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# The Problem of Church Autonomy among Churches in Okpe Central Baptist Association: A Theological Evaluation

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## Abstract

*Local Baptist churches in the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) are grappling with challenges in implementing church autonomy, including its abuse, misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and misapplication. Additionally, many pastors are maltreated in the name of church autonomy. This article aims to theologically evaluate and address the problem related to church autonomy with particular reference to local Baptist churches in Okpe Central Baptist Association. The study employs descriptive and phenomenological methods, using both interviews and literary reviews to gather data. It reveals that the abuse of church autonomy hinders effective church mission and evangelism, development, and strategic fit. It further reveals the financial strain as many local churches refuse to pay dues to the affiliate bodies. The study concludes that church autonomy should be practiced to prevent anti-Christian attitudes and promote church growth. It recommends that the Christian Scripture and theology should serve as the foundation of church policy.*

**Keywords:** Theological Evaluation, Church Autonomy, Church, Baptist.

## Introduction

Local Baptist church autonomy is a crucial aspect of church administration and governance within the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC). This autonomy often interferes with church management, growth, strategy suitability, and mission and evangelism success. However, it promotes social transformation by influencing and educating for high moral standards in both the church and society. The doctrine of local church autonomy is based on the free access to God made possible by Jesus Christ's sacrifice, which Baptists believe is devoid of any sense of spiritual superiority among members. This autonomy allows churches to choose their own officers, make their own judgments, establish

their priorities, and manage their finances. Churches that promote church autonomy recognise that no other denominational body should exercise authority over the local church. This principle allows for direct communication between people and churches without the need for a middleman. The biblical basis for church autonomy does not provide a biblical example of accountability to other congregations or organizations. Research on the abusive and problematic nature of local Baptist church autonomy in the NBC is relevant due to the abusive nature of the practice. This study aims to provide a theological evaluation of the problem associated with the practice of church autonomy among churches of the Okpe Central Baptist Association of the Nigerian Baptist Convention.

While the study focuses on the abuse of church autonomy, it also examines its advantages and disadvantages in Baptist associations and their churches. The study uses descriptive and phenomenological methods to achieve its aim including ensuring accurate information through oral interviews and critical literature review, as recommended by scholars such as McCombes.[1] The sample population comprises church pastors, leaders, officers, staff, and members of selected Baptist churches in Okpe Central Baptist Association. The research is significant as it emphasises local church autonomy, addresses issues like abuse, misrepresentation, and misapplication, and contributes to theological and biblical understanding, including aiding the Nigerian Baptist Convention in developing a comprehensive constitution and by-laws for the effective practice of church autonomy.

## The Baptist Denomination

The Baptist Church, a significant Protestant sect, differs from other Christian sects by performing total immersion baptisms on only avowed Christian believers.[2] The Baptist World Alliance's (2022) census revealed that the world's largest Baptist denominations comprise 246 denominations, 176,000 churches, and 51 million baptized members.[3] The Baptist recipe includes important principles such as the priesthood of each believer, baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbols but not necessary for salvation, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible as the only written authority for faith and practice, soul competency, salvation from sin and eternal death to forgiveness and eternal life only by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are observed as symbols but not necessary for religious liberty and its corresponding principle of separating church and state.[4] The Nigerian Baptist Convention

[1] S. McCombes, *Descriptive Research Definition, Types, Methods & Examples* (London: Scribbr, 2020), 25.
[2] W.H. Brackney, Historical Dictionary of the Baptists, New ed. (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2020), 31.
[3] Baptist World Alliance. "Population", baptistworld.org. Accessed June, 2023.
[4] The Nigerian Baptist Convention. Book of Report for the Nigerian Baptist Convention Annual Session (Ibadan: Baptist Press, 1986), 128.

(NBC) is the leading organisation for Baptists in Nigeria, with local churches being autonomous and self-governing.[5] Baptists advocate equality for everyone and believe in churches being linked rather than isolated. A Baptist Association is a network of Baptist churches united for administrative purposes and resource sharing. The Okpe Central Baptist Association, established in 1999, is part of the Providence Baptist Conference. Its formal opening in 2002 was hosted by notable Baptists at Ogiedi Baptist Church. Currently, there are 25 local Baptist churches in the association, with twelve organised and thirteen not.

**Review of Extant Literature on Church Autonomy**

In the western Christian tradition, the church's power is restricted to spiritual authority, such as education, encouragement, and the administration of religious rites. Weinberger posits that the idea that the state's authority is arbitrarily constrained because anything against its laws occurs within a church is unjustified.[6] Each organisation must exercise discipline to prevent significant encroaching on the other since there is overlap. This theory encourages both responsibility and autonomy for the church and state. In the Netherlands, Kuyper's theory of sphere sovereignty is applied in the evaluation, recognising the rights of affiliated bodies like the Convention, Conference, and Association to provide for the general welfare and local churches' legitimate authority.[7]

The term "autonomy of the local church" refers to the guidelines for church activity and lays the groundwork for addressing other questions about church structure, such as interfaith collaboration and the employment of outside institutions. According to the Bible, a church is considered autonomous if it is self-governing, meaning that none of its decisions are subject to review by another church or group. Akanbi et al. argue that the Bible does not mention any committees, boards, or conferences in its teachings on church organization.[8] Instead, elders are solely responsible for supervising their assigned congregations, and each church should be on an equal footing with the others. This suggests that congregational rule should be under the supervision and rule of its own elders, and each church must be absolutely independent of any other church or organisation.

[5] O.O. Akanbi et al., Evaluation of the Organizational structure of the Nigerian Baptist Convention and the role of the pastor in a local church (Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 74; Nigerian Baptist Convention Constitution, 2021.
[6] L.D. Weinberger, "The Limits of Church Autonomy". Notre Dame Law Review. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4092087. Accessed May 23, 2023.
[7] A. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty". Abraham Kuyper, ed., A Centennial Reader (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 28.
[8] Akanbi et al., 76.

According to Imasojie, the phrase "autonomy of the local church" describes a way to establish guidelines for church activity.[9] Church independence and congregational autonomy are evident in texts related to the church treasury. The local church has authority over the donation, as each member gives and cedes power to the church's united will and direction. The money remains within the local church's control until it is handed to a central collecting agency, church, or institution. The apostle Paul had no control over the Corinthians' wealth, as the couriers who would deliver the gift were entirely under the authority of the Corinthians. According to Lapsley, the Corinthians never lost control or supervision of their contribution, and the apostle Paul acknowledged their right to choose their own messenger to deliver the gift.[10] Each church has the power, legal right, and organisational ability to create its own donation and have a messenger of its choosing deliver it.[11] This organisational design excludes other types of church rule and supervision, such as conventions, boards, and central churches.

McCune opines that the fifteenth chapter of Acts describes a gathering or convention to settle a theological issue, which differs significantly from modern conferences.[12] The gathering was led by divinely inspired apostles and prophets rather than congregational delegates who voted on creeds. The purpose of the gathering was to proclaim God's teaching on the subject, not to poll churchgoers and ask them to vote on a creed or confession of faith. The apostles, elders, and brothers decided to send a letter to combat the growth and impact of the false doctrine.[13] They authored the letter, which was sent to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, along with Judas and Silas, who were also prophets. The letter stated that the false teachers had taught such things without approval, using the Jerusalem Church as some kind of reference or backing. The assembly was guided and approved by the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the words "For it appeared right to the Holy Spirit" in verse 28 and the prophets who went with the letter for first-hand miraculous confirmation of its teaching. As a result, Acts 15 is an example that should be disregarded and not used as a guiding model. According to Grudem, the New Testament churches were subject to the same rules and had to choose elders to manage their daily operations.[14] The authority of each group of elders was restricted to managing the flock among them, and any type of governing body other than the recognised and sanctioned autonomous local church is considered an addition to God's Word and immoral.

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[9] O. Imasogie, Comments and Suggestions/Recommendations on the Proposed Restructuring of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (Ogbomoso: Model Nigeria, 2007), 61.
[10] D. Lapsley, "Moral agency, identity and narrative in moral development", *Human Development*, 53.2(2010): 87-97.
[11] R. McCune, A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things. Vol. 3 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 11.
[12] McCune, 14
[13] McCune, 11
[14] W.A. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Leicester: Zondervan Pubishing House, 2004), 51.

For Babalola-Jacobs, the Baptist doctrine of local autonomy is a central aspect of Baptist thought and tradition, originating in continental Europe during the Reformation.[15] Early Baptists argued that their understanding of the church was distinct from the Reformers, believing that baptism serves as a symbol of the regenerated faith and that the church is a voluntary community of persons changed by the Holy Spirit. The movement began in Europe but took off in the New World, with the United States emerging as the global Baptist powerhouse. Local autonomy emerged in the New World as a conflict for religious freedom, initially arising from the American Baptist's attempt to liberate the church from governmental domination and ecclesiastical hierarchy.[16] Baptist doctrines support church autonomy as a fundamental aspect of their faith, adherence to the Bible as their source of faith and practice, and their belief in the Bible as supporting it.

Hamilton presents arguments against church autonomy, based on the rule of law and the republic's focus on public benefit.[17] These arguments are unpersuasive and may not be entirely accurate due to historical considerations. The concept of church autonomy is ambiguous, and more research is needed to determine which sense is susceptible to the four arguments: formal sense (correlative jural relations of immunity and disability), normative sense (jural relations justified by a conception of moral or moral-political autonomy), or standard-of-review sense.[18] Hamilton's views are strongest against formal legal relationships governing church autonomy, as she does not consider alternative explanations for autonomy. The rule of law is broken either way if such a philosophy is against the law. For Hamilton, the rack and screw example serves as an example of how government and religion can cooperate while coercively using government power to further religious beliefs.

The literature reviewed in this study focuses on the issues of church autonomy and its impact. The concept of moral autonomy, as proposed by Scharffs, for instance, is a crucial aspect in understanding human respectability and honor.[19] Opponents of formal church autonomy argue that it violates core values like the rule of law and is incompatible with the idea that rules in a republic are centred on the common good.[20] Church autonomy, like group rights, can refer to legal interests held by a collectivity rather than an individual. Some of the authors

[15] A. Babalola-Jacobs, "The autonomy of Baptist local Churches and its implications," Tropical Journal of Arts and Humanities, 3.1(2021): 44-50.
[16] D. Diel Jr., "Local Autonomy of the Baptist Church: A Review in Light of Tradition, Practice and Holy Scriptures", CPBC Assembly Souvenir Programme, 2004, 4.
[17] M.A. Hamilton, "Religious Institutions, the No-Harm Doctrine, and the Public Good", BYU Law Review, 1099.
[18] Weinberger, 331
[19] B.G. Scharffs, "The Autonomy of Church and State", BYU Law Review, 4(2004): 1246–251.
[20] P.O.O. Ottuh, "A prudential personalist Ethical appraisal of human cloning," Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, 7.3 (2021): 310-330.

aimed to address the question of whether a local church needs a central board, convention, or other organisation to determine its tenets and practices. It is emphasized that each church should be completely autonomous, governed by its own elders, and that each church has the authority, legal right, and organisational capacity to establish its own contribution.

**Abuse, Misconception and Misapplication of Church Autonomy among Baptist Churches**

The Okpe Central Baptist Association is witnessing instances of abuses, misinterpretations, and misapplications of church autonomy among its churches.

1. **Indiscriminate hiring, maltreatment, and firing of church pastors**

Theological thought underlies the pastoral vocation, as a pastor must teach God's Word and the Gospel. The New Testament makes the pastorate a non-theological position. Baptist congregations are independent and choose their own pastor, who serves at the congregation's discretion. A Pastoral Search Committee is elected to find qualified candidates for open pulpits. However, the best preacher may not necessarily be the best pastor. According to Agba, pastors in Okpe Central Baptist Association churches consider their congregation's influence on their tenure, and sometimes members vote without formal church laws, leading to pastors' removal.[21]

2. N**on-commitment to the Nigerian Baptist Convention "cooperative programmes"**

The Baptist Cooperative Programme is a voluntary association of independent churches that aims to promote friendship and love with God through Christ. It involves each church member giving their tithes and offerings to their local congregation, who then sends a portion of their undesignated revenue to the Nigerian Baptist Convention. This cooperative effort aims to achieve what a single church cannot. However, many churches in the Okpe Central Baptist Association do not show commitment to the cooperative programme, leading to irregular payments.[22] Since 1992, congregations have committed to providing 20% of their undesignated donations to the NBC, allowing them to pool resources and work together to accomplish more than they could alone.

[21] H. Agba, oral interview, Sapele, June 21, 2022.
[22] K. EgbeidI, oral interview, Amukpe, May 7, 2022.

3. **Church constitutions at variant with Baptist distinctive beliefs and practices**

Local churches are self-governing entities, able to handle their own internal affairs, and have their own constitutions and by-laws that do not conflict with the National Baptist Convention's (NBC) constitution.[23] However, some Baptist churches in Okpe Central Baptist Association breach NBC's constitution, particularly in church administration and governance, such as by appointing a deacon to preside over council meetings.[24]

4. **Lack of church discipline and accountability**

Some churches in Okpe Central Baptist Association disapprove of church discipline due to its conflict with biblical love, imperfections, sinful individuals, and invasion of privacy.[25] Others argue that the church's discipline is subject to error due to human frailty and bad judgment. One argument against punishment is that it could violate privacy and cause excessive shame. In a society where individualism and autonomy are valued, this goes against the Bible.[26] According to Faith involves submitting to the authority of God, the local church, and its leaders. Most churches lack accountability, believing they are not accountable to external authorities. Accountability encourages biblical restraints, self-discipline, and internal controls, while the Holy Spirit and God's Word act as agents of control.

5. **Pastoral office abuse**

Pastors are spiritual leaders in churches and should be respected and honored by their members.[27] However, some Baptist churches in the Okpe Central Baptist Association struggle under their leadership for church autonomy, leading to scandalous examples of pastoral misconduct. Pastors may be critical of their congregations, propagating heresy, taking dictatorial actions, or acting immorally themselves. It is essential for churches to address these issues and ensure that pastors are fired for their actions.

[23] D.F. Oroniran, The Baptist Heritage: A Nigerian Perspective: An Epistle to the Nigerian Baptist Convention (Ibadan: Titles Publishers, 2013), 73.
[24] EgbeidI, oral interview
[25] V. Afitala, oral interview, Sapele, November 11, 2022.
[26] J.M. Kimble, *That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance (*Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 144.
[27] 1Timothy:14–15.

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6. **Assimilation and practices of non-Baptist beliefs, practices, and theological drift**

Local autonomy in a Baptist Church is a principle that allows local churches to freely collaborate with the broader body rather than assume control over it. This principle is rooted in the Scripture and is emphasised through clear thinking, well-defined functional boundaries, and civility among general bodies. However, the principle can sometimes clash with the autonomy of other independent local churches, associations, conferences, or conventions. The Baptist organisation places a strong emphasis on clear thinking, well-defined functional boundaries, and civility among general bodies to avoid misunderstandings and collisions. When a church freely and legally agrees to collaborate with the convention or association, autonomy becomes problematic. Responsibility and autonomy lead to integrity, but collaboration and autonomy can lead to high production. The idea of autonomy often goes hand in hand with the idea of community, which is often overlooked in local culture. The Bible should be read according to a non-liberal context rather than a secular idea to avoid problems with autonomy.

**Impact of Church Autonomy on Churches in Okpe**

Church autonomy is a traditional and controversial Baptist ideal that has been a pressing issue for churches and members since the beginning of time.[28] It provides benefits such as the freedom to choose the best way to engage with and serve the neighbourhood where it is located, promoting flexibility and creative thinking. Church autonomy supports the idea that each member of a Baptist church is accountable to the church, which can lead to a strong feeling of belonging and support for its operations and services. It also offers protection against responsibility claims in local Baptist churches, as the denomination is not responsible for the deeds of any particular congregation or body.[29] Baptist churches in local churches in OCBA have maintained their independence throughout the years by making significant sacrifices to the development and growth of the Baptist mission.[30] They believe that the Bible instructs churches to be autonomous, free from any outside control by people or organisations.[31] Baptists also believe that Christians must participate in missions to fulfill Christ's mandate to spread the gospel across the globe.

The voluntary character of churches allows them to choose their own leaders, the kind of worship they will practice, and how they will interact with other Baptist organizations. No person, group of people, government agency, or other entity has the right to restrict this freedom. One benefit of church autonomy is

[28] K.W. Mannoia and W. Larry, Characteristics of effective pastors: How to strengthen your inner core and ministry impact (California: Regal Books, 2007), 176.
[29] Mannoia & Larry, 178.
[30] G. Ejekierie, oral interview, Effurun, June 19, 2023.
[31] Afitala, oral interview.

the freedom to resolve internal conflicts without external interference. The New Testament mentions that disputes that would have threatened to split the early Christian movement were resolved by open discussion, with no church or Christian organisation having the authority to tell people what to believe.[32] Variable collaboration in the New Testament includes the agreement that certain evangelists and missionaries would focus on distinct population groups, such as the Jewish community or Gentiles. Although each church was independent, it was still connected to the others, demonstrating the importance of church autonomy in the Baptist faith. Baptist living, based on biblical doctrine, offers advantages such as voluntary collaboration and unofficial networks of churches. However, complete independence can hinder the influence of a collection of churches on furthering the cause of Christ. Baptists have responded to this by establishing associations of churches, which serve different purposes but adhere to the voluntary cooperation paradigm.

However, a steadfast dedication to local church autonomy has been a barrier to voluntary collaboration among Baptist churches. Many Baptists were concerned that groups established outside of churches would try to rule over them, placing more emphasis on autonomy than collaboration. By emphasising that affiliation with any group outside of the local church would be optional, the autonomy barrier is removed. A voluntary affiliation of local Baptist churches with an association offers them a broad base of support, allowing them to be more stable and powerful than they would be if they operated entirely independently. This allows Baptists to minister more effectively and benefit a large number of people, both within and beyond the Baptist faith. Evangelism and missions are priorities for Baptists worldwide, with the former focusing on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ through words and deeds and the latter focusing on evangelism in their teaching.[33] Baptist schools exist to evangelise and educate, but church autonomy may be a barrier to the general mission or task of the local church.

**A Theological Evaluation of Church Autonomy**

The theological evaluation of church autonomy among Baptist churches explores various topics, including Scriptural authority and imperative, faith challenge, moral autonomy, religious freedom, and sphere of sovereignty.[34] Local autonomy is considered a guiding principle of local churches, and the question is whether it conforms to the normative government or organisation of early believers and is consistent with the New Testament imagery of the church. The New Testament provides a thorough description of how the first congregations lived together across geographical boundaries, emphasising

[32] D. Beale, Baptist History in England and America: Personalities, Positions, and Practices (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2018), 66.
[33] Kimble, 144.
[34] Weinberger, 332

reconciliation and resolving disputes.[35] Early Christians chose their leaders in response to a need and with the support of the whole group, demonstrating an egalitarian way of life.[36] The Gospel of John, unlike the synoptic gospels, shows Jesus as someone who uses the pronoun "I am" often. Baptists defend freedom of conscience and religion on the grounds that they believe in God's omnipotence. They believe in the Bible as the infallible word of God and the ultimate authority on all matters of doctrine and practice. Baptist identity is based on universal freedom of conscience and religious liberty, with individual conscience freedom, the importance of the Church, its regenerate nature, and its final authority in believers' lives, congregational policy, aversion to outside authorities, and the call to minister freely but responsibly in its context.

Autonomy as a moral concept is a complex concept that encompasses competence, relatedness, and autonomy. According to Scharffs' theory, individuals possess three moral-psychological needs: competence, independence, and autonomy, influenced by social context norms and values.[37] This perspective emphasises respect for one another above independence, interdependence, and inter-independence. However, Scharffs' views on moral autonomy can be problematic when applied to political debate, as they may not align with fundamental principles like the rule of law.[38] Various conceptions of church autonomy exist, each responding to three questions: what legal links exist between church autonomy, what concept of the value and meaning of autonomy does this relationship support, and how the legal connections should be resolved when opposing autonomy exercises or manifestations occur. Hamilton's arguments against church autonomy do not specifically address a definition of church autonomy but reject any formal legal proposals for it.[39] The concepts of "church autonomy" and "group rights" are complex, with the latter potentially referring to legal interests held by a collectivity or specific political or moral ideas.[40] Religious freedom is crucial for the church as the body of Christ, and Baptists believe that it is essential for maintaining diversity in faith-related ideas and experiences.[41]

Religious groups have varying organisational structures, which affect the shaping of religious life. Baptist churches' independence often arises within the Baptist movement rather than from the state or other religious institutions. However, the emphasis on autonomy has led to misinterpretation, criticism, and

[35] Babalola-Jacobs, 46.
[36] P.O.O, Ottuh and M.O. Jemegbe, "Communication in religion and its integrative implications for Society, Pinisi Discretion Review, 4.1 (2020): 1-10.
[37] Scharffs, 1248.
[38] Scharffs, 1248.
[39] Hamilton, 1099.
[40] P.O.O, Ottuh, J.A. Ottuh and V.O. Aitufe, "Distributive justice and inclusive society: Role of religion in the equitable distribution of wealth," European Scientific Journal, 10.23 (2014): 196-213.
[41] D. Bebbington, Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People (Kano: Baylor University Press, 2010), 58.

even persecution. Baptists have been punished by governments for being traitors, and some religious groups have declared them heretics.[42] The Baptist denomination comprises local congregations, church alliances, state and national conventions, and other organisations, each with its own authority according to Baptist polity. However, this independent connection is sometimes misinterpreted and misused. Autonomy concerns have evolved since Baptist organisations, societies, state and national conventions, and institutions have developed as part of Baptist life.[43] There are concerns about the independence of Baptist institutions like colleges, facilities for the elderly and children, and hospitals.[44] Local congregations face difficulties with autonomy, such as establishing new churches, which can be influenced by the support of supporting organizations and the newly formed church. Sphere sovereignty, or the concept of no social group having absolute power over another, is another issue in Baptist life. Baptists have resisted pressure from outside groups to tell local churches what to believe or run their ministries. To ensure church autonomy works well among local Baptist churches, several issues must be resolved.

One could say that Baptists, especially the Nigerian Baptists, ought to reevaluate their conception of and use of local church autonomy in the interests of clear thinking, courtesy, and respect for Scriptural authority.[45] The autonomy of the local Baptist church as practiced today in many local Baptist churches needs to be reexamined since it is no longer clearly understood—the reason for the abuse, misinterpretation, and misapplication. What is evident is that regulated autonomy has to be stated and put under check and balance if Baptists are to sustain collaboration inside and outside of local churches.

A regulated autonomy would outline the key pacts required for local churches to collaborate in activities like associations, conferences, and the convention. The Baptist faith and message, which were embraced in all its iterations throughout history, should be used to serve as a sufficient point of agreement—that is, the ideal local church autonomy. However, it is evident from the differences within the NBC that during the last 20 years, the Baptist faith and message have no longer been widely accepted, as the current practice of church autonomy implies and is evident in many local Baptist churches. Baptists must consider issues like: "Does local church autonomy override the autonomy of association and convention, or are those autonomys equally authoritative? What definition of such 'generic bodies' autonomy should be used to promote cooperation? The Baptist churches must accept a regulated autonomy that values the association, conference, and convention as equally vital as the

[42] Weinberger, 332
[43] Babalola-Jacobs, 47.
[44] Diel, 4
[45] B. Ajiboye, M. Alawiye and A. Fauziyah, Availability and use of Records for decision making in the Church of Nigeria (Ibadan: Anglican Library Philosophy and Practice, 2019), 13.

individual churches if they want to stop splitting into ever-smaller communities. “Autonomy” is in crisis. Unfortunately, it seems that such an argument is becoming more and more difficult to make, particularly for Baptists in Nigeria, where polarisation is strong and fewer individuals care about denominational specifics.

The fundamental tenets of belief and conduct for the church, as envisioned by Christ Himself, are revealed in the New Testament (NT).[46] What Christ Himself revealed to those who knew Him best serves as the foundation for all Christian doctrine and practice. The basic Baptist stance is that many confessions of faith were prepared by early Baptists, but they served as supplementary manuals for the interpretation of the Bible.[47] However, this current study does not anticipate that the New Testament pattern would be conveyed to the local Baptist churches in the Okpe Central Baptist Association setting as an exact replica. Instead, it is a task to look for a base upon which to construct their structure and an essence around which to shape their form. Evidently, the apostles, believers, followers, and those who identify with Jesus are not often referred to as the "church." The truth is that the NT writers employed several different phrases that were interchangeable and equivalent to one another. A theological understanding of the church is necessary in order to properly underpin its social and juridical aspects. This is obvious since the majority of Baptist organisations and large churches function according to their legal identities (constitutions and by-laws), which is to perceive the church only from a sociological and not a theological perspective.

## Conclusion

The paper emphasises the importance of church autonomy in the New Testament, reflecting the Baptist view of the regulative principle. It suggests that local Baptist churches should promote responsibility and teamwork for society's benefit under Christ's rule. Autonomous and self-governing churches make decisions based on God's lordship and form alliances with other organizations. However, the Nigerian Baptist Convention's constitution and bylaws do not provide internal checks to prevent misuse of local church sovereignty, especially in protecting pastors. The study argues that the use of phrases implying secularity in Baptist churches has led to abuse, incorrect interpretation, and misuse of local church liberty. The main thesis is that church autonomy should not be used to perpetuate anti-Christian attitudes, as its ideal aims to offer the Christian church the autonomy to embrace Christ and act morally in all situations. Therefore, theology should be the foundation of Baptist church policy, and terms such as "Baptist Convention," "Baptist Conference,"

[46] Ajiboye, Alawiye and Fauziyah, 14.
[47] L. E. Ruiz, “Thoughts on Local Autonomy: A Question of Faith”. This paper was written as a critique to The CBBC-CREED Committee’s Study: Local Governance vs. Centralization: The Case of Pastors in the CPBC, 2005.

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and "Baptist Association" should be reevaluated to reflect the importance of the Baptist Church and Christian theology. For example, the terms "confession of faith" or "covenant" should be used to replace such terms as "constitution" and "by-laws."