

(Luke 22:30; Acts 2:42), not through earthly roles that replaced their function. This is the crux of where Scripture conflicts with the Catholic false doctrine of apostolic succession.

Congregational Autonomy and Independence

These limitations to the authority of the eldership of local churches serve as a primary evidence for the independence (or autonomy) of local congregations. The Bible never uses the term *autonomous*, but the principle is inferred throughout the New Testament. Notice again Peter's command to elders to **"shepherd the flock of God which is among you** [*en humin*]**"** (1 Pet. 5:2). Paul told the Ephesian elders **"take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which** [*en hō*] **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers"** (Acts 20:28). Notice the Greek preposition *en* used in both passages. It carries the same spatial sense as our own preposition *in* from which it is derived. The elders are "in" the flock over which they watch.

This independence is also seen from the fact the actions of the leadership of one congregation are not necessarily binding on another congregation. We see this in John's words about Diotrephes. We don't know if he was an elder or not, but he was one who loved **"to have the preeminence"** (3 John 9). His influence succeeded in putting **"out of the church"** (a likely reference to withdrawing from) those whom the apostle John had sent (3 John 10). In the same way, the situation that forced Paul to rebuke Peter also demonstrates this. At the influence of James (in Jerusalem) men came spreading the false practice of withdrawal from social contact with Gentiles to the church in Antioch. This influence was so pervasive that even Peter yielded to it (Gal. 2:11-12). Now this may not have been a formal act of church discipline, but in spite of the fact that this involved the Lord's brother and the apostle Peter, Paul rebuked it and urged churches to reject it. Congregations in the New Testament were not considered branches extending from some centralized stem. They were independent communities of individuals serving the Lord.

In our next lesson we will consider some extreme views of autonomy and what the Bible teaches about scriptural methods by which church may cooperate with one another in the cause of Christ.

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Welcome Visitors

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Faithful Sayings



Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM
10:00 AM
11:00 AM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:
Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:
Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Arend Gressley
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:
Kyle Pope

Church Government and Cooperation (1)

By Kyle Pope

Recently I shared with the brethren at Olsen Park that in October I have been invited to participate in a discussion on the subject of Institutionalism in Cullman Alabama between 25 non-institutional preachers and 25 institutional preachers. For the next two issues of *Faithful Sayings* I want to share some of the material I will address on the subject of cooperation.

The Church in the New Testament

Let's start with some basics. The Bible teaches the church is the assembly of souls in a saved relationship with God having been added to it by God upon obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:47, KJV, NKJV, cf. Col. 1:13). This gathering of God's people is described with the Greek political term *ecclesia* (usually translated **"church"**), but also with other terms revealing different aspects of its nature. It is God's **"family"** (Eph. 3:15), His **"kingdom"** (Dan. 2:44, Col. 1:13, Rev. 1:6), His **"flock"** (John 10:16; Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:2), His **"temple"** (1 Cor. 3:16, Eph. 2:21), which is a **"spiritual house"** (1 Pet. 2:5). It is His **"body"** (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23), His **"vine"** (John 15:4-5), etc. Building this assembly of disciples was the focus of Jesus' coming (Matt. 16:18). It's importance is seen in the fact that its membership was purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). As the Bible teaches it, seeking Christ without the church is seeking to be saved, but not a part of the body of those defined as the saved. That doesn't add up.

While the Bible teaches that there has always been an assembly of those who belong to God, this assembly of Christ's disciples didn't ex-

ist until its establishment on the day of Pentecost. This is clear from passages looking forward to its establishment before Pentecost (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 6:10; 10:7; 16:18; Mark 9:1; Luke 12:31; 23:51; Acts 1:6-8) but backward to it after Pentecost (Acts 14:22; 28:23; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; 15:25; Col. 1:13; 1 Tim. 6:15; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 1:9).

The Lord's use of this political term *ecclesia* is significant. The Greeks used it for the political assembly of citizens of a city-state (Herodotus, *Histories* 3.142; Polybius, *Histories* 16.26; *Laws* 764a; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.87.6). This non-religious use is seen in the New Testament in references to **"a lawful assembly"** (Acts 20:39) or even the mob who chanted **"great is Diana of the Ephesians"** for two hours (Acts 20:28, 41). The Greek OT (LXX) used it of the congregation of Israel in the wilderness (Deut. 31:30). This likely set the background for the Lord's application of it to His own disciples. Twice the New Testament uses the word *synagogue* is used of Christian assemblies (Jas. 2:2; cf. verb form Heb. 10:25), but the Holy Spirit likely used *ecclesia* to distinguish it from the Jewish assemblies of the synagogue.



Olsen Park church of Christ

The Organization of the New Testament Church

This background helps us see that God used terms describing our relationship to Him that teach how this relationship functions. A body and family have a head, a flock has a shepherd, a kingdom has a king, a temple has a structure, and a political entity has an organizational structure. Some might object to speaking of "church government," because that seems too impersonal. We must understand, however, while Scripture doesn't exclusively picture our relationship in political terms, it is one of the ways. We won't understand all God would have us to if we neglect any of the ways God describes our relationship to Him.

With that said, how does Scripture use this political term of Christ's disciples? In the New Testament *ecclesia* is used in three ways: 1) *a universal sense,* 2) *a local sense,* and 3) of *a local congregation* actually *assembled.* Let's note these distinctions.

1. Universal Sense. In its first use Jesus speaks of building **"My church"** (Matt. 16:18). This isn't an assembly in a specific location, but His assembly in general. We see this in the book of Hebrews:

> **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.** (Heb. 12:22-24).

Notice here that this **"general assembly"** is inclusive of all people everywhere (living and dead) who are **"registered in heaven."**

2. Local Sense. In contrast to the universal sense the New Testament also speaks of congregations in specific locations. We read of the **"church in Jerusalem"** (Acts 11:22); the **"church in Cenchrea,"** (Rom. 16:1); the **"church in Smyrna"** (Rev. 2:8); etc. How do we know this is distinct from the universal usage? For one thing, it can be used in the plural. Although Paul declares there is **"one body"** (Eph. 4:4; Col. 3:15) in the same epistles describing the church as **"His body"** (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24), throughout his writings he also writes of the **"churches of Christ"** (Rom. 16:16); the **"churches of Galatia"** (Gal. 1:2); the **"churches of Judea"** (Gal. 1:22) and the **"churches of God"** (1 Thess. 2:14).

3. The Local Church Assembled. This second sense is also reflected in the third way it's used. While one is added to the church upon obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:47, KJV, NKJV) and identified with a local church upon expressing a willingness to do so (cf. Acts 9:26; 11:26), that is not the same as being in an assembly of a local church. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth as he begins to address their abuse of the Lord's Supper he discusses what they did **"as a church"** or literally **"in** [*en*] **the church"** (1 Cor. 11:18, ASV). This sense is used in instructions about behavior. Paul doesn't address using an unknown tongue in other contexts, but **"in** [*en*] **the church"** he says, **"I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue"** (1 Cor. 14:19). A woman isn't forbidden to speak when the Lord adds her to the church universally, nor when she is identified with a local church. It's in an actual assembly that Paul commands **"Let your women keep silent in** [*en*] **the churches, for they are not permitted to speak"** for **"it is shameful for women to speak in** [*en*] **church"** (1 Cor. 14:34-35). This is describing a local church, but applying it to when it's actually assembled. I compare this to the word *congress.* An elected official becomes a member of *congress,* but it's when a member is *in congress* that rules of order apply.

So what does this have to do with church government? It is the clearest way that we can see the scope (and limitations) of leadership within the church. Scripture tells us Christ is the **"Head of the church"** (Eph. 5:23). Is this a local church or an assembly of a local church? Certainly in assemblies of God's people Christ is **"in the midst of them"** (Matt. 18:20), but it is over His church universally that Christ is set as Head.

In contrast to this, what organization has Christ set over local churches? Paul and Barnabas **"appointed elders in every church"** (Acts 14:23). These elders were commanded to **"shepherd the flock of God which is among you"** (1 Pet. 5:2; cf. Acts 20:28). An elder is never given authority over multiple congregations, nor is a single elder given authority over a whole congregation.

As the New Testament teaches it there is no authority lower than the Headship of Christ but higher than the eldership of local congregations. There are no officers "at large." The closest to it is the role the apostles played. They held authority that wasn't limited to the local church (Eph. 2:20), but the Bible doesn't teach that this authority was passed down by succession. The sense in which they govern the church today is through what they have taught