

Romans 12:4-5  
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Hampton Baptist  
Charles R. Smith

## “Baptists Are a Free People”

Baptists have often been exercised over the question, “What do Baptists believe?” Someone has jokingly said, “Ask *two* Baptists what they believe, and you will get *three* opinions.” William B. Johnson, the first elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, is a good guide for what Baptists in the South believed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Johnson published a book the next year entitled, The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ. Listen to his words, “The denomination to which I have the honor to belong holds the true fundamental principles of the gospel of Christ. These are, the sovereignty of God in the provision and application of the plan of salvation, the supreme authority of the scriptures, the right of each individual to judge for himself in his views of truth as taught in the scriptures, the independent, democratic, Christocratic form of church government, the profession of religion by conscious subjects only, and the other principles of scripture truth growing out of these or intimately connected with them.”

Listen again to what Johnson called “the true fundamental principles of the gospel”: 1. God’s sovereignty in salvation; 2. the supreme authority of the Scriptures; 3. the right of private interpretation of the Scriptures; 4. Congregational church government; 5. Soul competency (C. Doug Weaver. A Cloud of Witnesses., Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1993. p. 124-125). Today we focus on the autonomy of the local church and Voluntary Connectionalism, both considered under the principle of congregational church government.

Much has been said about the independence of Baptist churches. They are local, autonomous, and free. They are independent of the government, of any religious organization, and independent of each other. Property is held in their names, and the deeds are in their own safety deposit boxes. The churches call their own pastors and conduct their own work. Membership in the churches is voluntary, and cooperation of the churches with other Baptist bodies is optional. They are free to join, free to withdraw. (Albert McClellan. Meet Southern Baptists, Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board. 1978. p. 30)

The local Baptist church makes its own decisions without coercion from an outside body. In an organizational flow chart, the local church would be at the top, followed by the local Baptist Association, then the state convention, then the national convention.

A local Baptist church is under the control of no human, persons, or group. It is under the absolute control of the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore it follows that Baptist autonomy is not *license* for a church to do anything it pleases. Just as *personal* freedom needs always to be coupled with *individual* responsibility, *church* freedom finds its counterpart in *congregational* responsibility. Baptist historian Leon McBeth wrote the following words regarding autonomy and cooperation: “Baptists do not want to lose or compromise either of these important principles. Fortunately, we need not give up either, for freedom and cooperation do not compete. Instead, they complement each other. Baptist churches are both *independent* and *interdependent*.” Baptists hold to these principles for individual believers as well as for churches. Autonomy of the local church has its roots in the basic

belief that the church is a *community* of autonomous individuals under the Lordship of Christ, held together by a common faith.

It may seem to some that the Lordship of Christ coupled with the gift of autonomy are paradoxical. But the paradox is resolved in that the individual believer *chooses* to come under the Lordship of Christ. In short, Baptists follow this New Testament pattern *voluntarily* choosing to cooperate with like-minded bodies, while still recognizing Christ as sole authority to the individual and for the local church. Any study of a Baptist church's autonomy must recognize that freedom of self-government does not preclude freedom to choose to cooperate. New Testament churches chose to cooperate and believed that cooperation did not take away their freedom, but instead was an *exercise* of their freedom. Following the New Testament example, groups of churches in England chose to work together, with the understanding that they did not yield their freedom. (*On These Truths We Stand*, Brochure published by Virginia Baptist Mission Board, 1989. p. 6-7)

In his letter to the Church at Rome, Paul wrote that each body has many members; diversity was recognized and appreciated. In a similar passage in I Corinthians, he illustrated his analogy with the physical body of a human being. Each human body contains a variety of parts.

In like manner, no single person exists in isolation if that individual is a person of faith. Being in the church means sharing an inter-connectedness with someone else. Paul also said each part of the body performs a specific function. Teeth chew, a nose sniffs, a hand grasps, an eye sees. Given his understanding of physiology, Paul quickly moved to church-life. As the *human* body worked, so also did the *church* body. The coming together of many people within a congregation forms the body of Jesus Christ. One of us performs one function in the church; another performs another function. No outside group or person should be able to dictate what an individual Baptist church can or cannot do, or who a particular church elects or ordains to serve in a specific capacity. Unity of faith and diversity within the body of Christ *can* occur at the same time. Unity does not come because someone mimics another, or because uniformity is the goal. Instead, unity results when the Holy Spirit permeates the church. A common belief and commitment in Jesus ties together the loose strings of a congregation as surely as the skeleton of a body holds a frame erect. In Christ, differences should come together for the common good. Paul believed that God dispersed the gifts, and that the body came together. (*Celebrate Freedom, VBS Guidebook*. Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1998, p. 38-39)

Being faithful to our callings is a fulfillment of the priesthood of all believers' doctrine which results in local church autonomy. An individual is responsible solely to God; we have no spiritual accountability to any other person, except Jesus Christ. Also, the local Baptist church answers to no other authority except the One who is the head of the church: Jesus. No one can tell a particular church *what* to believe, *how* to practice and *who* should serve in positions. These are sacred matters between an individual and God, and since the church is composed of regenerated believers, the decisions are made congregationally. Church members, being led by the Holy Spirit, vote their individual consciences. It is a democratic system. Traditionally, Baptists have trusted the freedom of the believer to make the right choices for God's church.

It is not a flawless system. Because of free will, *individuals* will make mistakes; as a result, *churches* will also make mistakes. It could've been the fault of a minister, church leaders, or the church's majority. Humans are not perfect, but we are accountable to God. With mistakes come consequences. Every church has dark pages in their histories; these rough times were not a result of God's intention, but of humanity's failure.

Paul was suggesting that the body of Christ, the church, allow its members the freedom to serve

in their own way, giving each person permission to demonstrate their own sense of calling and belief. The church then lives as a free, autonomous congregation because its members come together with their gifts and convictions to make congregational decisions. (*Ibid*, p. 39)

Congregational church government not only involves local church autonomy but Voluntary Connectionalism. Local church autonomy signifies *independence*; Voluntary Connectionalism depicts *interdependence*. *Voluntary* is defined as “proceeding from or affected by the will as an act; unconstrained; intentional; by choice.” *Connectionalism* means “coming together or union.” This term was used frequently by our ancestors in the faith in building our Baptist consciousness to issue a call for cooperation within and among churches, associations, and conventions. Coercion and compulsion have no place in Baptist life. Authoritarian and inflexible leadership styles are anathema to authentic Baptists. Because we own no Lord except Jesus, we abhor denominational imperialism in any form. We reject any and all attempts to coerce these voluntary relationships into any position other than voluntary.

In practice, believers *choose* (volunteer) to join a Baptist church; Baptist churches *choose* (volunteer) to join a Baptist association; Baptist churches *choose* (volunteer) to cooperate with state and national conventions. By the same token, these conventions *choose* (volunteer) to cooperate with each other. (*On These Truths We Stand*, p. 16) Remember, the local Baptist church is at the top and decides with whom it will associate. In supporting another group, a church should not sacrifice its integrity for the sake of cooperation.

Churches that work together are able to accomplish more than churches that work alone. The New Testament teaches *interdependence* of churches just as clearly as it does *independence*. Churches should exist in relationship with others. The church at Antioch was related to the church at Jerusalem. Paul established a series of churches related to each other. (*Meet Southern Baptists*, p. 31)

Someone has called Voluntary Connectionalism a “rope of sand.” It is a *rope*, because it rests upon the Lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). It is a *rope*, because it grows out of His missionary imperative (Matthew 28:19-20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). It is a *rope*, because it seeks to fulfill His high priestly power (John 17:21).

It is *sand*, because it depends on human cooperation and consensus. It is *sand*, because it requires flexibility and care to preserve its genius. It is *sand*, because it prospers only in an environment of mutual trust where diversity and difference are accepted and appreciated. Therefore, Voluntary Connectionalism describes Baptists’ extraordinary strength, our unique mutual relationships, and our practical way of working together. It is part of our self-understanding as a people of God. (*On These Truths We Stand*, p. 17)

Baptists are a free people: free to exercise gifts that God has given them; free to interpret Scripture individually with the Holy Spirit; free to be autonomous in church government and polity; free to choose with whom they partner; free to change if the body decides to do so. Baptists are a free people. As an individual Baptist, your birthright is to seek liberty especially in matters of religion. May we never forget our heritage and never allow anyone, no matter how powerful or prestigious, to tell our church or us as individuals how to believe. And may we remember that we always, ultimately, answer to God, and to God alone.