The Autonomy of the Local Church

Another belief that has made Baptist people different and separate from others down through time, is their belief concerning how a true church is to be governed. A true church is governed from within and not from without. The very word “church” denotes a local assembly having directly as its head, the Lord Jesus Christ. There should no hierarchical governing structure at any level (city, state, country, or world) that should be dictating to the local church:

1. What it is to believe
2. How it is to practice
3. Who its leaders are
4. Where and when it is to meet
5. How it is to manage its affairs and finances

Pastor Armitage, in his History of the Baptists, makes the following statement (page 113):

“The right of the Churches in the Apostolic Age to manage all their internal affairs, arose primarily from the fact that each congregation was perfect in itself for all the purposes of its own Church life. Whatever fraternal sympathy and fellowship it might crave, it was in itself the visible Church of Christ, and complete for all the ends of a visible Church”

The local church, and the local church only, can be seen in the instructions to the New Testament church for the believer to function and obey. If a group of believers were not meeting together (called out assembly) how could you obey the following verses?

Hebrews 10:22-25

22 Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.
23 Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)
24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:
25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

The church is something then that can be “gathered together”. The church is an entity over which leaders can be appointed and those leader knows who they are responsible for!

Acts 14:21-3

21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,
Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.

And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:

And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.

And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.

And there they abode long time with the disciples.

Acts 20:26-32

Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men.

For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

These words in Acts 20, as far as I can discern, were spoken to the elders (pastors) of the church of Ephesus (verse 17, and 18). To oversee and to feed the church of God means that these people must have known the object of this overseeing and feeding.

The reason for pointing out what may seem to be obvious is to combat perhaps one of the most destructive teachings regarding the church by the “wolves” the apostle Paul just spoke of. That being that the church is “universal” in nature and is viewed as a single entity consisting of ALL Christians, in ALL denominations and parachurch organizations around the world. I could therefore (for example), not come to church today, sit at home in my pajamas sipping my tea or coffee, turn on the TV, watch some “church” service, and claim that I went to church and am part of the universal church not needing to EVER go to a local assembly of believers (true church).
Again, Dr. Armitage comments on this incorrect invisible universal church concept as follows (also page 113, History of the Baptists):

“The New Testament never speaks of all Christians in all localities, as if they belonged to one outward and visible Church, which forms one corporate body. This is a pure myth existing only in the imagination. But the Apostolic Churches were local bodies that could be found and known and governed; and the wording of the New Testament is very minute on this point.”

We can see then, that in the Bible, local churches are never designated as belonging to some conglomeration of churches called the church of some geographically large area such as the church of a certain province, nation, or the world. New Testament churches were always organized, in all localities, after the same pattern and order. We can see that there is no recorded example in the Bible of a local church being denied the right or the authority to regulate all of its function and affairs.

The figment of a church that is universal, invisible, and impersonal, did not exist until Rome founded the idea in the fourth century to bring into subjection all local Churches under their yoke of power, control, and authority. The divine rights given to the local church are then sacrificed most completely, which the rightful head of the local church, Jesus Christ has bestowed upon the local church. The local church, furthermore, was the only type of church that the Apostles ever knew, the only type of church they ever spoke or preached to, and referred to collectively ONLY as plural (churches). Here are some examples:

1 Corinthians 14:33 For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.
1 Corinthians 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.
1 Corinthians 16:19 The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.
2 Corinthians 8:1 Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia;
2 Corinthians 11:8 I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service.
2 Thessalonians 1:4 So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:
Revelation 1:4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne;
Revelation 22:16 | Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.

Notice one more place in 2 Corinthians chapter 8. The apostle Paul could have referred to his follow ministry laborers as ministers or messengers to the Church of God or of Christ, but he doesn’t:

2 Corinthians 8:23-24

23 Whether any do enquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellowhelper concerning you: or our brethren be enquired of, they are the messengers of the churches, and the glory of Christ. 
24 Wherefore shew ye to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love, and of our boasting on your behalf.

Furthermore, would it not be impossible to carry out the commands of discipline within the local church if it were not a local church but a nebulous, invisible, universal church? Once example given in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, requires the gathering together to put away the fornicator from their midst. “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (verse 13). This would be tough to do in a “universal” church. How would you gather? How could a person be put away from your midst’s when there is not midst’s?

The local church assembly gives us a place to serve and a group of believers with which to grow, fellowship and very importantly, be accountable to.

The local church is commanded to remain pure and to be on guard for leaven that would corrupt our local church. This again would be impossible except in a local assembly of believers.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

6 Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? 
7 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: 
8 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.

“That the church is local and autonomous in the Scripture is beyond dispute. The government and discipline of the local church must never be ceded to any religious hierarchy, be it a bishopric, archdiocese, convention, or association. The government and discipline of the local body must be only by that body.” – Pastor Jim Alter, Why Baptist - page 39