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Why We Are An Independent Church

The government of a New Testament Church is autonomous. This word (Grk. autos — self, nomos — law) means “self governing.”

Implicit in this word is independency (i.e., no other authority) and sovereignty (i.e., no higher authority.) When we say a Baptist church is autonomous, we mean it is independent of all others and acknowledges no higher authority under Christ than itself.

A. PROOFS OF INDEPENDENCY:

There are a number of scriptural reasons why Baptist churches should be independent Baptist churches:

1. The Absence Of Example.

There is not one example in the New Testament of any church, council, hierarchy, board, convention, fellowship, man, or anything else “running” the affairs of another church.

2. The Nature Of A Church.

The very definition of a New Testament church calls for independency. True churches are local churches; there is no such thing as “THE Church.”

If it was the Lord’s intention that churches have a centralized hierarchy, the universal (Catholic) model would be ideal.

3. The Headship Of Christ.

The fact that each church is to be directly responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ leaves no room for any other agency or human scheme.

Anything which comes between a child of God and his Saviour is sin — so too with churches.

4. The Highest Authority.

Matthew 18:17 — “...tell it to the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

This scripture teaches independency, because no other authority beyond the church is mentioned.

5. The Apostolic Inability To Govern.

See: Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-7; I Corinthians 5:3-5.

Apostolic authority exists today in the “words and commandments of the apostles” (II Peter 3:2; Jude 17; Ephesians 3:3-5) — i.e., the New Testament, the foundation of every Baptist church **Ephesians 2:20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;”**

However, even the apostles could not, in and of themselves, direct the affairs of churches. In Acts 1 and 6 the apostles did not select men by their own authority — the church decided; and in I Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul could only judge and advise the church at Corinth in the matter of discipline.

6. The Council At Jerusalem — Acts 15:1-35.

This passage gives the account of a meeting between representatives of the church at Antioch and the church at Jerusalem over the issue of false doctrine. In studying this, note the following:

a. The CHURCH (at Antioch) sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to Jerusalem.

i. Verse 2 — “...they determined...”

ii. Verse 3 — “...by the church...”

Great man though he was, even Paul was subject to his home church.

b. The CHURCH (at Jerusalem) received them.

i. Verse 4 — “...received of the church...”

ii. Verse 12 — “...all the multitude...”

iii. Verse 22 — “...with the whole church...”

“The presence of the apostles is a circumstance which cannot be duplicated today. These men are gone, and their authority has been transmitted in scripture for our use — however, it is of significance to note that the apostles did not hold a solemn and restricted conclave of their own to emerge later with an ex-cathedra pronouncement.” (1)

c. The church at Jerusalem did not impose its will upon the church at Antioch.

Acts 15:19 — “...we trouble not them...”

All they did was write and ask the Gentile believers to show respect to the Jews because of their customs.

7. The Handling Of Monetary Gifts.

I Corinthians 16:3,4 — “And when I come, whomsoever YE shall approve by your letters, THEM WILL I SEND to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem. And if it be meet that I go also, they shall go with me.”

The apostle Paul did not expect the church at Corinth to simply hand over their offerings to him. He was not a centralized “clearinghouse.” The early churches sent their own men with the money they had raised.

Furthermore, the funds that Paul administered at the point of their intended purpose (II Corinthians 8:19) were also fully accounted for by him (II Corinthians 8:20,21).

8. The Seven Churches Of Asia — Revelation 2 & 3.

The Lord addressed Himself (through John) to the angel (messenger) of each individual church, not to some central body or ecclesiastical authority — or even to just one of the churches represented for it to pass the messages on to the others.

B. THE BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENCY:

Independency is a wonderful doctrine with four outstanding practical benefits:

1. It Maintains The Headship Of Christ.

Christ can truly be Head over a church when no human organization is present to interpose.

2. It Upholds True Liberty.

This is because there is no imposition of an outsiders will upon a church or the hearts and lives of God's people.

When churches become entangled with things such as coöperative budgets ("send your money to denominational headquarters and we'll divide it up for you"), then the decisions of denominational officials, committees, or councils take the place of church decisions. A church will soon finds itself financially supporting programs, seminaries, or missionaries it may not personally endorse, and certainly deprives itself of any leading from the Lord.

3. It Constitutes A Fortification Against Wholesale Apostasy.

One church may depart from the faith, but because of its independency no other churches are necessarily affected (or branded). When Baptist churches place themselves in a denominational barrel, history demonstrates the effects of one "rotten apple."

4. It Permits Broad Fellowship Between Churches.

Most Baptist churches will have differences in emphasis and how they practice the faith. They are not clones. Being independent enables a church to fellowship with another church

when others will not. The decisions of one church do not (cannot) affect the actions of another church. Churches are free to go about the Lord's work with their own discretion — bound only by the dictates of scripture.

THE LIMITATIONS OF INDEPENDENCY:

With privilege comes responsibility — Luke 12:48b. Being an independent Baptist church is a wonderful blessing, but such liberty does not grant an open license to do as it pleases. The independency of a New Testament church is limited by:

1. The Word Of God.

A church is executive, not legislative. It is to interpret the laws of Christ only — and that for itself, not for others.

2. The Great Commission.

A church cannot go outside the terms of Christ's commission to His churches to evangelize, baptize, and stabilize. It is not to become a business or a political organization.

3. The Law Of The Land.

In its conducting of day to day business, a church must not be a law- breaker. The one and only exception is when the law of the land violates a higher law — the law of God, Acts 5:29b.

4. The Personal Rights Of Its Members.

A church can only exercise authority over its members in spiritual matters. It cannot interfere with their personal rights in any way, except where the actions of a member are inconsistent with the position as a member, in which case the church may exercise its disciplinary function.

5. The Teaching Of Interdependency.

Being independent does not mean a church is to be “isolationist.” As I will note in a moment, there are scriptural grounds for churches to work together for the cause of Christ — without giving up their autonomy.

D. EXAMPLES OF INTERDEPENDENCY:

1. Churches Exchange Letters.

Acts 18:27 — “And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.”

I Corinthians 16:3 — “And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem.”

II Corinthians 3:1 — “Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?”

Membership is transferred from one church to another on the basis of “commendation” — Acts 9:26-28 — by means of letters between churches of like faith and order.

The sending and receiving of letters implies the recognition of a sister church as one of like faith (doctrine) and order (practice), which is why Baptist churches must baptize into membership those who come from other non-Baptist ‘churches.’

2. Churches Fellowship.

I Corinthians 16:1,19 — “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the CHURCHES of Galatia, even so do ye ... The CHURCHES of Asia salute you.”

Galatians 1:2,22 — “...unto the CHURCHES of Galatia ... And was unknown by face unto the CHURCHES of Judæa which were in Christ.”

Revelation 1:4,11 — “John to the seven CHURCHES which are in Asia ... What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven CHURCHES which are in Asia.”

These passages indicate there was some form of recognition and fellowship between various churches, on a regional basis at

least. (These churches were willing to be associated in reference, showing there was a common bond between them.)

3. Churches Support Evangelists.

The apostle Paul was sent to the regions beyond by the church at Antioch — Acts 13:1,3. However, those churches he established also assisted him financially — see: II Corinthians 8:1-4; Philippians 4:10-16.

Note also that Titus was “chosen of the churches” to assist Paul with the administration of funds raised — II Corinthians 8:19.

4. Churches Aid Other Churches.

Financial aid was sent to the struggling church at Jerusalem from several churches — Romans 15:25,26; I Corinthians 16:1-3.

Note: This financial assistance was a gift, not a loan. Loans are of necessity binding upon churches, and replace Bible charity with contracts.

5. Churches May Advise Other Churches.

In Acts 15, the church at Antioch sought the advice of the church at Jerusalem over some doctrinal issues. It is acceptable for a church to do this, and in some cases advisable. However, any advice given is not obligatory.