

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A BAPTIST? We affirm the Autonomy of the Assembly (the Local Church)

1. MEANING:

Meaning of The Word “Autonomy”:

- autos (αυτος) – “self”
- nomos (νομος) – “law” or “rule”
- Thus, “self-governing” or “self-ruling”

Meaning of the Principle – We Believe that the Bible Teaches that a Local Assembly is Self-Governing:

- An autonomous church is a local assembly that is governed by itself, rather than being governed by any human organization outside the local body (denomination, convention, synod, presbytery, bishop, parish, pope, etc.).
- An autonomous church can utilize any of the forms of government (they may or may not best reflect the pattern of Scripture, but would still be self-governing). Autonomy points to internal rule, but does not define what form the rule might take.
- Autonomy, rightly appropriated, is not a disregard for the Word, but assumes that the local assembly is seeking to obey the Word to the best of its ability and understanding. The Word of God, not the local assembly, remains the authority.

2. FORMS OF LOCAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT:

a. Episcopalian (Greek: episkopos)

- “overseer” – usually understood as one man; possibly a hierarchy; “pastor-rule”
- Misapplications:
 - A dictatorship
 - Pastor worship
 - No accountability (“touch not God’s anointed”)

b. Presbyterian (Greek: presbuteros)

- “elder” – usually a group of men
- “elder board”; possibly a deacon board
- Misapplications:
 - Separating the position “elder” from that of “overseer” and “pastor” (used interchangeably)
 - Ruling elders vs. teaching elders (some know the Word, some don’t)
 - Deacon “boards” that run as a board of directors
 - Ruling by “business” sense instead of Biblical truth

c. Congregational (Greek: possibly ekklesia)

- Usually majority rule, or “democratic rule” or “democracy” – the majority decides.
- This is seldom purely practiced (it usually functions as some form of representative government)
- Some see this as the “Baptist” form of church government
 - Many Baptists are in some way congregationally ruled, but many are not
 - Some in the GARBC and IARBC (for example) have elder boards, but are still Baptist
 - Baptist churches that are primarily run by deacon boards are essentially functioning in a Presbyterian form of government regardless of how they might define themselves as Congregational.
 - Some Baptist churches are run by a strong, central leader, and are more Episcopalian than congregational (e.g. churches in the Southern Baptist Convention or the Baptist Bible Fellowship more commonly follow this pattern of government)
 - Others, including Congregationalists, are congregationally ruled, though in truth they usually function in some combination with the other two forms: Boards or leaders present recommendations for items to vote on, etc.
- It is often argued that the congregational form of government is based upon the Biblical teachings of individual soul liberty (the right to believe and live as you understand the Scriptures, without coercion) and the priesthood of the believer (the right to directly approach God without a human mediator or go-between). No form of church government violates these truths, and all forms require some form of submission to the decisions made by the governing body, whatever that may be (individual, board, or congregation).
- Misapplications:
 - The majority “determines” what truth is (majority rule, not God-ordained absolutes & commands)
 - The majority rejects Biblically-defined pastoral leadership (Heb 13:7,17) of proper influence and authority
 - Power-plays, emotional appeals and politics in trying to win votes (“I’m of Apollos, of Peter, of Christ”)
 - The empowering of the sinful, the immature, the spiritually weak, and the ignorant, giving them equal say (and often more) than mature, spiritual believers and leaders

WHICH FORM OF GOVERNMENT IS RIGHT?

Key Principles of Local Church Government:

1. Congregational *government* in Scripture is not clearly seen, and definitely not clearly defined. The selection of deacons in Acts 6 is a very limited focus, and primarily focuses around the leadership of the twelve apostles (they diagnosed the problem, established the priorities, prescribed a solution, determined how many deacons there would be, what their duties were to be, what their qualifications would be, how they would be selected, and then ultimately appointed the deacons!). It is anything but proof of any type of true congregational form of government, and does not even clearly define how the deacons were selected by the congregation. (Ballot? Consensus?)
2. Congregational *involvement* is clearly seen in the enforcement of church discipline, and congregational *input* is seen in some decisions, though it is unclear exactly how it took place (“it pleased the whole congregation”).
3. Submission to leadership would assume that persuasion or agreement has *not* taken place (essential to congregational rule). Submitting assumes that you would do it a different way if you were leading. Agreement with a pastor is not always essential when following a pastor. – Heb 13:17 – Voting assumes that one has been persuaded; Heb 13:17 indicates that believers should yield when they are not persuaded.
4. Pastors are appointed by God (seemingly through other pastors). Pastors affirm other pastors (know the Word and can evaluate one’s knowledge, as opposed to looks, eloquence, charisma, baritone voice, etc.) – Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 3:1-7
5. The picture and function of “shepherd” (pastor) would indicate a level of responsibility and authority over the flock, as would be understood in a true shepherd/sheep situation (the sheep don’t vote whether to accept the wolf or not).
6. A pastor, or shepherd, cannot protect the flock without some level of control over who teaches, etc. (1 Tim 1:3-9)
7. The term “overseer” would have no real bearing apart from influence and ability to make changes. The pastor, though human and fallible, is truly the supervisor.
8. The verb form of pastor is most often translated “rule”. It is a stronger word than we usually care to consider.
9. Pastors are open to correction and accountability by anyone, given they follow the right steps – 1 Tim 5:19-20
10. Since the terms “pastor”, “elder”, and “overseer” are interchangeable, the two Bible-identified “forms” of government are in some way synonymous, not different. Episcopalian and Presbyterian forms of government are thus, Biblically-speaking, identical (even though they are not defined that way outside of the Bible).
11. Though a church *may* have only one pastor, it seems that no church should remain that way:
 - *2 Tim 2:2 teaches that there should be an ongoing process of training faithful leaders.*
 - *Men have limits. Differences in abilities and spiritual gifts (or negatively, what abilities any one man does not possess) encourage the development of additional leaders. Having multiple leaders is ideal, as more leaders allows for greater breadth and depth of ministry. One man can only do so much (limits of time and ability), and can do only so much well.*
 - *Team ministry is a pattern seen time after time in the NT.*
 - *God seems to send out leaders from a mature church which had multiple functioning leaders (Acts 13), as opposed to young or unseasoned workers. Leaders develop other leaders with the idea of some eventually being sent out for evangelism or edification.*
 - *Team ministry is much more stable and strong (“a three-stranded cord is not easily broken”), and provides a form of built-in accountability (which can be further enhanced)*
 - *Having multiple pastors does not mean there is not a primary leader. Usually one leads. However, all men are fallible, and all should mutually rely on the counsel of the other pastors, as well as input from spiritual and spiritually knowledgeable believers in the congregation.*
12. Biblical pastoral leadership is not dictatorship, and requires the gentle, patient leading of the flock to follow God.
13. The Scriptures do not describe or picture deacons as leaders, but servants (not deciders but doers).
14. One cannot lead without a solid understanding of Scripture (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:5-9)
15. The governing authority, ultimately, is not a man or group of men, but the Word of God.
16. Leaders are to lead in obedience to the Word, for the eternal benefit of the sheep, with the input of others.

Scripture-Ruled, Pastor-Led, Team-Strengthened Government with Congregational Accountability and Input