

Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Jesus, Lord, we look to thee;
Let us in thy name agree;
Show thyself the Prince of Peace;
Bid our jars forever cease.

By thy reconciling love,
Every stumbling-block remove:
Each to each unite, endear;
Come, and spread thy banner here.

Make us of one heart and mind—
Courteous, pitiful, and kind;
Lowly, meek, in thought and word—
Altogether like our Lord.

Let us for each other care;
Each the other's burden bear;
To thy church the pattern give;
Show how true believers live.

Free from anger and from pride,
Let us thus in God abide;
All the depths of love express—
All the heights of holiness.

Let us then with joy remove
To the family above;
On the wings of angels fly:
Show how true believers die.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Associationalism

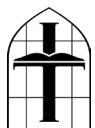
Kevin T. Bauder

This weekend I am traveling to Lake Benton, Minnesota, to address the southwestern fellowship of the Minnesota Baptist Association (MBA). The MBA is the current permutation of what used to be the Minnesota Baptist Convention. It is the organization that W. B. Riley and Richard Volley Clearwaters managed to separate from the old Northern Baptist Convention. Later on, Clearwaters led the state's Baptist fundamentalists to prevent the convention from being captured by neo-evangelicalism. It continues to perpetuate a solidly separatist position to this day. In fact, before I will be permitted to speak, I will be required to sign a document expressing my agreement with the ideals of separatist fundamentalism.

The MBA is divided into several regional fellowships. I'm not sure that I can remember them all, but I know that there are distinct southwestern and southeastern fellowships, and I believe that highway US-169 is just about the dividing line. The Twin Cities has its own fellowship. There is also a fellowship, or maybe more than one, for the northern part of the state. Northern Minnesota is sparsely populated and the churches are pretty spread out.

All these fellowships, including the MBA itself, are organized along the associational principle. Baptists have found different ways to cooperate. In some cases, their cooperation is on a purely case-by-case basis. Sometimes pastors form preachers' fellowships. Sometimes Baptists establish independent service organizations that are not subject to local church control. Occasionally, a larger church will invite smaller churches to help in accomplishing some great purpose. Historically, however, Baptists have usually chosen to organize in church associations. The characteristic of associations is that the decisions are made by messengers from the churches that fellowship with the association.

The rationale for associationalism centers on the priority of the local church in the New Testament. During this age, God is not primarily doing His work through independent preachers or through loose alliances of individuals. Rather, God has created the local church as the primary agency through which He is accomplishing His purpose. The local church is the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16) and it is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). Consequently, Baptists have usually concluded that when some aspect of



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centalseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

God's work is too large for a single congregation to accomplish, it is best pursued by churches working in cooperation.

Why do churches need to work together? One reason is education: few churches are able by themselves to train their next generation of leadership. Another reason is missions: raising support for missionaries, getting them to the field, and coordinating their activities requires specialized knowledge that few individual congregations possess. Pulpit exchange and transfer is another: associations provide a way of connecting pastorless churches with potential pastoral candidates. Furthermore, as governmental pressures are increasingly brought to bear against biblical Christianity, churches will experience a greater and greater need to encourage and support one another. An association provides a structure that formalizes such relationships. It provides for direct accountability to the fellowshipping churches while at the same time giving them a common voice.

Of course, associationalism is not the only way of meeting these needs. Nothing in scripture requires churches to form or fellowship with associations. Nevertheless, associations have often proven a useful tool in helping churches to accomplish those things that scripture does require them to do.

A good association also meets another need. Ministry is hard for both pastors and churches. We need to find ways to encourage one another. Associational meetings provide a venue for sharing ministry challenges, praying for each other, and finding mutual strength in the God of scripture. May I say that the southwestern fellowship does a good job in these areas.

Associations are organizations. With all organization a certain amount of planning and executing must take place. Otherwise, communication lapses, meetings don't get planned, and nobody gets to fellowship. Many pastors are more expositors than they are administrators. Others are more gifted in relationships. Associations need at least some leaders who are gifted in planning and managing.

Of course, the danger is that planners and managers can take over the whole show. When that happens, the result is called *conventionism*, and it means that the planners and managers start to pry into the affairs of the churches themselves. The MBA and its regional fellowships have taken measures to guard against conventionism, resulting in fellowship meetings that have been conspicuously free of ecclesiastical politics.

I know nearly all the pastors in the southwestern fellowship. Many of them were my students. I also know many of the members of their churches. As I meet with them this weekend, my goal will be to give them scripture that will encourage them in the challenges that they face. Along the way we'll talk informally about what our churches are going through and what our pastors are experiencing. We'll discuss what we've been reading. We'll enjoy table fellowship. We'll probably laugh together, maybe weep together, and

certainly pray together. By the time it's all over, I'll have received more encouragement than I've given. That is associationalism at its best.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
