

Baptist DNA: Church Autonomy (Acts 6:1-7)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/baptist-dna-church-autonomy/

I'm curious if you've ever had the same problem that I've ran into over the years... Have you ever struggled to explain to someone what kind of church FBC of Jefferson City is? For myself and I know for many others, it's not enough to simply say, "I attend a Baptist Church." Because there are ALL KINDS of Baptist Churches.

Today we're starting a series about what it means to be a Baptist Church – we're calling it "Baptist DNA" – and why it's important to know and understand. But I must admit admit that I'm probably not the most qualified person to talking to you about this. Let me explain...

Years ago when I was filling out my college application to attend the University of Missouri in Columbia, I came across the question about my "religious preference." I don't think that category exists any more in the application paperwork. But I remember coming to that section on my application form, and I was blown away by all of the denominations and church affiliations that were listed for me to choose from. I grew up attending a small Baptist church in the country, so I knew that I needed to focus on the long list of Baptist denominations that was on the form. I knew I was raised Baptist, but I didn't know what kind of Baptist I was – if that makes any sense. My mind grew numb as I scanned through all the options: American Baptist, National Baptist, General Baptist, Southern Baptist, Free Will Baptist, Primitive Baptist – and on and on. Well, I knew I had to make a decision, so I put my teenage reasoning abilities to work and came to the decision that since I was a Baptist, and since I was an American – that must mean I was an American Baptist! So that's the box I checked. Little did I know at that time that I was raised as a Southern Baptist.

Again, I might not be the best person to preach about this topic. And I'm also apprehensive about this sermon series because, um, well... it can be kind of boring. Today and in the coming weeks we are going to dig into inspiring topics like the Priesthood of the Believer, the Separation of Church & State, and – today – Church Autonomy. Isn't that so exciting that you can hardly contain yourself?! But I'll do my best not to put you to sleep; I promise.

But – in all seriousness – I've talked with others in our congregation and we agree that these topics – even though they can be a bit dry - are extremely important to us now and for the future. They have implications for our pastor search process, but even more significantly they inform how we live our lives as Christians during this time of division, misinformation, mistrust, and struggles for power. So please bear with me, because this is important stuff.

We begin by focusing on "Church Autonomy." Autonomy is one of those \$10 words that I don't use much, so I thought it might be helpful to review just what it means to be "autonomous"...

- Having the right or power of self-government;
- Independent and having the power to make your own decisions;
- Functioning independently without control by others.

So Church Autonomy means that as a congregation, we are in charge of ourselves. Unlike some other denominations – namely Catholics and Methodists - there is no person or group or organization that is in charge of us... that tells us what to do.

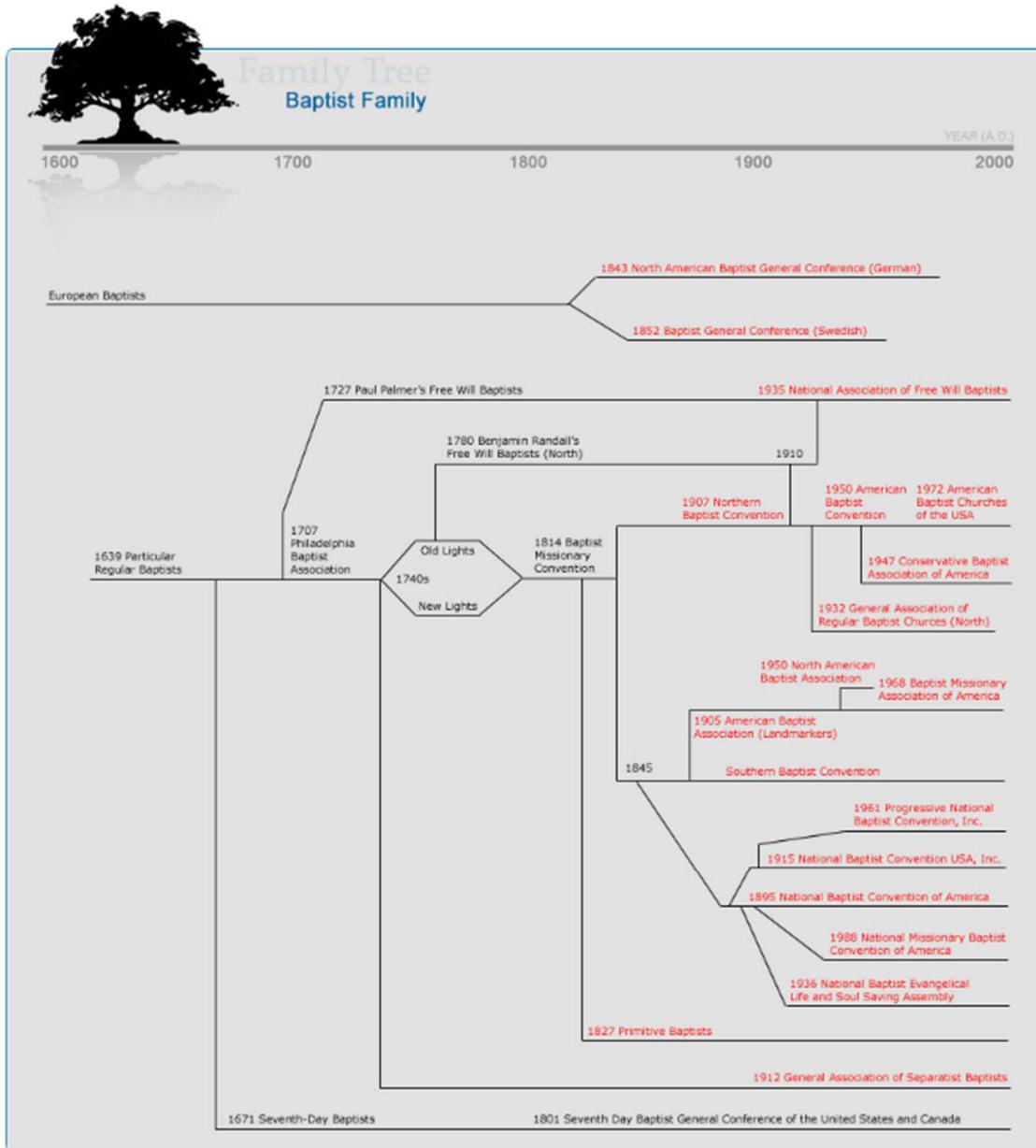
This part of our DNA allows us to decide together how we're going to respond to emergencies, or challenging situations, or cultural questions and issues that we can't ignore. I'll give you a few examples: Because we're a Baptist church...

- In 1970, when 200 people from our congregation felt led to start what would become Concord Baptist Church, they did it. They did what they felt God led them to do, and they didn't have to ask for permission.
- More than 30 years ago, when this church felt like it was important to begin ordaining women – as well as men – to serve as deacons, we did it. This congregation has a strong history of affirming and supporting the role of women in ministry, as well as men. We've been able to do that because we're a Baptist church.
- On April 28, 2013, when this congregation took a leading role in organizing the first "Mission JC" day of service in our community. We didn't have to ask anyone if we could do that.
- Just a few months ago we didn't have to wait for someone else to give us permission to respond when the war started in Ukraine. We needed to react quickly by providing support, and we did. And we continue to respond to that conflict by writing and sending cards and notes of encouragement.
- Finally, we don't have to rely on some authoritarian group somewhere else to tell us who we should call as our next Lead Pastor. We are a unique and diverse group of people who are doing our best to follow Jesus and serve God together. It's important that we make our own decision about who we should call to lead and serve as ministers.

Of course, the principle of church autonomy comes with trade offs. It makes Baptist life pretty complex and confusing in some ways. When I tell people that I'm a member of a Baptist church, I always have to explain the "kind of Baptist" that I am – because unfortunately churches like Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka Kansas... a group of people that represent hate more than they do God's love – have made "Baptist" a dirty word for many people.

And it's the principle of church autonomy that has led to there being all sort of Baptist churches that hold a wide range of stances on various theology matters. I've already mentioned the role of women in ministry, which is a prime example. It also reminds me of all the jokes about Baptists not being able to agree on anything other than having potluck meals together.

This reminds me of a very important point my church history professor made in seminary. He showed a slide that looked something like this one. (*See below.*) You won't be able to read all the text, but hopefully you can see the lines, which tell the story. This slide starts in the year 1600 on the left, and move to the year 2000 on the right. In 1600, you could count the number of Baptist denominations on one hand. But you see the many branches and splits the formed among various denominations as we moved forward in history – and there are several more that took place and aren't included in this graphic!



My seminary professor made this important observation: As long as Baptists were focused on the mission of doing ministry by sharing the gospel, serving others, helping those in need – things like that, then there was no need for them to fight amongst themselves and splinter into different groups. They were unified as long as they focused on their purpose. But whenever Baptists became more concerned about the doctrinal details of their beliefs, more likely than not they couldn't get along and a split occurred.

Now please do not hear me say that doctrinal beliefs are insignificant or should be ignored. I'm not saying that. They are important. But if we care more about the minute details of what we believe than we do about the Great Commission and the Great Commandments – that we are to love God and love others – then we're doomed to focus on what separates us.

I wish there were passages in the Bible that clearly spoke about what Church Autonomy is and what it should like, but we're not going to find those two words – Church Autonomy - in the Bible. But we are going to look at a story that has some implications for us as an autonomous church.

The passage that we'll look at is in Acts 6. It's important to realize that church life back then looked immensely different than it does now...

- They had no church building, but met in homes and outdoor spaces.
- Their worship wasn't as structured and formalized as ours is. There was no "response time" at the end of worship. When they shared communion together, it was a true meal instead of a few minutes added to larger gathering.
- Perhaps most importantly, they were still working out questions and conflicts about what church should be like and how they would do things. They were figuring it out as they went. And that's the focus of this passage...

Acts 6:1-7 (Seven Chosen to Serve)

6 Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

There are four things I want to point out from this snapshot of what an autonomous church looked like 2,000 years ago and how it functioned:

1. They had conflicts – just like we do. In this account, it was about two groups of widows. The Hebrew widows, who were being cared for receiving what they needed, and the Hellenistic widows or widows that had adopted the Greek language and culture. This might be a stretch, but perhaps it would be similar to if people who attended our early worship service – when we have two Sunday morning services – felt that they were missing out on something important that the people who attended the 10:45am service got to participate in.

The bottom line is that there was a conflict. So how do we respond when there's a conflict? As an Autonomous Church that doesn't have to ask or be told what to do, we work it out together.

2. Led by their leaders, the church dealt with the conflict and found a way to move forward.
They acknowledged there was a problem. Leaders got involved. If this was a Baptist church that we were reading about, I'm sure they would have formed a committee to look into the problem. But they dealt with the issue. They didn't ignore it. They didn't have a bunch of hush/hush side conversations that did more harm than good. And most importantly, they kept their focus on DOING what they felt like God wanted them to do.
3. They remained focused on their calling and purpose, instead of allowing the conflict to take center stage.
Maybe to say it another way: They were committed to DOING SOMETHING about the situation than they were about ARGUING ABOUT the situation. So the leaders came up with an idea that they felt would work, they talked it over as a congregation, and they moved ahead – doing what they believed God wanted them to do. Which led to the final point...
4. "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly..."
I'm very cautious about putting my faith into some sort of formula, something like "If I do this, then God will do that." But I think we are shown a sort of formula in this story that is universal. When God's people – the church – focus on living out of faith together be DOING things that help others, that helps those in need, then God moves through the church and that work and the Kingdom of Heaven grows.

Please join me in prayer...