

Baptists Believe in Church Autonomy



What does it mean to be an autonomous church? The word “autonomous” comes from two Greek words that mean “self” and “law.” Autonomous means self-governing or self-directing. Thus, an autonomous church governs itself without any outside human direction or control. Of course, it is not absolutely autonomous, because a church should always recognize the control and authority of Jesus as Lord.

The Autonomy of Baptist Churches

Every Baptist church is autonomous. Being an autonomous church is a large part of what it means to be a Baptist church. Baptists use the term “church” to refer to a local congregation of baptized believers and not to the Baptist denomination as a whole. Therefore, to use the term “The Baptist Church” is incorrect when referring to the Baptist denomination in general. Each local congregation is autonomous, so there is really no such thing as The Baptist Church.

Autonomy means that each Baptist church, among other things, selects its pastoral leadership, determines its worship form, decides financial matters and directs other church-related affairs without outside control or supervision. Baptist denominational organizations such as associations of churches and state and national conventions have no authority over a Baptist church. **For any one of these organizations to attempt to exercise control over an individual church is to violate a basic Baptist conviction about polity.**

Being autonomous, **a Baptist church recognizes no governmental control over faith and religious practice.** Although Baptist churches obey the laws of governments related to certain matters, they refuse to recognize the authority of governments in matters of doctrine, polity and ministry (Matthew 22:21). Baptists have consistently rejected the efforts of any secular government entity to dictate to a church what to believe, how to worship or who should or should not be members. Such refusal to bow to the demands of governments has cost Baptists dearly.

Baptists also have **rejected the practice of some denominations for denominational authorities to hand down to local congregations** what to believe and how to worship. Baptists have insisted that there is no human authority over a Baptist church. Only Jesus is Lord of a church.

Threats to Baptist church autonomy in the United States seem to come more from within the Baptist denomination than from the government or other religious groups. In some cases, Baptist associations and conventions are viewed by Baptists as having some sort of authority over churches.

This may be due to misunderstanding of the proper relationship of these entities to churches. Associations and conventions are a vital part of Baptist denominational life and contribute greatly to the efforts of Baptists to make and mature disciples for Jesus Christ and to minister to persons in his name. However, they have no authority over local churches. Each church can choose to relate to these other Baptist entities or not relate, depending on the will of the congregation.

The insistence on autonomy by Baptists has resulted in misunderstanding, criticism and even persecution. Governments have punished Baptists as traitors, and some denominations have condemned Baptists as heretics. Many other forms of church governance exist, and congregational autonomy is practiced by a relatively small minority of Christian denominations. **Why then have Baptists insisted on the autonomy of churches?**

The Biblical Basis for Church Autonomy

Church autonomy is not peripheral to Baptist beliefs. It rests on basic Baptist convictions. No other form of governance is in keeping with the recipe of Baptist beliefs and practices.

The Bible is the authority for faith and practice for Baptists, and **Baptists believe that the Bible supports church autonomy.** In New Testament times, each

congregation of Christians was autonomous. Each was a separate entity under the lordship of Christ. They related to each other in fellowship, but no human individual or group exercised authority over the congregations.

In the New Testament, the second and third chapters of the Revelation indicate that each of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which the Revelation was directed existed as a unique, separate entity and was under no authority except that of Jesus Christ. The risen and glorified Christ gave direction to the churches.

The churches in New Testament times selected from their own membership persons to care for the physical need of members (Acts 6:3-6), determined what persons would be commissioned for specific ministries (Acts 13:1-3) and disciplined their own members (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Each of these actions was taken under the lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit without any external direction or control. Spiritual

leaders, such as the Apostle Paul, relied on persuasion and example rather than dictatorial demands when writing to the New Testament churches.

Furthermore, Christians in New Testament times resisted the efforts of governmental and religious authorities to dictate religious belief and practice (Acts 4:18-20; 5:29). The early Christians insisted on autonomy from both secular and religious authorities.

Other Biblical Baptist Convictions and Church Autonomy

Church autonomy rests on other biblically based convictions of Baptists. For example, the lordship of Christ, a belief precious to Baptists, relates to autonomy. Christ is Lord of each person and of each church. Jesus, not any individual or group, is to be in control. His lordship for a church is exercised through the members of the church, persons who have trusted and followed him as Lord (Ephesians 4:1-16).

Born-again persons voluntarily gather in groups and form churches. The Bible indicates that only those who have been born-again are to be members of churches (Acts 2:47). These persons have been saved only by faith in God’s grace gift of salvation in Christ, and thus all are spiritually on the same plane (Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:8-9). As such, **no individual or group inside or outside of a church is to “lord it over” another individual or church (1 Peter 5:3).**

God has endowed each person with the freedom to know and to follow God’s will. Furthermore, each person who believes in Jesus as Savior and Lord becomes a believer priest (1 Peter 2:9) with direct access to God. No intermediary, such as a human priest, is needed (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:21). Each believer priest has a responsibility to exercise this priesthood responsibly. Part of that responsibility is to relate to one another in a loving church fellowship and to participate in the governance of that church fellowship, seeking the Lord’s will through the study of the Scripture, prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Just as all the members of a congregation are to have an equal voice in their own church’s governance, so is each congregation spiritually equal to others. No church, or organization of churches, is superior to another church. None has authority over another church. In other words, each church is to be autonomous.

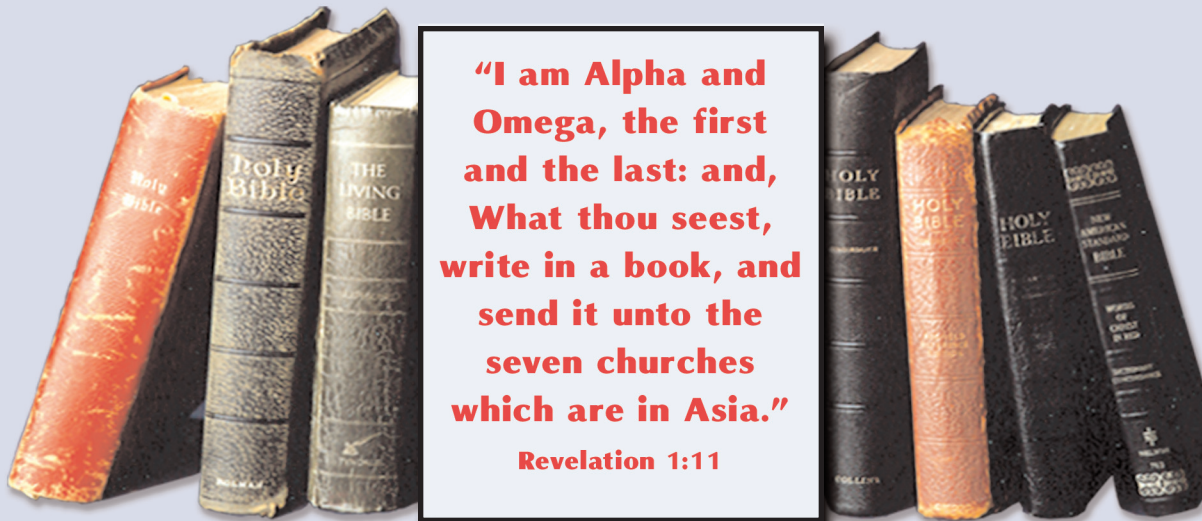
Congregational church governance and the autonomy of churches go

hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other. If individuals or groups outside of the congregation exercise control over it, then there is no autonomy of the church, and there is no congregational governance.

Conclusion

Although challenges are associated with church autonomy, it **is a basic biblical concept that is a vital part of Baptist identity and is worth preserving and strengthening.** The next article in this series will address these issues.

For further information on Baptist autonomy, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.



“I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia.”

Revelation 1:11

“Each Church is forever free and independent, of any and every ecclesiastical power formed by men on earth, each being the free house-hold of Christ.”

*Bill of Inalienable Rights, Art. 1
of the Union Baptist Association, October 8, 1840*