

The Authority Of The Local Church

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:15–20)

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In our text we see that the local church is given authority by Christ to handle difficult disciplinary matters under the authority of Christ. We typically hold it to be an important principle in Baptist belief and practice that the local church is free, and should be left free to handle her own business. Jesus certainly seems to have established this principle.

One of the reasons that we hold to the local church is that the Scriptures never show us a regional or state church that has authority over local churches. Neither do the Scriptures present to us an association, or any other organization as being in authority over local churches. Furthermore, we see no evidence in the Scriptures that the local church has the right to concede, or delegate her authority over her own affairs to anyone else. Should someone assert otherwise, the burden of proof rests upon them to present a Biblical case for their assertions.

It is important to note that the New Testament pattern shows that the local church is free to tend to her own business. In Acts chapter six, when there was a need for help in caring for the widows in the church, the apostles told the church what they needed to do, and guided them in doing it, but the church chose and approved the men who were to carry out the task at hand. In like manner, when the Holy Spirit moved upon the church at Antioch to set Paul and Barnabas aside to do the work that God had called them to do, the local church was free to attend to this in obedience to God. Likewise, as Paul commanded Corinth to exercise church discipline, he told them that it was their duty as the church to carry out this duty. The local church is autonomous and has the authority under Christ’s headship to carry out her own business.

Binding And Loosing In The Local Church

Our text shows Jesus stating that there is, within the local church, the authority to bind and loose as long as it is in accord with what has been done in heaven. When we consider that the ultimate authority in the church is Jesus Christ (See Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:18), and that God alone has the authority of forgiveness (And that forgiveness and judgment are the prerogative of Jesus. See Matthew 9:1-8; John 5:22; James 4:12), then we see that the binding and

loosing must be done under the authority of Christ, or in harmony with the teaching of His Word.

What does it mean to bind and to loose? Jesus shows us this in Matthew 18:21-35. It is here that the parable shows us how one can either be bound to, or loosed from his debt. When we see Jesus tells the church that we have the authority of forgiveness (John 20:23), we understand that He is speaking of the same thing. The binding and loosing refers to the sinning member who is put outside the fellowship of the church (See 1 Corinthians 5:1-13), thus being bound to his sins until he repents; and then receiving him back into fellowship through forgiveness, thus loosing him from his sin as God has done (See 2 Corinthians 2:1-11).

As we consider this, it shows us that the church has authority under Christ to receive and/or reject members. This is not something that is to be done carelessly, but under the authority of Christ only. We have no right to receive or to reject anyone that Christ would not treat the same as we do. Thus it is that we see very explicit directions concerning how to exercise church discipline. We also see that the New Testament pattern was to receive the baptized believer into the fellowship of the local church (Acts 1:41-47). Though we see no formal vote that took place, we do see that those who trusted Jesus were baptized and then became a part of the fellowship of the church. We also see that Saul of Tarsus was initially rejected, but then received by the church at Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-28). Later this same apostle wrote to the Roman church, commanding them to receive their weaker brethren (Romans 14:1). Thus the church has the authority concerning whom they will receive into their fellowship.

While we see only the broad principle regarding the receiving of members into the fellowship of the church, we must recognize that this is a very important issue. What is at stake is the holiness and purity of the church. As mentioned earlier, there are issues that will be dealt with more in depth when we address church discipline; here we will let it suffice us to say that the church should be careful that they only receive into their fellowship those who give credible evidence of saving faith in Christ, baptism, and good moral character (Acts 2:41-47; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

Respecting The Local Church

The authority and autonomy of each local church should be respected. As members of local churches, we must ourselves be respectful of the church. We should do that by living godly lives so that we can be a blessing to the church, thus upholding the Biblical standards of holiness. We should respect the local church by showing Christian courtesy in all things, so that we minister to the harmony and edification of the body in our assemblies, and so that we represent the church and Christ well in society. Finally, we should respect the local church by submitting to her teaching and discipline, as the church follows Christ Jesus.

We should also show respect to the authority of the local church by respecting the rights and privileges of other local bodies as we deal with them. Whether we are receiving or granting letters of commendation for members, conducting business in associations, seeking for or planning the ordination of ministers or deacons, or whatever business we are transacting, we must always be

aware that each local church must be respected as an individual body that is responsible for carrying out her own business. That being so, we should respect the freedom and authority of each local church in carrying out the business of the church.