

AN ASSESSMENT OF BAPTIST BELIEF ON SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND
STATE

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ABSTRACT

The basis for this study is to correct the negative tendencies with regards to separation of church and state as characterized by the church's incessant visits to state houses seeking for government's financial support in order to sponsor church projects and to stem the growing trend of pastors changing messages to soothe the ego of government officials whenever they come to church. Also the research was geared towards understanding the role the church has over the state and the state over the church, without necessarily infringing into the activity of the other.

The researcher approached the work with a view of ensuring that an ideal way of Church-State relation is reached. In reaching this objective, the practice of separation of church and state among Baptists were assessed using Questionnaire method. The gathered data were analyzed and interpreted and the following findings were made:

1. Religious liberty works best when church is separate from the state
2. State sponsorship of church project is not in the best interest of the church
3. Separation of church and state does not extend to segregation.

Sequel to the above, the following recommendations were made; the church must focus more on things of eternal reward and of spiritual value rather than ephemeral matters, church must not resort to government powers to facilitate church concerns. The separation of church and state must be fashioned to meet the Nigerian context. The state must not influence the activities of the church and the presence of state officials must not be a determinant for the spiritual temperature of the church. Emphasis on separation must be stressed never to extend to segregation or isolation.

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5.2 Conclusion

It is pertinent to conclude that separation of church and state protects religion from the coercive power of government. From the facts reached it is not out of place to say that when discussing the issue of separation of church and state, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding floating around which distort people's perception of critical issues. It simply is not possible to come to a reasonable understanding about the nature of how religion and government should interact when people do not have all the facts or, even worse, when what they think are facts turn out to simply be errors. The safest way to conclude thus is that separation of church and state is a political and legal doctrine that government and religious institutions are to be kept separate and independent from each other. The term most often refers to the combination of two principles; secularity of government and freedom of religious exercise, which is freedom of religion and not freedom from religion. Thus, while this research is geared towards positioning Baptists to resist all forms of hostile separationism that tends to segregation and isolation, "Baptists must not abandon their defense of strict separation" (Spivey 16).

5.3 Recommendations

It must be stated unequivocally that the matters of church and state cannot be handled with hands of levity. The reasons that suffice are that it defines the social, economical, political, cultural and indeed the religious setting of both the church and the state and as such, the following recommendations are pertinent:

1. Every matter that would require church – state relations to the extent of the church going to the state should be handled by the convention. This would help to ascertain the genuineness and authenticity of the need for such.
2. Baptist is gradually loosing its identity. Sequel to this, the church should take more seriously the matter of doctrinal teachings at the various levels of denominational activities.
3. The church should focus more on things of eternal reward and of spiritual value rather than ephemeral matters. The essence of the church must not be lost, so the church must de-emphasize the high premium placed on physical gratification and cheap popularity enjoyed by playing around the people in the corridors of power. Also, the church must make a conscious effort to stop chasing shadows and concentrate on the real substance of evangelism rather than seeking the favour and recognition of the state.
4. The church should pay careful attention to the widespread loss of integrity that has plagued the pastoral ministry, part of which was caused by the church's incessant and unbridled requests from the state concerning church concerns. The church must rid itself of corruption, and it can do this by attempting a re-branding of the church to negate the stories that have featured prominently on the pages of Newspapers on various misconducts on the part of pastors and indeed the church, also speak against every act of the state that conflict with God's purpose for humanity and by also holding back from every act that seems to suggest an unhealthy church-state relation that is occasioned by the church looking for state's financial strength for the good of the church, not minding if the funds are illegally gotten from the state coffers without due process. God has the ability to fund the visions and projects of the church. Thus,

the church must not rely on the financial ability of the state to advance church's benefit.

5. The separation of church and state should be fashioned to meet the Nigerian context. The practice of separation of church and state is a borrowed practice, imposed on us by the Southern Baptist Convention, thus for it to soothe the Nigerian context, it must be practiced in such a way to conform to the dynamism of the people called Nigerian Baptist.

6. The state should not influence the activities of the church and the presence of state officials must not be a determinant for the spiritual temperature of the church. There should be no special seat for government officials, unless when a government official comes for a thanksgiving service. This practice must be upheld because God has not handed to anyone a high class citizen status in the church – for there must be equality.

7. Emphasis on separation should be stressed never to extend to segregation or isolation. Honour to people in authority is a must; however this must not cross the boundary lines that define the distinction of operation, for the church must obey the state as much as it does not contradict God's purpose for the church.