

The autonomy of Baptist local Churches and its implications

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Abstract

The question of local church autonomy has always been critical to the issue of church administration and governance as local churches are often time subjected to the obnoxious control of external ecclesiastical authorities. This study aims at examining the autonomy of Baptist local churches from historical and biblical perspectives and the implications for the church, particularly in terms of its leadership/governance and relationship with others. The *study* is carried out using the historical and analytical methods. The study establishes that the autonomy of local churches has biblical basis and there are numerous documents of the Baptist Convention that have since gazetted the autonomy of the local church in line with the biblical principle. However, the study noted that some of the members of the church abuse the use of their church autonomy because there is no greater body to which they are accountable. It recommends therefore, that while the autonomy of the local church should be upheld for effective administration that reflects democratic principles, there should be internal mechanisms to check the tendencies of members to abuse their local autonomy, particularly in mistreating the clergy in charge of the local church.

Keywords: Baptist, Autonomy, social, transformation, morality

Introduction

The Baptists believes in the absolute independence of the local church. By this, they mean that every church of Christ, that is, every group of believers united together according to the laws of Christ is wholly independent. It means that the church is capable of self-government; therefore, no one acknowledges any higher authority under Christ than itself. Hence, with the church all ecclesiastical action commences and terminates with it. Thus, the ecclesiastical relations of every member are limited by the church to which he belongs (<http://www.bible-truth.org/autonomy.html>, 1/1/2016).

In investigating the biblical basis for church autonomy in terms of its relations to other organizations, there is no biblical instance of the church being answerable to any other congregation or organization. In relation to this stated fact Cooper (n. d.) referred to I Peter 5: 1-3 and thus: the elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the suffering of Christ and also partake of the glory that

will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

At this point when they had appointed elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23). These two passages imply specific structure from which one can confidently draw definite conclusions. It is on this basic fact that one should note that elders who oversee the local churches were appointed per congregation. They were appointed purposely for the church. Basically, each church is equal to the other. Moreover, these elders or overseers were instructed to tend the flock of God which is among them. Therefore not only was each church on an equal basis with the others, it was to tend those over which it has been appointed (Acts 20:28).

The study aims at examining how the autonomy of Baptist local churches

enhances social transformation in terms of teaching and impacting high standard of morality in the society. The study focuses on the assessment of church leadership, language of worship, adequacy of programmes, appropriateness of strategies and effectiveness of methods of inculcating morality. The study is done within the frame work of consequentialism theory, which states that the consequence of an act is the determinant of the rightness or wrongness of that act. For example, the consequences of acts of sexual immorality, promiscuousness and permissiveness that are rampant in the society, especially among young people and adult, such as contracting sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and the consequent death indicate that these acts are wrong.

A sample population of 600 adolescents and leaders between twelve and seventy-four years of age were selected for the study. The instrument used for data collection was structured questionnaire. The instrument went through purpose and content validity as copies were given to research experts for validation. To ensure reliability, the instrument was tested through Cronbach alpha method of reliability. The responses were computed by odd and even numbers. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was found to be 0.9366, while the item alpha is 0.9240. Many works have been done on the history, structure and organisation of Baptist Church, but none of these works focuses on the autonomy of a local church and how this enhances social transformation, that is, how the Baptist Church autonomy is used to teach and impact the lives of the members in terms of ethics and morality. These gaps and other similar ones are what this work is set out to fill. Meanwhile for the focus of this study and for the purpose of clarity some key words will be defined.

Definition of terms

Autonomy

Autonomy as used in this paper means self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting. It is a paradigm for locally

determining the operations and activities of the church. Based on historical antecedents, Baptists decided to pattern their churches after the New Testament model, which was based on the principle of congregational self-rule and the absolute independence of the local church from external control.

Local Church

Local church is used in this work to refer to a particular church located in a given town or city, which is a congregation of believers under the earthly authority of ecclesiastical leadership in a locality. It is the fellowship of saints or people of God (I Peter 2:9). It is the body of Christ as the head and Christians are the members (Romans 12:5; I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4).

Autonomy of a local Church

It is pertinent to point out that to be autonomous means to be independence. There is no other authority to rule over the affairs of the church other than the elders or pastors as the leaders. There is no ecclesiastical authority higher than the local church (Cooper, n. d, 10). The church is administered by elected representatives of the members. It is important to note that the church is a dynamic organization and issues confronting church differ from generation to generation, both in magnitude and in complexity. However, the pastor is the leader who tends the flock, which is the church. The pastors are the leaders in Nigerian Baptist Convention. Once a Baptist church identifies with the general body which is the convention, then it must cooperate with the leadership of the convention who are the pastors that guide or lead them. In his submission on the importance of understanding the doctrinal basis of the Baptist Convention, Imasogie (2007) states that:

If every pastor will seize every opportunity to sound this doctrine into the ears of his people, a spiritual revival through transformation will erupt in all churches

individually and corporately in our Associations, Conferences and Convention. In the past, our leaders were interested in leading our people to become knowledgeable in our doctrines. This was why a provision was made for a doctrinal sermon at every convention session. The text of the sermon was eventually published in the proceedings and the *Nigerian Baptist* for the benefit of our people. Unfortunately, this practice has been abandoned for some time now. The practice should be revived to ensure that more of our people are grounded in the doctrinal emphases that make us Baptist (p. 21).

With this stated facts, it is definite that once the members have a clear understanding of these doctrinal teachings, that is, autonomy of believers, then transformation will be assured in their individual lives. In other words, an understanding of what the Baptists believe will have effect on the spiritual growth of the individual and the church as a whole. To examine this stated fact vividly, it is essential to x-ray the historical foundation of the Autonomy Baptist Local Church as expatiated below.

Historical perspective on the autonomy of Baptist Local Church

In 1608, John Smith with thirty six others established a church on the basis of believers' baptism, first baptizing himself and then the others (Vedder, 1908, p. 21). The London confession of 1644, section XLVII states that although there are particular distinct congregations and several bodies, everyone is a compact and knit city within itself, yet are they all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they, by all means

convenient, are to counsel and help one another as members of one body.

As a further development on the above, the Philadelphia Confession of 1942, Chapter 26 on the Church, section 7 states that to each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he has given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of the power. (Adeyemi, 2006). Section 15 of the same chapter stated that:

In cases of difficulties or differences either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union and edification, or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order; it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers. (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 3)

The point here is that during any Association, Conference, or Convention meetings, the agreement reached by the messengers cannot be imposed on any cooperating church. Adeyemi (2006) further submitted that "We believe that a

visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his Word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops, or Pastors and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus (p. 4).

The Abstract of Principles of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1858 article, section XIV on the Church states that the Lord Jesus is the head of the Church, which is composed of all his true disciples and in him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to his commandment, Christian is to associate themselves into particular societies or churches; and to each of these churches. He hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which he hath appointed the regular officers of a church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 4).

In relation to this stated fact the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1963, section VI states that:

New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 4).

In congruence to this the report from the Presidential Theological Study Committee of the Southern Baptist

Convention in 1994 on the Autonomy of the Local Church posited that, a New Testament church is a gathered congregation of baptized believers who have entered into covenant with Christ and with one another to fulfill, according to the Scriptures, their mutual obligation. Under the Lordship of Christ, such a body is free to order its own internal life without interference from any external group. This same freedom applies to all general Baptist bodies, such as associations and state and national conventions. Historically, Baptist churches have freely cooperated in matters of common interest without compromise of beliefs. We affirm the wisdom of convictional cooperation in carrying out our witness to the world and decry all efforts to weaken our denomination and its cooperative ministries (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 5).

Similarly, in the year 2000, the Baptist Faith and Message, section VI submitted that a New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation, each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of the pastor is scripturally limited to men. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe and tongue, and people, and nation (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 5).

All these articles point to the fact that the New Testament Church is and should be autonomous and the external authority can only advice and recommend. They cannot impose their decision (s) on

any local church. The foregoing portrays that the individual has the right and privileges of reading the scriptures and extending the Gospel to the ends of the earth as commanded in the scripture and, by this, transformation will occur.

The Biblical analysis of local Church autonomy

As Shurden (1993) has observed, Baptists grounded their contention for liberty of conscience in several arguments, but behind all of these lay the belief in God's sovereignty. Early Baptists, without question, rooted religious freedom in the nature of God (pp. 19-25). The great principle underlying religious liberty is the fact that God alone is Lord of the Conscience (Mullins, 1912. Pp. 73). In 1980, the Baptist World Alliance adopted a statement from its "Commission on Freedom, Justice and Peace" on human rights chaired by William W. Pinson, Jr. Rather than basing the statement on some humanistic notion of an autonomous self, the Commission rooted it theologically. The Commission held that "Human rights are derived from God-from his nature, his creation, and his command" (Shurden, 1993, p. 244). There is no known description of the Baptist identity anywhere that would not place universal freedom of conscience and religious liberty at the very centre of the Baptist identity. The Baptists are called 'People of the Book' because of their belief in the Bible as the Word of God and as the final authority on policies and practices (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 6).

The Baptist identity statement issued by the Commission on Baptist Heritage of the Baptist World Alliance in 1989 indicates that "Baptists were among the first to campaign for liberation of opinion and religious practice, not only for themselves but for all people, including the unbeliever, for they believed that each individual needed to be free to make choices about faith and commitment unfettered by any outside agency," (Shurden, 1993, pp. 65-66). The implication of all these is that one cannot talk about the

Baptist identity without talking about freedom of conscience for all. Baptists possess some principles and distinctive traditions such as the individual's freedom of conscience, the centrality of the Church, especially the local Church, its regenerate nature, its final authority in the life of believers, its congregational policy, its fear of external authorities, and its call to minister freely but responsible in its setting.

Hence, one of the major identities of the Baptist is the idea of Church autonomy, since the authority of the church lies in the hand of the believers and its polity is congregational, not bring subjected to external authorities in whatever form (Shurden, 1993, pp. 65 - 66). Adeyemi (2006) further submitted that this autonomy has biblical support. However, the New Testament provides evidence of cooperation among Churches. For example, churches founded by Apostle Paul had some forms of interconnectedness; the Church in Antioch received some help from the Church in Jerusalem on some doctrinal issues (Acts 11:19-26). The Churches met to discuss mutual concerns when occasion demanded for it as is evident in the contribution collected in some churches for the Church in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-29; I Corinthians 16:1-4). It is therefore pertinent to note that once there is freedom of worship transformation will occur.

The governance of a Baptist local Church in relation to other local Churches

Having examined the issue of the autonomy of Baptists' local churches from historical and biblical perspectives, it is pertinent to look at the governance of a Baptist local church in terms of its relationship with other local churches and their mutual responsibilities. To start with, the writer is of the opinion that, since democracy is "a system of government in which the authority to rule resides in the people" (Fry, 1997, p. 208), and there is a biblical basis for democracy as reflected in Acts 1:15-26; 13:1-3, democracy was practiced among the people of God then and can still be

practiced if well understood (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 8).

However, Baptists are not sectarian in spirit, for they recognize themselves as part of the wider fellowship which is the body of Christ. The Baptists agree that “there is one universal church, of which every particular congregation is a local expression” (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 8). Gambrell argued that “the true conception of a general body is that it is for counsel, with no ecclesiastical functions and therefore, having no authority over the churches (283). Being autonomous means being independent, and this is not isolation. For biblical example, the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem cooperated in counsel and act to uphold sound doctrine (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 9).

Association is not used in the Bible, but the idea is naturally suggested by the living example between the church at Antioch and that at Jerusalem. When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with some believers from Antioch to the apostles about doctrinal issues in Acts 15:1-31, it was for counsel. The Church at Antioch was disturbed by a question on doctrine. In Acts 15:22, messengers were sent to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. These men were supposed to be better versed in God’s word and will be likely to give sound advice on all doubtful points, (Rutherford, 1885, p. 118).

One thing should be clear: that Associations do not form any part of the governing power among the Baptists. All ecclesiastical government resides in each local Church, as though it was the only Church on earth. However, “some churches, not well informed on the subject, sometimes drift into the belief that the Association can rectify the action of the Church. The only role of an Association is advisory (Rutherford, 1885, p. 119).

Historically, the first Association was formed by Five Baptist Churches in England in 1624, while the first formal Association of Baptist Churches in America was 1707, and that of the Nigerian Baptist was in 1914. The principle involved in the

Association is significant in the sense that it is not considered an abridgement of local independency or local autonomy, but rather an enlargement, improvement. It should be noted that two things are clear: Association must maintain the independency of the local church, and they must cooperate with sister churches in the wider kingdom enterprise (McNutt, 1935, pp. 143-146).

Conclusion

As illustrated in this study so far, a local Baptist Church is autonomous and thus self-governing. The government of the church is by the congregation, that is, members are the decision making body. In congregationalism, the government of the church is by all the baptized believers in Christ through the leadership of the Holy Spirit and for the whole congregation of the Church. If the Holy Spirit, through the instrumentality of the regenerated and baptized children of God in a local church governs the church, such government is theocratic. Thus, the autonomy of a local church is premised on the fact that God, through Christ, is the head of the church. The idea of being subjected to the authority and control of external ecclesiastical groups, bodies or hierarchies is unbiblical. The relationship of a local church to others is merely an association intended for mutual support in various areas of their spiritual, social and material life.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. The local church should be given freedom to govern itself in line with the peculiarities of the church
2. The governance of the local church should be democratized in such a manner that all members of the congregation should participate in the process of its administration.
3. There should be internal mechanism to check the tendencies of the local church to abuse its local autonomy, particularly to guide against mistreating the pastors serving in the local church.

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