

Faith Pulpit

On Service Organizations

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:16).

It appears to be a penchant of Western culture that whenever people see a task bigger than they can perform, they start a specialized society, club, institution, or agency to carry out the task. The impulse carries over into the Lord's work. We have three organizations clearly authorized in Scripture: the family, the government, and the local church. However, we find ministries that seem too much for the local church to handle by itself, and so we organize societies, committees, conventions, associations, schools, missions, theological seminaries, Christian radio stations, presses, orphanages, hospitals—all to carry out a specific work of the Lord. If their initial growth looks hopeful, we justify our creations with the assertion that God has blessed them, since the numbers, finances, confession, or results prove that blessing.

The Two Plans

All the specialized agencies might be described under two categories. Some fit the associational principle, and the rest fit the service organization principle. A generation ago the two came under earnest debate. While our collective experience since then has pretty well resolved the debate, we continue to use both kinds.

1. The Associational Principle.

Under this, an agency is organized under the control of a group of local churches—churches that may already be linked in some sort of fellowship or convention. The new society is then placed under the control of a governing board whose members are elected by messengers of all the churches in the fellowship. The great advantages include (1) sponsorship by the association of churches, thus giving it

stability; (2) a focused and balanced program, including more than one's personal pet projects; (3) instant financial support for the agency's personnel, allowing them to get directly to the work without having to raise their own support. Certain Baptist preachers used to make a big point of these things and berate their brethren who were building on the service-organization principle.

Its disadvantages were that (1) in practice there was little or no accountability to local churches and (2) one tended to support programs, rather than specific people.

2. The Service-Organization Principle.

The alternative was the promotion of several independent specialized agencies organized by equally earnest believers, but each under its own self-perpetuating board. Under this approach there tended to be more duplication of efforts in some areas, missionaries had to raise their own support, and people and churches could choose to support their own pet projects, but there was more accountability of the agency to local churches and their supporters, and one supported people whom one knew, interviewed, and trusted.

Among the refugees from the old Northern Baptist Convention, the various associations experimented with both plans. O. W. Van Osdel and his Regular Baptist associates left the Convention with strong reasons for the service-organization principle. They had been burned so badly in the denomination that they resolved to own no agencies, only to approve some, more or less briefly. On the other hand, the Conservative Baptists opted for the associational principle and organized along a more centralized denominational approach.

Lessons

With the passing of the years, certain lessons began to appear. One was that despite much specific Scripture as a basis for our societies, they assumed a greater and greater position. Our societies, schools, and missions tended to gain in size, power, and sometimes wealth. The Convention had gotten immense power; but when we left it and set up our own associations and agencies in its place, we saw the same problems develop. The new agencies had a tendency to draw power to themselves. People began to speak of a pastor being "promoted" to such an agency or professorship. A mission in its monthly letter referred to its office as a "command headquarters," odd language for a Baptist society.

Another lesson was that the service organizations were often more responsive to church control, since churches had several agencies from which to choose with regard to their support. If the churches approved of the school or mission, they voted by sending their young people and their money. If they disapproved, they voted by shutting their checkbooks and directing their young people elsewhere. One can make a strong case that the service organization principle often turns out in practice to have more Baptist democracy in it and less politics than did the alternative.

A third lesson from those years was that some of the societies attracted an almost blind loyalty. If things were going wrong financially, or if society officers were ignoring their printed standards, donors still tended to ignore warnings and to support the agency. Pastors who counted on local church autonomy for control of denominational machinery found that in practice it was not as easy as it was expected to be.

Applications

First, where tasks seem too large for our churches, let us frankly admit our lack of Scripture on which to base our societies, missions, schools, whatever. Let us walk softly and apply the Word so far as possible. Local churches are based on the Scripture's teaching (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:14, 15). Other agencies do not have this explicit basis. Our highest office under heaven is the pastor of the local church. If anyone on earth comes close, it would only be the church-planting missionary (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Ephesians 4:11, 12). In New Testament polity nobody outranks those two offices. When I left the pastorate to become a professor, I took a demotion. If we would guard our servant mentality, let us remember that principle. Humility befits the officers of a society. Mission executives should remember their place and walk humbly in the presence of the missionaries they serve. Some of us who teach may find pastors taking our courses; and when that happens we do well to treat our superiors with respect.

A second application is the duty to vigilance. Power flows to the center, and societies tend to take on power. Even a loose fellowship of pastors may find itself helping out with pulpit placements—and inevitably gaining power. Societies tend to become ends in themselves, looking to churches as constituencies to be exploited. History should remind us that when a society begins to drift, doctrine is usually the last evidence of that drift. The churches must not suppose that professions of orthodoxy are proof against drift. If the churches do not keep careful watch on their agencies, they will find the agencies in control of the structures and the churches on the outside looking in.

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A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.