

The Autonomy of a Baptist Church

Baptist churches following the New Testament
have historically insisted on the autonomy of the local church.

0. It can be proved historically that Baptists, in patterning their churches after the New Testament, have demanded congregational rule and the absolute independence of the local church from outside rule. Francis Wayland (1796-1865), Baptist pastor, prominent educator, president of Brown University, states it this way:

0. *"The Baptists have ever believed in the entire and absolute independence of the churches. By this we mean that every church of Christ, that is, every company of believers united together according to the laws of Christ, is wholly independent of every other; that every church is perfectly capable of self-government; and that therefore, no one acknowledges any higher authority, under Christ, than itself; that with the church all ecclesiastical action commences, and with it terminates, and hence, that the ecclesiastical relations proper, of every member are limited by the church to which he belongs" (Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches, Francis Wayland, (1796-1865), Baptist Heritage Press, Watertown, WS 53094, pp 177-178. Later in his book he says: "We, (meaning Baptists), however looked with great disfavor upon any practice which, in the remotest degree, violates the great principle of the independence of the churches. . . . Throughout the New Testament we can discover not a trace of organization beyond the establishment of individual churches. . . . Is it not probable that as he left it, so he intended that it should continue to the end of time?" (Ibid, p. 182).*

0. We can historically establish what constitutes a New Testament church by the writings of the early Baptists. O.S.C. Wallace, writing in 1913 in "What Baptists Believe" says that,

0. "The word "church" designates a company of people called out and joined together in a body by themselves." He continues, "A gospel church is composed of

people living on the earth, and so related as to form a company which can be seen of men" (What Baptist Believe, O.S.C. Wallace, SBC, Nashville, Tennessee, 1913, p139-140). In addressing the issue of self-government of the local church, Wallace further states "A church, if it indeed be a gospel church, seeks from the New Testament to know the laws of its government ordained by its Lord. Whatever is opposed to the letter or spirit of the New Testament, however fully it may represent the wisdom of this world, or whatever promise it may seem to contain of new efficiencies and wider conquest, must be rejected. The church does not need two heads.

0. The word in the New Testament that is translated "church" in our modern English Bibles is the word "ekklesia" and means " an assembly called out to come together for a particular reason." The word in itself does not tell you who is meeting, but only that a group is to assemble. The context of the passage tells you who is meeting. The English word, "church," cannot be translated back into Greek because there is no word in New Testament Greek that is the equivalent of the understanding of the English word. For example, the word "ekklesia," is used in Acts 19:39,41 and demonstrates this word was used to refer to a civil assembly of local townspeople of Ephesus which included idol makers. In most places in the New Testament, it refers to a local assembly of believers in Jesus Christ.

0. These believers met in rented halls and in the homes of people and they had "elders" or bishops which were called of God and given oversight of the congregation (Acts 20:28). They carried out the work of missions, in their area and outwardly to the world. Sometimes these churches were wealthy, but most often they were poor in the world's goods. Some needed outside help, and others sacrificially gave to that need. Most were more like small mission churches today than like large modern congregations with administrative staffs and buildings. There is absolutely no hint that Paul or anyone else looked upon any of them as being anything but independent and autonomous assemblies because of their financial situation , age or spiritual condition. Even a casual reading of the Epistles

shows this was the spirit behind Paul's instructions to them.

0. The autonomy of a local church is at the very heart and soul of what constitutes a true Baptist church. A church must first be a true New Testament church following, without compromise, the example and teachings of the New Testament. This was a core belief of those that founded the first Baptist churches. They sought, in practice, to follow the New Testament example, and called themselves Baptists to identify themselves as such. A church that does not follow these principles cannot legitimately call itself a Baptist church.

0. Even the secular Encyclopedia Encarta⁹⁷ recognizes this historic position of Baptists and has this to say in listing the Distinctive Beliefs of Baptist churches. *"Baptists believe in the autonomy of the local church, which is the key unit of Baptist polity. The local church ordains and call its on clergy and theoretically may dismiss its own clergy. No power - ecclesiastical or secular - may dictate to a local Baptist congregation. . . . Baptists argue that the self government of the local church preserves the spirit of democracy, encourages the participation of lay persons in the church and permits a wide range of theological expression."*

0. Writing on the status of councils among Baptist churches in 1906, William Henry Allison, in his book *Baptist Councils in America* states: "In the first place, the council has ever been regarded as the servant, not the master of churches. As we have traced its introduction into Baptist polity, we have seen that it was not imposed upon church from without, but was called into service by themselves to perform functions which the church found necessary for their own best welfare." Allison further states: "In no sense are they (meaning the councils) essential to the existence of a true church or ministry. The church antedates the council which was called into being by them. The local church is independent and possesses through its union with Christ, without reference to other bodies of Christians, a self-sufficiency to live its own ecclesiastical life, choose it own ministry, administer the ordinances and exercise discipline of the Baptist polity" (Allison, p42). Allison in his third point states: "in its relation to the local church, the council is advisory only. The council

exists, we are told in church manuals, solely for the purpose of giving advice, with no authority to enforce its own decisions (note that this was written in 1906)." The Warren Association in 1792 shows the opinion of Baptists in its constituency in this item from its minutes: "A query whether the judgment or result of an ecclesiastical council, is more than advisory? Answered unanimously in the negative."

0. Edward T. Hiscox, a respected Baptist pastor and historian known for his keen insights into church polity stated: "As has been said, each particular and individual Church is actually and absolutely independent in the exercise of all its churchly rights, privileges, and prerogatives; independence of all other churches, individuals, and bodies of men whatever, and is under law to Christ alone. The will and law of the great Lawgiver are to be found in the New Testament, which is the only authoritative statute book for His people" (Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches, Edward T. Hiscox, Kregel Publications, p145). He further states: "A Church is not a legislative body, but administrative only. . . . It cannot make laws, but it's the interpreter of the laws of Christ; the interpreter for itself, not for others. Nor can others interpret laws for it. . . . There is no human tribunal to which they can be brought for trial and punishment, except that of public opinion" (Ibid, p 146). He continues, "There is no such thing as interdependence in the sense of a limitation of the self-governing right and authority of a Church. One Church may be poor and need help from one that is rich; or it may be in perplexity and need advice from one supposed to be more experienced --as the Church at Antioch sought counsel of the older and more experienced Church at Jerusalem, or as the churches in Macedonia and Achaia contributed to the poor saints in Judea. But these facts do not touch the question of polity or government; their relations to each other in these respects remain the same. Fellowship and fraternal accord may be strengthened; the helpfulness of the one and the gratitude of the other may be increased, but the one is none the more independent, nor the other any less so, because of these friendly interchanges" (Ibid p49). In addressing the supposed need of outside control, Hiscox states: "The defects lie not in the plan (meaning God's plan for the church) but in those who administer the government" (Ibid, p151).

0. The independence of the local Baptist church was dear to the hearts of the early Baptists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thomas Hooker (1586-1647) a prominent Puritan and one of the founders of the Colony of Connecticut, said, "... The truth is a particular congregation is the highest tribunal." The respected Baptist scholar of this period, Isaac Backus, concluded, "... The whole power of governing and disciplining their members is in each particular church." Backus granted that, when necessary, local churches should seek the advice of sister churches. Backus was reluctant to join the Warren Association in 1770, however, he did so when their plan of organization was rewritten to reassure concerned churches about the matter of independence. The document was drawn up by James Manning, the first president of Rhode Island College, later to become Brown University, and read in part, "That such an association is consistent with the independence and power of particular churches, because it pretends no other than an advisory council, utterly disclaiming superiority, jurisdiction, coercive right and infallibility" (Baptist Concepts of the Church, Winthrop Still Hudson, Judson Press, Chicago, 1959, p124.) Isaac Backus, and the prominent Baptist pastor John Leland (a contemporary of Backus), stated their position: "Neither Backus nor Leland was prepared to support any system which seemed in any way to threaten those liberties" (Ibid, p128).

0. Melvin L Hodges understood the need for self-government in planting and establishing local churches. He concluded that, "To fail to place the responsibility of self-government on the converts is to choke their initiative and dwarf their spiritual growth" (The Indigenous Church, Melvin L. Hodges, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield Missouri, p 22). He makes the point that, "It is quite evident that there were hundreds of organized local assemblies in the Early Church before the apostles and elders came together in Jerusalem for the first ?General Council?. In certain areas it would appear that we have started at the wrong level. We have set up an organization at the top level, among missionaries, with perhaps a small number of the most capable workers included, and have hoped that in time organized self-government would filter down to the local church. In doing this we have started at

the wrong place. In order to have any real foundation in self-government, we must begin with the local church" (Ibid. pp23-24). He goes on to conclude that in church planting, we cast the mold for the future of these churches and that is why it is of utmost importance that we make a good beginning. He states that "the foundation of self-government should be laid with the first church."

0. The local New Testament church is an autonomous body. This "autonomy" means that the local church governs itself. The Biblical example of a New Testament church is one that is not ruled by any board, hierarchical system or another church. The local church has been defined as: *"A body of believers immersed upon credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ, sovereign in polity, and banded together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances and the world wide proclamation of the Gospel."*

In conclusion the Scriptures give no higher authority than the local congregation of born again, baptized believers. Baptists believe that the local church is to be governed by the Word of God, and the local church does not need, nor does the Scripture teach that the local body rests under the authority of any earthy outside group. It is a group unto itself, under the authority of God, and solely responsible unto Him for its conduct, direction and affairs. Jesus, in Rev. 2:6, 15, said that he "hated" the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which was a group of heretics in the early church who promoted doctrinal errors, and a clerical hierarchy in the church.

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