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Nathan and the Work of the Local Church

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Debates have long raged concerning the work the Lord has appropriated for local churches. Though many nuances exist, there are two primary views taken of this work: either the local church is bound by the pattern found within the Bible, or the local church is free to do anything not specifically condemned within the Bible. However, a situation occurring many years before the establishment of Christianity provides guidance in coming to an appropriate conclusion.

King David desired to build a temple for the Lord. He made this known to Nathan, stating, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent" (II Samuel 7:2). Upon hearing this, Nathan quickly replied, "Go, do all that is in your heart; for the Lord is with you" (vs. 3). Later that evening, the Lord corrected Nathan's permissive statement to the king. Though pleased with David's attitude, the Lord did not want him to carry out this work. Though He blessed David for the humble and godlike spirit which sought to honor Him, the Lord had not authorized David to construct a house for Him. Why, though, did Nathan so quickly give approval to David? His reasons are important in determining how Christians of the 21st century establish authority.

Three reasons led Nathan to prematurely express approval for the king's request. First, David was a good man and Nathan knew this. In fact, the king was acclaimed by the Lord as "a man after His own heart" (I Samuel 13:14). Second, building the temple was a good idea and one which the Lord approved. After denying David's request to build the temple, the Lord stated,

"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (II Samuel 7:12-13). Third, the temple would positively benefit others; it would stand prominently in Jerusalem, reminding the people of their special relationship with the Lord. A good man wanted to do a good work that would be good for others; surely there was nothing but good associated with this effort.

Nathan, however, did not know the mind of the Lord and chose to speak on his own authority. He failed to understand that God desired the temple to be built by a man of peace. David did not meet this requirement since he had fought many battles and shed much blood: "But God said to me, 'You may not build a house for my name, for you are a man of war and have shed blood'" (I Chronicles 28:3). Solomon, in contrast to his father, was not a soldier king. In fact, the very meaning of his name is "peace." Because of this, he was uniquely qualified to build the Lord's house in the way that the Lord desired. Though not readily apparent to man, the Lord's plan fit perfectly into the grander scheme of salvation, with the temple serving as shadow of the "Prince of Peace" who would one day bring reconciliation through "making peace by His blood on the cross" (Colossians 1:20b). The point: God knows best!

Nearly 75 years ago, debates broke out among brethren over the appropriate scope and work of the local church. Though most professed the desire to restore primitive 1st-century practices, large scale disagreement was witnessed in what the local church could and could not do. One area of disagreement was whether local churches could use the church's treasury to support institutions such as orphanages, widow's homes, and Bible-based colleges. Some might ask why this was even debated; after all, good people (Christians), desired a good work (charitable institutions), which would benefit others (orphans, widows, and students). Occasionally, the debate was ratcheted up with emotional appeal. Young orphans with dirty clothes and faces were brought into local assemblies with the heart wrenching question: "Can you really turn away these children?" Many groups answered with a resounding no, and for the next

seven decades, millions of dollars were pumped into institutions helping in a variety of causes. Throughout this time of conflict, many failed to ask the real question: "What is the plan of God?" Like Nathan, a quick response based on surface appearance was given.

In determining the Lord's plan, two important points must be observed: the very narrow scope of the local church's work, and the very wide scope of the individual Christian's work. For one who seeks to restore 1st-century Christianity, New Testament letters written to local churches are essential points of focus. They provide a picture of groups meeting to worship God, spread the gospel, and on very limited occasions, care for the physical needs of other Christians. However, churches are never commanded to become charitable organizations in providing assistance to those outside of Christ. Such a task would be virtually limitless in its bounds and quickly widen the narrow focus God has given. Conversely, individual Christians are commanded to give liberally and generously to those in need. The writer James states that this is a real test of one's faith: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27a). Christians, therefore, are not to burden local churches with personal responsibility; instead, they are to accept and excel in providing for all who are in need—even for those who hate them (Romans 12:20).

No matter the situation, Christians must rely on the Bible for authority. Emotion can often lead to erroneous conclusions, and decisions reached by human reasoning will not always reveal the mind of God. Nathan was a good man, but a wrong man. May every child of God learn from his mistake and seek to follow God's plan, respecting His ways and His will as supreme in every decision.

Awesome

Awesome is a word that is used today to describe the trick of a dog, the taste of a dish or even the finding of a lost object. In the Scriptures however, this powerful word is used to speak of God or even of His mighty works. In the Hebrew the word that is translated awesome or reverend is *yare* which means to fear, revere or to stand in awe. (Strong's & BDB) Surely we can see how important it is to not water down words that are reserved to speak of God. The taste of a dish or the trick of a dog are light years away from the glory and power of Awesome and Mighty God.

Consider:

He has sent redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant forever: Holy and awesome is His name.
Psalms 111:9

Jacob dreamed a dream of a ladder that reached into heaven and when he woke up he was afraid and said... "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Genesis 28:17

"Come and see the works of God; He is awesome in His doing toward the sons of men." Psalms 66:5

There are many more passages that make this point. Christians must consider their choice of words carefully.