

Divine Authority

Lesson 9

Cooperation of Autonomous, Independent Local Churches

What We Have Learned In The Previous Lesson

Universal church has no earthly centralized organization

A local church is a team of saints that agrees to work and worship together as the Lord directs

Each local church should be overseen by qualified elders assisted by qualified deacons

There are differences between individual and local church actions

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Introduction

- It is often asked, “How can we get all the local churches together so that we can evangelize or distribute benevolence more efficiently?”
- Before we can get to that answer, we must understand that each local church is autonomous and independent
- Of what benefit is congregational independence?

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Introduction

- Does independence of local churches prevent us from cooperating with other local churches?
- Historically, many examples of men changing God’s order of how His people should work together

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Examples Of Sinful Cooperation Efforts By Humanity

Tower of Babel – Gen. 11

Israel desiring a king – 1 Sam. 8

Denominations that centralize local churches

Churches of Christ establishing centralized plans where one local church oversees the work and collects funds from many local churches

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Introduction

- Many brethren will accuse us of being “anti-cooperation” because we oppose their centralized plans
- They will tell us these centralized plans do so much good and it could not be accomplished without following these plans
- But, our biggest concern must always be, “Are these things authorized for us to do?”

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Purposes of This Lesson

- Understand meaning and implications of local churches being autonomous and independent
- Understand the meaning of scriptural and unscriptural cooperation
- Identify unauthorized methods of cooperation

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Cooperation of Autonomous, Independent Local Churches

Local churches must be independent and autonomous
Independence safeguards a local church from error
Authorized and unauthorized cooperation
Examples of authorized cooperation of local churches
Examples of unauthorized cooperation of local churches

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Local Churches Must Be Independent And Autonomous

- Neither independent or autonomous are found in the New Testament
- But, when we see the meanings of these words, we find the concepts within the New Testament
- Based on the evidence, we necessarily infer that these are characteristics of each local church

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Independent

- Not dependent (reliant) on another for anything that is needed to function.
- In other words, local churches do not depend on others for funds, oversight or anything else that is needed for their work.

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Autonomous

- Self directed, not subject to the control of outside forces.
- Self-governing, not dependent on the laws or supervision of another organization.

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

- Each local church is to have its own overseers, qualified elders
- Their rule is restricted to the local church among them
- Therefore, it is sinful for elders to extend their oversight beyond a local church

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

ACT 14:23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

1PE 5:2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

- In matters of judgment, elders are free to decide among a number of acceptable alternatives
- For example, time of worship and number of worship assemblies each week
- But, when God specifically requires something, it must be followed without adding or subtracting from it

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

COL 3:17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

- Local churches may only have a local treasury
- Storage of money, a medium of exchange through which local church work is done

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

1CO 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

1CO 16:2 On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

- The only time one or several local churches sent funds to one or several local churches was when saints in the receiving churches were in need through no fault of their own
- When their need was met, funds were stopped

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

ACT 24:17 "Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings;

2Co 8:13 For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality--

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Evidence For Independent, Autonomous Local Churches

2Co 8:14 at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality;

2Co 8:15 as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."

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Independence Safeguards A Local Church From Error

- As each local church practices independence and autonomy, this helps protect them from error
- If local churches are centralized together in some way, error tends to spread more easily and quickly to many local churches
- Because local churches are independent, no church can force another church to accept and practice error

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Independence Safeguards A Local Church From Error

- Independent local churches stand in sharp contrast to the Catholic Church
- Because of centralization of local churches, over time, they installed their universal ruler, the Pope
- Most denominations today although they say they believe in independent local churches do not practice this but promote centralization of churches

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Independence Safeguards A Local Church From Error

ACT 20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

ACT 20:29 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

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Independence Safeguards A Local Church From Error

ACT 20:30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

- Problem – false teachers came from Jerusalem and spread error to other churches
- Error – Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved
- Result – Paul and Barnabas had much conflict with them

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

ACT 15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
ACT 15:2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

- Why did Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem?
- Did they go to get their teaching approved by the apostles and elders?
- The Holy Spirit directed them to go in order to present the gospel they had been teaching and to know for sure that the apostles had not approved of these false teachers

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

GAL 2:2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.
GAL 2:3 But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

GAL 2:4 But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.
GAL 2:5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

- Paul met privately with some of the apostles
- This meeting was not to make decisions about the content of the gospel or any other decision for other local churches
- The meeting was so Paul could relate the gospel he had been preaching to see if they were standing for the same truth or whether they had endorsed these false teachers

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

GAL 2:6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) -- well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.

GAL 2:7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

GAL 2:8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles),

GAL 2:9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

GAL 2:10 They only asked us to remember the poor -- the very thing I also was eager to do.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

- Guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem send a letter to local churches that had been troubled by these false teachers
- Letter clarified the apostles had nothing to do with these false teachers who were binding circumcision and the Law of Moses on the Gentiles
- Note no decision was made that changed what Paul had been preaching

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

ACT 15:24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

ACT 15:25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

ACT 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

ACT 15:27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

ACT 15:28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

ACT 15:29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

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Acts 15 – Is This Proof of Centralization?

- There was no new teaching that came out of this meeting in Jerusalem
- Also, note that those who met were not representatives from various local churches
- Acts 15 shows that some of the apostles met together privately and with the local church at Jerusalem publicly
- Acts 15 does not show that local churches can meet together to decide anything

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Authorized And Unauthorized Cooperation

Cooperate - to work or act together toward a common end or purpose

Two types of cooperation

Collective cooperation

Concurrent cooperation

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Collective Cooperation Unauthorized

- When a number of people or organizations are collected together into some centralized, organized arrangement to accomplish a certain goal
- Goal is attained through centralized oversight and treasury
- Both denominations and many churches of Christ practice this method of cooperation

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Concurrent Cooperation Authorized

- When a number of people or organizations work independently to accomplish a common goal
- Goal attained without centralized oversight and treasury

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

- Local churches set example of faithfulness as they follow apostles' teaching
- Local churches may assist each other in various ways
- Local churches may independently cooperate with one another by supporting preachers and helping needy saints
- No sign of one local church overseeing other local churches or churches working through centralized organizations

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

1TH 1:7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

1TH 1:8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

1TH 2:14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

ROM 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;

ROM 16:2 that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

COL 4:16 When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

3JO 1:5 ¶ Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers;

3JO 1:6 and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

2Co 11:8 I robbed other churches by taking wages *from them* to serve you;

2Co 11:9 and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.

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Examples Of Authorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

ROM 15:25 but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints.

ROM 15:26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

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Examples Of Unauthorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

- Any plan or method designed to collect local churches together under centralized leadership so they can act as “one” is unauthorized
- Local churches should never allow another local church or human organization to oversee their decisions or funds
- These methods result in collective cooperation and are not authorized

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Examples Of Unauthorized Cooperation Of Local Churches

- We recognize these centralized plans among denominations but often we fail to see them when it comes to churches of Christ
- The following example and further lessons should help us identify this error among ourselves

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American Christian Missionary Society - 1849

- Promoted by Alexander Campbell who had once taught against such centralization of local churches
- Local churches sent funds to society
- Society then distributed funds to preachers who were sent out to evangelize
- What is wrong with this?

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American Christian Missionary Society - 1849

- Universal church was seen as composed of local churches rather than individual Christians
- Universal church composed of local churches was seen to have a collective obligation to preach the gospel to the world
- Local churches have right to centralize their work so they can evangelize more efficiently

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American Christian Missionary Society - 1849

- Therefore, Society was created to accomplish collective cooperation among churches with centralized oversight and treasury
- They violated principles of local oversight and local treasury
- They violated principle that each local church is responsible to send funds directly to preachers and oversee their own evangelistic work

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Only Local Oversight Authorized

Act 14:23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

1Pe 5:2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

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Only Local Treasury Authorized

1Co 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

1Co 16:2 On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

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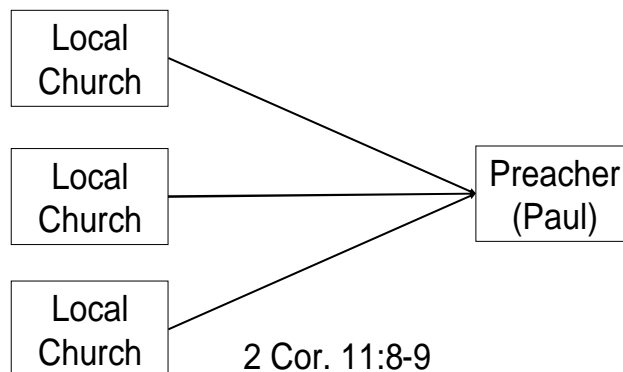
Only Sending Funds Directly To Preachers Authorized

2Co 11:8 I robbed other churches by taking wages *from them* to serve you;

2Co 11:9 and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.

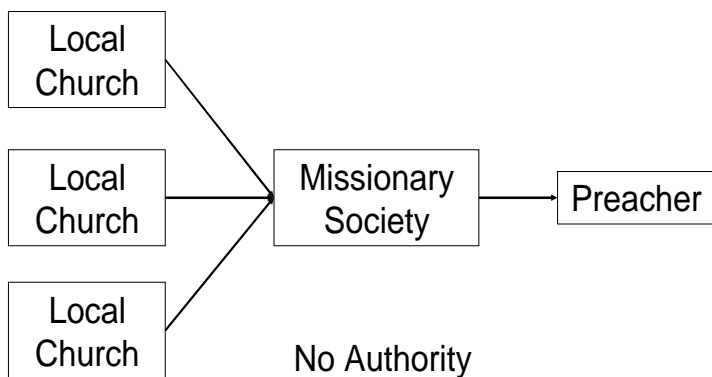
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Local Churches Concurrently Cooperated To Support Paul



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Local Churches Collectively Cooperated Through Society



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What We Have Learned In This Lesson

Local churches are to be independent and autonomous, overseeing their own decisions and treasuries

Independence safeguards a local church from error

Acts 15 does not prove local churches have the right to meet and settle matters for other local churches

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Divine Authority

Lesson 9 - Cooperation of Autonomous Independent Local Churches

Various passages and material from Lesson 9 outline

For each of the following questions, please circle the letter by the correct answer.

1. We know local churches must be independent and autonomous because we have
 - A. A direct command.
 - B. An approved example.
 - C. A direct statement.
 - D. A necessary inference.

2. The only time any local church sent funds directly to any other local church was when
 - A. The saints of the receiving church or churches were in need of basic necessities.
 - B. The receiving church or churches need funds to support an evangelist.
 - C. The giving church or churches decided to help fund whatever program was being overseen and conducted by the receiving church or churches.
 - D. The receiving church or churches were in need of funds to build a church building.

3. The reason Paul and Barnabas went to meet with the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15) was because
 - A. They were unclear about what they should be teaching.
 - B. They were willing to allow the apostles to decide for them what they should be teaching.

- C. The Lord commanded them to go and reveal to the brethren what they had always been teaching.
 - D. The apostles commanded them to appear in Jerusalem.
4. One of the benefits from local churches being independent of one another is
- A. No local church ever has to depend on another.
 - B. Error can be contained more easily.
 - C. Local churches can work together in whatever way they please.
 - D. Each local church is restricted from communicating with any other local church.
5. What type of cooperation does the new Testament authorize between local churches?
- A. Recurrent.
 - B. Collective.
 - C. Concurrent.
 - D. No cooperation is authorized.
6. Which of the following is an authorized way for local churches to cooperate with one another?
- A. Local churches sending wages directly to an evangelist.
 - B. Local churches sending money to a benevolent organization.
 - C. Local churches sending money to a local church that oversees the evangelizing of South America.

- D. Local churches that send representatives to a meeting where they debate and decide what the Bible teaches on various issues.
7. Which was not one of the beliefs that led to the creation of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849?
- A. Local churches should act as “one” together.
 - B. The universal church is composed of local churches.
 - C. The universal church has a collective obligation to preach the gospel.
 - D. The universal church is composed of individual Christians.

For each statement, circle True or False.

- | | | | |
|------|-------|----|---|
| True | False | 1. | The words independence and autonomy can be found in the New Testament. |
| True | False | 2. | The rule of elders is restricted to the one local church where they are members. |
| True | False | 3. | There is no authority for either oversight or treasury that goes beyond the local church level. |
| True | False | 4. | Local churches are authorized to send money to other local churches as long as they believe it is for a good work. |
| True | False | 5. | The Jerusalem meeting in Acts 15 proves that local churches of Christ can meet together to discuss and decide what the Bible teaches on various issues. |
| True | False | 6. | When local churches remain independent, this helps contain the spreading of error among local churches. |
| True | False | 7. | In order for local churches to cooperate with each other, they must have oversight from either a local church or a man-made organization. |

For each question, please provide statements that clearly answer each question.

1. Please give a Scriptural explanation for why we believe that each local church is to be independent and autonomous.

2. Please describe how Acts 15 relates to us today? Does this passage give us authority to have centralized meetings of local churches?

3. Please define the two different types of cooperation. Which type is authorized for local churches to follow?

4. Please give examples of Scriptural cooperation between local churches.

5. Please give examples of unscriptural cooperation between local churches.