

THE GREENWOOD BULLETIN

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Church Autonomy

By Robert Turner

"Autonomy" is a compound word, composed of *autos*, meaning "self," and *nomos*, meaning "law." An ordinary dictionary will tell us the word means "self-ruled," so that an autonomous church is "self-governed, without outside control."

There are those who reject the concept of God and revelation, saying ultimate authority is in man. To them there would be no limitations placed upon self-rule. Of course most of our readers accept Christ as King, and know that a church which wishes to exercise "self rule" in *all* things is not the church of Christ. But our brethren are far from clear on the legitimate (scriptural) field of self rule, and how this affects the relation of one church to another. Some seem to think "autonomy" means the right to devise organizational arrangements for which there is no N.T. authority; while others

think calling attention to such error violates the "autonomy" of the erring brethren.

A church can not "rule" on the importance of Christ's death, the necessity of faith, the meaning and purpose of baptism; for these are legacies of truth which Christ gave the world and by which we are called. The church is the product of the gospel, not its author. One would not violate some church's autonomy by teaching along these lines, for no church as a legitimate "say" in such things.

Does God give a local church the right to decide the day of worship? May they "rule" on the need for assembling, or the so-called "items" of acceptable worship? It is not clear that even in those things assigned as church (team) activity, a distinction must be made in that which is part of "the faith, once for all delivered unto the saints" (over which the congregation has no rule), and such details as are left to human judgement. The field of church

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autonomy is that of human judgement, and that only.

As an example: God's word indicates the day on which saints are to partake of the Lord's Supper---but it does not specify the *time* of day. The *time* is left to human judgement, and therefore to the "rule" of brethren. A church exercises autonomy when it sets its own *time* of assembling---and we might add, that *time* rests upon human authority, not upon divine mandate. Each church has this same right and may choose different times. If one sought to unduly influence or alter another's *time* of meeting, this would be interfering with "autonomy."

But if one church should declare Thursday the Lord's Day, others could seek to teach them more perfectly the way of the Lord---and violate no legitimate "autonomy" in doing so---for no church has the scriptural right to "rule" in matters God has settled.

When brethren have honest differences in their understanding of what God has said, one church may believe their "ruling" is done in matters of judgement, while another may believe they violate plain teachings of God. If both parties

are equally interested in serving God, neither will rest the case in "our rights," but will be happy to study God's word together so that God can rule supremely in all.

The Last Fight

By Robert Turner

On the ruins of a theater in Ephesus there is a memorial to an athlete of the 2nd century A.D. which reads: "He fought three fights, and twice was crowned." Watch out for that last step! You see, those "athletes" fought to the death. A man's last fight was always fatal. So, the crown meant only that one changed opponents; and sooner or later the last would slay him.

What a difference in this crown, and that of the apostle Paul: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day..." (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Paul did more than fight "unto death" — he fought unto life, eternal. If his fight of faith cost him his earthly life, it only meant he was now free to claim the crown that counted most (Revelation 2:10, 2 Cor. 5:6ff.).

How different from those who die without hope.

Paul sought an enduring victory — one that could not be taken from him. He exhorted Timothy, "La hold on eternal life..." (**1 Timothy 6:12**). This called for training, perseverance, and above all, self control (**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**). The athlete trained his body only to prolong the day when it would fail him; but Paul trained his that it might the better serve the Lord, and thus serve his eternal purposes.

We are all engaged in some sort of battle, and in a very real sense it is "unto death." The fatalist, the fool, resigns himself to shortchange. Though he fights 3,000 times, he can expect but 2,999 temporal crowns, not one of which he can take with him beyond that last fight. The futility of it all is enough to make a man throw in the towel.

The Faith gives purpose to life. The Christian fights, hard and often. But he has submitted himself to God's will, "strives lawfully" (**2 Timothy 2:5**), and his fight is never in vain. Jesus Christ has provided for him a crown, and not for him only, "but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Waving Our Flags

By Robert Turner

A brother was explaining the distinctive character of the church of which he was a member. He said, "We support an Orphan Home." Of course they did. They couldn't stop that \$15 per month contribution if they wanted to; for it was a status symbol. Lower that flag, and "prominent brethren" would rebel, institutional pressures would be applied, and someone might even call them "Anti." They would lose their place in their party.

The same thing could be said of churches that march under the flag of "no class," "no located preacher," or even "no support of institutions."

We are not here concerned with arguing the merits of any of these "positions." Further, we understand the necessity of sticking with honest convictions; and we know that those with the same or similar convictions have rapport or are drawn into association with those of like faith. But we are concerned with the sectarian spirit that puts "party" before honest convictions, "flag" before God's word.

Being right about a position does not avoid a sectarian spirit or status. I suspect there are some who would "throw a fit" if a piano was used in the worship, but who couldn't explain why to save their lives. "No instrument has become their "flag" — inherited from an earlier generation, and followed without genuine regard for God's teaching on the subject.

Or maybe some one knows all about his particular "flag," Right or wrong he can make all the arguments, citing pet scriptures for the symbol of his "soundness." But his ears are closed to the opposition, no matter how many scriptures used. This is not honest, objective following of God's word. It is sectarian flag following. Such a person may have meager knowledge of any save his "pet" scriptures.

The Lord's church does not need sectarian "flags" to survive. His people "sanctify in their hearts Christ as Lord, and have a reason for the hope that is in them" (**1 Pet. 3:15**). "Soundness" is found in "wholeness," not in emphasis upon some one part. The Lord's people can say "hello" without waving a party flag.

Mistrust the man who finds everything good, the man who finds everything evil, and still more, the man who is indifferent to good and evil.