

# THE GREENWOOD BULLETIN

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## **Problems With** **Local Autonomy**

**By Al Diestelkamp**

One of the most important characteristics of the Lord's church is local autonomy. Each congregation is completely independent from all other congregations or organizations.

Local autonomy is shown in several New Testament examples:

The church in Jerusalem had control of its own membership and did not accept Saul of Tarsus until they were convinced that he truly was a disciple (**Ac. 9:26**);

The apostle Paul acknowledged the right of the church in Corinth to choose their own messengers to deliver contributions to the poor saints in Jerusalem (**1 Cor. 16:3**); and Paul implied that the church in Philippi did what other churches chose

not to do-support him in gospel work (**Phil. 4:15**).

Whenever men try to mobilize the universal church, even for seemingly noble causes, they compromise local autonomy leading to more departures from the truth. Truly, the wisdom of God's plan is seen when local churches are not swept with the tide into error. Without local autonomy, error at the "top" would permeate the whole body, resulting in wholesale apostasy.

But, admittedly, there is a "down-side" to respecting local autonomy. There are some things we may not be able to accomplish because of local autonomy:

**1. We won't be able to accomplish uniformity.** Every church will not be identical in what they do, or how they do it. We have come to expect uniformity in many aspects of life. No matter where we go, we expect golden arches and drive-up windows at every McDonald's, a light on at every

Motel 6, and glazed donuts at every Dunkin' Donut shop. But the church is not a franchise or corporate operation. If we are following God's pattern, there will be some things the same in every place, but there will also be many differences.

We joke about congregations which don't meet at "the scriptural time," but we need to remember that's just a joke! When we are away from home we should seek out congregations where we can worship. Simply finding a building where brethren meet doesn't always tell when they meet. I've seen visiting brethren just show up at 11 a.m. for worship only to become angry when they learn that the congregation was saying "Amen" to the closing prayer.

For others, a "red flag" might go up if they hear about a congregation which uses a description on their advertising other than "church of Christ," or if they decide not to have weddings in the building, or if they don't have a second serving of the Lord's supper, or if there is no overhead projector, or the preacher uses a modern translation, or the songbook is not one of the "standard" editions, etc., etc.

It might be a bit more convenient to visitors if all congregations had the same sign, same hours and same order of services, but God didn't organize the church that way. From man's standpoint it might seem to be a problem caused by local autonomy, but evidently God thinks the benefits outweigh the problems.

**2. We will have limited resources for mass advertising and evangelism.** It may be hard for some to understand why the Lord, who's "not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9), would not want local churches to pool their funds which would enable us to evangelize using cutting-edge techniques and mass media which are financially out-of-reach to any local congregation.

The temptation is to suspend or amend our opposition to centralized control in order to accomplish something we deem to be advantageous to the cause. However, the Lord knew before the Bible was written what our dilemma would be, and still He didn't authorize the mobilization of the universal church through sponsoring churches and/or other organizations.

**3. Fellowship issues will not be as "cut and dried."** Even among those of us who teach and preach that each church is independent, there are those inclined to meddle into the affairs of congregations other than the one of which they are members. Don't misunderstand me! You have a right and a responsibility to teach what you believe to be truth to anyone and everyone (even members of other congregations), but you don't have the right to use other means to bring them into compliance.

There has been much written about the "fellowship issue," centering on whether certain brethren should be called upon to preach or lead prayer. No matter what conclusion one comes to on this issue, the application must be made locally. Any attempt to enforce compliance on any congregation other than the local congregation of which one is a member is "none of our business."

We venture into dangerous territory when we begin to brand as "unfaithful" whole congregations or quarantine brethren because they have not arrived at the same convictions as we have. Our Lord had some pretty strong

warnings for most of the seven churches of Asia. If we found a church today like the church in Thyatira (**Rev. 2:18-29**) would we consider them "faithful" or "unfaithful"? How about Sardis (**Rev. 3:1-6**)? As bad as things were in these churches, it appears there were some in each which pleased the Lord (**2:24; 3:4**). Nor did the Lord tell the faithful brethren in nearby Smyrna and Philadelphia to put a quarantine label on the other congregations.

There is a certain comfort zone we enter when we "write off" some brethren as apostate or unfaithful. We no longer feel a kinship to them and we are able to ignore them instead of trying to correct them. Furthermore, we don't have to listen to the abuse they heap upon us. But at the same time we lose the opportunity to be a safety net for a few honest truth-seekers who eventually may be open to study when they realize that they are unable to halt digressions.

We "talk a good game" when it comes to local autonomy. We need to practice what we preach.

## **Being Past**

### **Feeling**

**By David Sain**

Recently, I read of a man in England who has a horrible disease which is potentially fatal. The disease is ganglioneuropathy. As I understand it, he will never die from the disease itself, but from the results. You see, this disease destroys nerve sensations of the body. Thus, if he gets burned, scratched, or cut, he feels no pain. He cannot tell if his bath water is too hot. There is no pain to warn of appendicitis or any infection. He simply has no feeling.

Friend, this is possible in a spiritual way. It is possible to be so accustomed to sin that you feel no danger in those things which can destroy your soul.

Paul warned about some, *“Who being past feeling have given themselves to sin...”* (Ephesians 4:19).

Physical health is important, but spiritual health determines your eternal destiny.

**Our Next Gospel Meeting**

**March 3-8, 2013**

**David Lanius**

**Invite Night – Dec. 16<sup>th</sup> “Is Christ More Than Christmas?”**