

Is There a Role for Local Associations in the 21st Century?

Acts 16:4-5

Intro: A Question of Relevance.

Yes, I believe there is a role, I wouldn't be here if I didn't. But let me qualify. Can they play a valuable role in the future? Yes. Do they play a valuable role as they currently exist? Questionable.

What would an effective local Baptist Association look like today and in the future? Let's look at the Bible and Baptist history to help us find the answer.

Acts 16:5, what is it that cause the churches to be "strengthened in faith and grow in daily number"? The delivery of the apostolic word. (v.4)

1. Encouragement in Sound Doctrine and Theological Accountability

See also Nettles quote.

Gospel conversation – sharing the word of God with each other

Choosing this rather than "church complaint" style conversation

Association becomes an avenue to act out your sinful divisiveness.

Real unity is based on common, gospel-centered fellowship. It's our only real reason for existing. Practical ministry opportunities come after gospel unity.

When we assume the gospel/sound doctrine, it is soon lost.

2. Becoming a Channel of Financial Resources Rather than a Reservoir

2 Cor 8-9, yes, cooperating churches necessarily deal with money

John Leland quote

Battling an "institution-first" mentality (Mike Day quote)

This is something that conventions and associations are battling all around us – how to not fall into this kind of mindset. Some places have been more successful than others. Endemic to any organization or business. After first "visionary" generation is gone, will the vision and purpose survive?

We'd like to think "institution-first" can't happen here. But our latest budget is a plain-sight reminder that it is alive and well and must be confronted. How much of our budget goes to institution maintenance? (Includes building & grounds, utilities, personnel, office supply) Used to be 80% before recent budget cuts. Now is 93%. Half of cuts were to the 80%, half to the 20% of direct ministry line items. Leaving us with a budget of \$144,000, of which \$9,000 goes to ministry items.

3. Establishing, Equipping, Empowering Churches

This comes from what we *don't* see in the New Testament: Associations! Christ instituted his church! Everything the association (or convention) does must be church centered and church driven. Try to avoid anything that would replace the ministry of a church or churches.

Leadership Training

Church Planting – long distance and HERE!

Example of Missions Development Team – don't collect money to distribute, connect churches to other churches. Example of Union Baptist helping us get started with mission trips.

Vision is for an organization that is streamlined, decentralized, theologically-based, gospel-centered, church-driven, and Great Commission-effective.

Tom Nettles, *The Baptists*, Vol 2

p. 75 Est in 1707, the Philadelphia Association was the first association of Baptist Churches in America... The Philadelphia Association had no sympathy whatsoever with that which it considered to be false doctrine. Many cases of doctrinal discipline appear on the pages of the minutes of the Philadelphia as well as a well-ordered plan for inculcating orthodox doctrine....The Philadelphia Association functioned in its earliest stages solely as an advisory council but soon saw the strength of voluntary cooperation in promulgation of the gospel and support of education. It was instrumental in establishing hundreds of other churches and took a special interest in giving aid to destitute areas of the South, to 'preach the gospel, counsel feeble churches, and instruct the scattered disciples of Christ.' In 1742, the Association published its Confession of Faith and Discipline, adopting the Second London Confession, which they considered a 'standard of orthodoxy among Baptists'... In 1851, H. G. Jones wrote, 'In every period of its existence the Association has firmly maintained the soundest form of Scripture doctrine; nor could any church have been admitted, at any period, which denied or concealed any of the doctrines of grace'... The same, with minor exceptions was true of the Charleston and Sandy Creek Associations. The overlap that can be seen in influence between churches and preachers developed into a solid unity in doctrine and practice... The interaction of [these] Associations and churches gives substance to the Baptist ideal of orthodoxy and church autonomy as a catalyst to united witness.

Nettles, *The Baptists*, Volume 1

p.36 The highly influential Philadelphia Association endorsed [the language of the Second London Confession] as the standard by which churches in the Association were received, disciplined, and advised; it was adopted early on by the FBC of Charleston, and became the theological guidepost of the Charleston Association.

John Leland, *Missionary Societies*, 1818, argues against them, criticisms:

“unceasing solicitations... which are made for money... the numerous and continual collections... the amazing sums they have funded... almost wholly taken up in managing money matters...”

Mike Day, DOM in Memphis, Mid-South Baptist Association, at Union University, Baptist Identity Conference, Feb. 15-17, 2007

<http://www.uu.edu/news/release.cfm?ID=1144>

Day examines future of associations, state Baptist conventions

Baptist associations began to face an identity crisis after state conventions and the SBC came on the scene, Day noted. That crisis heightened after the Cooperative Program was established in 1925 and state conventions were given the assignment of collecting and dispersing those funds three years later, Day continued.

“Both state conventions and Baptist associations are seeking to be relevant,” he said. Day observed that much of what occurs in Southern Baptist life related to its various levels (national convention, state conventions, associations) is confusing to members of local churches.

As a result, Southern Baptist associations and state conventions are dealing with the “predicaments of the present,” Day told participants at the Union conference.

Those predicaments include (sampling):

- The duplicated-effort syndrome. “We do the same things at a lot of different levels,” Day observed. He noted that some associations can assess, train, and deploy a church planter. Those same services are also provided by state conventions and the North American Mission Board, Day said. He noted the largeness and the success of the denomination has created a duplication of services.
- The institution-first syndrome. Day noted that there are institutions to be cared for, especially on the state convention level. “These are not bad things, but they are expensive things,” he said. “Our need to provide, educate, and edify pushed us into the institution business,” he continued.
- The thinly-spread missions dollars syndrome. “Our missions dollars are thinning out,” Day said. Simply put, he noted, fewer dollars are being shared with more ministries at all levels.