

“Independent: Free, autonomous, and thus self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating; each local church, each association . . . is independent in controlling its own affairs without coercion from outside influences. The word is sometimes used incorrectly as meaning ‘unaffiliated,’ but a church in affiliation with an association . . . is just as independent as one unaffiliated.

“Autonomy: Self-determination or self-government; each Baptist church . . . is according to Baptist ideology, completely independent or autonomous.

“Fellowship: Used in several ways: (1) of the spiritual communion among born-again people; (2) of the covenant bond forming a local church; (3) of the affiliation or association of churches of like position and procedure.

“Association: A voluntary relationship of local churches formed by pastors and messengers from said churches for the purpose of mutual fellowship and united expression of common convictions . . .”

A careful review of these definitions will demonstrate that the term independence centers on being self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. None of these are in the least interfered with when a church voluntarily associates with other churches. Affiliation in no way can be defined as limiting independency in its literal meaning.

Now let us consider the evidences in Scriptures for churches fellowshiping together.

THE TASK DEMANDS FELLOWSHIP

The first evidence I find is that the task assigned to the local church in Scripture demanded fellowship. Consider Acts 1:8 where we are told that the task is to “*be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*” No local church could expect to accomplish this monumental task all alone.

Jerusalem was the first sphere of witness. Indeed one local church might be able to reach its local community without cooperating with other churches of like faith and practice. However, it will only be effective within its community if all within the body (the local church) work together. The principle of fellowship in witnessing is true to some extent even within the local community.

However, when we look beyond the local community to the broader areas we begin to see the vast importance of fellowship beyond the local church. Judaea would correspond to one’s state. Now no one local church is going to be able to effectively reach the entire state alone. To reach the state we must work together with other local churches of like faith and practice. I believe this was anticipated, if not implied, by the task assigned.

In like manner, no one local church will be able to effectively witness to its “*Samaria*” (which would seem to correspond to our nation) alone. Nor will one local church be able to reach to the “*uttermost part of the earth*” alone. We can carry out this great task when we recognize the principle of fellowship in God’s work.

Thus, to effectively fulfill our four-fold mandate we must work together. Churches fellowshiping and working together is assumed by the task assigned.

NEW TESTAMENT GIVING DEMONSTRATES FELLOWSHIP

Secondly, we have the pattern of New Testament beneficence as evidence of a close bond of fellowship. Consider these Scriptures:

I Corinthians 16:1 – “*Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.*”

II Corinthians 8:1,4 – “*Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; . . . Praying us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.*”

It is obvious from these similar verses in the New Testament that there was a bond of fellowship which was demonstrated by the sharing with those of sister churches in benevolent giving, that the work of God might prosper.

COMMON OWNERSHIP PRESUMES FELLOWSHIP

The third evidence we have for churches associating together in the New Testament is that common ownership demands fellowship.

Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, “*For ye brethren became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus; . . .*” Notice that “*churches*” is plural. Notice the possession of God. This is consistent with the promise of Christ when He said that He would build “*my church.*” The church would belong to HIM. When Christ died on the cross He paid the price to purchase the believers from sin and Satan. He ransomed us. Now we belong to Him. Since the church (ekklesia) is but the assembly of “*the called out ones*” which have been purchased by the blood of Christ, therefore, the church belongs to Christ. He purchased us with His blood on Calvary’s cross. How can we be biblical if we refuse to fellowship with those “*called out ones*” for whom Christ died who share our same faith and practice? Every true church belongs to Christ; therefore, they are each of the household of faith. They constitute one family. The menorah holds separate lights, which are bonded together in a union. The bond that unites the churches is the common ownership of Jesus Christ.

COMMON COMMUNICATION ANTICIPATES FELLOWSHIP

A fourth evidence of fellowship between churches in the New Testament is that of common communication. Paul spoke for many churches when he said to the church at Rome, “*The churches of Christ salute you.*” A common communication from many churches that had a common fellowship to the church at Rome through the Apostle Paul.

Galatians was an Epistle written by the Apostle Paul to “*the churches of Galatia,*”—a common epistle to all the Galatian churches, denoting a close bond of fellowship between these churches.

Note also that in the well-known passage in Revelation 2 and 3 the messenger of God addressed seven letters to seven local churches of Asia, yet each church was commanded to observe what was written “*to the churches.*” Thus, the contents of the letter written to each local church was to be shared with the other churches. This denotes a very close bond between these churches of a geographical area.

Finally, Paul told the church at Colosse that *“when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea”* (Col. 4:16). I know of no instance where we would make such a bold request today. It denotes a far greater interdependence of the churches in the New Testament days than even we enjoy today in biblical fellowship.

PAUL’S MINISTRY DENOTES FELLOWSHIP

Paul’s ministry would seem to present a further evidence of fellowship among churches in the New Testament. His pattern of ministry was to go throughout an area seeking to evangelize souls, edify and instruct converts, and organize local churches (cf. Acts 14:21-23). He later would return to this same area and seek to confirm these churches. We never find that he sought to isolate a local church, but rather assumed they would work with other churches he had initiated of like faith and practice. Furthermore, in his letters to the churches of Corinth and Philippi we find that he was supported in his missionary endeavors by many local churches, which stood together in the work of God.

COMMON BUSINESS REQUIRED FELLOWSHIP

The final evidence I will mention is the picture presented in the New Testament of close harmony and fellowship between local churches as they shared in common business. In I Corinthians 16:3 Paul said that whoever was approved by letters (a poll was seemingly to be taken) Paul would send to receive their gifts for the work of God. Later, he wrote in II Corinthians 8:18-19, *“And we have sent him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches; And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace (gift) . . .”* Thus, we see that the churches exercised some sort of election to select one to represent them in carrying their gifts to Paul for the work of God. I suggest that this is the first recorded associational action! Truly, this is great evidence for the fellowship of churches in the New Testament.

BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP IS GOOD AND PLEASANT

Much more could be said about the value of fellowship in God’s work. Let’s not be intimidated by those who speak negatively about fellowshiping together. Let’s be true to the Word of God. Let’s stand for the local church. Let’s stand together in godly unity and fellowship to go forward in our great mandate for this age. Indeed, *“we are laborers together with God”* (I Cor. 3:9). Remember the words of the psalmist, *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”* (Psalms 133:1). Let’s put it into practice.

BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP by Dr. Richard Paige

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It has been my opportunity over recent years to travel quite extensively over the United States and many areas abroad. Repeatedly in my travels one matter has come to arrest my concern . . . that of the seeming deterioration of fellowship among Bible believing and practicing Baptists. Constantly we hear about the “high road” of independence as contrasted to the “low road” of fellowship in associations. This bodes great dangers for the next generations of Baptists. Such an overreaction to denominationalism that implies that churches fellowshiping together in some sort of association is in some way unbiblical, is a very shallow and oft times self-serving concept.

If we are going to have a fundamental Baptist testimony to bequeath to the next generation, then we must stand together with others of like faith and practice. I contend that such fellowship is not only practical, but also biblical in its very nature. I wish to share with you in this brief message why I believe such fellowship is indeed mandated in the Scriptures.

Now we know that God has established the local church as His instrument to carry on His work in this age. The centrality of the local church in the New Testament account is undeniable. The Gospels record the preparation for the church by our Lord Himself. The book of Acts presents its inauguration. The Epistles give to us its explanation. Revelation presents its glorification. While all of Scripture focuses on Christ Himself, the New Testament cannot be properly understood without clearly understanding what Christ taught about His church. Christ established the local church. Christ committed the continuation of His work to the local church He established. The local church is the highest tribunal in all ecclesiastical matters.

Does this great doctrine of the local church in the New Testament rule out any thought of an inter-dependency of the churches? Is there a Scriptural bond between the churches? Is an association of independent local churches fellowshiping and working together in consistency with New Testament practice? Before presenting to you six evidences from the Scriptures that I believe demonstrate such fellowship to be biblical, perhaps we should note some important definitions.

IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

We are indebted to Dr. Warren Vanhetloo for these definitions, which were printed in the pamphlet “Words Baptists Use” by Central Seminary Press.

“Affiliation: The relationship of a local church to a group of cooperating churches . . . affiliation refers to relationship without connectionalism in that an affiliating church does not thereby join either its membership, its assets, or its program to that of the association. . .