

Baptist Distinctives Part 4 – Local Church Autonomy

Each church mentioned in the New Testament is presented as an autonomous group (see Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2). Following the New Testament model, Baptists have no hierarchy of command to make decisions for all churches. Each local church voluntarily cooperates with other Baptist congregations. Baptist churches of like doctrine and practice have chosen to band together and form a cooperative convention for the purpose of assisting each other in their work and to partner for missions, evangelism, and church development.

Here is the description of the local church defined by the *Baptist Faith and Message, 2000* adopted by cooperating churches of the Southern Baptist Convention June 14, 2000.

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His Laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture (1 Tim 3:1-15).

The New Testament also speaks of the church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27) which includes all the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people and nation (Rev 5:9-10).

God's eternal redemptive purpose is to be realized through the church (Eph 3:1-13), which should be the center of a believer's labor and loyalty. Believers should work to achieve the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) in their own local fellowship.

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