

# BAPTIST AUTONOMY: Difficulties and Benefits

A kaleidoscope of issues, misconceptions, threats, and challenges surround the practice of Baptist autonomy. Yet Baptists remain firmly committed to church autonomy and believe that the benefits far outweigh any difficulties associated with it.

## The Meaning of Autonomy of Baptist Churches

**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.

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. Baptists have insisted that there is no human authority over a Baptist church. Only Jesus is Lord of a church.

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; Acts 5:29).

**Church autonomy is not peripheral to Baptist beliefs. It rests on basic Baptist convictions.** Believing in religious freedom, Baptists recognize the right of other denominations to hold a different polity. However, no other form of governance is in keeping with the recipe of Baptist beliefs and practices.

**“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*



## The Biblical Basis for Church Autonomy

The Bible is the authority for Baptist faith and practice and **Baptists believe that the Bible supports church autonomy.** In New Testament times, each congregation of Christians was a separate entity under the Lordship of Christ, relating to each other in fellowship; no human individual or group outside the church exercised authority over the congregations. For example, each of the seven churches to which the Revelation was directed existed as a separate entity under no authority except that of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1-3).

The churches in New Testament times selected from their own membership persons to care for the physical needs 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.

The Bible indicates that only those who have been born-again are to be members of churches (Acts 2:47). Born-again persons voluntarily gather in fellowships and form churches. These persons have all been saved in the same way—only by faith in God’s grace gift of salvation in Christ (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).**

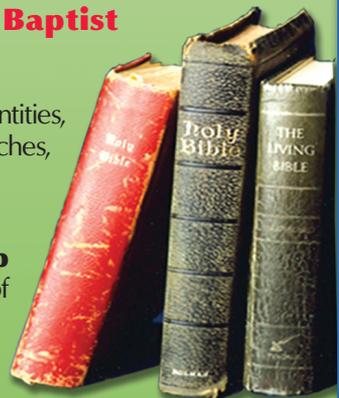
Just as all the members of a congregation are to have an equal voice in their own church’s governance, so is each congregation spiritually equal to others. No church, or organization of churches, is superior to another church. None has authority over another church. In other words, each church is to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

### Some Misconceptions about Baptist Autonomy

The Baptist denomination is made up of various entities, including local congregations, associations of churches, state and national conventions, and various other groups. **Each of these is autonomous.**

**However, this autonomous relationship is sometimes misunderstood.** Some talk of “levels” in Baptist life, such as the local church level, the associational level, the state convention level, and the national convention level.



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This is not Baptist polity. Actions taken by a nationwide Baptist convention, for example, have no authority over Baptist state bodies, associations, or churches.

Similarly, a church has no authority over an association or convention. Furthermore, associations and conventions, being autonomous, have the right to determine who will be included in their fellowship and to decide which other Baptist organizations they will relate to and which they will not.

**However, autonomy does not mean isolation of churches from one another or other parts of the denomination.** Churches ought to recognize that they are part of the larger body of Christ and the worldwide family of Baptist Christians. Fellowship and cooperation are not the enemies of autonomy but rather should be its companions.

## Some Possible Threats to Baptist Autonomy

**Threats to Baptist autonomy exist today. They come both from outside local congregations and from within.**

**Threats from outside a church** come when some organization attempts to dictate to a church what to believe and/or how to conduct its ministry. Threats to Baptist church autonomy in the United States come more from within the Baptist denomination than from the government or other religious groups. Even when the basic concept of Baptist autonomy is understood, the application of autonomy in the complexity of Baptist organized life is not always clear.

The temptation exists to compromise autonomy in favor of uniformity and control. An example sometimes cited is an effort by Baptist associations, state conventions, or national conventions to pressure churches to accept certain doctrinal statements by threatening to withdraw fellowship and/or financial support if they do not.

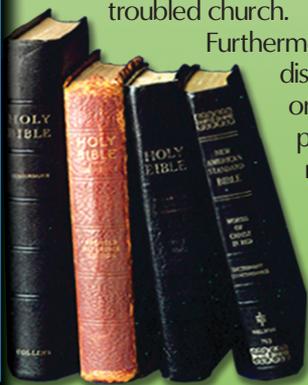
**A threat to autonomy from within a church** surfaces when the members do not exercise biblical principles and give in to pressures from outside organizations. Church members ought to overcome any apathy, ignorance, or fear that would cause them to abandon the cherished biblical concept of autonomy.

## Some Difficulties Related to Baptist Autonomy

**Autonomy is not without its difficulties.** For example, the denomination as a whole has no authority to either assist or reprimand a troubled church.

Furthermore, the denomination has no authority either to discipline or protect persons employed by churches or other denominational entities since they are employed by autonomous Baptist organizations and not by the denomination.

Another difficulty relates to carrying out the biblical mandate for missions, Christian education, and benevolence. Carried to an extreme, autonomy leads to isolationism that hinders a church from accomplishing all that it could do regarding these.



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Also, when autonomy is interpreted to mean that individuals or churches are free to do as they please, the results are negative. As Herschel Hobbs commented, "Both should do as Christ pleases or wills."

**Baptists have sought to deal with these difficulties related to autonomy in various ways, such as through voluntary cooperation of Baptist churches, associations of churches, and other entities.**

## The Benefits of Baptist Autonomy

If difficulties exist with autonomy, why preserve it? A basic reason is that autonomy is based on biblical truth. If for no other reason than this, Baptists ought to hold steadfastly to the autonomy of churches.

Other reasons also exist. For example, **autonomy**...

- **assists** Baptists in living in accord with other basic concepts such as congregational governance.
- **allows** each individual congregation to determine how best to reach and minister to the community in which it exists.
- **reinforces** the fact that in a Baptist church each member is responsible for the church. Such a sense of responsibility can lead members to have a strong identity with the church and to do their part in strengthening the health of the church and carrying out its ministries.
- **provides** a defense in liability lawsuits. The denomination is not liable for the actions of a local congregation, and the congregation is not liable for actions of any other church or entity of the Baptist denomination.

## Conclusion

**Church autonomy is a basic biblical concept and a vital part of Baptist identity.** Every effort should be made to preserve and strengthen it. Misconceptions ought to be clarified by carefully teaching its meaning and the bases for it. Threats should be resisted and difficulties dealt with creatively.

*For further information, see [www.baptistdistinctives.org](http://www.baptistdistinctives.org)*

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the Baptist Standard in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series include (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only By Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Church Organization and Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.