

Blest Be That Dear Uniting Love

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Blest be that dear uniting love,
That will not let us part!
Our bodies may far off remove,
We still are one in heart.

Join'd in one spirit to our Head,
Where he appoints we go;
And still in Jesu's footsteps tread,
And shew his praise below.

O may we ever walk in him,
And nothing know beside,
Nothing desire, nothing esteem,
But Jesus crucify'd!

Closer and closer let us cleave
To his belov'd embrace;
Expect his fulness to receive,
And grace to answer grace.

Partakers of the Saviour's grace,
The same in mind and heart,
Nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,
Nor life, nor death can part.

But let us hasten to the day
Which shall our flesh restore;
When death shall all be done away,
And bodies part no more!

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Association and Autonomy

Kevin T. Bauder

The following essay was published in 1995 in *Ruminations*. Recent pronouncements in the Southern Baptist convention have underlined its current applicability.

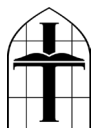
An Association is a voluntary society formed and maintained for mutual help among the churches associated.... No Church is under obligation to affiliate with it; and any connected church can withdraw cooperation, at any time, for any reasons which seem to itself sufficient, without prejudice to either its evangelical or its denominational reputation and standing. But while it continues associated, it must abide by the rules and regulations, mutually agreed upon, by which the body is governed.... If any Church does not approve the proceedings it can refuse to affiliate, and withdraw at any time from the Association, if it thinks best.

Edward T. Hiscox, *New Directory for Baptist Churches* (1894), 335

The year is 1922; the scene, the Northern Baptist Convention at Indianapolis, Indiana. Cadle Tabernacle is packed as W. B. Riley stands and moves that the Convention recommend the New Hampshire Confession of Faith to the churches. In solemn tones, he reads the Confession through. As soon as he has finished, Convention treasurer James Colgate jumps to his feet. "So that's the New Hampshire Confession, is it?" he says. "I thought Dr. Riley was reading off the back of a Western Union telegraph blank."

Cornelius Woelfkin, pastor of the prestigious Park Avenue Church in New York City, then offers a substitute motion: "The Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice, and we need no other statement." Woelfkin's motion lands like an 88mm shell among the embattled fundamentalists. They cannot vote for the New Hampshire Confession without voting against the New Testament. When the vote is taken, the New Hampshire Confession is rejected by a margin of two to one.

The Woelfkin motion teaches a lesson that ought to be branded on the forehead of every serious Baptist. Any principle that we hold can be twisted



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and used against us, and the more dearly we hold the principle, the more dangerously it may be warped. Woelfkin embezzled the first and most important of the Baptist distinctives: the absolute authority and sufficiency of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order. In his hands it became a threat to the purity of the faith.

A misunderstood principle is always a hazard. We find it easy to repeat slogans but harder work to define our distinctives or to understand the applications and limitations of our principles. It behooves us sometimes to reflect soberly upon first things.

No belief has been more characteristic of Baptist churches than the autonomy of the local church. We have always refused to submit the local church to the authority of any external hierarchy, synod, board or denomination. The liberty of the individual congregation is a rallying cry for all true Baptists.

But precisely because this doctrine is so important to us, we must be more careful than usual in examining those who appeal to it during times of debate. We must make certain that we are not being hoodwinked by someone who knows our language but misapplies our principles. In fact, I believe that many individuals are making very bad use of this doctrine today.

For example, take the current [in 1995] debate over the inerrancy of Scripture within the Southern Baptist Convention. As I write, I am looking at the words of a man who claims that it is unbaptistic to require Convention churches to affirm inerrancy. Such a requirement, he argues, would violate their autonomy: they must have the liberty to define their own doctrines.

This is the same argument that was made repeatedly against the fundamentalists during the battle for control of the Northern Baptist Convention. You could not force a man or a church to accept your theories about the inspiration of the Bible, or the incarnation, or the atonement, they said. To do so was to violate Baptist liberty.

Even in the early days of the GARBC, some questioned the validity of establishing tests of fellowship. In an essay entitled, *Can a Baptist Body Define the Requirements of Its Own Membership Without Violating the Sovereignty of the Local Church?*, Robert Ketcham argued convincingly that it could. He suggested an analogy between an association's relationship to the churches and the individual church's relationship to its members. A local church, he said, can certainly define requirements for membership without violating anybody's soul liberty. In the same way, an association can define requirements for fellowship without violating any church's autonomy.

The analogy cuts to the heart of the matter. Fellowship, whether it takes place in the local church or in an association, must always have some basis. In stipulating *requirements* for fellowship, the church or association is actually stating the *basis* of its fellowship. It is saying what all those who stand

in its ranks hold in common. As David Nettleton taught us, we must either limit our message or limit our fellowship.

The local church is free to decide the locus and extent of its own fellowship. No one can force a church to cooperate with any organization. The church must decide for itself, on the basis of the organization's position. Tests of fellowship not only keep churches out, they also attract churches of like belief. If for some reason the organization changes its position, the individual local congregation is free to pack its bags and leave. In another essay, Ketcham argued that this ability to withdraw at any time for any reason was the *sine qua non* of "Baptist doctrine and principle."

Strictly speaking, then, no test of fellowship that an association adopts can be regarded as an abridgment of local church autonomy as long as the local church possesses the ability to leave the association unscathed. If an association demands that all churches in its fellowship must paint blue circles in their parking lots, it is within its rights. Any churches that object to the standard are free to leave—and assuredly many will.

Therefore, if a truly Baptist association is discussing whether to implement or retain some test of fellowship, it is never proper to raise the issue of local church autonomy. The only proper question is whether the proposed standard is justified. The question stands or falls on its own merits: if the proposed standard is necessary to define the position of the organization, then it ought to be adopted. If it is not necessary, or if the position it defines is an unworthy position, then it ought to be rejected. Some churches may be attracted whichever decision the organization makes, and some will leave whichever decision it makes. In neither case is the autonomy of the local church at stake.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and 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.
