

BAPTIST AUTONOMY: Difficulties and Benefits

A kaleidoscope of misconceptions, issues, threats and challenges surround the practice of Baptist autonomy. Yet the benefits far outweigh the difficulties associated with autonomy.

Baptist churches are autonomous under the lordship of Christ. No individual or group of Baptists outside of a church has authority to dictate Baptist doctrine and polity to that 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.

According to Baptist polity, each of these is autonomous.

However, this autonomous relationship is sometimes misunderstood. For example, some think in terms of “levels” in Baptist life, such as the local church level, the associational level, the state convention level and the national convention level. The concept is that the higher levels include the lower ones and have authority over them. This is not Baptist polity.

National conventions are not comprised of state conventions. State conventions are not comprised of associations. To the contrary, each is an autonomous Baptist body. Furthermore, none of these entities has any authority over another. 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 accepted or seated as messengers and to decide which other Baptist organizations they will relate to and which they will not.

Some Issues Related to Baptist Autonomy

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.**

When Baptist life was primarily comprised of small congregations of baptized believers, autonomy was a relatively simple matter. As Baptist associations, societies, state and national conventions and institutions of various kinds have evolved as part of Baptist life, autonomy issues are not quite as simple as they once were.

For example, **questions exist concerning the autonomy of Baptist institutions**, such as universities, aging and child care entities and medical centers. If all or a portion of the trustees of a Baptist institution are elected by another Baptist entity, such as a state or national convention, what autonomy does the institution have?

Other autonomy **issues relate to local congregations.** Some of these have to do with starting new churches. For example, one approach calls for a Baptist association, state convention and a church to sponsor a new congregation. Normally, the selection of the pastor is not entirely in the hands of the newly created congregation but includes also the sponsoring entities. This is not considered a violation of autonomy because the group has not yet been constituted as a church.

Some Possible Threats to Baptist Autonomy

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

The challenges from outside the congregations come when some organization attempts to dictate to a church what to believe and/or how to conduct its ministry. Secular governments sometimes exert such pressure. Baptists have resisted, holding fast to the belief in religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

Baptist organizations outside of the church may exert such pressure. An example sometimes cited is an effort by Baptist associations, state conventions or national conventions to force churches to accept certain doctrinal statements by threatening to withdraw fellowship and/or financial support if they do not.

Although such efforts may infringe on the autonomy of the local church, it should be kept in mind that each Baptist organization is also autonomous and has the right to determine those churches with which it is in fellowship. Furthermore, a church does not have to bow to such pressures but is free to do what it believes is Christ's will for it. For example, an association can say “no” to what

a church wants, and a church can say “no” to what an association wants.

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.**

“To many Baptists, autonomy has become anarchy. This is true when either a church or an individual Baptist says, ‘I can do as I please!’ Both should do as Christ pleases or wills.”

Herschel H. Hobbs
The Baptist Faith and Message

Some Challenges Related to Baptist Autonomy

Certain matters need to be addressed so that church autonomy functions in a positive way. For example, the denomination as a whole has no authority in relating to a troubled church. If a church is behaving in a disgraceful way, the denomination cannot require any change of conduct or even the removal of the name “Baptist.” If a church suffers internal conflict, no denominational entity can force a resolution to the conflict. If a church falls into financial crisis, there is no requirement for the denomination to come to its rescue. Even if a church asks for help from a Baptist denominational organization, it does not relinquish its autonomy.

Another matter relates to pastors and others who are employed by churches and various Baptist organizations. The denomination as a whole has no authority either to discipline or protect such persons since they are employed by autonomous Baptist organizations and not by the denomination.

A challenge 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 regarding missions and ministry.

When autonomy is interpreted to mean that individuals or churches are free to do as they please, the results are negative. Always the lordship of Christ ought to be kept central. Individuals and churches are free to do as Christ pleases.

Baptists have sought to deal with these possible negative impacts on autonomy through voluntary cooperation, the subject of another article in this series.

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.

Autonomy also assists Baptists in living in accord with other basic concepts such as congregational governance, the priesthood of all believers and soul competency.

In addition, autonomy allows each individual congregation to determine how best to reach and minister to the community in which it exists. Autonomy can enhance flexibility and creativity.

Church autonomy 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.

Furthermore, autonomy provides a defense in cases of 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

Baptist church autonomy has been preserved through the centuries at great sacrifice. **This generation ought to strive diligently to pass this biblical principle to the generations to follow.**

For further information on Baptist autonomy, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Matthew 18:20

