
Co-operation Between Evangelical Churches

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This is one of the most urgent issues confronting *independent* evangelical churches today. Are we going to maintain a position of isolation or seek to conserve denominational traditions or, positively grasp the opportunity of promoting a wider expression of evangelical unity? Let us look at the relevant biblical principles.

First, we must distinguish between primary and secondary issues and doctrines. If we fail to make this distinction there will be no end to the possible divisions and subdivisions in which we shall be involved; we will find ourselves walking down the path of exclusivism. All truth is important, but not all truth is equally important; some is of the *esse*, essential nature, of the gospel and of the Church, and some is not. The writer to the Hebrews recognised this distinction in Heb 6:1-2, 'Therefore leaving the principles (ie *first* principles implied) of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.' (cf Mt 23:23). It is vital that we recognise primary and essential truth, that which is foundational to the Christian life and to the Church, and distinguish it from the secondary truths. The authority of Scripture and the deity of Christ are primary truths; but whether we believe in paedobaptism or believers' baptism is secondary, as are such issues as differences over elders and millennialism.

A primary gospel truth is one without which the gospel would cease to be the gospel — and one would have to say, '*anathema*'; a primary church truth is one without which the church would cease to be the church, and one would have to say, '*ICHABOD*'. Those are the principles to be applied — the biblical principles of distinction. There will be a measure of raggedness at the edges, but there is a practicality about them.

Second, we must recognise that schism between gospel churches is a terrible sin and evangelical unity is a biblical obligation. The brother who thinks he is defending and preserving the faith by refusing to have fellowship with a believer who rejects the doctrine of limited atonement, but who is otherwise evangelical, must come to terms with the fact that he is also under obligation to defend and preserve the doctrine of the unity of the church, and that if he finds himself in a position where he cannot do the one without failing to do the other then he must seek the greater good. This is something which never seems to cross the minds of some Christians. But the urgent question facing us is how do we secure this unity in practice? What ought to be the practical outworkings of such a unity? At present the law of the jungle appears to prevail between evangelical churches in most areas of our land.

Nevertheless, the desire to secure a firmer control within and over the life of the churches, such as is obtained within human organisations, by some system of authority or power structure is not in accord with New Testament precedents. It leads to *'heavy-shepherding'*, both in Reformed and Charismatic circles, and to a rigid denominationalism which stifles true spiritual life. We must recognise that the character of the New Testament churches was voluntaristic; and also that order, submission, and mutual recognition and respect depend upon grace and not nature. Where there is little spiritual grace there will be discord and division — and I believe God intends that! He intends it because in that way we are brought to see that the proper functioning of the church and the unity of the church depend just as much upon grace as does salvation itself. The real problem today, where there is so much division and anarchy, is that God's people are acting carnally, and our churches are not humbling themselves before God as is appropriate and necessary to spiritual vitality and the promotion of unity.

In view of these preliminary observations we must address ourselves to the question, **What degree of mutual recognition and co-operation ought we to seek between evangelical churches?** — in humble dependence upon God, and divine grace, and guided by the light of Scripture.

A ministers' fraternal is one obvious expression. Ministers are shepherds under the great Chief Shepherd and mutual recognition and co-operation acknowledges that fact. Ministers attend not just as private individuals but as ministers of our churches, therefore the fraternal ought to be an essential appointment for ministers. Our attendance should not be conditional on Monday 'blues', or affected by a reserved personality. We are under a biblical obligation as ministers to confer together in the interests of our churches and of Christ's kingdom, the boundaries of which extend beyond our local responsibility and individual churches. We ought to be concerned about each others' churches because they all belong to the Master we serve. We need one another's insights and understanding and we should learn wisdom by sharing our experiences together. Isolationism can never be right. It makes a man morbid, despondent and jaundiced. Mutual recognition between ourselves is essential before there can be a similar recognition and co-operation between the churches. Our churches will rise no higher than we do.

But beyond this forum of evangelical unity **there is need for the officers of independent evangelical churches to confer together** on matters of mutual concern. The sort of co-operation which will best promote evangelical unity is not so much the organising of united preaching meetings; but what is required for the benefit of all the churches is consultation on matters which impinge upon all the churches and require deliberation between the churches. Within this realm are developments within the life of the nation which affect the interests and liberties of all the churches and their members; matters of church discipline where members of one church may seek refuge in another church to evade necessary discipline; the emergence of heresies which threaten the life of all the churches; serious disagreements between individual churches where the collective mind of other churches may help to resolve matters (cf Acts 15:2); issues of common concern to all the churches where consultation may help church officers to arrive at wiser

decisions in reference to their own churches, eg re the proliferation of different translations of the Scriptures; the problems associated with the conversion of people out of a secularist society and their introduction within the life of the churches; modern moral problems, such as divorce, abortion, etc; shared insights into the problems of evangelism etc. All these are areas where mutual consultation could be of value without in any way impinging upon the autonomy of the local church.

Such joint meetings of church officers on a regular basis, say twice yearly, could do nothing but strengthen the bonds between evangelical churches, and give rise to mutual trust and respect for one another's churches and church disciplines. That evangelical churches should compete with each other for members, and be prepared to provide a safe haven from dissidents from other churches is a disgrace. Such behaviour eventually has a boomerang effect upon all the churches, undermining internal discipline and destroying a sense of mutual responsibility between members of the church of Christ. Regular conferences of church officers would help to prevent such loveless disregard for other limbs of Christ's body.

The classic biblical precedent for such *Conferences and Synods of church officers* is the conference at Jerusalem in Acts 15. To describe what took place in Jerusalem as a 'council', with its overtones of authoritarianism, is anachronistic and reads far too much into Acts 15. The gathering was essentially a consultation (v 2) and the result or conclusions of the conference were more in the nature of exhortations (v 32). Not even the apostles ever assumed the note of legislative authority with respect to the life of the churches. Their authority resided in the revealed Word of God and the Holy Spirit by whom they exhorted the churches to be subject to God's revealed Word. They had no formal power to oblige the churches to conform to God's Word. If such were the case the apostle Paul would have had no problem with the Corinthian church.

Regular synods and conferences, therefore, should not be regarded as a threat to the independence of the local church, nor as an incipient form of denominationalism. Such synods need not detract from the spiritual autonomy of the local church in which, as Professor John Murray so aptly expressed it, 'whenever believers are gathered together in accordance with Christ's institution and in his name, there is the church of God, and to that church of God belong all the functions, prerogatives, and promises which God has accorded to the church... The localized assembly is the body of which Christ is the head'.¹ And, therefore, there can never be beyond the local church, where Christ the head is present, any superior or greater authority to which the local church is obliged to be subject. You have in that quotation from John Murray, if ever you wanted one, an admission from a presbyterian of the central principle of congregational church government — that the local church is wholly competent to act without the necessity of outside oversight because where it meets Jesus Christ is in the midst, and there is no higher authority in the life of the church than its sovereign Lord. The spiritual autonomy of the local church is not an expression of isolationism, therefore, but of the Lordship of Christ over his churches. In practice, there is very little difference between benevolent Presbyterian and classical Congregationalism as practised by

the early Baptist and Independent churches.

The spiritual autonomy of the local church in subjection to its sovereign Lord does not exclude, as some have mistakenly imagined, **inter-church synods**. Classical congregationalism has recognized the biblical justification and need of such synods. *The Articles of Church Order of The Savoy Declaration* of 1658 recommends 'occasional synods or Councils' of 'Messengers' from the churches for the purpose of inter-church deliberation 'In cases of Difficulties or Differences either in point of Doctrine or in Administrations...to consider and give their advice in. or about the matter of difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned', whilst explicitly excluding any thought of 'Jurisdiction over the churches themselves' or any imposition of 'their determinations on the Churches and Officers'.² Likewise *The Baptist Confession of Faith* of 1689 states that churches ought to hold communion among themselves 'for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification' and recommends occasional church synods using very similar words to those employed in *The Savoy Declaration*.³

The modern isolationism of some independent evangelical churches has never been sanctioned by historic Independency, but is a by-product of the influence of Trade Unionism upon Baptist and Congregational churches of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a misguided introduction of what has been called 'democracy' into the life of the churches. John Cotton, whose influence upon the thinking of the early Baptist and Independent churches was considerable, preferred the term 'Congregationalism' to that of 'Independency'. In his treatise, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 1648, he has helpful sections advocating 'lawful synods (gathered and proceeding according to the pattern of Acts 15)... to decide controversies from the Word, and to appoint a course for the preventing and healing of offences...'⁴ Their function is advisory and not judicial. The moral power of a synod is to counsel churches in need of admonition, to pronounce in an issue involving scandal, to act when all churches are corrupt in some way, or to withdraw communion from a church which becomes irregular in life or doctrine.

Both Thomas Goodwin⁵ and John Owen⁶ write at some length upon the necessity of inter-church co-operation. They give lists of what Goodwin calls 'duties which one church owes another'. In his *Short Catechism* Owen asks, 'Q 52. Wherein consists the duty of any church of Christ towards other churches?' In response he lists six duties:

- (1) In walking circumspectly, so as to give no offence. (1 Cor 10:32)
- (2) In prayer for their peace and prosperity. (Ps 122:6; 1 Tim 2:1; Eph 6:18)
- (3) In communicating supplies to their wants according to their ability. (2 Cor 8:4,6; Acts 11:29,30; Rom 15:26f)
- (4) In receiving with love and readiness the members of them into fellowship. (Rom 16:1,2; 3 Jn 8)
- (5) In desiring and making use of their counsel and advice in such cases of doubt and difficulty, as may arise among them. (Acts 15:2)
- (6) In joining with them to express their communion in the same doctrine of faith. (1 Tim 3:15)

Goodwin lists four of these six duties and adds another two of his own, viz: 'There is that brotherly communion between churches, that whom one church denies communion with, having cast him out by a just censure, all the rest of the churches do reject him also' and 'We acknowledge that there are *res communes*, things in common, that concern many churches alike in a brotherly way.' This could include 'the setting up ministers over particular churches'. But this does not amount to the power of ordination or the like — '... it is but giving the right hand of fellowship'.⁷

Under 'things in common' to the churches we can think of the need of ministerial training and the even greater need of some form of ministerial recognition, and the regularising of the activities of self-appointed local preachers who act in the main without the slightest submission or reference to the authority of the churches. There is need to facilitate the placing and removal of ministers from one church to another. The present situation is causing great suffering both to men in the ministry and to the churches.

These are all matters which need an airing at church officers conferences. In the absence of mutual recognition and co-operation between evangelical churches matters tend to fall into the hands of individuals and extra-church-organizations who seek to impose upon the churches their own self-will. No man is an island, no church is an island. But the best interests of the churches are not served when churches and ministers act as if they were islands. We belong to an uncommon community, and we need to act in close fellowship together to further the interests of this community within our nation and in the world.

References

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- 3 BAPTIST CONFESSION, Ch 26 Sections 14 & 15
- 4 John Cotton on THE CHURCHES OF NEW ENGLAND, Ed Larzer Ziff, Harvard Univ Press, 1968, p 332
- 5 Treatise on The Constitution, Right Order and Government of the Churches of Christ, WORKS Vol XI, James Nichol, 1865
- 6 Short Catechism, WORKS, Vol XIX, Thomas Russell Edition, 1826, pp 565 and The True Nature of a Gospel Church, WORKS, Vol XX
- 7 WORKS Vol XI, Nichol, pp 266-270

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