



Faith Pulpit

First Century Local Churches in Association, Part 1

Introduction

The local church is “the house of God,” it is “the church of the living God,” and it is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). The New Testament says much about the purpose of the local church and about its polity and practices. On the other hand, the New Testament does not say as much about multi-church, associational endeavors. Fundamental Baptists have historically, and rightly, emphasized the primacy, authority, and autonomy of the local church.

Nevertheless, although the New Testament says little about multi-church undertakings, it does say a few things. Certainly, a little is more than nothing—especially since all of God’s Word is authoritative. The New Testament records several cooperative ventures of some First Century churches. Now, while such examples should not be considered binding unless they are accompanied by commands (lest, for example, we all be required to meet daily for prayer in the Temple, Acts 2:46), these examples can be illustrative for local churches today. The New Testament depicts First Century local churches as associated by proximity, by pattern, by people, by practice, and by purpose, project, and procedure.

Associated by Proximity

The New Testament mentions the “churches of Asia,” a Roman province of Asia Minor (1 Corinthians 16:19a; also Revelation 1:4a), the “churches of Galatia,” another region in Asia Minor (Galatians 1:2), the “churches of Macedonia” in the district north of Greece (2 Corinthians 8:1; 11:9), the churches “in the regions of Achaia,” being the territory that comprised Greece itself (2 Corinthians 11:10; Romans 16:16), the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), and the churches in “Judaea and Galilee and Samaria” (Acts 9:31; Galatians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 2:14). First Century churches, therefore, were united by their proximity.

The modern practice of having state, regional, and national fellowships or associations of churches is something akin to this First Century phenomenon. In several of these Scripture passages, the regional fellowships of churches either sent or received collective greetings by the hand of the Apostle Paul, and this corresponds to the modern practice of church fellowships publishing statements of commendation and other public resolutions (e.g., the commendation to “all the churches of the Gentiles” in Romans 16:3,4).

Associated by Pattern

The New Testament explains how one group of churches can provide a pattern of behavior for a single local church. For instance, the churches in Judea served as an example to the church of the Thessalonians on how to endure persecution correctly at the hands of one’s “own countrymen” (1 Thessalonians 2:14). This means that churches which were united in proximity could also be united in persecution. By responding appropriately to suffering, the regional group of churches put forth a collaboratively positive reputation. This is analogous to the way, for example, that the oppressed Baptist churches in the former Soviet Union provided a pattern of endurance for other Baptist churches throughout the world. The reverse is also seen in the New Testament—a single local church provided a pattern of behavior for many other churches. Paul, Silas, and Timothy gloried “in the churches of God” because of the Thessalonians’ “patience and faith” in all their “persecutions and tribulations” which they endured (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

In order for a group of churches to rejoice over the advances and determination of single local churches, the group of churches must first be informed of what God is doing in the individual local churches. In the First Century, word spread by means of traveling apostles, teachers, and circulated epistles. Today, church groups utilize magazines, web sites, e-mail, mass mailings, and conferences. The modern practice of sharing local church and associational news is not new; it harkens back to the First Century.

The impoverished churches of Macedonia sacrificially supplied Paul’s financial needs so that he could work in Corinth without being a burden to the wealthy Corinthians. Paul gave reports throughout Achaia concerning the Macedonians’ generosity. Doubtless, Paul’s “boasting” disgraced the proud Corinthians before all the neighboring churches in their region of Achaia (2 Corinthians 11:8,9). The Corinthians probably asked Paul to stop, but he responded that he did this because he loved them and that he would continue to do so in order that the church at Corinth and all the other churches throughout Achaia might follow the sacrificial example of the churches in Macedonia (11:10,11). Again, we see how one group of churches served as a pattern for another group of churches. Paul was not ridiculing so much as he was provoking to love and to good works.

Today, one region of churches can set the attitude and agenda for other regions of churches. If one group of churches, for example, is successfully planting churches, reaching young people, or training new converts, that group of churches can incite other groups of churches to excel as well. A church association that is lagging may well send its representatives to the thriving association in order to learn from those who are succeeding.

Associated by People

During the days of the New Testament, groups of churches provided the context for leadership recognition. Early in his ministry, for example, the Apostle Paul acknowledged that he was as yet “unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea” (Galatians 1:22), but as news spread concerning his dramatic conversion, the churches collectively “glorified God” because of Paul (1:24). Collectively, churches may acknowledge and rejoice in the ministries of individuals (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8:18).

Today, some church associations maintain lists of evangelists and Bible teachers who minister within the doctrinal frameworks of their associations. Furthermore, these fellowships of churches sometimes publish ministry updates and speaking schedules for these itinerant preachers. In this way, an association of churches acknowledges and rejoices in the ministries of individuals.

Associated by Practice

The Apostle Paul instructed the church at Corinth concerning the proper length of hair for men and women. Paul appealed to theology and to nature (1 Corinthians 11:5–15), but he also appealed to the common custom of the “churches of God” (11:16). Paul indicated that the general custom of the First Century churches supplied a solid reason for men to wear their hair shorter and for women to wear it longer—that there be a visible differentiation between the genders. Paul warned those who would contest his instruction that neither he nor the churches had any other custom.

Another Scriptural passage stresses an additional commonality of practice among the churches. Paul instructed the Corinthian believers that, when it came to the interpretation of prophecies, the women were to keep silent and to remain in submission to their own husbands. Why? Because God desires orderliness in church services. God did not want the women to interpret and judge the prophecies of their own husbands. God is a God of “peace, as in all churches of the saints,” and He does not want women usurping their husbands’ authority not in the home and not in the church (1 Corinthians 14:33). The reference to “all the churches” underscores the common practice that should be evident in the churches, and these verses remind us of the great care that Paul took to maintain the connections of common customs. Within a group of churches, these commonalities of practices unite the churches.

Today, associational meetings provide an opportunity for expressing commonalities of custom and for articulating and modeling “good practice” (e.g., when it comes to expository preaching, God-honoring

music, and the orderly conducting of business). Of course, final appeal should be made to Scripture, and Paul himself set the example for this; but there should be no shame in also appealing to common custom—again, Paul himself set the example. Associational leaders and local church representatives should first contemplate and deliberate, and then produce position papers on important issues facing the churches. Then, the conduct of the meetings should mirror the stated positions of the association. An association united in practice potently reprimands, tenderly by example and unmistakably by stated policy, those individual local churches that deviate from the associational practice. The process requires mature discernment, unmistakable clarity, and continual vigilance.

The New Testament, therefore, illustrates how local churches can function in association. This issue of the Faith Pulpit has pointed to ways that First Century local churches were associated by proximity, pattern, people, and practice. The next issue will describe ways that First Century local churches were associated by purpose, project, and procedure.

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