

READING

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

SERMON

Trans-Local Church – LBA

During the 17th Century, while under persecution, Baptists published a number of Confessions – *what they believed*, to clarify their doctrinal position and to refute errors with which they had been branded. In London one such confession was subscribed to by seven Baptist congregations.

So said one article I read when looking at the subject of Associations.

- As you know we have looked at the local church that is us, here at ADBC. We are the local church.
- Then we have looked at the Global Church, the church worldwide with which we are in contact with through such organisations as BMS World Mission. Where we have contacts like Romania through Calin and Adela
- Coming a little smaller we have the National Church. For us that is the Baptist Union of Great Britain or BUGB for short. This is a resource centre, an organisation that helps out smaller churches to have a minister via Home Mission grant. When Sue and I began at Swavesey, one third of my stipend was paid by Home Mission – this meant that ADBC was helping to keep me and Sue at Swavesey for three years, the length of time we were on Home Mission as a church.

So surely that is it. But here we have some Baptist churches in the London Area getting together to form an Association, to think about what they had in common, their common beliefs, where they all stood as Baptists, because communications were more difficult, you did not know who was up North or for matter down South! So you joined with those nearest to you. At around the same time as the seven churches in London got together we also had the foundations of:

- the Abingdon Association involving churches in Berks, Bucks and counties around there
- the Western and Midlands Associations

And slightly later

- Northamptonshire Baptist Association

And so on. Baptist churches all over the country formed themselves into Associations.

So we have a sort of halfway house. An Association is larger than a church, but smaller than a national body. Over the country, under the umbrella of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, there are thirteen Associations, we being in the London Baptist Association. Each Association or Regional Association has a team of regional ministers and administration staff that support the local church pastorally, advise on mission and practical matters and organise beneficial training events.

But

- Are they Biblical?
- Are they necessary?
- Are they needed?

You do not find Associations in the Bible among the early church, or do you?

Let me read you an inscription dated A.D. 136 about a burial society that was around at that time

It was voted unanimously that whoever desires to enter this society shall pay an initiation fee of 100 sesterces (A silver or bronze coin of ancient Rome equivalent to one fourth of a denarius, so this was a month's pay) and an amphora (a narrow-necked jar) of good wine, and shall pay monthly dues of 5 asses. It was voted further that if anyone has not paid his dues for six consecutive months and the common lot of mankind befalls him, his claim to burial shall not be considered, even if he has provided for it in his will. It was voted further that upon the decease of a paid-up member of our body there will be due him from the treasury 300 sesterces, from which sum will be deducted a funeral fee of 50 sesterces to be distributed at the pyre [among those attending]; the obsequies (the rituals carried out at a funeral), furthermore, will be performed on foot. . . .

It was voted further that if any member desires to make any complaint or bring up any business, he is to bring it up at a business meeting, so that we may banquet in peace and good cheer on festive days. It was voted further that any member who moves from one place to another so as to cause a disturbance shall be fined 4 sesterces. Any member, moreover, who speaks abusively of another or causes an uproar shall be fined 12 sesterces. Any member who uses any abusive or insolent language to a quinquennalis at a banquet shall be fined 20 sesterces. It was voted further that on the festive days of his term of office each quinquennalis is to conduct worship with incense and wine and is to perform his other functions clothed in white, and that on the birthdays of Diana and Antinoüs he is to provide oil for the society in the public bath before they banquet. (Lewis and Reinhold, 274–75)

Sound familiar?

“Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1 Corinthians 16:1-2 NIV)

And

“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,” (Revelation 1:9-10 NIV)

Associations like the burial society, of which we have just heard, would meet perhaps on a monthly basis, the church met on a weekly basis. Then we read

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,” (1 Corinthians 11:20-23 NIV)

As the association had a banquet, the people of God in Corinth were similarly holding a banquet, called the Lord’s Supper, the agape or love meal together, but it was going horribly wrong. It seems as if for some they had found a new association to belong to – the church of God and although they met in houses – the church – they also met in groups of houses – their association.

Slightly earlier in the letter to the church of God in Corinth, we read

“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.”
(1 Corinthians 11:17-19 NIV)

There were division among them. Earlier as we heard earlier, in the letter Paul writes

“Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn’t talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in the Christian life. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world? When one of you says, “I am a follower of Paul,” and another says, “I follow Apollos,” aren’t you acting just like people of the world? After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God’s servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us.” (1 Corinthians 3:1-5 NLT)

Were there several house churches in Corinth and they would come together at times as an Association of Corinthian churches and this rivalry would rise? It seems as if this may have happened. There was an association of churches in a geographical place, because they recognised one thing – the fact that they were not independent. This is by far the most important concept that brings churches into Associating with each other.

In a Baptist church we are autonomous, but this does not mean independent. Autonomous means that our finances are controlled by us and that the only money we receive is from ourselves. The stipend of the ministers comes out of the church finances, not a centralised body. We make decisions about ourselves here, how we conduct ourselves in worship, how we govern ourselves – do we have deacons and elders and deacons only? Many areas that we have autonomy over, but we should never think of ourselves as being independent – we are interdependent.

This is why our forebears grouped together in Associations because they saw that we were interdependent. We here have been beneficiaries of that interdependent. Before Sue and I came here, the church had a moderator, someone who looked after things – that was another minister from another Baptist church nearby. We also have had training put on by the London Baptist Association into church finances and church constitution, which would have been harder to have put on ourselves, if we were independent, not realising that we were interdependent.

So we have the London Baptist Association who look over the whole of London and have a strategy for the whole of London. The strategy that they are doing this under is the purpose statement of

**The LBA is an association of churches called to
make disciples who share the good news of Jesus.**

With the strapline

Making disciples – sharing the good news of Jesus

They are doing this using a foundation being grounded in God and then four models:

- **A Net:** that is a network of relationships through which the churches offer mutual support to each other in their life and mission – i.e. interdependence, not independence
- **A Pool:** As churches together we have a pool of shared experience, knowledge and resources from which the churches draw to sustain and enhance their life – i.e. interdependence not independence
- **Light:** Those called into leadership within the Association are called to be light to the churches, allowing the light of the gospel to shine where there is darkness, witnessing to the way of Jesus and helping churches to stay true to Jesus.
- **A bridge:** The Association through its committees and through the team forms something of a bridge between the local church, the wider church and the wider community.

That is the vision, the plan of our Association and I think that it is a good vision, hopefully one that is followed through, but it can only be carried out because as churches we see ourselves as interdependent as we too are **Making disciples – sharing the good news of Jesus.**

So how is the LBA financed? To put it simply - through us. The money we give to Home Mission, which we do as a church, a percentage of that comes back to the Association in order to pay the four Regional Ministers we have and the admin staff that are based in Bloomsbury Baptist Church in the middle of London, near Tottenham Tube Station. Every tie we give to Home Mission we as part of the LBA also benefit.

The word Association may not be in the Bible, but associations were known in the culture of the day. So the idea was taken over into the early church – sadly so were some of the behaviours as well! The early church also realised the worth of being interdependent, as did Baptists after they had formed church in areas, churches near each other formed an Association.

But are they useful today? Let me end by telling of two stories showing the worth of Associations and of church being interdependent.

One of the tasks I am asked to do, because of our interdependence, is to be a Home Mission visitor. This entails me going to meet with deacons from a church or to look at a special ministry. One visit I made earlier this year was to Kings Cross Baptist Church where we met among others, Peter James. Peter does not work in a church as such, although he attends Kings Cross Baptist Church – Peter is a Student Worker and works among the 90,000 students based in London, or at least those around Kings Cross which has a high student population. This work can only happen because Peter, or the church for Peter receives a Home Mission grant for Special Ministries and also a grant from the LBA – the association. This is because Kings Cross Baptist Church itself could not afford to find Peter, but because of our interdependence, then the money can be found for the worthwhile task Peter is carrying out.

Then there is another story involving Ivan King, the minister of Cranbrook Baptist Church, or at least until this month was up. Ivan and his wife Nikki are moving to another church. The name of the church is Church From Scratch, which is in the Southend area. This was started by Peter Dominey who had the vision for it, took it to several churches who then joined together to fund the project and the Church From Scratch went ahead with the help of several churches in the area working together, the local Association, and a grant from Home Mission.

God wants us to work together, to be interdependent both as people and as churches and we can do this through the LBA.

PRAYER