

Happy the Souls to Jesus Joined

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Happy the souls to Jesus joined,
And saved by grace alone;
Walking in all Thy ways, we find
Our heaven on earth begun.

The Church triumphant in Thy love,
Their mighty joys we know;
They sing the Lamb in hymns above,
And we in hymns below.

Thee in Thy glorious realm they praise,
And bow before Thy throne,
We in the kingdom of Thy grace:
The kingdoms are but one.

The holy to the holiest leads;
From hence our spirits rise;
And he that in Thy statutes treads
Shall meet Thee in the skies.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Thoughts on Baptists and Independence

Kevin T. Bauder

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Sometimes things that look alike are actually quite different. One mushroom cooks up into a delectable repast, while another that appears almost identical can kill. A gold nugget will buy a new car, but a pyrite crystal is a mere curiosity. Careful minds learn to distinguish things that look alike when they are not the same.

That is why Baptists should recognize the difference between independence, non-affiliation, and autonomy. This distinction is one that has been almost entirely lost in some circles. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the health of both Baptist churches and Baptist identity in general.

Autonomy is self-government. The autonomy of the local congregation is one of the Baptist distinctives. It is a historic principle that is a *sine qua non* of Baptist identity. Baptist churches—which is to say Baptist *congregations*—make their own decisions under Christ. They cannot be overruled by synods, general assemblies, presbyteries, councils, conclaves of bishops, boards of elders, committees, boards, or any other hierarchy or official, whether external or internal. Under the pattern of the New Testament, an individual congregation is sovereign under Christ.

Of course, sovereign, autonomous congregations still have leaders. Deacons exercise a kind of leadership. Scripture sets them as coordinators over the material affairs of the church. But Baptist deacons cannot make decisions for Baptist congregations. They exercise a delegated authority from their churches, and they can always be corrected or overruled by the congregation.

Pastors (bishops, elders) exercise spiritual leadership in New Testament churches. Some translations of the Bible even state that bishops or elders “rule,” but their rule must not be understood in terms of decision making. Elders rule by their example and their teaching. They persuade, but they do not decree. Biblically, they do not ever have authority to enforce a decision upon a congregation without the church’s consent.



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Here is a snippet from the constitution of an organization that calls itself an independent Baptist Church (its name does not matter, since this is only one example of a widespread phenomenon): “The senior pastor shall be the president or chief executive officer, and the pastors shall select the other corporate officers He shall have the complete and final authority, under God, in any matter directly affecting the spiritual program of the church.” This church may think of itself as independent, but it is not autonomous. The biblical prerogatives of the congregation have been sharply curtailed. Properly speaking, it is not a *Baptist* church, since congregational autonomy is one of the Baptist distinctives.

Most churches that call themselves *independent* actually mean that they are not affiliated. They participate in no formal, organized fellowship with churches outside themselves. They are not connected with any convention, association, conference, or other organized body.

A church that chooses non-affiliation is well within its rights. An autonomous Baptist congregation does not have to maintain formal connections with other organizations—not even with other churches—to function as a fully-ordered New Testament church. The reasons for seeking (or rejecting) affiliation are purely practical.

Nevertheless, the New Testament does establish a pattern of churches cooperating *as churches*. The apostolic churches worked together in the cause of missions, benevolence, mutual encouragement, and even mutual accountability and counsel. This kind of cooperation does not always require a formal structure, but it does involve cooperation between congregations, not merely fellowship between leaders. If affiliation is not biblically required, it is certainly biblically permitted and even encouraged.

What the New Testament never depicts is a genuinely independent church. Instead, the apostolic churches were keenly aware of each other. They recognized that what affected one would often affect all. They communicated with each other and even held each other accountable. When members of the Jerusalem church created a problem for the church in Antioch, messengers were sent from Antioch to Jerusalem. They urged the Jerusalem church to clarify its position and to call its members into account. In turn, Jerusalem sent messengers with written counsel to Antioch and the gentile congregations. While both churches were autonomous, their conduct was light years from independence.

Baptist churches are interdependent in all sorts of ways. When one makes a decision, it often affects others. Pastors move from church to church, and so do members. They face common concerns and must answer common questions. The fact is that Baptist churches influence each other, even when they are not formally connected. For that reason, any Baptist church is within its

rights to seek counsel from another Baptist church. It is also within its rights to offer counsel, even if that counsel has not been solicited.

The most dangerous course is for a church to abandon autonomy (usually by placing fiat authority with the pastor) while claiming radical independence. This move often results in pastoral leadership that has little accountability either internally to the congregation or externally to sister churches. Good men may still make good pastors, even under this unbiblical polity. Still, this is the form of order that allows cranks, despots, and abusers to flourish in the pastoral office. It is sheer fiction to apply the name *Baptist* to churches that operate this way.

Baptist churches are always autonomous because New Testament churches are always autonomous. Congregational autonomy is a Baptist distinctive. Any church that abandons autonomy loses its right to the name *Baptist*.

Affiliation is optional. If they wish, Baptist churches may engage formally in organized fellowship with each other. They have plenty of warrant from the New Testament if they do. Still, the decision is practical, and churches that prefer non-affiliation are within their rights.

No Baptist church is ever truly independent. As a matter of fact, Baptist churches are mutually dependent. The fiction of independence has kept churches from helping each other as much as they might. It has also prevented them from challenging each other as much as they should.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
