through which they did common work (Acts 2:44-48). Paul, the apostle, exemplified well the

essentiality of membership in the local church. As soon as he was baptized, he became a part of the disciples at Damascus (Acts 9:19). He had hardly arrived in Jerusalem when he wanted to become a member of the congregation there (Acts 9:26-28).

The above demonstrates the nature and meaning of a local church. A local church is composed of saints who agree to work together (Acts 9:26-28), is based in a specific locality (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:5), so that its members assemble regularly (Acts 11:25-26; 20:7; Hebrews 10:24-25), and it functions collectively, i.e., as a whole (1 Timothy 5:16; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), and when mature, is organized, with bishops (i.e., overseers, also called elders/presbyters or pastors/shepherds - Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:17, 28), deacons (servants - 1 Timothy 3:8-13), and saints (members) working together as they have ability and opportunity (Romans 12:4-8). The local church may have fellowship with a preacher or preachers, who both preach to them and work in other places (Philippians 4:15-16). Each local church is autonomous (independent, self-governed - 1 Peter 5:1-2; Acts 13:1-3).

One important feature of the church lies in each mature and organized congregation having a plurality of elders. Paul and Barnabas ordained “elders in every church” (Acts 14:23); and from Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus and called “the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17). Since elders, bishops and pastors are the same, a plurality of these must exist in a scripturally organized local church. An arrangement that has one pastor over a congregation or that has a bishop over several churches is a violation of the organizational structure given to churches in the New Testament (2 John 9; Hebrews 8:5).

In the New Testament, Elders were limited in their work of tending or overseeing to the church “among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit makes these men overseers only in “the flock of God **which is among you**”ⁱⁱⁱ (1 Peter 5:2). An elder's oversight or “tending” does not go beyond the local church of which he is a member. Being an elder in one congregation does not give him any authority in the affairs of another congregation. Also, no other organization needs to be formed, nor do congregations need to be yoked



together in an arrangement that has several congregations combining their money or work in one that directs and controls such work.

The Concept of the “City-Church” – An Examination

The New Testament is replete with examples of congregations or local churches meeting in the houses of individuals or members of the Lord's Church, or meeting on some private premises or the other (Romans 16:3-5, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1-2).

Over the years, advocates have come up with the concept of the “city-church”. Whilst devoid of sound scriptural basis, these individuals seek to distinguish between what they call a “house-church” and what they call a “city-church”.

Amongst the expositions of the city-church concept that I have readⁱⁱⁱ, the advocates consider any regular located gathering of Christians for worship as “an assembly or a congregation or a **house-church** (whether or not it meets in a home or a purpose-built hall)”. Where and when several assemblies exist in a city (settlement), we see all the members in these assemblies as constituting one body: the **City-church**. The whole church may or may not regularly come together into one place. Whether the **City-church** do meet in one venue and how frequent is up to them but each assembly constitutes a **cell/cluster/congregation/house-church**. However, if there is only one assembly or house/hall church in a city, then it is simultaneously the **City-church**.

The basic error of advocates of the city-church concept appears to be their assumption (without sound basis in the New Testament) that **each church of the 1st century was a network of house-churches** (or home groups, which they also call cell-churches), with each house-church being a subset of the city-church.

These advocates do not deny the “church” identity assigned by the Holy Spirit to the churches meeting in the houses of individuals (Romans 16:3-5, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1-2). Only they claim that these churches are subsets within a wider “City-church”. However, the latter seems clearly a product of willful assumption or extrapolation which contradicts direct teaching of the New Testament. If the “house-church” and the “city-church” are both “churches” as identified by the Holy Spirit, would these advocates be able to

apply all the features of a church as revealed in the New Testament to both church concepts?

Three broad but flawed approaches can be observed in the arguments of the advocates of the city-church concept:

- i) They cite passages that show there were groups of Christians meeting in their homes from within the same congregation. But a group of Christians from within a local church, even if they meet for spiritual reasons, does not comprise a church within a church. The New Testament has never so described any group. If two or three disciples within a local church meet to resolve differences, they are not a church (Matthew 18:15-17). This truth negates the arguments used to defend the belief that several house churches should comprise one city-wide church shepherded by one eldership.
- ii) They refer to several notable cities of the New Testament times where prominent or decent-sized churches were established or existed and claim or imply that there were several “house-churches” in these cities – Jerusalem (Acts 11:22; 15:4, 22-23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2), Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1), Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea (Revelation 1:11). **Very simply put, there is no scripture that proves that there were multiple churches in any of these cities.** Additionally, they cite passages demonstrating one set of elders in certain cities (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5), but there is no proof of scripture whatsoever that any of such cities had multiple churches.
- iii) Thirdly, they cite passages that demonstrate some New Testament cities had more than one congregation (Romans 16:5, 14-15; Colossians 4:15), even as we have today in many cities. But they have no such passage to cite which proves that these various congregations comprised a city-wide congregation shepherded by one eldership. They have no such passage to cite because no such passage exists in the New Testament! (1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9-11)

Given that similar ideas throughout history have led to apostasy of massive scales, the “city-church” advocacy portends grave dangers for Christians and the truth, in view of the potential for placing elders over multiple churches, just as in the beginning of the first apostasy (in the 2nd Century) a bishop was placed over multiple churches. The result will be the same in many cases when

those who are effectively the leaders of “City-church” exercise control over those described by the advocates as house-churches or cell-churches.

We learn in the New Testament of churches (meeting) in the houses of individual Christians. We learn nothing of a “City-church” or a “house-church” in the manner propagated by the advocates of these concepts. Nor do we learn anything from the Holy Spirit about one group of elders shepherding multiple house churches (1 Timothy 4:1).

Conclusion

The local church is the only organization in the New Testament given for the Lord's spiritual work and service. A church can meet for worship including observing the Lord's supper (1 Corinthians 14:23; Acts 20:7), it can discipline its members (1 Corinthians 5), sound out the word (1 Thessalonians 1:8), care for its needy members (Acts 6:1-6), support men preaching in other fields (Philippians 4:15-16), and have elders appointed in it (Acts 14:23).

Advocates of the “City-church” concept accept the “church” identity assigned by the New Testament to churches meeting in the houses of individual Christians. Hence, our question to them would be: if indeed both the “house-church” and the “city-church” are “churches”, can we properly apply the salient features of a church (set out in the preceding paragraph) to both church concepts? (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)

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ⁱ The referenced English versions are mostly specified. Where not specifically indicated, then the scripture quotation is from the New King James' version (NKJV).

ⁱⁱ Emphasis supplied.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Multiple Assemblies vs Single Assembly Church etc – www.lainosint.com/download/faith



IS THE PRACTICE OF AUTONOMY OF THE CHURCH SCRIPTURAL?

by Kayode Adekunle

"So when they had appointed elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23)

"For this reason, I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Titus 1:5)

Introduction

Autonomy is a compound word consisting of autos, self, and nomos, meaning law. Hence, self-law or self-governing. Autonomy is simply defined as, "Independence; the right of self-government". The church we see in the New Testament is made up of autonomous congregations.

The Greek word used for the church is "ekklesia" which means "the called out." It is used to describe God's people who have been called by the gospel of Christ from "darkness" that is the kingdom of Satan; into the kingdom of Christ, which is His church. (Matthew 16:18-19; Colossians 1:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 2:14). They have been called out of the world and into the service of Christ. This is the universal body of Christ that God adds anyone who obeys the gospel through baptism (Acts 2:47). Paul says to the Corinthians "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free and have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

However, the church is only seen and organized physically in the local sense in the New Testament. This is a particular locality where a group of Christians come together as a church for fellowship, worship and to carry out other functions assigned to the church by Christ, the owner. We have the example of the Church that is at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1), the church at Caesarea (Acts 18:22), the church of God at Corinth (1 Cor 1:2) etc. The local church must be joined by believers, unlike the church universal where God adds anyone who obeys the gospel of Christ. The local church has a geographic location, either unassembled or assembled (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 14:23).

The Autonomy of Each Local Church

Churches of Christ are autonomous in government. Each one is independent of all others. Each one has its own leadership. We read in the New Testament of churches in a district such as "the churches of Galatia" Galatians 1:2.

However, there was no distinct organization. Each of the churches in Galatia was self-governing. The local church when fully organized has elders and the members are to submit themselves to the rule of the elders (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3; Heb. 13:17). It is in the assembled local church that the Lord's Supper is observed, songs of praise are sung and admonitions are delivered, Christians contribute into the treasury, and Christians are provoked unto love and good works (1 Cor. 11:18-34; Eph. 5:19; 1 Cor. 16:1, 2; Heb. 10:24). The local church is inferred in the command, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25, 26). The local church is not a denomination but is simply a group of Christians who have banded themselves together in a particular locality, for the purpose of worshipping God and collectively preaching the gospel to the lost and edifying the saved (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 4:16).

It is easy to see that God's plan for His church was for each church in each place to be self-governing. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, they again visited the churches they had established. They "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). Every church had its own eldership. When Paul wrote to the church of Christ in Philippi, he addressed his letter to "the saints who are in Philippi with the bishops elders and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). The Apostle Peter commanded elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (1 Peter 5:2). They were not to feed other flocks, but they were to shepherd the flock which was among them. This is the local congregation where they were members.

When Paul told the church in Corinth to contribute for the purpose of benevolence in 1 Cor 16:1-2, he made it clear that the brethren there will be the one to "approve the bearer of the gift" (1 Cor 16:3). This further shows how local churches are independent of each other in decision making as seen in the New Testament.

Paul wrote to Titus: "For this reason, I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Titus

1:5). The church at Jerusalem had its own elders (Acts 15:4). The church in Ephesus had its own elders (Acts 20:17). The church at Philippi had its own elders too (Philippians 1:1).

Autonomy in the preaching of the gospel

A close look at the New Testament regarding the preaching of the gospel by the local church, one can clearly see autonomy practised. When Paul was preaching in Thessalonica, the church at Philippi "sent once and again unto my necessity" (Philippians 4: 16, 15). It must be noted that the local church at Philippi did not send to the church at Thessalonica, but to Paul himself. This was not an isolated practice. While preaching for the Corinthian church, Paul took wages from other local churches. Again, these funds were manifestly sent to Paul, not to the church at Corinth (II Cor. 11:8).

One set of local elders cannot scripturally oversee another local church or churches. The practice of a set of elders coordinating or supervising the work of a number of churches is not in agreement with the New Testament. Even local churches of Christ pooling funds together to sponsor Radio or TV evangelism contradicts the New Testament principle of autonomy (I Pet. 5:2).

Autonomy in benevolence

It is true that in the matter of benevolence, local churches sent to a local church or churches as the case may be (Acts 11: 27-30; I Cor. 16: 1; 2 Cor. 8, 9, Rom 15:26). It must be noted however that these cases of churches or a local church extending acts of benevolence to other local churches or church were not a permanent situation, they only happened in isolated cases of when the need arose. It must also be mentioned that the situations that warranted the benevolence acts were cases of sudden incidences that were beyond the control of the receiving churches. The churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Corinth extended benevolence to the "poor saints" in Jerusalem, who became destitute as a result of the fact that they were visitors in Jerusalem, who could not go back to their homes after obeying the gospel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 5-11). The second case was that of "famine" a natural disaster that occurred "throughout the world" and the church in Antioch sent relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea (Acts 11:27-29). Even in this particular case of benevolence, the relief was sent to the elders of each local church for distribution Acts 11: 29, 30, still underscoring the principle of autonomy.

Does Autonomy Hinder the Growth of a Local Church?

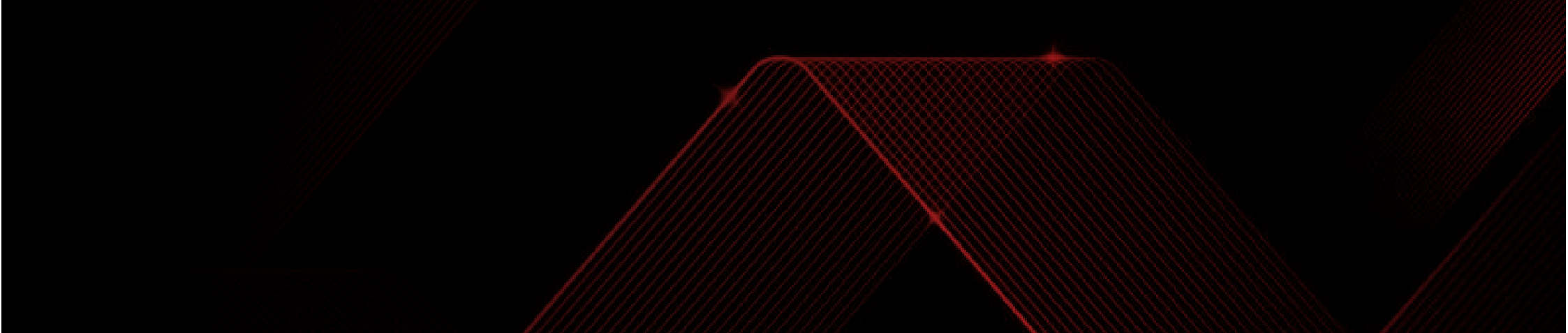
As a matter of autonomy, each local church separately submits to the headship of Jesus, through the New Testament, doing the work that God has assigned to them (evangelism, edification and benevolence), according to the ability and means available (I Tim. 3: 15, Eph. 4: 9-16; Acts 13:1). In this regard, each local church grows at their pace. Jesus Christ said *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."* (Matthew 18:20). Where brethren, in each local church, stick to the principle of the New Testament, autonomy does not hinder the growth in any way.

In practising the principle of autonomy, each local church is expected to grow at their pace. Each is also bound by the principle of *"do as prospered"* when it comes to finance, as given to individual Christians in 1 Cor 16:1-2. It is not by accident that we have some local churches meeting in the houses of some brethren. Paul speaks of such a church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3, 5) Philemon's house (Philemon 1:2), and of Nympha in Laodicea (Col. 4:15)

Are there Limits to the autonomy of a Local Church?

It is not uncommon to hear these days that local churches can do whatever they like without anybody challenging them and it is always quick for those who hold on to such erroneous belief to say that autonomy of the local church must not be violated. There is no doubt about the fact that God designed autonomy for protection. When one local church went astray, it did not automatically affect other local churches, even when in the same geographic area. For instance, Pergamos held the false doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, but this did not affect the other six churches within the same region as Pergamos (Rev. 2: 3). However, you will appreciate the fact that the false beliefs of Pergamos were revealed and challenged by John and Jesus to the knowledge of the local church at Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. A violation of autonomy would have been for the local church at Ephesus to demand, as a church, that Pergamos repent and conform. Preachers are repeatedly seen exposing and challenging errors in local churches where they were not members. This is evident in Paul's letter to some churches where he condemns some of their errors. (the Epistles). Autonomy is meant to be





protection against group alliance contamination, but not exemption from challenge and/or exposure of sin and false doctrine. The dispute in the church at Antioch was settled by the Apostles in Jerusalem when the matter got to them, (Acts 15: 1-29) and this does not erode the autonomy of the church in Antioch in any way.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized that God's wisdom in creating local churches and making them independent of one another is borne out of His desire to make fellowship of the saints and worship easily achievable. Jesus Christ says *"God is Spirit and He seeks worshippers that will worship Him in Spirit and Truth"* John 4:23-24. The whole idea is for all believers to have easy access to the body of Christ and fellowship without any human regulations and demands. God's wisdom is equally seen in the sense that, if there is a central organization of all the churches (as in denominations) and false teachers come in, all the churches will be led astray. If there is no central organization, then false teachers might lead one congregation astray, but the others will not be harmed. Let us do everything in our power to protect the principle of local church autonomy as seen in the New Testament so that God will be pleased with us.

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THE CHURCH AND THE CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUAL

by Oladapo Olawale

The church is a group of individuals who have been called by the gospel as an assembly of people saved by Christ. A Christian is an individual who has been called by the gospel to become part of the assembly of saved people (2 Thessalonians 2: 13-14; Acts 2: 36-41, 47). As an assembly of the saved, the church is universal in nature, being made up of all the saved in the world. But in the New Testament, all the saved of the world do not gather in one place to function as a church. The work of the church is thus carried out through a local congregation of Christians who agree to worship and do God's work together (1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 9:26-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

Although the church is comprised of individual Christians (1 Corinthians 12:27), an individual Christian is not the church, and the church is not the individual Christian (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 18-20). There are many things that an individual is at liberty to do that the church cannot do. A failure to understand this distinction has resulted in many unscriptural practices being lauded as noble, yet beyond the divine mandate for the church.

One major factor that has contributed to this misunderstanding is a failure to recognize that the work of the church is ultimately spiritual and geared towards an eternal destiny. As such the church cannot be viewed as an earthly organisation that engages in and overburdens itself by every secular or material thing. Jesus Christ emphasised this point in John 18:36 when he said: *My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.* In the same vein the Apostle Paul reminded the Christians in Rome that *the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17).

This article will highlight the difference between the work a Christian individual is at liberty to engage in and that of the church. We will reiterate that an individual Christian is at liberty to engage in many activities which the church is not biblically authorized to do. Also, where the individual Christian so acts, it is not the church working.

The Role of the Christian Individual in the Church

As an individual member of the local church, a Christian has responsibilities that he must perform towards the effective functioning of the body of Christ. Such

responsibilities are done collectively with other Christians and are not the same as individual responsibilities outside the church.

A Christian has the obligation of working towards building up or edifying the body of Christ which he is a part of (1 Corinthians 3:1 – 10). Both men and women must help to build the body of Christ and ensure they are doing so upon the right foundation which is Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11, 12). As part of a local congregation, a Christian must continue to stand upon the word of God and help to disseminate it (Acts 8:4; 2 Tim. 2:2). Edifying the body of Christ entails being part of the evangelistic work of the church—seeking and saving the lost. It also entails working together to ensure there are no divisions in the body of Christ. Every Christian must work to promote unity and be of the same mind with other Christians in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10).

A Christian has a responsibility to worship with other Christians and to not forsake the assembly of the saints (Hebrews 10:24-25). There is also an obligation to contribute towards the church's finances on the first day of the week to help the work of the church (1 Corinthians 16:1-2) as well as gather resources together with fellow Christians to support needy saints (Acts 11:29; Romans 15:26).

Some of these spiritual responsibilities can also be performed outside the church in individual private capacity. For instance, a Christian has an individual obligation to spread the gospel wherever he is whether or not the church is present there. A Christian also has the obligation to do good to all men whether they are Christians or not (Galatians 6:10). These duties when performed in individual capacity of a Christian are not done by him as part of a local church because they are not done collectively by the church or assigned to the individual Christian to do on behalf of the church.

Christian Individual Responsibilities outside the church

A Christian in his individual capacity enjoys many relationships with corresponding responsibilities which the church cannot be involved in. Some of these relationships include family, business, political and community associations.

(a) *Family*: In the home, husbands and wives have obligations to show affection to one another (1



Corinthians 7: 3 – 5). In family relationship there is a duty to provide for members of the household (1 Timothy 5:1 – 16) and any man not able to do this is worse than an infidel (1 Timothy 5:8). Providing for one's household includes aged parents and widows, a responsibility that the church cannot be burdened with unless they are 'widows indeed' (1 Timothy 5:16). Responsibilities and obligations in the home are not the work of the church.

- (b) *Business*: Christian individuals have the responsibility to work with their hands to provide for their family (2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 15, Ephesians 4:28). An individual may seek employment in an organisation or establish his own business to carry out buying and selling or provide services (Acts 16:14; 18: 1 – 3). The church has no such scriptural responsibility to incorporate itself as a business venture trading and providing services to make profit.
- (c) *Political and Civil*: An individual whether a Christian or non-Christian has civil and political responsibilities to obey the ruling authority, laws of the land, pay their taxes (Romans 13: 1 – 7), vote and be voted for or appointed into public positions (Titus 3:1). The church cannot, however, be involved in politics and government duties because it is not a *kingdom of this world* (John 18:36).
- (d) *Social and community relationships*: An individual has the privilege of forming associations with other people in his community in carrying out noble tasks and duties. An individual Christian within his immediate community or society can become part of a charity club, he can in conjunction with other people establish non-governmental organisations that specialises in offering various kinds of help and support to people. The church does not operate as a social club meeting the secular needs of its community. The church being God's spiritual body has a divine mission which is primarily to edify the saints.

What the Church can do

According to the New Testament, the works authorised for the church to carry out are essentially three-fold namely: Evangelism, Edification and Benevolence. The church has a responsibility to preach the gospel to the lost as Christ commanded His disciples (Matthew 28:18 -19; Mark 16:15-16). The church being the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15) is also charged to hold fast the

word of life (Philippians 2:16). The church can send people out to preach the gospel and support them Acts 11:22-23; 13:1a, 2-3; Phil. 4:15; 2 Cor. 11:8).

Another vital part of the work the church does is edification. Edification simply means to build up, encourage or lift towards maturity. Christians are built up through studying, teaching and practicing the word of God (Acts 20: 28, 32). Through regular worship assemblies – Sunday worship, Bible classes, prayer meetings, the church edifies its members. The goal of evangelizing the lost and helping the needy saints is also to build the Christians up.

Benevolence is also a crucial aspect of the scriptural work of the church. The church in the New Testament works to relieve the needs of the saints (II Corinthians 8:1-4; Romans 15:25-26). We can understand from the Bible that the church was never tasked with relieving the material needs of all the poor across the world. Attempting to assign such a role to the church goes beyond what the bible authorise and inevitably places an unscriptural burden on the church – one that could encompass every imaginable material need. For instance, while some have urged the church to support orphanages, others have gone further by advocating for churches to establish and operate their own. However, addressing every benevolent need in the world is not part of the church's divinely given mission.

From the foregoing, we can see that the church cannot do everything that the individual Christian is at liberty to do. The church cannot act as parents to children even though parents may be members of the church, the church can only teach them how to be good parents according to the bible. In the same vein, whilst the church can teach its members about being good employees and employers, it cannot establish and operate business ventures.

To further its mission to edify its members, the church cannot pursue entertainment such as organize shows or invite a motivational speaker or a comedian to take the place of teaching the word of God. Individual Christians are however at liberty to pursue such interests in a scriptural manner. Similarly, the work of preaching the gospel is not the same as teaching secular subjects or establishing a secular school being run by the church. Individuals may own and operate a school and decide to make it also a religious school. The church has no such

divine mandate.

Does it make any difference that the individual work is noble enough for the church to engage in them?

It is often misconceived that if a practice is good and not immoral, then the church can engage in same just as the Christian individual. This reasoning has been employed to justify many unscriptural practices that the church is being burdened with. Few of such seemingly noble but unscriptural work include:

- (a) Supporting Human Institutions such as charity or educational organisations, medical institutions and so on are lauded as good work (and indeed they are) which the church can support human institutions to do. **The most important consideration is not whether a work is good work, but whether it is authorised by God (Leviticus 10: 1, 2 Samuel 6:1-7 and 1 Chronicles 13:9-12) for the church to carry out.** Running a charity, educational institutions and hospitals, albeit good work are not authorised for the church. The church is also not commanded to support human institutions to carry out its scripturally ordained work because as God's divine institution, it is sufficient to discharge its three-fold work. To do otherwise would mean going beyond the doctrine of Christ. Individual Christians are however at liberty to collaborate with, form associations and support human institutions.
- (b) Social and recreational activities are laudable but not the work of the church. The church cannot engage in organizing and sponsoring social events e.g wedding ceremony, sporting competitions and birthday parties. They fall within the realm of individual responsibilities.
- (c) The church in its immediate community does not have the obligation to provide basic amenities and infrastructure or establish a home to help the poor and homeless. The church's obligation to its immediate community and indeed to the whole world is to preach the gospel to them (Mark 16:15-16; Matthew 28:19).

Conclusion

There is a need to understand and continue to identify the difference between the church and the individual. The Church's mission is divinely spiritual and is not subject to man's desires and wants, but the word of God. To equate

the church to any earthly institution will permit the formulation of every sort of seemingly noble idea on the nature of work the church can engage in. In the same vein, individual Christian responsibilities cannot be transferred to the church. May God guide us to continue to ascertain the difference between the role of the church and Christian individuals so that we can effectively serve His purpose.

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