

Editorial: Autonomy of the local church: master or servant?

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[Autonomy of the local church](#) is a historic and problematic Baptist principle.

Every part of that phrase is important: autonomy, local and church.

'Church' signifies, in general, a group of people who come together in the name of Jesus for worship. 'Local' means that group of people comes together in one location, such as under one roof, as opposed to an abstract collective of Christian groups associating around a name or cause. 'Autonomy' means each one of those local churches is self-governing.

How local church autonomy works in real time

One way local church autonomy works is in the employing of pastors. Local Baptist churches seek their own pastors. No outside entity determines who the local Baptist church will call and employ as a pastor, and no outside entity determines when a local Baptist church will no longer employ that pastor.

A second way local church autonomy works is how different Baptist churches approach who they will call as a pastor. One local Baptist church may understand the Bible to teach only men may be pastors while another local Baptist church may understand the Bible to teach anyone may be a pastor who is called by God to pastor.

A third way local church autonomy works is in how these different Baptist

churches decide to relate to one another. Some Baptist churches will not associate with any church that believes differently than them. Other Baptist churches will associate with any church holding to a mutually agreed upon set of beliefs.

To put a finer point on this, Southern Baptist churches tend to believe only men can be pastors and tend to associate only with churches who believe likewise. Cooperative Baptist churches tend to believe both men and women can be pastors and tend to be open to associating with all churches regardless of who pastors them.

To those watching from the outside, it may seem Baptists have nothing but disagreement in common. But look again at the example above. Both types of Baptist churches call their pastors and form their associations based on their adherence to local church autonomy.

Where local church autonomy may be leading Baptists

Over the last few weeks, I've had occasion to observe differing Baptists up close. Among Cooperative Baptists, I've heard talk of [staying with](#) or [leaving](#) the CBF based on a given local Baptist church's view of LGBT inclusion. For these churches, the [Illumination Project](#)'s adherence to individual conscience and autonomy of the local church leaves too much room for those with whom churches disagree on matters of LGBT inclusion.

Churches who have left or are discussing leaving the CBF want a more definitive statement for or against LGBT inclusion. They do not want the gray area afforded by autonomy of the local church.

Among Southern Baptists, I've read how ministers were able to serve in multiple settings despite [sexually abusing minors](#) in previous places of

ministry. I've read how Southern Baptists have been questioned about the [lack of measures](#) to prevent the undetected movement of sexual predators from one church to another, and I've seen "autonomy of the local church" offered as a defense for the lack of such measures.

I wonder how many people are leaving and avoiding Baptist churches of all kinds because of reports involving leaders and ministers in the SBC. I wonder how many people will not accept the historic Baptist principle of local church autonomy because it is being used as a defense. I wonder which court will influence the principle first: the law courts or the court of public opinion.

How long before autonomy of the local church leads to unsustainable attrition among both of these Baptist groups?

How long before autonomy of the local church is not cherished as much as it is mistrusted for being a tool to avoid divisive positions or to hide evil deeds?

How Baptists are like the world

The world outside local Baptist churches is also struggling with the tension between autonomy and cooperation. If we doubt this, all we need to do is observe the debates around tariffs, immigration and international alliances like the EU and NATO.

Despite their mutual need for one another, individual nations do not want anyone telling them what to do. When these nations sense a threat to their autonomy (or sovereignty), they respond like individual people through fight or flight. They engage their militaries or their markets in order to preserve their autonomy.

In the case of the United States and the United Kingdom, so cherished is

the principle of autonomy that both have turned hard toward autonomy, tearing away from others and tearing the fabric of global cooperation and stability on which many pin the hope of human existence.

Similarly, despite their mutual need for one another giving rise to associations, conventions and denominations, local Baptist churches simply do not want any outside influence telling them what to do, regardless of how serious the issue is that's facing them. As a result, they seem to be tugging at the fabric of their congregational and denominational existence.

Where is the tension of local church autonomy leading us?

In one direction, adherence to local church autonomy is testing the sustainability of cooperation among one group of Baptist churches.

In another direction, the reliance upon local church autonomy threatens to undermine evangelistic efforts of another group of Baptist churches.

At what point will the historic understanding of local church autonomy spell the end of Baptist denominational life? At what point will local church autonomy require modification in order to salvage Baptist denominational life?

We may be very near the time to relax the grip of autonomy of the local church so it may once again be our servant rather than our master.

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