

Introduction

Ryan King

Across the great narrative of Scripture it is abundantly clear that we were created to be co-operative creatures from the very beginning and that we are recreated in Christ into familial, congregational co-operation within and among local churches.

The books of the Law tell how the first humans were not created from isolation but from the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God said, as recorded in Genesis 1:26, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' Nor were we created for isolation. God, having created the first man, said in Genesis 2:18,

‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’

The prophets implicitly rule out isolation. They prayerfully confess the sins of the nation, thus Daniel prays, ‘we have sinned’ (Dan. 9:5). They do not only address individuals, but most often a larger corporate audience, or leaders who represent the whole. When Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian exile, he condemned the ‘shepherds of Israel’, noting their isolation in privilege – they have only looked after themselves, leaving God’s people scattered, alone, hurt, and hungry. When Haggai prophesied after the exile, he noted the nation’s isolation in misplaced priorities. Each person was seeking his own interests, the development and decoration of his own house, but not the dedication of the Lord’s house. The rebuke was corporate. Repentance would be corporate.

The writings wisely advise, ‘Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgement’ (Prov. 18:1). Ecclesiastes reframes the same principle more positively, ‘Two are better than one ...’ (Ecc. 4:9–12).

Carry these principles over from the books of the old covenant to those of the new. Jesus does not roam about

preaching on his own. He has an inner circle of three men (Peter, James, and John), a core of twelve disciples (including these three men), and a larger group of men and especially women who follow them, host them, and help finance their ministry (Lk. 8:1-3). Jesus sends seventy-two people out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk. 10:1-20). He does not send them one-by-one, but two-by-two. Here we see forming an interpersonal model for partnership and co-operation that would take its fullest form in the post-resurrection new covenant Christian context.

This descriptive model for how Christian individuals should go about ministry in co-operation with other Christian individuals becomes more prescriptive as we get into the epistles. The biblical concept of the church is that of a spiritual building (1 Cor. 3:16), body (1 Cor. 12:27), and bride (Eph. 5:22-33). Bricks and mortar must combine to construct a building; bones and all the other bits must be joined together to create a body; a bride is a particular kind of body, and the word 'bride' implies that there is to be a marriage union with a groom at some point - each of these images depict relationships of partnership, co-operation, and a sense of mutual responsibility.

What should be true between Christian individuals must surely be true of relationships between churches. Sadly this is not always the case. Theologically, churches that isolate themselves might plead the independency of the local church – ‘we are under the authority of Christ alone’ – at the expense of interdependency, which says, ‘we join others in being under the authority of Christ alone’. Practically, associational affiliation is shunned, and as a result gospel partnership, multi-church financial co-operation, and joint social action often suffer if they even exist.

The concept of healthy co-operative fellowship between like-minded churches is pervasive in the New Testament. Bear in mind that the letter to the Galatians was written not to one church, but to multiple churches (Gal. 1:2) so when the apostle Paul says, ‘Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2), he does not only have in mind the members of a church within their own church, but churches helping other churches!

This co-operative bearing of other churches’ burdens is supported by the example of New Testament churches in response to various needs and crises such as church planting (consider Paul’s church planting ministry in Acts,

and how it came about and was sustained), theological formulation and cross-cultural missional reflection (Acts 15), sharing gospel workers (Acts 18:28), economic relief (2 Cor. 8), missionary support (Phil. 1:5; 4:15-16), and spiritual encouragement (1 Thes. 1:7-10). There is then no biblical basis on which a church can or should isolate itself from others of the same faith and practice – quite the contrary.

One word for the sort of co-operation and partnership outlined above is ‘association’. Association is joining together with other people or organisations as allies for a common purpose. An association is the formally structured expression of such purposeful mission. This book is itself a work of association. It was commissioned by a committee representing the Association of Grace Baptist Churches (South East) on the occasion of their 150th anniversary. It has two editors, who despite sharing a surname are unrelated and serve as pastors of different local churches, in the same association. It features the contributions of several authors, some from churches that are part of formally organised associations, some not. Chapters four and five even have two authors each, with different nationalities, church contexts, personal perspectives, and ministry philosophies. This volume’s

essays then demonstrate by their very collection – never-mind content – that association is the antithesis of individual isolation, and is not best seen in coalescing around rigidly narrow tertiary standards of cultural uniformity, but by co-operating from a shared doctrinal basis and core distinctives in Christ-centred, kingdom-building unity.

In the first chapter, Robert Strivens develops a biblical and theological framework for geographically local and doctrinally aligned associations of churches, making the case that while formally organised associations may not be clearly identified in Scripture, there is sufficient grounds to encourage them.

Some historical application of these biblical and theological principles is further explored in the second chapter by Greg Tarr, who shares helpful anecdotes of associational expression from Baptist history: Abingdon, Northamptonshire, and Philadelphia. This is not history for history's sake, but instead pursuant of healthier associational life today, even in the seemingly little things.

In chapter three, Paul Smith narrows the historical focus to England's Association of Grace Baptist Churches (South East), formerly the Metropolitan Association of

Strict Baptist Churches, whose 150th anniversary has occasioned this book. In it, he charts the highs and lows of associational life, from its more hyper-calvinistic and some might say schismatic past, to days of evangelistic urgency and theologically conservative voice, to decline, to increasing evangelical catholicity, arrested decline, and gospel advance in the Association of today. When association works, it results in church planting and revitalisation. Kingdom advance through local churches working together is not a thing of the past, but actively continues today.

Nigel Hoad and Barry King have a great deal of experience in this area and in chapter four they recount the fruit of effective associational partnership they have personally enjoyed within and between the AGBC(SE)'s Home Mission and Grace Baptist Partnership. This chapter demonstrates from lived experience the potential of associational partnership, and should lead us to pray for and actively pursue closer relationships to this end.

Leonardo De Chirico and Jaime D. Caballero contribute to a more global perspective on Baptist church associations, writing chapter five from their respective European (Italian) and Latin American

(Peruvian) perspectives. They helpfully approach the subject with the same scriptural grid and core questions, but unique contextual voices. We must listen to and learn from such voices if we will do association better in our own context, and do mission better in theirs.

To what end is all of this writing about association? As the confessions and critiques of this volume should make clear, it cannot simply be to celebrate an association's 150th anniversary! There are, after all, 150-year-old buildings that are useless, crumbling, and should be torn down, if they have not fallen down. Like any building that stands the test of time, we must not fall into complacency but maintain any association if it is to be strong and healthy. John Benton, an elder statesman in AGBC(SE) life, brings the book toward its conclusion by identifying keys and threats to healthy association and makes three suggestions for building associational life.

Andrew King, the current Association Secretary of the AGBC(SE), concludes the book by weaving together its main themes into priorities for the future of the AGBC(SE) and, indeed, any other associations that may benefit.

Churches do not healthily associate for the purpose of denomination, to create a kind of franchise, but for

co-operation, to build a family. They do not associate under dictation, to give one person or board of people control, but to co-operate, because Christ already has control, and has given us together a commission. Associations are not formed out of isolation, in further isolation, but out of co-operation and into further co-operation, because in creation we are made from the triune communion of God, for communion with God and one another, and in recreation by Christ, we know that he has died to bring us to God and we can draw near to him, together, without any dividing walls of hostility.

Organic association and organised associations among local independent Baptist churches are not ends, but means to the end: that the Lord our God be exalted among the nations through the witness of our fellowship and mission.