

Throughout its history the true church has had to struggle to maintain its autonomy and independence. History records the battle of a number of groups of believers to maintain Biblical teaching and practice. Today many local churches are controlled in some measure by an organization or headquarters. Baptists believe this is not Biblical. Baptists are distinctive in holding to the autonomy of the local church.

## 1. Our Baptist Heritage: Our Spiritual Forerunners

- a. Just as the nation of Israel was tempted to combine the worship of the true God with the worship of false gods, so the early church was tempted to fall prey to combining the worship of Christ with the practices of paganism.
  - i. The New Testament Epistles warn against false teachers who were creeping in even in the church's infancy. This only increased when Constantine "converted" to Christianity while continuing to practice the worship of pagan deities.
  - ii. When the Roman Catholic church became the state church under the rule of Theodosius I in 379, there still were some small and generally unrelated groups of believers which kept alive the light of Biblical Christianity. In the first few centuries especially, there were errors in the teaching of these groups, but they were trying to maintain Biblical Christianity in autonomous local churches.
- b. We don't claim that these groups were Baptists as we are today, but they were people who believed and practiced vital parts of the truth distinct from Catholicism. These groups became greater in impact and maintained more of the truth as time went on.
  - i. The **Montanists** (2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> centuries), though still a part of the Roman Catholic church, believed that the true church consisted only of regenerated people and that infants should not be baptized.
  - ii. The **Novatians** (3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the **Donatists** (4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> centuries) believed in the spiritual nature of the church and the necessity of regeneration for membership.
  - iii. **Patrick** (A.D. 384—461), a Celtic missionary from Scotland to Ireland, believed that the Scriptures were the supreme authority, that salvation came by grace alone and that only believers should be baptized.
  - iv. The **Paulicians**, **Cathari**, **Albigenses** and **Bogomils** (4<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) were four groups in Bulgaria who attempted to maintain true Christianity.
- c. Some of the doctrines and practices of these groups and individuals had limited resemblance to the beliefs of Baptists today. However, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, we begin to find people whose beliefs closely resemble ours. This indicates that people were breaking further and further from the Roman Catholic church and its doctrines.
  - i. **Arnold of Brescia** (A.D. 1100—1155) tried to restore the purity of the church in Brescia, Italy. He believed in the necessity of a pure church composed only of true believers.
  - ii. The **Petrobrusians** (12<sup>th</sup> century), founded by Peter of Bruys, appealed to the Scripture as the final authority, denied that children can be saved by baptism, denied transubstantiation, taught that the church should be composed only of true believers and that faith should precede baptism.
  - iii. The **Waldenses** (12<sup>th</sup> century), founded by **Peter of Waldo**, believed that the Bible is the final authority, that salvation is by grace alone, that infants should not be baptized and that baptism comes after belief. They, too, denied transubstantiation and purgatory.
  - iv. **John Wycliffe** (1320—1384) of Oxford, England, taught that the Scriptures were supreme, that pastors and deacons were the only church officers, and that the clergy should not interfere with civil government. He, too, denied transubstantiation.
  - v. **John Huss** (1364—1415) of Bohemia taught that salvation was by grace alone, that the Bible and not the pope was the supreme authority, and that the church should not persecute people.
  - vi. **Savonarola** (1452—1498) labored in Florence, Italy, and taught the necessity for purity in the church.

## 2. Church Autonomy in the Scriptures

- a. New Testament churches elected their own leadership from among their membership (Acts 6:3-6).
  - i. **"Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.** But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: **and they chose** Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: **Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them."** (Acts 6:3-6)
  - ii. God uses the membership of local churches to elect those who should lead their local assembly.
- b. New Testament churches commissioned missionaries (Acts 13:1-3).
  - i. **"Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."** (Acts 13:1-3)
  - ii. Local churches don't call people into ministry, but they do play a part in recognizing the hand of God upon the lives of those He is calling into various aspects of ministry.

- c. New Testament churches disciplined their own membership (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).
  - i. Matthew 18:15-17 “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, **tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.**”
  - ii. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 “It is reported commonly that there is **fornication among you**, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, **that one should have his father's wife**. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. **I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators:** Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. **Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.**”
  - iii. At times, local churches must vote to remove members for repentant sin. The purpose of this last resort measure is to protect the health of the church and encourage the errant member to repent. Church discipline removes someone from the membership of the church, but never from the family of God.
- d. New Testament churches were distinct and separate local churches that were under no authority except that of Jesus Christ (Revelation 2-3).
  - i. 2:1 “Unto the angel of the **church of Ephesus** write;”
  - ii. 2:8 “And unto the angel of the **church in Smyrna** write;”
  - iii. 2:12 “And to the angel of the **church in Pergamos** write;”
  - iv. 2:18 “And unto the angel of the **church in Thyatira** write;”
  - v. 3:1 “And unto the angel of the **church in Sardis** write;”
  - vi. 3:7 “And to the angel of the **church in Philadelphia** write;”
  - vii. 3:14 “And unto the angel of the **church of the Laodiceans** write;”
- e. New Testament churches resisted the efforts of governmental and powerful religious authorities to dictate their religious beliefs and practices (Acts 4:18-20; 5:29).
  - i. Acts 4:18-20 “And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”
  - ii. Acts 5:27-29 “And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. **Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.**”

#### Conclusion:

1. Since local churches are to be autonomously governed, members have great responsibility to know and practice the Scriptures to effectively govern their local assembly.
2. Are you growing in your doctrinal discernment well enough to evaluate teaching, hold leaders accountable to biblical truth, and guard against drift or false teaching?
3. How do you handle conflict in your home, close relationships and church family? Do you pursue reconciliation? Do you confront sin lovingly when necessary? Do you affirm or participate in discipline sessions?
4. Are you preparing yourself to carefully evaluate and call leaders when necessary? Do you support and pray for them? Have you learned how to appeal to leadership in a Christ-like manner when necessary?
5. Do you prioritize unity over personal preference? Do you resolve conflict Biblically? Are you learning to submit to the needs of those around you?
6. Do you shoulder the responsibility for evangelism and discipleship in your local church?