

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE ASSOCIATION PRINCIPLE

(This Bible study is suggested for use in churches, small groups, leadership teams and classes.)

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONGREGATIONS TO EACH OTHER?

- Matthew 16:18
Jesus said, *"I will build my Church..."* He did not say, *"I will build my churches..."* Had Jesus used the word *"churches,"* He would have given primary place to individual, isolated gatherings of believers. By saying, *"Church,"* Jesus emphasized that His followers from all times and places form one united movement.
- I Corinthians 12:12-13
Jesus' focus on His Church (singular), gave rise to the New Testament metaphor of the *"Body of Christ,"* rather than *"bodies of Christ."* Including himself, as well as his readers, Paul wrote, *"We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..."* including even people from ethnic and social groups that were far apart.
- John 17:11, 21, 22 and 24
If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you pray about tonight? What do you see as the significance of Jesus' repetition of His concern for the unity of His Church the night before He died?

EXAMPLES OF NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES WALKING AND WORKING TOGETHER

Groups of New Testament churches within limited geographical areas, sharing cultural and historical roots, strengthened each other in carrying out Christ's mission.

The Churches of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria Acts, Chapters 1-9

In the first few years after Jesus' ascension to heaven, thousands of Jewish people in Jerusalem and Judea became His followers. Sharing a common language, culture and faith, they easily formed a united body of believers. Their cultural affinity was so great it became a confining box, out of which the Holy Spirit had to move them through persecution. (Acts 8:1, 4)

In Acts 8:1-24, Phillip proclaimed Jesus in Samaria, where many believed.

- Why do you think Peter and John were sent to Samaria?
- This is the only passage in Acts where a special delegation was used to bestow the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Why do you think God chose this method in Samaria?
- How do you think the people of Samaria felt toward Peter, John, Phillip and the church of Jerusalem following this?



The Churches of Antioch, Cyprus and Galatia Acts 11:19-29, and Chapters 13-15

In Antioch, *“a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”* (Acts 11:21) The Church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas, to evaluate and oversee the rapidly growing congregation.

- What was Barnabas’ role in Antioch? (Acts 11:22-26)
- How did the Church of Antioch feel about the Church in Jerusalem? (Acts 11:27-30)



The focus for the Church of Antioch turned westward, as these predominately Gentile believers sent Saul and Barnabas to bring the Gospel to Cyprus and the province of Galatia.

- How was the continuing concern of Antioch for these new congregations demonstrated? (Acts 14:28-28; 15:36, 40-41)

The close relationship between the Church of Antioch and the churches of Cyprus and Galatia is also seen in Paul and Barnabas’ role at the Council of Jerusalem.

- Who appointed Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem? What was the issue? (Acts 15:1-3)
- What was the result of the representatives of the churches meeting to discuss this important theological issue? (Acts 15:28-29)
- How was the decision communicated? What was the reaction in the churches? (Acts 15:22-35 and 16:4-5)
- Paul also wrote the Epistle to the Galatians about this time, and it dealt with the same issues. (Galatians 1:2, 3:1-14, and 26-29)
- How do you think the churches of Cyprus and Galatia felt about Paul and the other leaders of the Church of Antioch?

The Churches of Macedonia and Greece Acts 16:7 – 18:28

Macedonia and Greece were not part of Paul’s vision when he left Antioch for a second visit to Cyprus and Galatia. Seeming to have reached a frustrating “dead end,” Paul received a vision *“of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”* (Acts 16:6-10)

Paul’s letters to congregations in Macedonia and Greece reveal a lively and active associational relationship among them.



I Thessalonians

- To whom had the church of Thessalonica become an example? (I Thessalonians 1:6-9)
- What Church did the Thessalonian Christians imitate? (Acts 2:14)
- In what ways do you think the Church at Thessalonica was showing brotherly love toward “*all the brothers throughout Macedonia?*” (I Thessalonians 4:9-10)
- Since this letter was addressed to the entire Church in Thessalonica (1:1), who do you think Paul may have had in mind when he wrote, “*have this letter read to all the brothers?*” (I Thessalonians 5:27)

I and II Corinthians

- The Church in Corinth was known for disputes and divisions. Why do you think Paul held up the importance and example of other churches to this Church? (I Corinthians 10:32; 11:16; 14:33, 36; and 16:1, 19)
- II Corinthians was a circular letter to all the churches of Greece. (II Corinthians 1:1)
- What group of churches did Paul use as an example for the Corinthians to follow? (II Corinthians 8:1-3)
- In what Church did Paul use the Corinthians as an example to follow? (II Corinthians 9:1-2)

The churches of Macedonia, as a group, commended and sent with Paul members of various congregations to oversee the offering he was gathering for relief in impoverished Jerusalem.

*And we are sending along with him **the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering...as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ.*** (II Corinthians 8:18-23)

Thus, we see that the congregations of Macedonia and Greece shared teaching, financial, and even management resources in order to further the cause of Christ.

The Churches of the Lycus Valley

The most interesting of all these New Testament church clusters is found in the Lycus Valley. The first was Ephesus, planted by Paul (Acts 18:18-21; Chapter 19).

The Church at Colosse was planted by Epaphras, who likely came from the Church of Ephesus at the instruction of Paul (Colossians 1:7-8).

- For what other churches did Epaphras provide leadership? (Colossians 4:12-15)



- What kind of relationship do you think may have existed among these churches that were led by Paul and Epaphras?

Revelation, Chapters 2-3, contains letters dictated by Christ to Apostle John, addressed to seven churches in this area. Because these letters were circulated together as part of the Book of Revelation, each congregation “read each other’s mail” from the Lord.

- How do you think members of the six “daughter churches” felt when they read that their “mother church” (Ephesus) had lost its first love? (Revelation 2:4)
- What did the other churches think of the congregation at Pergamum when they read that heresy and moral failure had so permeated this church that Christ threatened to come and *“fight against them with the sword of my mouth!”* (Revelation 2:14-16)
- Why would Christ allow all the churches to know that the Church of Laodicea was lukewarm and about to be spit out of His mouth? (Revelation 3:16)

It is clear that Christ intended that these congregations learn from each other’s examples, both good and bad, and hold each other accountable to be faithful to Him.

PURPOSE OF “ASSOCIATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We have seen that as churches walked and worked together in the cause of the Gospel, they discovered God’s purpose in “associational relationships,” including:

- Outreach (church planting)
- Theological discussion, particularly on issues related to the contextualization of the Gospel in new cultures
- To serve as examples (good and bad) to each other, learning by each other’s experiences
- To raise money for mission causes, such as the relief offering for the church in Jerusalem
- To commend ministerial leaders to each other (e.g., Acts 18:27 and Titus 3:13)
- To hold each other accountable for the apostolic instruction they received

THINK ABOUT IT

- Make a list of the benefits the New Testament congregations experienced by walking and working together.
- Could churches today experience the same benefits? Why or why not?
- Has your congregation been blessed by its relationship with other congregations that are committed to the same cause? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- What steps can your congregation take to increase its experience of walking and working together with other congregations to advance the cause of Christ?