

The Value of Godly Ministry Partnerships

By Dr. David M. Doran

“...in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.”
Philippians 1:5

Separatist Baptists possess a healthy fear of denominations (when defined as “an organized group of religious congregations”). This fear is rooted in what it means to be a separatist Baptist. As separatists, concern regarding compromise is always a “front burner” issue. As Baptists, the autonomy of the local church is a core conviction. Because denominations have often been a conduit for both the spread of compromise and the surrender of control, separatist Baptists have grown very suspicious of them. Historically, Baptists have used words like association, convention, or fellowship to describe their organized efforts as a means of avoiding the dangerous tendencies of more formal denominational structures.

Yet, it seems possible to overreact to these dangers by denying what seems to be clear in the New Testament—local churches did enjoy some level of cooperation and mutual help in the fulfillment of God’s purposes. The churches of Macedonia and Achaia gathered offerings for the saints in Jerusalem. And, in Philippians 1:5, the Apostle Paul mentions the “participation” of those believers “in the gospel” and, in 4:15, he mentions the fact that they supported him while he was ministering in Thessalonica. Paul, a missionary sent out by the church at Antioch, was being supported by the church in Philippi as he planted the church in Thessalonica. What a great illustration of the power of godly ministry partnerships!

The Greek word translated “participation” in Philippians 1:5 is the Greek word *koinonia* which is often translated “fellowship.” It points to their sharing or communion with Paul in his ministry. The Philippians had not only embraced the gospel message that Paul preached, they had embraced the missionary himself. Their joining together in this task is truly called a fellowship or partnership in the ministry. It speaks of mutual involvement and cooperative effort.

The Philippian church participated with Paul in this gospel work through intercession (1:19-20), involvement (4:2-3), and investment (4:15-16). What an incredible privilege for a local assembly to serve Christ in its own locale *and* be involved in the spread of the gospel around the world at the same time. By partnering with Paul and his missionary team, they multiplied their fruitfulness.

It is truly sad when the vision of any local church collapses inward so that everything is measured by what it will do for itself and so that there is little left over of time, energy, and resources for the work of planting churches. However, sometimes churches have the vision but not the resources to tackle this challenge alone. That’s where godly partnerships, like the one between Paul and the Philippians, can prove so valuable. Together, likeminded local churches can make a significant impact for Jesus Christ!

Let’s be clear: this text is not warrant for blind involvement in denominational cooperative programs, but it does suggest that the ministry of each local church may embrace cooperative efforts that carry out God’s program for this dispensation. While there is no binding obligation for ministry cooperation outside of the local church, there is a biblical precedent for it. Since the task of the Great Commission is larger than any one church can fulfill, Baptists have traditionally valued the opportunity to form partnerships in the gospel (conventions, associations, fellowships, and mission agencies). Most of these have started well and served a legitimate place as helpers to the local church.

These all serve as servants of local churches. Edward Hiscox writes, in his classic work, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches*, “While the churches are the only Christian societies provided for by the New Testament economy, and, therefore, the only ones really essential to the accomplishment of the purposes contemplated by the Gospel, yet combinations of individual and local efforts have been found convenient for the carrying on of Christian work on wider areas and more distant fields than could well be cared for by individual service” (p. 330). The New Testament is clear about the primacy of the local church, but this principle does not rule out cooperative effort.

It rules out anything that replaces or usurps the role of the local church. As long as a fellowship of churches maintains its proper place as servant to those churches, it can be a blessing to them and God's work.

Church fellowships do not necessarily violate the autonomy of the local churches participating in them. Hiscox rightly observes, "Churches are not received into *membership*, though such expressions are often, and indeed ordinarily used; but they are received to *fellowship* and *cooperation*; which fact is evinced by their pastors and messengers being admitted to *membership*, thus composing its constituent elements" (p. 334). No group outside of the local church can dictate to that church how it must believe and operate. A properly constituted fellowship would never attempt to do so. The danger always exists that associations or fellowships will begin to amass power and that loyalties will shift from the local church to the association. But this problem is a depravity problem, not one inherent in the concept of cooperative ministry. The church at Corinth was plagued by power struggles and divided loyalties because of fleshly attitudes, not ecclesiastical structures.

It is important to remember that church partnerships to advance the gospel are human, not divinely established societies. Again Hiscox: "An Association is a *voluntary* society formed and maintained for mutual help among the churches associated, and for the religious welfare of the field it occupies. It is of human, not divine authority; it grows out of the sympathies of Christian fellowship, and the need of mutual help" (p. 335). In other words, they must walk lightly and not think themselves to be the center of God's program or more important than the local church. The local church is the God-ordained vehicle for carrying out the work of the Great Commission.

This seems to be the type of voluntary participation by the Philippians for which Paul praised God. This has also been the type of voluntary participation that is the heritage of Baptists through the years. Great missionary and church planting efforts have characterized Baptists as they joined together for the spread of the gospel and mutual fellowship in that truth and task. While it is true that over time many of these fellowships have turned from their original confidence in the gospel or have become mired in compromise, it seems faulty to conclude that we should abandon the idea altogether. If we stand together in common commitment to Christ and the fundamental doctrines of the faith, then we should have strong "sympathies of Christian fellowship." If we believe that our churches can benefit from the mutual help of an association and that the Great Commission is better served by united effort, then we ought to prize the opportunity to stand and serve together in these dark days.

Many believe that the day of formal church associations or fellowships among separatist Baptists is past. A spirit of independence rules the day, and that isn't necessarily bad. But we should not, in our desire to maintain independence, forget the biblical precedent and historical pattern of cooperative effort that has been a great practical help to the spread of the gospel and the planting of churches. Very few churches have the resources to go completely on their own. There is still a great window of opportunity for likeminded churches to serve as partners in the Great Commission. As we strive to avoid compromise and maintain legitimate local church autonomy, let's not pull so far apart that we can't partner together in the fellowship of the gospel.