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  - "Acts 14:23"
  - "2 Corinthians 8:19–22"
  - "Romans 15:25–28"
  - "2 Corinthians 11:7–9"

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## Local Rule and Autonomy — Lesson 15

### Eldership and Church Autonomy

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***Big Idea:*** God designed the church to function under **local oversight**, with **local responsibility**, and with **no human structure above the local church**.

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## Key Texts (NASB 1995)

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### Acts 20:17, 28

*“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.” (v.17)*

*“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.”  
(v.28)*

### 1 Peter 5:2

*“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God...”*

### Philippians 1:1

*“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons...”*

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## Why This Lesson Matters

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Autonomy is not a side issue. It is one of the first things Satan attacks when he wants to corrupt the church.

When men start “improving” God’s arrangement, the results are predictable:

- authority shifts from Scripture to organization
- churches become dependent instead of mature
- control grows distant and unaccountable
- truth becomes negotiable
- unity becomes forced, not spiritual

If we lose autonomy, we will eventually lose sound doctrine.

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# 1) Over Whom or What Do Elders Rule?

## The elders' authority is local, not universal

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Acts 20 makes the scope unmistakable:

- Paul called **the elders of the church in Ephesus** (Acts 20:17).
- Those elders were overseers over **the flock among them** (Acts 20:28).
- That means a defined group of Christians known personally, served directly, and watched carefully.

This was not:

- the universal church
- a regional network
- a “mother church” supervising others
- a diocesan model

When later Scripture speaks of multiple churches in the same region, none is elevated above the rest.

## Local eldership is the New Testament pattern

Acts 14:23 states:

*“When they had appointed elders for them in every church...” (NASB 1995)*

The pattern is consistent:

- each local church has its own shepherds
- those shepherds oversee that local flock
- they are not assigned to rule other churches

## 1 Peter 5:2 nails the boundary down

Peter commands elders:

*“Shepherd the flock of God **among you...**”*

That phrase matters.

Elders can only shepherd what they know.

Oversight requires:

- presence
- familiarity
- proven character
- earned trust

No man can shepherd what he does not actually live among.

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## A simple truth many people resist

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**No church has the right to submit itself to elders in another place.**

Not because elders are weak men, but because God set the boundary.

An elder is not a spiritual governor over churches.

He is a shepherd over a flock.

A flock is not the whole countryside.

It is the sheep God has placed “among” him.

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## Table: The Scope of Elder Rule

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QUESTION	BIBLICAL ANSWER	KEY TEXT
Who do elders oversee?	The flock among them	1 Pet 5:2
Where is elder oversight exercised?	In the local church	Acts 20:17, 28
How many elders should oversee one church?	A plurality (not one-man rule)	Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; Phil 1:1
Do elders oversee other churches?	No pattern or permission exists	Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2
Can a church “submit” to outside elders?	That violates the boundary of rule	1 Pet 5:2

## 2) Overstepping the Bounds of Rule

### Leadership corruption often begins with “bigger plans”

Most departures do not start with open rebellion.

They start with ambition dressed up as urgency:

- “We need to do more.”
- “We can reach farther.”
- “We can organize better.”
- “The local church is too small for global work.”

That sounds noble.

But noble intentions do not authorize unscriptural structures.

### The temptation

When churches pour money into large projects, it pulls authority with it.

Money produces expectations.  
Expectations create leverage.  
Leverage becomes control.  
Control becomes a structure.  
That structure becomes a rival authority.

By the time people realize what happened, the church has slowly been moved from God's plan to man's system.

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## **Evangelism support is biblical — control is not**

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Scripture shows churches supporting preachers financially.

Paul received support from brethren (Phil 4:10–18; 2 Cor 11:7–9).

That is real.

That is authorized.

That is good.

But there is no Scripture for:

- one church overseeing another church
- one eldership managing multiple churches
- “sponsoring church” authority
- centralized planning imposed on saints elsewhere

Support is not oversight.

Aid is not ownership.

Funding an evangelist is not controlling a church.

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## **A crucial distinction**

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**A church supports an evangelist — not a church.**

A church may help a man preach.

That does not give it authority over:

- the local decisions where he preaches
- the local work there
- the elders there
- the members there

When churches begin attaching control to support, autonomy is already bleeding.

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### **3) When Autonomy Is Not Violated**

Autonomy is not isolation.

It is **independence under Christ**, not independence from love.

Churches can cooperate in good ways without creating a structure bigger than the local church.

Below are biblical examples of what does *not* violate autonomy.

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#### **A) Autonomy is not violated when humanitarian aid is given**

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There are clear examples of financial help being sent to relieve need.

##### **Romans 15:25–28**

Paul speaks of contributions sent for needy saints.

##### **2 Corinthians 8–9**

Aid is described as:

- voluntary
- honest
- accountable
- aimed at relief

The key marker:

**No strings attached.**

No outside elders taking over.

No committees ruling churches.

No control transferred.

It is help, not hierarchy.

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## **B) Autonomy is not violated when elders investigate fellowship concerns**

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Shepherds must protect the local church.

Sometimes brethren try to run from discipline by shifting locations.

Elders must know who they are receiving into fellowship.

### **Acts 18:27**

When Apollos traveled:

*“the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him...”*

Recommendation and confirmation are biblical.

It is not “spying.”

It is shepherding.

A church must be careful about:

- who teaches
- who influences
- who leads
- who is welcomed as sound

This is not lack of love.

This is love that protects souls.

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## **C) Autonomy is not violated by communication between churches**

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Churches can communicate:

- scheduling
- teaching opportunities
- cooperation in events
- mutual encouragement
- shared information

Communication is not control.

What crosses the line is when churches:

- pool funds into a shared structure
- create a standing organization over multiple churches
- create a governing body above the local church

History proves that once structure grows, corruption follows.

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## **D) Autonomy is not violated when churches act concurrently through an agent**

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Paul carried funds to Jerusalem accompanied by trustworthy men.

### **2 Corinthians 8:19–22**

Men were selected to travel with the gift for integrity and accountability.

Each church gave its own gift.

Each church did its own work.

The funds were delivered honestly.

No eldership became a regional headquarters.

No church became a manager over others.

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## E) Autonomy is not violated when elders consult other elders for advice

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Wise men seek counsel.

Proverbs is filled with the wisdom of counsel.

But counsel must remain counsel.

A danger arises when:

- one church becomes “the authority church”
- other churches fear independent judgment
- people adopt policies based on reputation, not Scripture

Advice is healthy.

Intimidation is deadly.

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### Table: What Violates Autonomy vs What Does Not

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SCENARIO	AUTONOMY VIOLATED?	WHY
One church sends money for relief to needy saints	No	Aid without control is biblical (Rom 15; 2 Cor 8–9)
One church sends money to fund a preacher’s work	No	Supporting an evangelist is authorized (Phil 4; 2 Cor 11)
A “sponsoring church” oversees a work funded by many churches	Yes	Creates a structure above local churches
An eldership dictates decisions in another local church	Yes	Elders only oversee the flock among them (1 Pet 5:2)

SCENARIO	AUTONOMY VIOLATED?	WHY
Churches coordinate meeting dates to avoid conflicts	No	Communication is not control
Churches pool funds into a shared program run by one board	Yes	A structure bigger than the local church is created
Elders check the background of someone seeking fellowship	No	Shepherding requires knowing whom you receive (Acts 18:27)
Elders from one church become regional managers	Yes	No NT authority for a diocese model

## 4) The Heart of Autonomy: Christ Rules Locally Through His Word

Autonomy does not mean:

- “we can do what we want”
- “no one can question us”
- “we answer to nobody”
- “we set our own doctrine”

Autonomy means:

- Christ is the only Head
- the local church is the only organizational unit
- elders shepherd locally
- Scripture governs all authority

The local church stands directly accountable to Christ.

That is frightening.

That is glorious.

That is exactly how God designed it.

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## 5) Practical Applications for the Church

### A) Respect the limits of elder authority

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Elders must not act like:

- corporate executives
- political rulers
- regional strategists
- institutional directors

They are shepherds.

Their authority is moral, spiritual, and scriptural.

Not personal.

Not imperial.

### B) Respect the limits of church cooperation

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If something requires a structure above the local church to function, it is already suspect.

A good question is:

**“Can a local church do this work, using its own oversight, without surrendering control to someone else?”**

### C) Support without controlling

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A supporting church should give because it trusts God’s work is being done.

Not because it wants to manage it.

The moment a church supports with strings attached, the gift becomes leverage.

## D) Teach autonomy before a crisis forces it

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Most churches learn autonomy only after trouble arrives.

That's too late.

Autonomy must be taught:

- clearly
  - calmly
  - repeatedly
  - biblically
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## Discussion Questions (for class)

1. Why is Acts 20:17 and 20:28 such a strong proof of local oversight?
  2. What does “among you” (1 Peter 5:2) protect the church from?
  3. Why do you think many departures start with “big plans” and “big money”?
  4. How can a church support an evangelist without violating autonomy?
  5. What is the difference between counsel and control among churches?
  6. What dangers arise when one church becomes a “dominating influence” in an area?
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## Summary Statements to Remember

- **Elders rule locally, not regionally.**
  - **The local church is complete in God's design.**
  - **Cooperation must never create a structure above the church.**
  - **Aid is biblical; oversight over other churches is not.**
  - **Autonomy protects truth by protecting God's pattern.**
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# Closing Scripture

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1 Peter 5:2–3 (NASB 1995)

*“Shepherd the flock of God among you... nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.”*

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## Final Charge

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If we love the church, we will protect her structure.

If we protect her structure, we protect her doctrine.

And if we protect her doctrine, we protect souls.

Autonomy is not tradition.

Autonomy is obedience.

It is one of the ways God keeps His people safe.

## Lesson 15 — Teaching Charts (Eldership & Church Autonomy)

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### Chart 1 — The Boundaries of Eldership Rule (What Elders Oversee)

QUESTION	BIBLICAL ANSWER	KEY TEXTS	PLAIN MEANING
Over whom do elders rule?	<b>The flock “among you”</b>	Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:2	A local church, not a region, not a brotherhood network.
Over what do elders rule?	<b>Spiritual oversight of souls</b>	Hebrews 13:17	Their authority is not corporate or political; it is shepherding.

QUESTION	BIBLICAL ANSWER	KEY TEXTS	PLAIN MEANING
How far does their authority extend?	<b>Only where there is real knowledge and relationship</b>	Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2	You can't "shepherd" people you don't know and don't worship with.
Can elders oversee another church?	<b>No</b>	Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1	Each church has its own elders; each flock answers to its own shepherds.

## Chart 2 — The New Testament Pattern: What We See (and What We Do NOT See)

PATTERN IN SCRIPTURE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	SCRIPTURES	WHAT IT RULES OUT
<b>Plurality of elders in one church</b>	Multiple qualified men shepherding one local church	Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5	One-man "pastor system," CEO leadership
<b>Local oversight</b>	Elders over the flock "among" them	1 Peter 5:2	Regional bishops, dioceses, church chains
<b>Independent decision-making</b>	Each church acting under Christ's authority	1 Peter 5:2; Acts 14:23	Central offices, boards, headquarters
<b>Aid without control</b>	Help given with no strings attached	Romans 15:25–28; 2 Corinthians 8–9	Funding arrangements that purchase oversight

### Chart 3 — Common Ways Autonomy Gets Violated (Real-World Warning Signs)

THE DRIFT	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	WHAT IT BECOMES	WHY IT'S DANGEROUS
“We’ll oversee this work for everyone.”	“We can do it better, faster, bigger.”	A controlling hub	One church begins functioning like a headquarters.
“Send your funds here and we’ll distribute them.”	“We’ll manage the money for the brotherhood.”	Pooled resources	Decisions get made outside the local church where the money came from.
“Our elders will supervise the preacher there.”	“He’s our man, so we’ll direct it.”	Remote oversight	Supporting a preacher turns into controlling a church.
“If they don’t do what we like, we’ll cut them off.”	“We’re paying, so we decide.”	Financial leverage	Money becomes a weapon instead of help.
“Other churches must follow our example.”	“This is how faithful churches do it.”	Soft coercion	Pressure replaces Scripture, and fear replaces conviction.

### Chart 4 — Autonomy Is NOT Violated When...

SITUATION	WHY IT'S LAWFUL	KEY TEXTS	WHAT MUST NOT BE ADDED
<b>Humanitarian aid is sent to another church</b>	Relief is love, not control	Romans 15:25–28; 2 Corinthians 8:13–15	No oversight, no strings, no takeover

SITUATION	WHY IT'S LAWFUL	KEY TEXTS	WHAT MUST NOT BE ADDED
<b>A church supports a preacher</b>	Support goes to the worker, not the church as a ruled body	Philippians 4:10–18; 2 Corinthians 11:7–9	Don't "buy" authority with support
<b>A church checks the standing of a prospective member</b>	Fellowship requires discernment	Acts 18:27	Not spying; just responsible shepherding
<b>Churches communicate and coordinate schedules</b>	Cooperation is not organization	(principle)	No pooled treasury, no joint budget
<b>Multiple churches act concurrently through an agent</b>	Each church does its own work, without merging funds	2 Corinthians 8:19–22	No central treasury controlling all
<b>Elders seek advice from elders elsewhere</b>	Counsel is not control	Proverbs principle; wisdom	Advice must never become domination

### Chart 5 — “Support” vs “Oversight” (The Line Most People Cross Without Noticing)

TOPIC	SUPPORT	OVERSIGHT
Money	“We choose to help.”	“We control because we paid.”
Decisions	“They decide locally.”	“We decide remotely.”
Accountability	“The preacher answers to the elders where he works.”	“The preacher answers to the elders who fund him.”

TOPIC	SUPPORT	OVERSIGHT
Influence	“We encourage faithfulness.”	“We enforce compliance.”
Purpose	“To strengthen the work.”	“To take over the work.”

## Chart 6 — A Simple Scripture-Authority Checklist (For Any Big Plan)

STEP	QUESTION	IF YES	IF NO
1	Is this work assigned to the local church in Scripture?	Proceed	Stop and re-evaluate
2	Can this work be done without creating a larger structure than the local church?	Proceed	Stop and re-design
3	Does this arrangement require pooled funds and centralized control?	Danger	Don't do it
4	Does any church gain decision-making power over another?	Autonomy violated	Reject it
5	Is aid given freely without leverage, threats, or control?	Safe	Fix your motive and method
6	Does this protect the pattern of plurality + local oversight?	Safe	Stop and correct

## Chart 7 — Case Studies (Quick Class Discussion Table)

CASE	DESCRIPTION	AUTONOMY PROTECTED?	WHY
1	Church A sends money to Church B for food relief after a disaster.	✓ Yes	Aid with no control is lawful.
2	Church A collects money from ten churches and runs a “national evangelism program.”	✗ No	Central treasury + centralized decisions create a structure beyond the local church.
3	Church A supports a preacher working in another city, but demands authority over that church’s choices.	✗ No	Support is being used as leverage and control.
4	Churches coordinate gospel meeting dates so they don’t overlap.	✓ Yes	Coordination is not organization.
5	A church asks another about a member who left under discipline.	✓ Yes	Fellowship requires discernment and truthfulness.
6	Elders from multiple churches vote together on doctrine policies for the area.	✗ No	That becomes a functional council and violates local rule.

## Chart 8 — Key Scriptures to Anchor Lesson 15

PASSAGE	CORE PHRASE	WHAT IT ESTABLISHES
Acts 20:17, 28	“the elders of the church... all the flock... overseers”	Elders are tied to one local church and its flock.

PASSAGE	CORE PHRASE	WHAT IT ESTABLISHES
Acts 14:23	“appointed elders in every church”	Local leadership, local oversight.
Philippians 1:1	“saints... with bishops and deacons”	Each church can have its own officers.
1 Peter 5:2	“shepherd the flock... among you”	Limits authority to the local flock.
Hebrews 13:17	“watch out for your souls... must give account”	The spiritual weight of oversight—serious responsibility.
Romans 15:25–28	“relief”	Churches helping churches without control.
2 Corinthians 8:19–22	“chosen by the churches”	Concurrent action without central authority.

## Chart 9 — Final Summary (One-Sentence Lessons)

TRUTH	ONE SENTENCE
Local oversight is God’s design	The church is strongest when shepherded locally by qualified men who know the flock.
Autonomy protects purity	Once churches create bigger structures, corruption always follows.
Aid must never become control	Help is love; control is domination.
Scripture demands restraint	The church must not “improve” God’s design with human systems.

TRUTH	ONE SENTENCE
Real zeal stays within God's bounds	A big mission can never justify an unauthorized method.