

◆ QUESTION:

"WHAT AUTHORITY DID GOD GIVE TO EACH LOCAL CONGREGATION?"

◆ ANSWER:

Two Christians observing the Lord's Supper together are a New Testament church. Sometimes only a husband and a wife (such as Aquila and Priscilla) are "the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; see Philemon 2). They rejoice in the divine assurance that "where two or three have gathered together in" the name of the Lord, He is "there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20).

A congregation of the Lord's church began in Nicholasville, Kentucky, when a Christian woman, whose husband was not a Christian, invited another Christian woman in the town to her house for a Lord's Day worship service. The two sang together, prayed, read Scriptures, had the Lord's Supper, and saved their two offerings week by week. The devotion of those two women was the beginning of a large, mission-minded congregation today in Nicholasville.

No New Testament church has any "say-so" about what it teaches, for its teaching is restricted to "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). The apostles' doctrine originated in "heaven," and the twelve apostles were simply the mouth pieces. Jesus told them: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound [Gk.: *estai dedemena*] in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed [Gk.: *estai lelumena*] in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

So important was their relay-speaking that they were called "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). They were even described as sitting "upon twelve thrones" (Matthew 19:28).

The authority of the Twelve began in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. It was to extend not merely to the deaths of the Twelve, but "to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Regarding any doctrine, each Christian knows how to distinguish between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error": He must simply ask, "Is it from the apostles?" "He who knows

God listens to us," wrote an apostle, and "he who is not from God does not listen to us" (1 John 4:6).

Paul said, "Those who will walk by this rule (Gk.: *kanon*, the "canon" of apostolicity), peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). A congregation, with or without elders, is told to be on the alert, so that non-apostolic doctrine will not be brought into

the church. Peter warned, "There will also be false teachers among you" (2 Peter 2:1). For that reason Paul wrote, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them" (Romans 16:17).

Every congregation has apostolic authority to look after its own affairs, to be autonomous, to be self-governing. The apostles recognized the self-governing principle in the Jerusalem church even before it had elders. An emergency arose, calling for a charity committee. Even though twelve evangelists were present (even twelve apostles), those evangelists did not consider themselves to be in charge of the church. They respected local autonomy.

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

Their inspired commandment to “the congregation of the disciples” was for them to “select” (Gk.: *episkeptomai*, meaning “pick out”) the men for that committee. Then the twelve evangelists would appoint (Gk.: *kathistemi*, meaning “put in charge”) the chosen ones “of this task” (Acts 6:2, 3).

The “lay members” (as mistakenly called today) did the choosing. How they did the choosing is not recorded. If by voting or otherwise, they were practicing the self-governing principle of a New Testament church.

In the congregations in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, two evangelists—Paul and Barnabas—“ordained” (KJV), or “appointed” (ASV), “elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). The elders had not been selected by Paul and Barnabas, but only appointed by them. That fact is clear from Luke’s word, *cheirotoneo* (from *cheir*, “hand,” and *teino*, “stretch”), which suggests raising hands to indicate approval of someone’s name. The selection, then, was by church “voting.”

Luke’s inspired message shows that Paul and Barnabas respected local self-government by having the members do the choosing. Afterward, the two visiting evangelists appointed the selectees as elders.

In the same way, Titus, an evangelist visiting among the churches on the island of Crete, did not receive a commandment from Paul to “select” (Gk.: *episkeptomai*) men for the eldership. Rather, he was to “appoint” or “ordain” (Gk.: *kathistemi*) them (Titus 1:5).

Paul used the same Greek word that the apostles in Jerusalem had used in appointing men for the charity committee (Acts 6:2, 3). If this pattern was followed, the local members in the Cretian churches selected the elders-to-be, and then Titus appointed them to their work. It would have made more sense for the local members to do the selecting from among people they knew well than for a visitor like Titus to name them.

The above examples show the error in the teaching that a congregation without elders is to be under “evangelistic oversight.” Biblically, evangelists have no authority. All they do is to re-preach the apostles’ doctrine.

Because Paul said that the preaching done by Titus on the island of Crete was “with all authority” (Titus 2:15), some assume that Titus was put

in charge of all the churches on the island. The only way that an evangelist might have “all authority,” that is, the only way he could be an infallible teacher is by having an apostle’s hands laid on him (see Acts 8:18).

Since we know that Paul had laid his hands on the evangelist Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6), it is unreasonable to think that Paul left Titus among the Cretian churches without laying his hands on him as well. For Titus to have “all authority” without a miraculous laying-on-of-hands by Paul would have been impossible.

After elders are appointed, the authority originally vested in the local church is still in the local church. Likewise, the authority for the church to select its own elders carries with it the authority to depose unfaithful elders.

Paul warned the Ephesian elders, “. . . from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29, 30). When “an accusation against an elder” was “brought by two or three witnesses,” that elder was “to be rebuked publicly” (1 Timothy 5:19, 20; NIV).

It would not make sense to say that an unfaithful elder cannot be ejected. Certainly, the authority of the church that puts a man into leadership can put him out.

The self-government vested in each local congregation, whether or not elders have been appointed, allows the members to be “assembled” to “remove the wicked man” from their fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:4, 13). Christians are to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Likewise, the day-by-day affairs of a congregation, as long as they are in harmony with the apostles’ doctrine, are decided only by the local church. The apostles’ doctrine specifies an assembly (Hebrews 10:25), but it does not specify whether the assembly is to be in someone’s living room, in a rented auditorium, or in a church building. The local members decide the place.

The apostles’ doctrine specifies singing “spiritual songs” to “one another” and “to God” (Colossians 3:16). What song book to use and who leads the songs are purely local decisions.

The teaching of the apostles specifies Scripture reading (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) and mutual edification (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Thus it is essential to include these activi-

ties in our Christian assemblies, but how long these activities last during the assemblies is for the local church to decide.

Also specified in the apostles' teaching is the offering from each Christian as he "may prosper" on "the first day of the week" (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). In addition, we find an approved example of a special collection (Acts 11:27-30). Those collections, in the apostles' time, were not for entertainment, but only for two known purposes: for charitable relief (Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; Galatians 2:10) and for gospel preaching (1 Corinthians 9:14; Philippians 4:14-16).

Observing the Lord's Supper is one of the apostles' teachings, but its frequency is not specified. However, since there is an approved example (with an apostle present) of a congregation assembling on "the first day of the week" to "break bread" (Acts 20:7), wise Christians do the same today.

On Monday through Saturday, Christians

can be found "encouraging one another; and all the more as" they "see the day [the Lord's Day] drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25). Loving Christians look forward to joyful get-togethers where they can adore their Creator and Savior and the Holy Spirit in worship and for mutual edification (John 4:24; 1 Thessalonians 5:11). A Christian may adapt Psalm 122:1 to say, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to worship!'" He has a deep appreciation for what heaven has done for him, and he feels a need to express it:

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
 So my soul pants for You, O God.
 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
 When shall I come and appear before God?
 My tears have been my food day and night,
 While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
 These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
 For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God,
 With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival (Psalm 42:1-4).

BAPTISM: A DIVIDING LINE

| Before Baptism | | After Baptism |
|---|---|---|
| guilt of sins | Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-18; Lk. 24:46-49 | remission of sins |
| the unsaved | Mk. 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21 | the saved |
| sins not washed away | Acts 22:16 | sins washed away |
| no gift of the Holy Spirit | Jn. 14:17; Acts 2:38; 5:32; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13, 14; | gift of the Holy Spirit, a pledge of our inheritance |
| children of the devil | Jn. 8:44; 2 Cor. 6:16 | children of God |
| not in Christ | Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27 | in Christ |
| not in the kingdom of God | Jn. 3:5; Col. 1:13 | in the kingdom of God |
| not in the "one body," the church | 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:22, 23 | in the "one body," the church |
| those who do not have all spiritual blessings | Eph. 1:3 | those who do have all spiritual blessings |
| those who do not have the abundant life | Jn. 10:10 | those who do have the abundant life |
| those who do not have an inheritance reserved in heaven | 1 Pet. 1:4 | those who do have an inheritance reserved in heaven |