**Autonomy of the Local Church – Part Two**

**GOVERNMENT OF THE BIBLICAL NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Two weeks ago, we learned that the biblical definition of a New Testament Baptist Church is an assembly of baptized believers, organized to carry out the Lord’s work. We draw from this definition the following key points: (1) Assembly, hence local and visible, (2) Baptized believers, hence specifically constituted, (3) Organized, according to the New Testament pattern, (3) the Lord’s work, the Great Commission. Today we will look at the definition of autonomy, the different types of church governments, and learn how the church is a theocracy, not a democracy.

1. **DEFINITION OF AUTONOMY**
   1. **Autonomy is the right of self-government.** 
      1. One of the most immediate lines of separation between the true churches and the Roman Catholic Church was over the issue of autonomy.
2. In 313 AD, Constantine made a call for the coming together of the alliance of the “Christian churches” under the protection of Rome.
3. Many churches that had already strayed from God’s Word came together and formed a hierarchy. This heresy dethroned the Lord as the head of the church and placed a man, or a group of men, as the church’s head.
4. Effects of this alliance were denominational authority over other churches, church and state bond and persecution of any churches outside of the alliance, and the alliance became more important than the church itself.
   * 1. Bible-believing Baptists have always adhered to the principle that no group, alliance, convention, or otherwise has any authority over the church. Bible-believing Baptists have always held that Christ is the Head of the church, that He appoints the leadership of the church, and that He guides and governs the church.
   1. **Application of autonomy:**
      1. No church has another church over it. A church does not answer to anyone but Jesus Christ. Nor do we insist that any other church answer to us. This is seen in *Acts 15*, when the church at Jerusalem, in answering a doctrinal question, had no authority over the other churches, but gave advice.
      2. No church has a denominational hierarchy over it. Churches are not under the hand of popes, bishops, etc.
      3. Churches can and should cooperate in the work of the Lord. When you look through the New Testament, you will find cooperation in the churches.
         1. They worked together in Paul’s ministry to support him as a missionary.
         2. They worked together and shared with other churches those inspired letters that they had received.
         3. They worked together to send an offering to meet the needs of the poor saints in Jerusalem.
5. We must be careful not to confuse independence with isolationism.
6. We are to have self-governing churches, but there is a Biblical relationship that churches of like faith should have.
7. Areas where Baptists work together best include training of men and women for ministry supporting missionaries, summer camp ministries, and starting churches.
8. **TYPES OF CHURCH GOVERNMENTS**
   1. **Papal – Catholicism – autocratic** 
      1. The pope is an absolute authority over the Catholic Church.
      2. He delegates that authority to the local congregations through a hierarchal system of cardinals, bishops, and priests.
   2. **Episcopalian – authority resides in bishops and other offices of clergy**
   3. **Presbyterian – authority resides in sessions, presbytery, synods, and assemblies rather than the church**
   4. **Congregational – authority resides in the church** 
      1. “The very principles of church government in the New Testament are such that every form of church government, except congregation, is in hopeless antagonism.” – J.M. Pendleton.
      2. “Congregationalism antagonizes with Episcopacy and Presbyterianism, and distinctly recognizes these truths:
         1. That the governmental power is in the hands of the people. It resides with the people in contradistinction from bishops or elders – that is to say, bishops or elders can do nothing, strictly and properly ecclesiastic, without the occurrence of the people.
         2. The right of a majority of the members of a church to rule, in accordance with the law of Christ. The will of the majority having been expressed, it becomes the minority to submit.
         3. That the power of a church cannot be transferred or alienated, and that church action is final. The power of a church cannot be delegated. There may be messengers of a church, but there cannot be delegates in the ordinary sense of the term. It would be well for the churches in their letters to associations and councils, to say messengers, not delegates. No church can empower any man, or body of men, to do anything which will impair its independency.” – J.M. Pendleton, Church Manual, pp. 101-102, and Christian Doctrines, pp. 337-338.
      3. That the polity of the New Testament churches was congregational is proven from a number of things.
         1. From Jesus’ own words. *Matthew 20:26-27; 23:8* This leaves no room for any believer to practice lordship over another brother.
         2. From teaching of the apostles. *II Corinthians 1:24*
         3. From the responsibilities committed to the churches. All of these verses are addressed to the church, not a bishop or church council.
9. The responsibilities to administer the ordinances, to keep and safeguard them, implies congregational action. *I Corinthians 11:2*
10. The responsibility of each church to elect its own officers and deacons. *Acts 1:15,21-23, 26; 6:3-5*
11. The responsibility of each church to discipline its unruly or disorderly members. *I Corinthians 5:1-13; Romans 16:17; II Thessalonians 3:6*
12. The church at Antioch sent its missionaries. *Acts 13:1-3*
13. **THE CHURCH IS NOT A DEMOCRACY, BUT A THEOCRACY**
    1. **The church is not legislative, but administrative.**
14. God did not give authority to any person or the church collectively to legislate or decide.
15. He gave us the responsibility to administrate (carry out) His Commission.
    1. **Jesus is the only head of each and every church**.
16. Jesus is the head, not the pastor.
17. The church can only have one head.

**CONCLUSION:**

The purpose of this lesson is to make it more clear in your mind why we do what we do, and why we believe what we believe. The doctrine of the autonomy of the local church is very important and must be passed down to the next generation.