

Autonomy in the Local Baptist Church

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There are few things that are so highly valued in the modern western world as the concept of autonomy. Many would be surprised to hear that such autonomy is something of great value to members of the Baptist Church. Through an examination of the historic definition, the biblical roots, and the current ministry impact of local church autonomy, one can see the incredible value that is tied to this special piece of history that contains a part of what it means to be a Baptist.

The autonomy of the local church is a concept that is fairly self explanatory on a surface level but has a great deal of important implications tied to it. The government of individual Baptist churches is not controlled by any outside source such as bishops or synods, but rather is seen as being guided by “the priesthood of believers, the Lordship of Christ the authority of the Scriptures and the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹ Essentially the local Baptist church is not held to any outside coercion, but is able to make individual decisions before God as long as it does not conflict with Scripture and the other pieces of Baptist polity. This leads to major decisions guiding individual churches being made by vote of individual church members. Church membership is then seen as being an important matter as any wolves in sheeps clothing that enter into the flock have the same power to enact change as any other member. Claims of faith must be closely evaluated to determine the claims validity as membership holds a great deal of responsibility and potential power to damage the local church. With the freedom for a church to conduct its own affairs comes great personal responsibility.

Like anything in the world today the idea of local church autonomy is not something that is necessarily a black and white issue. Local church autonomy is something that is often helpful but

¹“Baptist Distinctives,” Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, accessed February 1, 2020, https://baptist-atlantic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Baptist_Distinctives.pdf , p.1)

has the potential to become a menace when taken to its extremes. It has the potential in local C.B.A.C churches to become something of a catalyst for cohesion. Individuals can feel like their voice has power in decisions of church policy that matter to them. In denominations where this is not the case, important church based decisions are made by a head office potentially hundreds of miles away from the worshippers that are being affected. Worshipers can apply for membership in a local church giving them a sense of connection to what is going on in that body. There is danger in local church autonomy, however. There exists the danger of Baptists becoming isolationists in their approach abusing their autonomy to defend points of view that come into conflict with other key pieces of Baptist polity such as the Inerrancy of Scripture.² Local church autonomy, while important to all Baptists, should never take precedence over what is laid out in God's Word.

Local church autonomy is an idea that has a precedent for it in Scripture. The Church itself was not spoken about until the book of Acts, however Jesus did certainly teach on issues related to corporate gathering, such as discipline, among a community of believers.³ Paul in his church plants would not micromanage how individuals worshiped from afar but would rather write to them on a regular basis encouraging them in their individual walk. Paul would only tell them how they were to act when they have strayed from the right path or had been exposed to false teaching. Paul would address issues that these individual church plants were facing in their socio historical context without putting an undue burden on them to conform to how other church plants acted. These churches were aware of each other, however, and some would be used as an

²White, Daryl, and O. Kendall White Jr. "Local Church Autonomy, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Remaking of Southern Baptist Polity." *Virginia Social Science Journal* 42 (Winter 2007): 1–17.

³ Matthew 18:15–20

example for others of how to act, such as the Macedonia Church being a model of generosity for their brother and sisters in Corinth.⁴ These churches were distinct from each other and autonomous, however they served the same Lord and grew together in powerful ways.

There are some fascinating implications in the 21st century for the Baptist community in regards to the autonomy of the local church. In the original setting which the Baptist distinctive of local church autonomy came into being there was not as much room for difference in areas such as worship, message content and opinions in areas of great cultural importance. For young Baptist men and women training in the field to become pastors this can represent a great learning opportunity as local autonomy can lead to small subcultures that must be understood and adapted to before a new individual can shepherd the flock. While all members of the Baptist denomination have the same core beliefs there is also great freedom in allowing the individual churches to make decisions, both large and small, before God and no other governing body. This allows individual Baptists to express their faith at an individual level without being governed by a body of individuals who have never stepped foot into their place of worship.

Local church autonomy is certainly a fascinating piece of what it means to be a Baptist and a part of being a Baptist that is not addressed often enough. Such a core piece of our collective history has ripple effects which influence how the collective Baptist faith is expressed in this ever growing and changing world.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

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