

Baptist Polity Essay

The Autonomy of the Local Church

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There are many denominations of churches throughout the world that adopt many similar theological stances; however, there are many distinguishing characteristics that separate these denominations. Baptists have branched off from other sects of Christianity due to disagreements in interpretations of passages that were contradictory to traditions within a different denomination. In this essay the distinguished characteristic that will be explored is the autonomy of the local church. Two major questions to consider with this topic are how does this characteristic affect modern day ministry, and what is the biblical basis for this principle?

Many denominations have an established order which the churches are required to abide by. Two denominations that come to mind in this are the Catholic church, and the Anglican church. The services are systematic which causes many of them to be quite similar in orientation. However, Baptist churches have many freedoms that allow them to appear different from other churches. It is possible to walk into an extremely traditional Baptist church that is rigid and only plays hymns, or another that primarily plays contemporary worship songs. Since Baptists believe in the autonomy of the local church, this does raise any red flags of how things are supposed to function; they can be different from other churches.

Since the members can have an involvement in the direction of the church leadership and other affairs it allows there to be a diverse group of churches that are likely to attract many different individuals. Rigidity in some of the other traditions make it difficult to reach multiple different people who may be inclined to something that is outside of the tradition. For example, some churches in the Baptist tradition have decided as a local body that they choose to put a focus on reaching out to the local community and meeting the needs by serving and showing Christ through these actions. Another Baptist church may instead have the priority of using the bulk of their resources to support missionary partners in order to extend their influence

worldwide. Both churches have a desire that reflects the teachings of the great commission, but they have decided that there are different ways to accomplish this goal.¹

Another way to look at this type of autonomy is by looking at churches by the gifts that they contribute to the kingdom. Paul talks a lot about unity and the gifts that God has given to each believer. Paul states; “for even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.”² Paul continues by explaining the importance of having all parts of the body in this unity and that they all function together as an organism in order to fulfill the work of the kingdom; without one part the body is incomplete.³ No part is considered better than the other, they are only used in a different way; just as one church is no better than the other, they work in different ways.

Adopting the priesthood of ideology is crucial in the understanding of why the members of the church should be allowed to be involved in major decisions. Since all have been called and are children of God, and all have sinned, no one is above the other.⁴ Therefore, it should be important for the laity to be involved in directional steering of the church. “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely”.⁵ This quote from John Dalberg-Acton explains that power corrupts people, but absolute power with one person in charge is much easier to become catastrophic. Giving power to the individuals in the church to help with decisions within the church helps to dampen the possibility of corruption being the downfall of the church. There is a certain congregational accountability that stems from this sort of autonomous approach.

¹ Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV).

² 1 Corinthians 12:12 (NASB).

³ 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 (NASB).

⁴ Romans 3:20-23 (NASB).

⁵ John Dalberg-Acton

The local church autonomy has great implications for modern day ministry. Having members involved in the decisions of the church allows them to become involved and passionate about the work the church is going to be doing. This motivates people to volunteer and gives a good avenue to get involved and reaching out in ways that they may not on their own. Having a passionate congregation that is behind the vision of the church makes for passionate discipleship making, outreach, or whatever other focus that is being aimed for.

Another key importance in church autonomy is being able to be different from other churches, filling in the gaps. Not everyone experiences God in the same way, so why should all churches be following the same model? With the autonomy of the local church it gives the freedom to think outside the box and reach in ways that others are not reaching. However, understanding that this can be used as a cooperation with other churches is crucial for success in this area. Take the CBAC as an example, there are many different types of churches in the CBAC, but they all have their own directions and own methods on how to reach people. There is however one goal, reaching people for Christ.

In Conclusion, the local church autonomy distinction that is associated with Baptists can provide a great diversity in which churches are able to reach out. Reaching people where they are at is extremely important, and not everyone is going to respond to the same experience. It is important to provide different opportunities in order to reach different people. Having help in discernment of direction can be helpful not only in diversifying thinking but can also reduce the possibility of power corrupting. The parts of the body all function differently according to their gifts, let the body function the way it is supposed to, with many parts!