

A Review of Mike Willis' Article, "Autonomy or Isolation?"

By Tim Haile

The February 2008 issue of Truth Magazine contains an article by Mike Willis entitled, "*Autonomy or Isolation.*" Though the article does call attention to some conditions among brethren that are worthy of our concern and consideration, the basic premise of the article is flawed, and several passages are dangerously misapplied. A cursory reading of the article may cause one to think that brother Willis is only making a noble call for unity among brethren. He repeatedly states that brethren have lost their "*sense of brotherhood,*" even going so far as to say that some "*churches have little sense of 'brotherhood.'*" And while we appreciate all pleas for unity, let us remember that unity must be achieved upon a scriptural basis, and by means of scriptural methods. A careful examination of his arguments reveals subtle errors with far-reaching implications.

1. Brother Willis makes too much of "brotherhood." He sees the brotherhood as a "*fellowship.*" Fellowship is *joint participation, sharing in* (some activity). Brother Willis' definition of "brotherhood" provides him with an arrangement or mechanism for advancing an agenda that allows churches and preachers to intervene in the works and affairs of other churches. He wrote, "*In the name of local church autonomy, we are creating a bunch of isolated churches. These churches have little sense of 'brotherhood.'*" Combined with his position on apostolic examples, his concept of "brotherhood" provides a platform allowing churches and preachers to send men to other churches to *appoint elders* and to correct what they perceive to be *problems* and *errors* (he cites Tit. 1:5; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:3; Acts 11:22, 23 and Acts 14:22, 23). As we shall see later, brother Willis obviously ignores the special role of apostles in the early church.

His proof text is 1 Peter 2:17. Peter there told Christians to "*love the brotherhood.*" And though I accept the translation of "adelphotes" as "brotherhood" in 1 Peter 2:17 and 5:9, I do not accept the conclusions that brother Willis infers from the word. Peter is describing a *classification*, not an arrangement. The state of "brotherhood" does not grant brethren the right to interfere in the works and affairs of brethren in other churches. Brother Willis cited Arndt, Gingrich and Danker for his definition of the word brotherhood (*adelphotes*): "*a fellowship (group of fellow-believers).*" They also described it as a "Christian community, whose members are *adelphoi* (brothers) and *adelphai* (sisters)." I like the word "community," for brethren do have certain things "in common." They have a "*common faith*" (Tit. 1:4)

and a "*common salvation*" (Jud. 3). But these men have about as much of a right to describe brotherhood as "a fellowship" as they do to use the word "Christian" as an adjective! Brother Willis' use of this definition, combined with his overall line of argumentation, suggests the existence of some type of extra-congregational or inter-congregational organization, arrangement or mechanism. Though he admits that "*there is no brotherhood of churches in the New Testament,*" still he cites the condition of "brotherhood" as providing some means of interaction between these churches.

So, what does the word "brotherhood" mean? After telling Christians to "love the brotherhood," Peter told them to "*love as brothers (philadelphos)*." (1 Pet. 3:8). "Adelphotes" bears the same relationship to "adelphos" that "theotes" does to theos. The "tes" suggests classification. "Theos" is God. "Theotes" is the God-class (Godhood), or *state of being God*. "Adelphos" is brother, and "adelphotes" (brotherhood) is the brother class, or *state of being a brother*. As members of "theotes" all bear the essential qualities and attributes of "God," the members of "adelphotes" all bear the essential qualities and attributes of "brother." Peter used "brotherhood" (*adelphotes*) in 1 Peter 5:9 because he wanted Christians to know that they were not alone in their sufferings. He told them, "*these kinds of sufferings are being experienced by your brethren that are in the world.*" That is, others of your *character, kind, and classification* are undergoing this same type of *suffering*. Why? Because they are children of the same Father, and they are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

2. Brother Willis has a false concept of the role of the evangelist. His application of certain passages suggests that he holds at least some form of the view known as *evangelistic oversight*. He argues that since Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint elders, present day preachers may also send preachers to certain churches to appoint elders. This position assumes some right of ecclesiastical ordination of elders by a preacher. This is not what the New Testament teaches, and it is not what Titus did. His job was to set forth the qualifications that were given by the *Holy Spirit*. These qualifications are listed in the very next verses (Tit. 1:6-9). Titus' job was not that of ecclesiastical ordaining, but of teaching. According to Acts 20:28 it is the *Holy Spirit* who "makes" men overseers. They are not made elders by means of some special pronouncement of some preacher, but by their attainment of the Spirit's qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9), and by the recognition of such qualities by their brethren in the local church. A preacher from another church may be invited to teach on elder qualifications, but he has no business inserting himself into the selection process. The notion that "preachers" possess some special power of elder-

appointment that others do not possess is absolutely foolish. This error fuels the egos of preachers, and leads them into all sorts of silly and arrogant errors.

It is possible that brother Willis means that preachers may appoint elders in other churches by means of *teaching*, but since he did not qualify the "example" of Paul leaving Titus in Crete to appoint elders in every church, and since churches did not invite Titus to come to appoint elders in them, Mike has preachers today going UNINVITED to appoint elders in every church!

3. Brother Willis has a false concept of the role and authority of New Testament apostles. He cites 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Philippians 4:9 in order to prove that we are to follow Paul's example, but he considers neither the context of the passages nor the implications of his argument. Brother Willis ignores the fact that the apostles were under a *direct divine* commission (Mk. 16:14-20). The Holy Spirit would miraculously supply their words in times of controversy and resistance (Matt. 10:20), and He would confirm those words by signs and miracles to follow (Heb. 2:4; Mk. 16:20). God told the apostles where to begin their preaching and where it was to end (Acts 1:8). This commission was given by God, not by men. Brother Willis ignores the fact that it was the *Holy Spirit* who told the Antioch church to send Paul and Barnabas on their preaching journey. It was not an arbitrary choice made by the Antioch church (Acts 13:1-4). He ignores the fact that Paul's own judgment as to where he would next go to preach was superseded by the will of the *Holy Spirit* (Acts 16:6-10). Does brother Willis think that the judgment of preachers today is better than the judgment of the apostle Paul? He forgets that it was "*to the Holy Spirit*" that "*it seemed good*" to send the letter to Gentile churches (Acts 15:28). Neither the church at Jerusalem, nor the preachers involved in the Jerusalem discussion acted arbitrarily or unilaterally in authoring and distributing that letter. Their actions were under the auspices of divine governance and legislation.

4. Brother Willis ignores the fact that apostles possessed some rights that we do not possess. They had a unique position in the church. Paul said, "*And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating and various kinds of tongues*" (1 Cor. 12:28). They played a special role in equipping local churches to become self-sufficient. Ephesians 4:11 lists "apostles" along with "pastors." Brother Willis cited Acts 8:14-16 in order to point out the "sense of brotherhood" of the Samaritans in receiving help from the apostles from Jerusalem. He should have also pointed out that

these apostles from Jerusalem were "*sent by the (other) apostles at Jerusalem.*" The apostles possessed special *rights* along with their special abilities.

Brother Willis cited Acts 11:22, 23 in an effort to defend the practice of a church sending a preacher "on a mission" to another church. He said, "*Can you imagine what reception I would receive were the church of which I am a member to send me on a mission to the church of which you are a member, similar to the one which Barnabas was given? I suspect the attitude we would have today would be this: 'You brethren take care of your business and we will take care of our own.'* What has changed since the first century church was established?" Well, brother Willis, I can think of one thing that has changed since the first century: **We no longer have Spirit-guided apostles in our local churches!** Mike emphasizes that it was the *church* in Jerusalem that sent out Barnabas, and that "*the text says nothing about what the apostles did.*" I guess this depends upon one's definition of "text." The first verse of the chapter mentions the apostles, and as we saw before, the apostles made logistical decisions involving matters of revelation (Acts 8:14), and this because of their guidance by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). Interestingly, *the very next verse* following those cited by brother Willis, mentions that Barnabas "*was full of the Holy Spirit.*" Doesn't this sound a little like Acts 2:4? Acts 13:1 identifies Barnabas as "a prophet." And Acts 14:14 identifies Barnabas as an "apostle." Even granting that Barnabas was an apostle with a limited commission, he was nonetheless an "apostle," at least in that sense. As were other apostles, he was selected personally by God to perform his mission (Acts 13:2) Then, verse 25 of Acts 11 has Barnabas going to Tarsus to find Paul. Paul was an apostle in the fullest sense of the word, and the apostles played an integral role in the grounding of New Testament local churches. Brother Willis overlooks these vital facts in his analysis and comparison. He implies that a church may send a preacher to another church and exhort it whether that church wants the visiting preacher to do so, or not! It should be noted that even as an inspired man, Barnabas could do his work (exhorting) in Antioch in conjunction with respect for that church. There is no *evangelistic control* inherent in what Barnabas did on this occasion.

Contrary to what brother Willis says, the role of the apostles was more than just revelatory. Paul smote Elymas with blindness because of his undermining of the teaching of the gospel (Acts 13:8-11). And how was Paul able to inflict this punishment? We are told that he was "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" (vs. 9). This raises an important question: Since Paul

commands us to imitate him (Phil. 4:9), does this mean that present day preachers are authorized to physically punish those who interfere with their teaching of others? To those who may be thinking that Paul was different, in that he was led by the Spirit, I will point out that brother Willis claimed that the revelation and confirmation of the gospel "*are the only works unique to the Apostles.*" He said this in order to prove that we can do everything else that the Apostles did. If he is correct, though we lack the ability to do so supernaturally, Paul's approved apostolic "example" in Acts 13:11 would still authorize us to afflict men with temporary blindness. This incident proves that Holy Spirit guidance of the apostles extended beyond the mere role of revelation. (Perhaps I should guard my eyes when around preachers who think that I am hindering their teaching efforts! If brother Willis' concept of the role of the apostles is correct, I may need to watch some episodes of the Three Stooges, and start practicing the old poke-to-the-eye hand block maneuver!)

Paul asked the Corinthians if they would rather that he come with "a rod" (of firm rebuke), or with a "spirit of gentleness" (1 Cor. 4:21). In his second letter he expressed his desire not to have to be "*severe*" in "*the use of the authority that the Lord had given*" him (2 Cor. 13:10). If apostles had no rights or privileges that ordinary preachers do not have, then following Paul's example would necessarily involve warnings of stern rebuke by preachers in uninvited returns to unrepentant churches to which they had earlier preached. The arguments made by brother Willis have far reaching implications with respect to "brotherhood" oversight and regulation.

5. Brother Willis ignores the fact that Paul **commanded** people to follow his example (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9). This is not optional! He cited Paul's example as authorizing present day preachers to send preachers to other churches to refute error (1 Tim. 1:3), correct problems (1 Cor. 4:17) and appoint elders (Tit. 1:5; Acts 14:23). If brother Willis is correct in his concept that the apostles had no authority that we do not have, then preachers are actually *commanded* to send men into other churches to perform the above-cited missions. This would mean that 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Titus 1:5 would require me and other preachers to send men into other churches to appoint elders. Brother Willis' article suggests that such action is merely *authorized*. But no, his arguments actually *require* that this action be taken.

6. Brother Willis' arguments suggest that there is some type of *hierarchy* among preachers. He argues for the right of some preachers to send out other preachers to perform certain duties in other churches. Some who have read Mike's material have raised a good question: Who decides

which preachers are going to do the sending, and which ones will be sent? Are there *classifications* of preachers? I have heard of the theory that there are three types of preachers: "brotherhood preachers, meeting preachers and local preachers." If I had to guess, I would guess that the well-known and influential "brotherhood" preachers would be the ones doing the sending, and others would have to go! This smacks of the episcopacy of Catholicism, and the pastor-system of denominationalism. It is a false and dangerous concept.

7. Brother Willis' argument works against him. If he is correct that Jerusalem's sending of Barnabas to Antioch, or Antioch's sending of Paul and Barnabas to other churches, authorizes our doing such today, then the church where I preach will send a preacher to the church where Mike is a member in order to refute his errors. If Mike Willis can do it, I can do it! And if the church where Mike is a member can do it, then so can the church where I am a member! He at one point made reference to the Proverb that "the legs of the lame are not equal." We shall here see whether or not brother Willis has "unequal legs." By his own argument I can come unannounced and uninvited to the church where he is a member and preach on subjects about which I believe him to be wrong.

8. By applying the conclusions of this latest article to the conclusions that he has expressed in the material that he has published on non-church religious organizations (see "*We Have a Right*," edited by Mike Willis and Daniel H. King), brother Willis has paved the way for the preachers of human organizations to send other preachers into local churches to correct problems, refute errors and appoint elders. He may claim that he doesn't accept this conclusion, but the conclusion is nonetheless valid. If one is going to defend the Truth Magazine lectureship as being nothing more than the *individual action of several different preachers*, and if individual preachers may send other preachers into local churches to correct problems, refute errors and appoint elders, then brother Willis' arguments not just allow, but actually *require* Truth Magazine to perform such missions. Sadly, when these two ideologies join, and I predict that they will, they will join in full-blown apostasy.

9. Brother Willis creates a false dichotomy. The title of his article is "*Autonomy or Isolation?*" The article suggests an "either/or." If one argues autonomy he cannot practice isolation. Or, if he argues isolation of one's church from outside control, he gives up autonomy. But autonomy is self-rule and isolation is a state that respects self-rule by not interfering with another church's business. The two are not mutually exclusive principles. Commensurate with the degree to which churches are autonomous, there

is a sense in which they are also isolated. That is, each church has its own distinct membership (Acts 9:26); the members of these separate churches are joined to each other in their respective churches under a common oversight (Acts 14:23); and these overseers are not permitted to oversee the works and affairs of other churches (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). The implication is clear: God did not want any mechanism or arrangement to exist that would tie churches to each other. Such arrangements empower men above what God permits, and facilitates in the spreading of error from one local church to another. Brother Willis' arguments from Acts 11:22, 23 and Acts 14:22, 23 defy this principle and must be vehemently opposed.

10. While I agree with brother Willis that mere teaching of the gospel, by its very nature, does not and cannot violate local church autonomy, I strongly disagree with his conclusions as to what this teaching allows. There is a difference between *teaching* and *sending*. There is also a difference in a church *sending* a preacher to another church, and that church *inviting* a preacher. In the noble work of "*sounding out the word of the Lord*," one local church may teach the members of other local churches (1 Thess. 1:8). However, this is not the same thing as one church *sending* a preacher (uninvited) to another church in order to appoint elders in that church or conduct other "missions." Such action would indeed violate local church self-governance. If brother Willis says that he is not excluding the "invitation" or "permission" of a church to which another church might send a preacher, then he has given up his argument on the example of Paul in what he did, for Paul did not need an invitation to do his work as an apostle.

Conclusion

Unity is both "*good and pleasant*" (Ps. 133:1), but we must be careful that we are not constructing a platform of *control* rather than a platform of true unity. Brother Willis may deny desiring any control over others, but he cannot deny such while desiring to do what he understands Paul's example to require, and while advocating a procedure that permits control. The Missionary Society of the 1800's denied controlling the work of evangelism, but it was the society, not the contributing churches, that chose the preachers, chose their salaries, and chose the destinations of their preaching!

Unity is had upon the solid foundation of apostolic teaching (Jn. 17:20, 21), and we rejoice when our brothers *walk in truth* (2 Jn. 4; 3 Jn. 3, 4). We wish to receive our brothers, and we are authorized to "*receive*" those who "*abide in the doctrine of Christ*" (2 Jn. 9-11). We wish there to be "*no divisions*" among our brothers, and we wish to be "*of the same mind*"

and of the same judgment." We wish to "*strive side by side*" with our brothers "*for the faith of the gospel,*" not strive against them (Phil. 1:27). But this can happen only among those who respect the authority of Christ (1 Cor. 1:10), and who "*walk by the same rule*" (Phil. 3:16). Let us therefore teach the Truth to all who welcome it. Let us not construct a mechanism by which those who think that they have the Truth may force their conclusions and agenda upon others.

Tim Haile