

## **The Proper View and Use of an Association**

The local church is the only divinely established organization in the New Testament and therefore only local churches are essential to accomplish the fulfillment of the purposes of the Gospel in carrying out the Commission. Combinations of individual and local efforts have been found to reach more profound goals and wider fields than singular efforts usually produce. It was and is this understanding that justifies the existence of the Bethel Missionary Baptist Association.

A migration from Tennessee and Kentucky principally and within it a number of ministers and church members brought about the organization of these churches. This association still maintains a close fellowship with those churches. (See: History of the Middle Tennessee Baptist/Twentieth Century Baptist/ History of Kentucky Baptist, etc.)

There are two senses in which we understand an association to exist. First, we speak of the yearly meeting of the messengers representing the churches as the association. Although the association is composed of churches, the churches never really meet as an assembly, but rather as joint committees of messengers from each church. As an advisory body, no authority is conferred by the churches to act in a any binding transaction or commitment. Only within the associational meeting itself are any rules of decorum, constitution, statements of doctrine, proposed meetings or projects, etc., adopted by the messengers. They are not incumbent upon the individual churches.

Second, there is a sense in which the association exists all year long (even as a church exists when it is not assembled). Indeed, it has had a continued existence since its date of establishment. J.M. Pendleton correctly states: "Some persons seem to think that the chief business of the associations is to collect the statistics of the churches and publish them. This is the least part of their business. Their great work is connected with local church extension, the missionary enterprise, Bible, book and tract distribution, ministerial education, and Sunday school work. Combined action for these objects is more effective than isolated action. This is the supreme reason for associations." (Church Manual pp. 173-174) Churches who separate themselves as independents when fellowship with sound sister churches is available become much more vulnerable to the snares of the devil. When a pastor is the only or excessively predominant influence on a congregation it may be hard to detect an error. The influence of other pastors, evangelists, and visiting ministers may awaken an alarm to a private interpretation or practice. "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety." (Proverbs 11:14)

As it is the duty of ministers to build up churches, it is also the duty of churches to build up ministers. There has therefore always been a very free exchange and support of supply and guest preaching. In revival, mission, singing, and youth services, there has been a steady united effort. Substantial representation is present at ordinations and church organizations.

When financial crises have arisen, the response has outdone what would have come from a single church. Our contributions to missions continue to increase.

Under the blessing of the Almighty, and possessing a spirit of love, like-mindedness, and good order, may the Bethel Association prove useful and faithful in the future as it has the past fifty years.

Elder Darrell Hicks