

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IS AUTONOMOUS

Division, no doubt, is the devil's tool to fight Jesus Christ. Jesus said that the greatest evidence of His Lordship is the unity of His followers. In Gethsemane the night of Judas' betrayal, the Lord Jesus prayed to his father in heaven, saying: **9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. 11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me that they may be one, even as we are one.**" (John 17:9-11 (ESV).)

Hello I'm Larry Murdock.

As you know, believers in Jesus Christ are divided into a multitude of competing groups. Most commonly these groups are called denominations. Each group is characterized by a name which stands for every interpretation that is peculiar to the group. The group usually guards its peculiar teachings in something called a Manual of Faith, or a Catechism, or a Creed. This man-made book condenses into one place the rules of faith that the group confesses and practices. The book contains the denomination's standard interpretations of Bible teaching. The denomination will usually have an earthly headquarters that publishes the manual and attempts to keep all the member churches in line; it is a place that member churches support with their money and allegiance.

By contrast, the church built by Jesus Christ that we read about in the New Testament is composed of autonomous churches of Christ. These churches we read about in the New Testament were not controlled by an earthly headquarters, or by a man's rules. The churches of Christ were controlled by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and prophets of Christ to reveal and write down the New Testament of Jesus Christ. That New Testament was Christ's perfect law of liberty. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this about the perfect law of liberty: "if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing." (James 1:23-25

(ESV.) There are many followers of Christ who look into the perfect law of liberty and then turn around to practice the opposite! That's right!

A moment ago I called the churches of Christ autonomous. What does that mean? The word autonomous literally means, "self-rule." Well, churches of the New Testament did not rule themselves. Christ ruled over them. Christ told the seven churches of Asia that he was Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The world was begun by Jesus Christ and when he comes again the world will end. Jesus is the head of the church. The churches of Christ are not autonomous in that they get to make their own rules.

There is another sense in which something can be autonomous. When something is independent of other things, it is autonomous. For instance, my right hand is not my left hand. My right hand is autonomous. It is controlled by the same person that controls my left hand, but my right hand is autonomous, that is, it is a distinct part of me. I have no other right hand. It does right handed things. It's location is peculiar; it occupies the right side of my body. It is not my left hand. It is autonomous. But autonomy does not mean that my right hand can do as it pleases. No, my right hand pleases me! And so it is with the churches you read about in the Bible. A church of Christ was autonomous in that it lived in a separate location and practiced their faith independently of other churches of Christ, but nevertheless they were under the control of Jesus Christ.

All of these autonomous churches of Christ were guided by the same Holy Spirit. They were following the will of Christ. The will of Christ was found in the teaching and preaching of the apostles. And that is where modern churches of Christ will find the will of Christ even today, in the preaching and teaching of the apostles as written in the book we call the New Testament of Jesus Christ.

True churches of Christ do not follow a man-made religion. They have no manual of faith other than the last will and testament of Christ. They have no other headquarters than the heavenly throne of Christ. True churches of Christ trust the Bible, God's word to mankind. Any uniformity that can be seen among churches of Christ is because each one is attempting to pattern its practice after New Testament teaching.

Churches of Christ are not perfect...just as New Testament churches were not perfect. To have a Perfect church would require 100% perfection in every member. The apostle John teaches us that that is not possible. He wrote to Christians and said, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10 (ESV).)

No, there is no church that is perfect. But the important thing is that each independent church of Christ is working toward doing all of the will of Christ. He is our Lord. His word is good enough for us. We will keep our eyes on the Lord and His Word. He is our teacher. Jesus taught us: “⁸ **But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.** (Matt 23:8-12 (ESV).) Christ is our Lord.

Friends, when you find a church teaching and practicing the traditions of men, then you have found a church that is following faulty guidance. Traditions of men are fatal when they take the place of Christ’s teaching. The traditions of men are the things that have divided the followers of Christ more than anything else. Jesus brought this to the attention of the religious leaders of his day. The Jewish religious leaders came to Jesus and asked him this pointed question: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” Jesus answered with a question of his own: “**And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”** (Matt 15:3 (ESV).) Then Jesus explained: ⁴ **For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Who ever reviles father or mother must surely die.'** ⁵ **But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, ⁶ he need not honor his father.'** So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.

⁷ **You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:**

⁸ **"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do**

they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' " (Matt 15:4-9 (ESV).) The Pharisees were actually teaching people how they could break the commandment of God concerning their parents. If they gave their money at the temple, they did not have to give any support to their parents. There are religious leaders among the churches even today who are teaching people how they can break the commandment of God. There is the commandment of God concerning marriage. But there are religious teachers that ending a marriage can be a good thing to do! Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder." But yet we hear of Christian counselors advising spouses to depart from their partners. And then, we hear of states who are declaring that males can marry males, and females can marry females. Well did Isaiah prophesy saying, "this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me!"

Can it be said of you, "you honor God with your lips, but your heart is somewhere else?"

There are whole churches that do not honor God in their hearts and in their practice. They give God lip service but they feel no compunction to do things as God has commanded. ¹² Then [Jesus'] disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" ¹³ He answered, **"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."** (Matt 15:12-14 (ESV).)

You and I have the obligation to avoid blindness! That's right! We are the ones responsible for following blind guidance. We are supposed to know better. We must do as John commands in 1 John 4:1: ¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1 (ESV).) Friends, are you prepared to "test" the spirits, the teachers of the world? Don't be a follower of a denomination: follow the Lord!