

THE TWIN POLES OF AUTONOMY AND FELLOWSHIP

As much as possible, a local congregation should function as the church of God in its particular locality without intrusion on its functions by synodical decisions or the policies of hierarchical persons or committees. If it does not do God's work well there, a centralised authority will not do it better. A local congregation exists by God's will. Although broader organisations are "churchly", they do not regularly proclaim the Gospel or administer the sacraments. Christ has delegated the authority to act in His name to His congregations (Mt 18: 17-20) and to ministers of His congregations when they speak in His name (1 Cor 4:1; Joh 20:23; 2 Cor 2:10; 4:5). Baptism implies that the local congregation will carry on the discipleship of the persons it has baptised, by teaching them to keep everything that Christ has commanded. Local congregations have the duty to exercise doctrinal care and discipline over the lives of their members. If a local congregation has to discipline one of its members by excommunication, to be effective, these spiritual sanctions require the unanimous support of Christians in the local area where the erring person lives and moves.

It should be recognised that the powers of wider church organisations come by human arrangements, and not by God's command. Neither local congregations nor synods have any right to decide questions of doctrine, because God's Word has already decided them. Resolutions of synods and synodical committees about things where God's Word gives no commands are made by human right, and should be regarded as merely advisory. Decisions of any broader bodies should therefore come before a local congregation as recommendations, and never as binding directives. It is easy to point to cases where protests to a bishop or president have either been ignored through inaction or by foboffs. Local initiative is cramped when people no longer regard their internal affairs as their own. Decisions about matters that God has neither commanded nor forbidden that a centralised authority makes are often inappropriate in a district remote from the centre. In these senses "autonomy" really means "non-interference."

At the same time, all Christians are together members of the Church of God of all times and places. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome he had not been there and had not met many of the members, but he recognised them as fellow members of the body of Christ (Rm 12:5). Fellowship extends beyond the borders of a local congregation. In the New Testament, the term "brother" regularly means "fellow-Christian." Local congregations in the time of the New Testament welcomed members of sister congregations. Greetings of fellowship were sent from one congregation to another through people who travelled and through letters. Congregations that are united in the doctrine of God's Word assume obligations towards each other that we cover by the term "church fellowship." Stronger churches should lovingly support the weaker ones. Self-evidently, if a local congregation excludes an impenitent person for wicked teaching or an ungodly life, a sister congregation should also refuse fellowship to that person (1 Tm 1:20).

Such co-responsibility means that each local congregation assumes full responsibility for what is taught and done in another congregation with which it is in fellowship. It regards as its own what is preached in sermons in a sister congregation, what is published in printed materials there, and all its decisions that affect doctrine. It means that a communicant member of a local congregation may expect to be welcomed at the altar of another congregation within the bonds of fellowship that is based on the pure teaching and practice of the Word of God. The early church was never in doubt that unity in doctrine is a prerequisite for fellowship at the altar. In Romans 16, Paul gave many fellowship greetings, and referred to the kiss of peace, with which churches began their celebration of the Lord's Supper. Then he wrote, "I urge you, fellow-Christians, to watch out for those who cause the divisions and the obstacles that are contrary to the teaching that you have learned, and turn away from them."

Some attention needs to be given to how these principles should be put into practice. When a local congregation is not acquainted with a visitor from a sister congregation, courtesy should lead the visitor to introduce himself to the pastor of the congregation before he comes to the altar for communion. The New Testament shows that congregations required written credentials from people who would be admitted to their fellowship (2 Cor 3:1). Because of the rise of false teachers in some churches, the early church arranged a system of "letters of peace", which the bishop issued, when one of its member transferred to another place. Such letters played a role in the re-admission of people who had lapsed from the faith during the Decian persecution when Cyprian was the bishop at Carthage in North Africa (from AD 249 to 256). When Cyprian refused to accept the baptism of people who had been baptised by heretics, he exchanged letters with Firmilian, the bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, about his decision. A Synod at Antioch (AD 341) expressed the principle that no stranger should be received without a letter of peace. From the time of Tertullian there is evidence that

congregations advised one another that an excommunication had taken place. Cyprian informed Cornelius, the bishop of Rome, about excommunications that had taken place at Carthage. In AD 318 Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, sent a circular letter to all his fellow bishops to inform them that he had placed an anathema on Arius and his followers for denying the deity of Christ.

It is never enough for a person to assume that, because God's Word directs that he should examine himself before coming to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:28), his decision to come to the altar is always his alone. The Scriptures also say, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as men who must give an account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would not be to your advantage" (Hb 13:17). Pastor ought to be concerned that people who receive that Lord's body and blood at their hands do not receive it to their condemnation.

For better or for worse, churches were involved in what their bishops did. In about AD 200 Victor, the bishop of Rome, foolishly excluded all the parishes in Asia Minor because they observed Easter on a different day from the Romans. He branded them all en bloc as outside of fellowship. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria differed from Stephen, the bishop of Rome, over the question whether a person who had been baptised in a heretical church should be baptised again. A break in fellowship between Stephen and Cyprian was forestalled only by Cyprian's death as a martyr.

However, matters of fellowship were never merely matters for the pastor. When the bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, expressed heretical views about the person of Christ, Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, went over the head of its bishop. He wrote to the whole parish of Antioch, and neither honoured its bishop with a greeting or addressed him in person, even before the Synod of Antioch dismissed him (AD 268). After the Council of Nicaea seemed to achieve unity about the deity of Christ, bishops of various churches were either leaders of unity or disunity. Bishops led the great parties that were opposed to the Creed of Nicaea. Nestorius, Dioscorus, and Severus, who were later condemned as heretics, were legitimate patriarchs of the established church, and held what was considered to be apostolic succession. There was no period in the early church when the question of the conditions and boundaries of church fellowship was not acute.

Our modern age has seen a great deal of the trampling over of the rights of independent congregations by synodical bodies. What is far worse, the boundaries of fellowship that used to mark right teaching from false teaching are crumbling. Many churches invite any visitors to communion, as long as they profess belief in Jesus Christ. Many people who are affected by this openness embarrass those who want to hold the line by assuming that they have a right to commune at whatever altar they choose. We must be keenly aware of the obligations of faithfulness of God's Word and the honest practice of fellowship.