

**BIBLICAL INTER-CHURCH ASSOCIATIONS**  
**by Conrad Mbewe**

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## **PREFACE**

The chapters in this book are a summary of messages delivered during a church-based seminar held at Kabwata Baptist Church in 1993 on the subject of inter-church associations. Those who have associated with Kabwata Baptist Church for the last thirteen years will tell how seriously the church members have taken the lessons learnt during this seminar. However, because of the length of time that has passed since these lessons were taught, most of the examples will sound a little outdated. I however felt that I should leave them as they were stated then so that something of the “feel” of what was said in those days is retained in the book. And the monetary figures mentioned in the Zambian kwacha will sound ridiculous today because inflation has changed things drastically since then. Just bear in mind that those figures were pretty high in those days!

Thankfully, though these messages are being prepared for the press thirteen years after they were preached, the tapes of all of them except one were still intact in the church library. Only the tape of the message on the boundaries of inter-church associations has gone missing. The result is that that chapter is shorter and lacks the “feel” of what was said in those days. It lacks the illustrations that make the other chapters interesting to read. If anyone ever finds that tape, I would appreciate having it back so that we can repair this defect.

Finally, I want to thank a young lady in the church, Anne Chansa, for the time she took to transcribe the messages on the tapes and type them on a computer. It has made my work of editing the material a lot easier in the midst of my normal work load as a pastor of an ever-growing church. Thank you!

Conrad Mbewe  
Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka  
September 2006

*Conrad Mbewe*

The Reformed Baptist movement in Zambia presently comprises about forty churches. Almost all of these started in the last twenty years. These churches have only come together in a formal association in the last two years. However, anyone who would have visited these churches would soon see that they have a lot to do with each other and own a number of joint ventures. It would be claiming too much to say that this unity is a fruit of reading this book. Rather, we should say that the seeds of what is being advocated in this book were already there and what this book did was to put them into words so that those churches coming to Reformed Baptist convictions would understand why the Reformed Baptist churches relate together with such practical unity. Judging by the level of fragmentation evident among Reformed Baptists in other parts of the world, we have not taken this unity for granted. It is all by the grace of God.

And, by the way, the Anne Chansa mentioned in the Preface is now Mrs Anne Majumo and lives with her husband in another town. May her works follow her!

## **INTRODUCTION**

As we commence the study of this all-important subject of inter-church associations, let me state the ground that we hope to cover. The first is that of establishing the biblical basis for inter-church associations. On what grounds can a local church associate with other local churches? What is it that makes it necessary for a local church to do so? After that I hope to deal with the biblical boundaries for inter-church associations. In other words, how far should we go in associating with other churches? Where should we draw the line and blow the off-side whistle if others go beyond the line? Should we relate to every grouping of people that is called a church or should we limit ourselves to only some churches? If the latter is the case, how do we choose which churches to associate with? Finally, we shall go on to deal with the bonds of inter-church associations. In other words, what ought our inter-church associational activities to be comprised of? What are the activities that should bind us together in inter-church associational life? It is in considering the bonds of inter-church associations that we will spend most of our time.

Let me also emphasise at the very start of this study the importance of applying what we shall be learning. We are dealing with a very practical subject. The proof, therefore, that you have truly appreciated its importance is when you are seen to be actively engaged in inter-church associational activities at a personal level. It is like the issue of land in Zambia. Many Zambians will tell you that owning land is very important, but very few Zambians actually go through the trouble of trying to get title deeds for any piece of land. They mistake their knowledge of the importance of land for a true appreciation of it. It is the same with inter-church associations. Many Christians know theoretically how important this is, but very few bother to deliberately make it part of their lives. Similarly, many church leaders know that it is important for their churches to be associated with other local churches, but very few work out the implications of this in their churches' weekly or annual schedules. It is all left in the theoretical realm. It is not real.

One of the reasons why we felt it important as a church eldership to have a seminar on inter-church associations was so that, if and when the churches we associate with come together to form an association, we as a

local church will be prepared and knowledgeable concerning that which will be demanded from us and that which we should be expecting from such an association. My aim, therefore, is not to show you which association of churches already in existence is the most biblical one so that we can join it. Rather, it is simply to educate us about the biblical teaching concerning how we as a local church should be relating to other local churches. My task is to persuade you, the ordinary church members of the church, to be responsible as individuals beyond the four walls of your church. Once we apply these truths to ourselves now at an individual level, it will be easy for us to respond biblically if and when an association has been formed among us, because we will be biblically literate. We will not only know what the Scriptures demand of us, but we will already be practicing it. It will also mean that, when constitutions of would-be associations are presented to us, we will be able to sift through them intelligently because our minds are filled with Scriptures relevant to New Testament inter-church associational life.

Let me say a few words about the approach I have taken in these lessons. One church member asked me why I did not simply teach about the Presbyterian form of inter-church relations, the Episcopalian form of inter-church relations, and the Congregational form of inter-church relations. After that, he said, I could then show which one was biblical. Whereas to this dear brother that was going to be the best approach, to me that was going to be a waste of time. It is wrong to begin with the world and then get into the Word. You never do things that way because you end up chiselling God's Word to fit into what you have already formulated. I will not do that. I am not interested in borrowing something that is already there and then selling it to you. What I am interested in is taking what the Bible teaches, verse by verse, and then applying it to the lives of God's people. If in the end, it does not conform to anything that already exists in Zambia, then so be it.

My preference ultimately is to simply open the Scriptures, break the bread of life, and dish it to you. That way, wherever you will go, and whatever inter-church structures you will find yourselves in, you will not be lost, because you will still be clear about what your Master in heaven wants you to do. You will be securely anchored in the Scriptures.

## **THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF INTER-CHURCH ASSOCIATIONS**

As we begin these studies on biblical inter-church associations, it is important for us to establish the biblical basis of such an interaction. This is especially important for independent churches that do not belong to any organised body of churches. Those that are in some kind of denominational structure often do not take the trouble to ask the question, "What does the Bible teach concerning the way we ought to relate to one another as churches?" Everything has already been done for them. Issues related to inter-church associations have already been packaged for them in an instant-formula form. All they do is simply follow the instructions on the box and things just happen. The thinking has already been done at "headquarters". They are simply told to send their representatives or their money and they go on to do so. Thus inter-church association happens without church members even thinking about it.

There are also those churches that are in a hierarchical system, either an Episcopalian or Presbyterian system, where it is not just a denomination working together, but the seat of authority is also identified outside the local church. For instance, in the Episcopalian system instructions may be issued from England (*e.g.*, for the Anglican Church) where the archbishop is, or from America (*e.g.*, for the African Methodist Episcopal Church) where they have their big bishops, or from Rome (*e.g.*, the Roman Catholic Church) where the Pope is. All these people do is to receive instructions in an authoritative form. They dare not fail to respond appropriately to those instructions. Such insubordination can be punished. Then there are people in the Presbyterian system where elders of various churches meet in their presbyteries or synods and make decisions. What they decide in those meetings as elders is binding upon the churches. They simply say, "That is what we have decided and that is what must happen." Inter-church associations are binding upon such churches.

Now, most of our churches are not in structures like that. Thank God we are not. I hope to show you in this document that, with all due respect to them, both the Episcopalian and the Presbyterian forms of inter-church association are not biblical. The Bible clearly teaches the autonomy of the

local church, and that each church's eldership is only directly accountable to Christ. For instance, when the Lord Jesus Christ wrote the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, he did not send them to some kind of area superintendent or some denominational headquarters with a view that from there the letters would be distributed to the churches. No, that was not the case. Each letter was addressed directly to each church. Also, the Lord Jesus did not say, "If you do not obey my instructions then the area superintendent will come and penalise you." No! He says, "If you do not obey then I will come and remove the lamp-stand from you." So every local church is directly accountable to Christ, whose headship in the local church is upheld by the elders of that church.

Having insisted on the biblical-ness of local church autonomy, let me hurry to state that it is this same church autonomy, when taken to its extreme, that often makes local churches guilty of neglecting their biblical obligations towards inter-church associations. We easily become blind to the fact that we ought to have certain relations with other churches and those relations must be jealously guarded. Sadly this is often left to the whims of pastors who often limit such associations to churches pastored by their personal friends. As far as the rest of the church's membership is concerned, whether we relate or don't relate does not really matter. Since somehow life in the local church seems to go on pretty well without the entanglements involved in inter-church associations, we could not be bothered. Churches fold up, and we don't feel any sense of guilt about it, because it does not even cross our minds that the closing up of that church could largely be due to our failure to play our role in supporting inter-church projects.

So it is important that we turn to the Scriptures and ask ourselves, "If those hierarchy systems are wrong, what is the biblical alternative?" Obviously extreme independence is wrong. We ought to make sure that we are inter-dependent. But how does this inter-dependence express itself? The best way to deal with this is for us to appreciate the biblical basis of our inter-church associations along two lines of argument. Firstly, it is the fact that Christ's body goes beyond the borders of our local church. The body of Christ cannot be limited to a local church's membership list. Secondly, the Great Commission necessitates inter-church purposeful cooperation in order to be successfully carried out.

**CHRIST'S BODY IS UNIVERSAL**

Let us begin then with the first line of argument. Romans 12:4–5 says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” According to this passage, there is a clear parallel between the human body and Christ’s body, the church. The parallel is that although the body has many parts, it is one body. In the same way, therefore, although the body of Christ has different parts (in terms of individuals), they are all one body. These individuals may be collected together in local churches according to their locations; they are still one body. This one body is spread across the entire world, and is indeed spread across history from beginning to end. This is what the apostle Paul is saying here: “...in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Notice that he says each member belongs to all the other members of this body. If this was only applicable to the local church context, that is very easy to visualise. If somebody joins our local church, it is assumed that his concerns in life become ours and our concerns in life become his. But, as we have already seen, this truth is not confined to a local church. Was Paul a member of the church in Rome? He was not, and yet he includes himself with them when he speaks about this body. He says, “...so in Christ we who are many form one body.” In other words, he is saying, “I belong to all of you there in Rome, who have turned from sin in repentance and put your faith in Christ. You also belong to me. We belong to each other.”

We find the same truth in John 17:20–22. In that passage Jesus was praying to the Father saying, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.” This passage needs very careful attention because it is one of those portions of Scripture that are wrongly used by the ecumenical movement to argue for a world-wide organisational unity of the church. Almost everywhere you go, you will find that people who are trying to create

organisational unity between professing Christians of all shades and colours will appeal to John 17. I have a big quarrel with that because, when you look at this portion of Scripture carefully, you will notice that it is not referring to organised unity but organic unity, *i.e.*, a spiritual unity. It is not referring to a unity which we must work towards. It is a unity that has been prayed into existence by Jesus. That prayer has already been answered. In fact, if you look at the whole prayer in John 17 you will find that every request in it has already been secured by the Lord. Therefore, our role is to merely maintain that unity rather than to create it by organisations.

Just as an aside, consider some of the other requests in this prayer. In verse 11 and 15, the Lord prays for the protection of the people of God. Are we protected or are we supposed to be organising this protection? Of course, we are already protected by God in answer to this prayer request! In verse 17, the Lord Jesus prays for the sanctification of God's people. Are we sanctified, *i.e.*, set apart for God's own use? Again the answer is that we are. We do not try to organise this sanctification, but we seek to maintain it. In verse 24, Jesus prays that all his people may end up in heaven. Again that has been secured in answer to his prayer. We do not need to organise it into existence. We will all end up in heaven if we have genuinely repented and put our trust in the Lord Jesus.

It is wrong to think that one of the prayer requests of our Lord is awaiting our frail human organisational abilities. All his requests have been answered, including the one for unity. In this passage Jesus was praying for spiritual unity. That is why he likens it to the unity between himself and the Father. That unity is not organisational. It is organic. It is "you in me and I in you." That is the kind of unity he was praying into existence between Christians all over the world and right across history. As I have travelled to almost all the continents of the world in my preaching trips, this unity has been evident. Despite the different cultures, languages, skin colours, etc., you cannot miss the spiritual connection that is immediately evident as you begin to have Christian fellowship with believers in other parts of the world. I often sit back and just marvel at this. It is the Lord's doing!

In case you do not know the difference between an organic unity and an organisational (or mechanical) unity, let me explain. When something

is joined organically, you cannot tell where one part ends and the other begins. A good example is the human body. You cannot tell exactly where one part of your body joins the other part. For instance, if someone took a knife wanting to cut off your finger from your hand, at which point do the cells of your finger end and the cells of your hand start? It is impossible to tell because the two are joined together organically. The two are actually one. A mechanical union is like the way a wheel is joined to a car. With the right spanners you can part the two very clearly, without wondering whether you have left parts of the wheel on the car in the process. It is very easy to see where one ends and the other one starts. That is how an organisational unity is as well. The entire structure can easily be dismantled with the components being clearly separated. You cannot do that to an organic union.

In John 17, Jesus was praying for organic unity in this new body that he was forming called the church. He wanted the unity to be enjoyed in this body to be precisely the same as that which is enjoyed in the Godhead between himself and the Father. This unity was also to be enjoyed between Christians and God himself. Jesus prayed, “May they also be in us...” In other words, you cannot separate a child of God from God. It is impossible. They are organically one. In the same way, you cannot separate a Christian from another Christian. It is impossible. They are organically one. Yes, physically we may be separated by space, with some living in America while others are living in Africa. But spiritually we are one body.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13 tells us how this organic unity between believers has been brought into existence. The apostle Paul says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” What is Paul saying here? He is saying that when the Holy Spirit brings a person to repentance and faith in Christ, he immerses him into the body of Christ. It is by being engrafted into the body of the Lord Jesus Christ that we become one with him. Not only that, the Spirit of God also comes to take residence in our hearts (“you in me and I in you”). This is the oneness with God, which is true of each and every person who is a true child of God. Since every

Christian enters into this one body by spiritual immersion and indwelling, then every Christian becomes related to all other Christians through this same union.

This is not merely theoretical. It is experiential. When a person becomes a Christian, the moment he genuinely gets converted, he begins to have a sense of oneness with the people of God. Haven't we all experienced this? Before we got converted, we used to go to church but we never used to care who was on our right or on our left in those pews. All we were interested in were the sermons and perhaps the offering bag too (for our self-righteous deeds). Once all that was over, we would quickly go home and feel that we have done our part. If people were to ask us who the members of that church were, we would probably only know the pastor by name because he was always standing in front and perhaps also the person who made the announcements. That was about as far as our interest went. But what happened when we got converted? All of a sudden we wanted to know who the person next to us was in church. We wanted to know the circumstances happening in their lives, and so on. And somehow we become a part of them and they become part of us. It was very real.

One place where this becomes very evident is when Christians are preparing for their wedding. They produce a list of possible individuals to be invited to the wedding, and most of the people on the list are fellow Christians. Relatives bitterly complain about this. They say, "How can you say that all these cards are for church people? Are they your family? We are your family and should, therefore, have the majority of the cards." Your relatives do not know that you have a spiritual family too. They think that you are just reserving cards for fellow church members, but the truth is that a lot of the individuals on that list are Christians who go to other churches. They are as much your brothers and sisters as those who are in the same local church with you. They have the same place in your heart and in your life as anybody else in your congregation. You have become one with all the people of God who you know.

A person who only comes to church to hear the sermon and quickly dashes home as soon as the sermon is over is not yet ready to join a church. The organisational experience must not precede the organic experience. There must be an experiential union before a mechanical one.

*Conrad Mbewe*

The person must first feel a sense of oneness with the people before he agrees to have his name on a membership list.

So, local churches are merely geographical locations of one and the same flock. That is what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:14–16). In bringing them together Jesus did not mean that he was going to bring all his people into one congregation. Rather, he was going to bring them into this organic unity, even though they may be scattered around the world in small localised expressions of this one body. I repeat: local congregations are simply geographical locations of one and the same flock.

Hence our filial affections for other Christians must transcend the boundaries of our local churches. What do I mean by filial affections? These are feelings of being part of one family, arising from the oneness of the universal body of Christ. It is these feelings that ought to give birth to inter-church relations. Isn't that the way it is with our families? You may have your brother in Petauke working for the government, and your sister might be living in Mongu, you may also have a cousin in Kasama and another one in Livingstone. You don't become indifferent to them simply because you are not in the same house. No! In fact, if you have a phone you will every so often ring them up to “just keep in touch” because of your filial affections. There are brotherly ties between you. That is the way it ought to be with the Christian church. If we are one family then we ought to be concerned about what is happening in the different locations where the family is. And true Christians are bonded to each other in this way.

### **THE GREAT COMMISSION DEMANDS IT**

Let me hurry on to the second point. We said earlier that inter-church associations are necessitated by the nature of the body of Christ. It is universal. Now I want us to see that there is a relationship between the unity of the universal church of Christ and the fulfilment of the Great Commission. For instance, in Romans 12:4–8, the apostle Paul says, “Just

as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." He is essentially saying that we all belong to each other and so we ought to use our gifts for the benefit of all. In using the imagery of the body, he is saying that one of you is an eye and the other is the mouth and the other is a hand and the other is the foot. Each of these body parts is a part of the one body. What is he teaching? He is teaching Christians to use their gifts for the benefit of the whole body. The eye should enable the whole body to see, the mouth should enable the whole body to eat, the hand should enable the whole body to hold things and the foot should enable the whole body to move around. In the same way, we should use our gifts for the benefit of the whole body of Christ. If that body is not limited to the local church, as we have already proved, then surely we must use our gifts for the benefit of the universal body of Christ.

We notice the same thing in John 17:21–23. After speaking about the organic unity of the people of God, Jesus goes on to say, "May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me." That is a very interesting statement. How will the organic unity of the church result in the whole world recognising that Jesus was sent by the Father? I think that the answer lies in the universal church carrying out the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:18–20 says, "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" Notice that the Great Commission encompasses the whole world. Our task is not simply to evangelise our immediate neighbourhood. It is to evangelise the world. Jesus said, "Go and make

disciples of all nations.” In other words, if there is no church in Cambodia, it is our responsibility to ensure that a church is planted there so that the people of Cambodia are evangelised. The moment I say that, you must be thinking, “How on earth will we get somebody to Cambodia to start a church there? This man must be out of his mind to make such a demand upon us.” I am not! Do you honestly think that Jesus said we should make disciples of all nations except Cambodia? Of course not!

The reason why this task seems impossible is because you are thinking of it being done by your church alone. The moment you bring in other churches, the task begins to look less difficult. One reason why the task may have seemed impossible would have been because of distance. However, if there is a church in Pakistan that we could work together with, then the distance factor is sorted out. That church in Pakistan may have a man who is ready to go, but they may be lacking in financial resources. That is where we could come in! In this way, the work could be our work too because we are supporting it through our finances and our prayers. Inter-church associations become vital if we are going to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. We cannot do all the work alone. And because the Great Commission demands it, we dare not neglect that responsibility. The gospel must go from Jerusalem, through the whole of Judea and Samaria, and to the furthest parts of the earth. For this to happen we must work together as churches.

This is what happened to a church in Kent, Ashford, in the United Kingdom recently. The church is called Mount Zion Baptist Church. They noticed that Christian students who were sent to a college in their city by the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines were stockpiling Christian books and sending them back to Zambia. They found this interesting and enquired from the Zambian Christians as to why they were doing this. They were told that there was a famine of good, solid Christian books in Zambia. The brethren at Mount Zion reasoned that if ordinary Christians were struggling this much to get books, it must be worse for the pastors who would never have the opportunity to be sponsored abroad. How were these servants of God getting the vital tools for their trade? They began to discuss how they could help in this famine in a land that was so far away. They soon learnt from these same Zambian Christians that there was a church in Zambia called Kabwata Baptist Church that they could use as a

contact point to coordinate things “on the ground”. They also realised that as a small church their own resources would be totally inadequate to provide such books, and so they contacted sister churches in the UK to help with the sponsorship. That is how the Zambia Book Fund was born! This Fund supplies Zambian pastors with books every year to enable them minister better to God’s flock.

The same thing happened with respect to the Baptist Urban Outreach Fund. Pastor Joe Simfukwe made use of his personal contacts with fellow pastors abroad, and especially with the Australian Baptist Mission, to provide funding for Zambian pastors to plant English speaking Baptist churches in Zambia’s urban centres. He essentially said, “We have the human resource here in Zambia but we lack financial resources. Instead of you sending missionaries from there, we can use what money you spend on one missionary to instead send out ten local men to do the same work. In fact, they can do the work even faster because they already know the customs of the people to whom they will be ministering. So send us the money and we can assure you that within three years the churches should be financially self-sustaining.” So the churches that were further a-field joined hands with Lusaka Baptist Church and as a result many English-speaking Baptist churches were planted in Zambia’s urban centres.

Many times you will find that your church has one kind of resource but it lacks another kind. This is God’s way of ensuring inter-connectedness between our churches, as what one church has supplies what another church does not have. Your church may have financial resources but may not have human resources. By working with a church that has human resources, you will be better able to use the financial resources that God has blessed you with. Here is another example. Lusaka Baptist Church was involved in planting a church in Livingstone. A time came when the person whom they had there had to leave and they needed somebody else to replace him. So what did they do? They sent word out to sister churches. They had the money but they did not have a person who could take over the work. Thankfully, there was a church in Kasama that had the person and so the two got talking. That was how Pastor Victor Kanyense found himself in Livingstone. Here was Lusaka Baptist Church with the money but not the person, and here was Kasama Baptist Church with the person but not the money to send him out as a missionary. In the end

they commended him to Lusaka Baptist Church who sent him to Livingstone as a missionary.

All these illustrations only make the point that, if we are going to meet the demands of the Great Commission, we will certainly need to cooperate with other churches. We need to work hand-in-hand with other churches.

You will, however, find that inter-church associations will not end with church planting work. Usually, church planting is only the beginning of inter-church associations. You will find that once a daughter church has been weaned and has become a sister church, you will still relate to one another as churches in some form of association—however informal that association might be. That church will begin to go through some problems that you went through in your earlier days, and the leaders of that church will run back to you for help. You cannot turn a blind eye to them just because they are no longer a daughter church. That is what happened between the Antioch church and the Jerusalem church in the book of Acts (11:19–15:35). The church in Antioch was born out of the persecution that took place in Jerusalem, which scattered the brethren. Some of them went to Antioch and preached the gospel there. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas there. Barnabas later called Paul to work with him. Later the two of them went off as missionaries of the Antioch church to plant churches elsewhere. When they returned, they found that false teachings had gained ground in the church in Antioch. To solve this problem they went back to the Jerusalem church for a pastoral council. The two churches were still relating even after the church in Antioch was already planted, weaned and even sending out its own missionaries.

It must be clear from the preceding that a sense of duty arising from the demands of the Great Commission necessitates inter-church associations. No church that is seriously obeying the command of our Lord to evangelise and disciple the world can stay long in isolation. If all we are concerned about is what affects us inwardly as churches then we will not go beyond visiting other churches only when there is a funeral or a wedding there. But if we are going to be concerned with the Great Commission then it will not be long before we start thinking about working together in various inter-church projects. We will soon see that we do not have all the resources that we need to do God's work. We will

ask our sister churches to join hands with us because they have what we do not have. It will be a matter of time.

Therefore, to the question, “Why should we be involved in inter-church relations? Why should we be bothered to dig into the Scriptures to find out what it says about inter-church associations and how they should be regulated in a God-glorifying way?” The answer is, “Because of who we are and what our work on earth is.” Firstly, we are part of a worldwide body of believers and, surely, we ought to be interested in the other brethren. And, secondly, we have a great commission and we cannot do it alone. It is absolutely impossible.

### **CONCLUSION**

Let me draw your attention to three implications of all this by way of conclusion. Firstly, we must never allow the localised entities that we call local churches to eclipse the universal reality of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, we are local churches governed by our elders, under the headship of Christ. But that is only half the truth. We are part of a worldwide body. So while we are labouring away in our small corner of God’s world, let us not be blind to what is happening in other churches of Christ. We must be constantly asking ourselves what we could do better by joining hands with other churches in the great cause of Christ. How can we contribute our few pieces of bread and fish in order to feed the multitudes that are starving spiritually all around us? We must never allow the local church concept to eclipse the universal church reality.

Secondly, our task is not one of creating unity, but one of maintaining the unity which is already created by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:1–6 the apostle Paul says, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Notice that he does not say that we should make every effort to develop unity but simply to maintain it. Why is that so? It is because “there is [only] one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope, etc.” There will be times when personal

clashes will cause inter-personal relationships to be strained in the body of Christ. When that happens, we need to do everything in our power to sort out the mess. We cannot afford to say, "It is their own fault," and look the other way. Sadly, there will also be serious doctrinal differences that will make us finally agree to disagree and part company. Yet, often it is not serious doctrinal differences which cause splits among us. Once you investigate the causes of most church splits you discover that it is mere personality differences. Such personal clashes often cause entire churches to have nothing to do with each other. We should not allow that. The Bible tells us to be completely gentle and humble. Let us learn to be patient, bearing with one another in love. Sometimes we should sit down with a person and say, "I feel this is how it ought to be done. But since you are insisting on your way, let us go ahead with your suggestion although I know that in the end it will backfire. At least I have expressed reservations on the matter." Ours is that of maintaining unity. While we are still sinners here on earth it will not be easy. But that is why the Bible is saying that we ought to be humble and gentle, patiently bearing with one another. That is the life which is worthy of our calling. We are called to one task and we are to do it under one Lord. Maintaining unity is vital for the task.

Finally, it is our duty to know how to relate to other churches so as to satisfy our filial affection for God's people and to fulfil the demands of our Lord's Great Commission. I am saying that it is our duty to gain this knowledge. We must make sure we become knowledgeable concerning inter-church relationships. This area of our church life must not simply happen by accident. We must find out what the Lord expects of us in this matter. Surely we cannot afford to be indifferent to the activities and the dangers that sister churches are in. We belong to them and they belong to us. We need to find out from the Scriptures how we are to relate to our sister churches in the various situations they are in. We have a common task. How are we working together in that task? Should we simply have our young people deciding on their own that they will work with young people in other churches or is there some way of doing it biblically? Should we merely hear that our women are working together with women in other churches or is there some biblical way of doing this? Should we just be hearing about sister churches being involved in some gospel work

through rumours or should there be some organised form of communication? And even when we hear, should we simply say, "Oh, even we should be involved in that work one of these days," or does this knowledge bring upon us some biblical inter-church responsibilities? All these are question that need biblical answers because we are accountable to Christ over these matters. Our task now is to find biblical answers to these questions.

## **THE BOUNDARIES OF INTER-CHURCH ASSOCIATION**

In the last chapter we established the fact that we are constrained by filial affection and by a sense of duty to associate with other local churches. We saw from various biblical passages that this was the way in which the churches in New Testament times associated with each other. It was because they recognised that they belonged to each other and it was also because they knew that they had a common mission to fulfil on earth. Hence, they fell back on each other's resources in order to fulfil this mission. No church was complete in itself. Every church will soon find that it needs other churches if it is to fulfil the Great Commission.

The first question, which arises from what we learnt in the last chapter, is: Where are we to draw the boundaries of our inter-church associations? Are we to associate with every group that calls itself a church? Are we, for instance, to have fellowship with Roman Catholic churches? What about Charismatic churches? What biblical principles are we to use in order for us to draw a God-glorifying boundary for inter-church association? These are very important questions which demand biblical answers. To simply associate with every group that calls itself a church would obviously be ridiculous, but what measuring line are we to use in order to see who to allow in and who to leave out?

A study of the Scriptures soon shows that the answer lies in two avenues: we are to associate with churches with which we have a common doctrinal confession and a common church order. Let us take a closer look at each of these two points.

### **COMMON DOCTRINAL CONFESSION**

Firstly, biblical inter-church association can only take place where there is an adherence to a common doctrinal confession. In other words, we must believe the same things about the most important aspects of the Christian faith. Truth is part of the biblical definition of a true church. Paul, writing to Timothy, referred to the church as "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). In other words, one of the primary functions of the church on earth is to uphold the truth of God and ensure that it is conveyed faithfully from generation to

generation. What this means is that any inter-church association must jealously guard this rather than compromise it. If your inter-church association results in your hiding the basic tenets of the faith so that you do not offend anyone, you will be hiding these same truths from those who need to know them and pass them on to the next generation. That is a very unhealthy inter-church association.

To go even further, a church that is in serious error over the fundamentals of the faith is invariably a church that lacks of spiritual life. It was this fact that the Lord Jesus alluded to when he told Peter, in Matthew 16:13–20, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Peter’s confession betrayed the fact that he had spiritual life, while those who were making wrong conclusions about Jesus lacked such spiritual life. Therefore, Peter’s task later on after Pentecost was that of going out to declare to those who were in error what the truth was—that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. That is our task as well. Those churches that are in error are to be evangelised and not associated with. There can be no filial affection for churches that are spiritually dead due to damnable heresies.

Apart from all the reasons given above, there is also the insurmountable fact that you cannot fulfil the great commission with churches that you do not have a common message with. What will you be preaching to the people as your message of good news? That was the basic difficulty that caused the churches to convene the Acts 15 Jerusalem council. The Bible says, “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:1–2). It was very clear that Paul and Barnabas could not work together with these men who had come down from Judea until this doctrinal issue was sorted out. In

fact, as the matter finally was resolved, the church banned those other men from preaching around and instead commended Paul and Barnabas to the churches as the men they should listen to.

We find a similar situation in the province of Galatia. Paul discovered that other preachers had gone there preaching a different gospel from the one he had been preaching. Did he commend such “gospel” preachers to the church? No, he called curses upon them instead. Paul wrote to the Galatians saying, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” (Galatians 1:6–9). Clearly, Paul was not going to be associated with such “gospel” preachers.

There are some circles in which “baptism by immersion only” seems to be the only basis of union between churches. To discuss anything beyond that is deemed to be divisive. Hence, there is as much variation of “truth” in the churches in such circles as there are birds in the forest. That surely is wrong. It betrays a fatal ignorance of true biblical unity. In the Bible, unity is based on truth. We may not agree on everything to the very jot and tittle, but surely we must agree on the basic truths of the faith. We must agree, for instance, with how a person can have his sins forgiven by God. Is it by faith alone or is it by faith and works? If we cannot agree on that, as was the case in Acts 15, then we must part ways. We cannot work together in an association. There may be other vital concerns as well, but the basic truths of the faith are certainly essential.

### **COMMON CHURCH ORDER**

Secondly, biblical inter-church association can only take place where there is an adherence to a common church order. By church order I mean the way in which we worship God and conduct our business as a church. The regulative principle of church government and worship makes it abundantly clear that God has decreed how people will conduct

themselves in his household. Just in case anyone thinks that this principle is man-made, it is important that we notice that it is based squarely on biblical teaching. Paul wrote his first epistle to Timothy because he did not want Timothy to organise the church in Ephesus as he pleased. Hence he wrote, “Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14–15). Timothy had no right to impose his own church order upon the church. He had to follow apostolic directives in whatever he implemented in the church. In other words, whatever the final application of this might be in our churches, this verse is teaching us that church order is important and it must be based upon our understanding of the Bible.

This is not the only passage where we can make such a deduction. Paul often made it clear to churches that he was expecting a uniform behaviour from them based on biblical principles. For instance, to the church in Corinth he wrote concerning the way in which women were to conduct themselves in public worship. In the midst of those instructions he wrote, “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.... As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Corinthians 11:16 and 14:33). Paul was basically saying to the church in Corinth that they were not going to get preferential treatment. They were to behave the same way that other churches were behaving with regard to the role of women in public worship.

So, since this matter of church order is not a matter of individual preferences, it is a test of how seriously people take the Word of God. Many churches are willing to superficially change their doctrine as long as it does not touch the way they worship. But truth was never meant to simply be cerebral. Truth must change the way we live. The way you worship God and conduct your church affairs tells me how much you respect the Word of God. If, by the way you order your church life, I discover that you do not respect God's Word, I must not enter into

association with you because you are living in disobedience, even if you call yourself a church. Again, I am not suggesting that the Bible has told us to the minutest details how we are to organise church life—it has not done so—but what I am saying is that, as far as the Bible has spoken, so far must we obey. To fail to obey the clear teaching of Scripture is a sign of lack of spiritual life (Titus 1:16), and so such “churches” are to be evangelised rather than associated with. You cannot have filial affection towards churches that are denying Christ’s Lordship by their very conduct.

Finally, under the heading of a common church order, we must observe a practical difficulty, which will beset our church-planting efforts if such a matter is not resolved. The practical difficulty is, if you work together in a church-planting project with churches whose church order is at variance with yours, which church order will the daughter church follow? For instance, if you truly believe that the Congregational form of church government is the correct and biblical one, but you enter into a church-planting project with a Presbyterian or Episcopalian church, what church government will the daughter church have? This is a very simple but practical problem that those who close their eyes to this reality will soon face.

## **CONCLUSION**

Having stated that the biblical boundaries of inter-church associations necessitates that we should have a common doctrinal confession and a common church order, I must hurry to make a few qualifications. The first is that such a position does not mean that we can only associate with those who have adopted the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* or have a plurality of elders. Of course not! We must give room to ignorance and growth in understanding, and so we must be accommodating even to those who are still wrestling with some of these issues. However, where there is a deliberate rejection of the truth as we see it in the Scriptures, then we must ask the question: What will be trying to achieve in associating with such? Let those who see things differently from us associate also among themselves so that their association is also a like-minded one, just as ours should also be.

The boundaries that we have been drawing are *inter-church boundaries* and must not be applied at a personal level. In other words, I can associate with a fellow believer in my office or neighbourhood at a spiritual level, even if he belongs to a denomination that I would not agree with in terms of its doctrine and practice. At a personal level, we are simply having fellowship together as brethren in the Lord in an informal way. But at church level we are talking about partnering in the work of evangelism and missions. That is different, as I have already shown. Inter-church association is not merely about having fellowship beyond the four walls of our churches, it is working together to fulfil the Great Commission. There are limitations experienced there that I do not necessary experience at an individual level as I associate with believers from other churches in the neighbourhood or office.

Sometimes the absence of a good level of common doctrine and practice will result, not in a complete withdrawal of fellowship, but a limited level of fellowship between our churches. We must not give every doctrinal difference the same weight. For instance, we may have different views on eschatology (*i.e.*, with respect to the one thousand years of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20), but that should surely not cause us to part ways as churches. Nor should we give every difference in church order the same weight. Some matters are in the sphere of *adiaphora* (matters indifferent) and so we can quite easily overlook them for the common good. For instance, in some churches they take offering during the service while in others this is a matter that is done individually after the service (perhaps using a box near the entrance). In some churches they sing during the collection while in others there is only musical accompaniment—while in others it is done in total silence! Surely, we are not going to divide over such matters. Rather, what we will find is that we will be more intimately related to those with whom we have a greater oneness in doctrine and practice.

Instead of spending all our energy in identifying those we cannot associate with, let us seek out those with whom we have a lot in common and begin doing something to enrich our inter-church associations with them. Also, in seeking those that we have a lot in common with, let us not use the church label as the litmus test. There are many “Baptist” churches that are not Baptist, and many “Reformed” churches that are not

Reformed. So, titles can be very deceiving. Let us get close enough to other churches to see what the real thing is behind the name. Where we find that our hearts beat the same way, even if they are not wearing our tag, let us associate with them for the sake of the gospel. Wherever we find a common doctrinal confession and a common church order, let us labour with such in the Great Commission. You will find that our hearts will love them and we will easily labour with them in the gospel. Inner association must precede outward association, not vice versa!

## **THE BONDS OF INTER-CHURCH PRAYER CONCERN**

We stated in the last chapter that the very first bond in inter-church associations is that of communication. We emphasised the fact that information concerning our sister churches must flow into our churches and not just into the pastor's offices. It should reach the attention of the ordinary members in the congregation. Why should it be so? It is because inter-church fellowship in the Bible was intensely personal. The ordinary members of the church were involved. They knew what was happening among sister churches. It must be the same with you. You must not tell people who come to ask you what is happening in your sister church, "Go and ask the pastor. He will be able to tell you what is going on. I don't know anything." You too should personally be clued in to what is going on. You must be interested and involved. We also saw that inter-church associations have to do with individuals who are involved in the work of the gospel. You should not pray vaguely for the work of the gospel in Southern province, for example, but rather you need to pray for individuals who are involved in the work of the gospel in that province.

The need for information is foundational. It is that which gives rise to other bonds of inter-church associations, and the very first of these bonds is that of prayer. We noticed from Scripture that the very first reason why we should associate as churches is because the church is one body, even if it is scattered throughout many nations. The second was that the church on earth has one mission. Whether the church is in America or Africa or Asia, it is one and the same job description that we are given and we need each other's help. These two reasons for inter-church associations demand that we should be praying for one another as churches. The parallel between the spiritual and the natural family will help to illustrate the point. I am sure that in your individual prayers, you pray for your relatives—your parents and your siblings, if they are still alive. Why is it so? It is because of filial affection. They belong to you and you belong to them. Because of that you are concerned for their welfare. We have already learnt in a previous chapter that we are a spiritual family right across the globe. Hence filial affection alone should be sufficient to keep us on one another's prayer lists. We should be concerned about one another's spiritual welfare not just within the congregation but even in

other churches. We have also already seen that the Great Commission needs divine energy. Therefore any person who is involved in this kind of work immediately feels the need to be prayed for. If we are to truly be partners with people who are involved in the work of the gospel, we will constantly find ourselves praying for them.

I intend to look at inter-church prayer concerns under three sub-headings. Firstly, we will look at the apostolic example. Secondly, we will look at the apostolic exhortations. And thirdly, we will look at the apostolic testimonies. Much of the following argument describes either the apostle Paul praying for churches or asking other churches to pray for him, but since Paul himself is a member of the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1–3), such passages really do fall under the category of inter-church prayer.

I hope that when you have seen the way in which prayer was such an important part of inter-church associations in the Scriptures, you will ensure that you include churches in your prayer calendar. Not only that but you will also include preachers of the gospel and pastors in your prayer calendar, realising that you are responsible to pray for them individually and in your church prayer meetings as well.

### **THE APOSTOLIC EXAMPLE**

Let us begin with the apostolic example. The apostle Paul often assured the churches to which he wrote that he prayed not only for them but for believers in other churches also. Let us consider the beginning of the book of Romans. In Romans 1:8–10, Paul writes, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” Paul constantly made mention of the various churches in his prayers to God. He even calls God to be his witness concerning this matter! This is especially striking with regards to the church in Rome. He was essentially saying, “God can bear me witness that when I am not with you it does not mean that I have forgotten about you. No! When I am on my knees, in my private closet, I pray for you. I plead with God on your behalf. And one result of this is that I have a constant

longing to come and see you and minister to you.” This is all the more striking when we realize that Paul had never been to the church in Rome, but only knew a handful of the Roman believers through his extensive missionary travel.

We notice the same thing in Ephesians 1:15–19. Paul wrote, “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.” Ever since Paul heard about the believers in Ephesus, after he had been absent from them for several years, he included them in his prayers. He made it a deliberate effort to be praying for them.

Also Paul says the same thing in his epistle to the Philippians. “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.... And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:3–6, 9–11). Notice that Paul’s prayers were essentially to do with that which is the general spiritual needs of God’s people. In this way he could never say that because he had no “latest information” on them then he could not pray for them. Paul knew that there were obviously things that all Christians are in need of and so he prayed on that basis.

In Colossians 1:3–9 Paul wrote, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the

gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Here was a church that the apostle Paul had never even visited and yet he was praying for their general needs all the same. It is also clear from the wording here that Paul did not only pray for the believers in Colosse when he heard about some problems there. He prayed for them regularly, for he says, "Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you." How can you do that? It is by making sure that you have some organised way in which you order your prayer life and that those individuals are included on your "prayer calendar".

In 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 we read, "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." And in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 we also read, "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." What further evidence would you want to convince you that Paul took seriously his responsibility before God to pray for believers in various churches of Christ? We should follow his example.

Whereas Paul ensured that, when he was with any group of believers, they together prayed for other believers, it must be clear that he also prayed for these various groups of Christians on his own. Hence, sometimes he spoke in the first person plural when assuring believers of prayer on their behalf (e.g., to the Thessalonians), but sometimes he spoke in the first person singular (e.g., to the Romans). This is an important observation. Inter-church associations must be intensely personal or else they are superficial. If you do not pray for other churches in your own

private devotions, it is proof that when you are praying for them in a church prayer meeting you are doing so simply because a prayer item has been mentioned but someone else has not yet prayed for it. That shopping-list approach to prayer is too superficial. And so, if you are going to copy the apostolic example, you ought to make sure that your prayers for other churches are taking part of your precious time in your prayer closet. Obviously that does not mean that we should pray for every conceivable church in the world! There are millions of churches in this world. If you try to pray for each one of them, you will be on your knees until you die. Rather, we must be responsible to pray for those churches that we have some ongoing relationship with, even if we are not the ones who planted them or have never been there before. To try and pray for every church is an impossible extreme and not to be regularly praying for any church except our own daughter churches is also a sinful extreme. Let us strike a biblical balance.

### **THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATIONS**

The apostle Paul also appealed to the churches that they should pray for him and the ministry he was involved in. His message to them was always, "I am praying for you. Pray for me too." Let us look at a few examples of this. At the start of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul had assured the believers in Rome that he was praying for them. In Romans 15:30–32 he said to them, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." Paul urged the Roman believers to pray for him on the basis of Christ's lordship as the one who has given us the Great Commission, and on the basis that the Holy Spirit has united us in love for one another. "Pray for me," he says, "I need your prayers!"

The apostle Paul did exactly the same thing to the Ephesians. In chapter 1 and 3 he mentioned the fact that he was praying for them. In Ephesians 6:19–20, Paul also asked them to pray for him: "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an

ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” It was the same with the Colossians. After exhorting them to be committed to prayer as a general way of life, he went on to say in Colossians 4:3–4, “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”

The same pattern continues. In 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3 Paul had assured the Christians in Thessalonica of his prayers. Now in 1 Thessalonians 5:25, Paul simply asked, “Brothers, pray for us.” Similarly in 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2, Paul pleaded, “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.”

Before we proceed, I want us to notice a consistent pattern concerning the apostle’s pleadings for prayer. Firstly, Paul’s requests for prayer were generally preceded by information about his circumstances and plans. In Romans, for instance, before he asked for prayer, he spoke to them about his plans to take some benevolent gift to the Christians in Jerusalem and then to go and minister God’s Word in Spain. It is after giving them this information that he proceeds to plead with them that they might pray for him. This shows us once again that information and communication are foundational for prayer. If we are not concerned about sending information to other churches, we must not be surprised when we discover that in their prayer meetings they do not mention us at all. Similarly if we are not concerned about hearing from other churches we have only got ourselves to blame if we are blank as far as specific prayer concerns.

Secondly, in many cases Paul’s requests for prayer were followed by assurance that more information was coming soon. That was certainly the case when he wrote to the Colossians and the Ephesians. Let us see an example of this in Paul’s epistle to the Colossians. As we already noted, in Colossians 4:3–4, Paul wrote, “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” Soon after that, in Colossians 4:7–9, he wrote, “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant

in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.” In other words, Paul was not willing to leave the brethren in Colosse praying like men shooting in the dark. He promised them that he was sending two brothers to tell them the precise circumstances that he was in so that they could pray for him meaningfully. In short, information fuels prayer. That is something that we definitely learn from the apostolic example and exhortations.

Before we move on, let us also look at one more exhortation to prayer. This time it is given by the Great Apostle of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Matthew 9. It is a precious exhortation to us to always pray to God the Father to send Spirit-anointed gospel preachers into the world to save the lost. The Bible tells us in Matthew 9:35–38, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” This is not prayer for a pastor for your own local church. It is prayer for preachers to go out and win the lost to Christ and to plant churches. I said earlier that this is an exhortation for us to always pray along these lines. Why do I say so? It is because even if God was to answer your prayers and a large army of God-anointed gospel preachers were to be raised in your generation and sent forth to win the lost, you would not stop praying would you? You would have to continue praying for them in the fashion in which the apostle Paul was constantly pleading for prayer. Hence, this is a general exhortation for us to always pray for gospel preachers and church-planting missionaries. These people need our prayers. We must continue to pray for the ministries that they are involved in that God would bless them with an abundant harvest.

If the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul were to visit our prayer meetings they would exhort us to be praying not only for the needs of our own church but much more for the needs of gospel preachers around the

world. Oh, how we need to learn afresh that the church of Jesus Christ does not begin and end with us. There are other churches and other saints elsewhere that need our prayers. We must pray for them regularly.

Let me end with one more exhortation by the apostle Paul. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul wrote, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” The context of this exhortation is the whole area of spiritual warfare. Every Christian is involved in battle with the powers of darkness. The saints need to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. They need to be able to stand against the devil and the devil’s schemes in the day of darkness. Therefore, we need to pray for them that together we might have a triumphant church here on earth. However you may want to understand this exhortation of the apostle Paul, it certainly does not limit you to only pray for Christians in your own church. He says that you must pray “for all the saints.” Many of us are guilty of serious failure at this point. We often only think about Christians in our own church when we are in prayer meetings and prayer requests are asked for. This is why we only end up praying for sicknesses and funerals among our members when there are major spiritual battles just across the road or hill that need our prayer support urgently. We need to realise that we have sister churches around the nation and around the world who need us to implore God for them so that he may deal with them graciously. The apostolic exhortations in the Bible clearly indicate we should widen the scope of our prayers.

### **THE APOSTOLIC TESTIMONIES**

Paul often testified that much of his perseverance in ministry and the fruit that was borne from his ministry were a result of the prayers that many people in different churches made on his behalf. Thus he was able to write back to the churches, thanking them for their prayers on his behalf. Let us see two examples of this. The first is 2 Corinthians 1:8–11. The apostle Paul wrote, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the

dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” Paul did not want to leave the brethren in Corinth in the dark, and so information flowed. In this epistle he does not state the precise circumstances that brought about great hardship to him and his apostolic team. It was most probably related to intense persecution. Paul knew that the saints were praying for him. Thus after the season of hardship was over, he told the Corinthians that he had been delivered from the peril and would continue to be delivered as long as the saints continued praying for them. The result of this was that many prayers of thanksgiving would go to go up to God because of the intercessions of the Corinthians.

We find a similar testimony in Philippians 1:12–20. The apostle Paul wrote, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.... And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” Paul says here that he depends on two things as he ministers the gospel—the help of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of the saints. He knew that the season of spiritual blessing he was enjoying in prison was because of the prayers of God’s people. And so Paul testified that his life and his ministry were carried along by the mighty prayers of God’s people in different churches. No wonder he earnestly coveted their prayers.

Paul also took it for granted that churches were praying for the other churches. There is an example of this in 2 Corinthians 9:12–14. There Paul wrote, “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. *And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you,*

*because of the surpassing grace God has given you.*” In this passage one can easily see that the apostle Paul had taken it for granted that the Corinthian church was being prayed for by other churches. This church had contributed to the financial well-being of needy churches in Judea, and so Paul was telling them that, the next time these churches mentioned them in prayer, they would do so with great affection and thanksgiving. That is not when the churches in Judea were going to *start* praying for the church in Corinth, neither were they going to stop soon after receiving the financial gift. Inter-church prayers were an ongoing concern. What made this season particularly special was that the gift was going to produce in the Judean churches a fresh gust of affection.

## **CONCLUSION**

I want to quote from *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. In chapter 26 paragraph 14 we read, “As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.” That is what we have confessed by adopting this Confession, and therefore it is only right that we also practice it. Let’s look at three areas of application:

Firstly, inter-church prayer concerns in the New Testament were primarily for the spiritual well-being of the saints and for the success of the spread of the gospel. We have read verse after verse as we have studied this topic, and hardly have we found any requests related to the physical or material well-being of the saints. I am not saying that we should not pray for Christians in other churches who are sick or have funerals or some other physical need, but when that becomes the major item of inter-church prayer concerns then it is worrying. It is important to note that we are not in the church primarily for ourselves. We are in the churches primarily for the extension of God’s kingdom. That is why, when our Saviour taught us to pray, he said we should say, “Our Father, who is in heaven, may your name be hallowed. May your kingdom come. May your

will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.” That is what we are here for—the extension of God’s kingdom and the manifestation of God’s glory. This theme must be evident in our prayer meetings, especially when we are praying for sister churches. Only when that emphasis is right should we proceed to ask, “Give us today our daily bread.” Unfortunately we have put the whole thing the wrong way round. The very first thing that people are thinking about when you ask for prayer requests is “daily bread” (*i.e.*, our physical necessities). That is wrong. The emphasis ought to be for the spiritual well-being of the saints and for the success of the spread of the gospel.

The apostle Paul often prayed for churches in a general way. In that sense he would be praying for them that they might live a life worthy of their calling, or please God in every way, or bear fruit to the glory of God, etc. We also, when we do not have any specific item for prayer may pray in such general terms. However, to end there would be wrong because when Paul himself asked for prayer he was very specific as to what he wanted the churches to pray for. He would say, “Pray for me for I am about to go Jerusalem. There’s work to be done there; pray that it may be successful.” In this sense, the prayer requests had names and faces and events. They had goals that needed to be achieved with the help of the prayers of God’s people. There were new regions that the gospel needed to penetrate and such pioneering work needed very specific prayers. It should be the same with us. We must never content ourselves with general prayer items. We must pray for very specific ministries and ministers. For instance, assuming you were praying for the inter-church project that we recently started, the Reformed Baptist Radio and Television Ministry, mention the names of the individuals who are involved in the ministry in your prayers. Pray for the effectiveness of the specific programme that is on the air. Do not just say, “Lord, bless the radio and television ministry.” Be personal. Be up to date in your prayers. You cannot run away from personalities when you are dealing with God’s work. When you are praying for Central Baptist Church in Mufulira, you cannot run away from the fact that there is a pastor labouring there and his name is Ronald Kalifungwa. It is the same here. People can’t help but think in terms of Kabwata Baptist Church and Conrad Mbewe. The two go together as far as ministry goes. That is the way it ought to be when you are thinking in terms of ministry in the

*Conrad Mbewe*

church—whether it is youth ministries or ladies’ ministry or any other ministry. If we can’t think of names then there is a problem with us or the ministry itself is not doing enough to convey information to us. We must have names and we must know what those names are up to so that we can pray for them meaningfully. That is the way it is supposed to be. Inter-church associations, I say again, are intensely personal. Inter-church prayer concerns, therefore, will also be personal.

Secondly, our church prayer meetings, and our family and individual prayer times, must be characterised by inter-church associational prayer concerns. This is where inter-church associations really matter. Often, those churches that are in denominational structures betray their failure to be truly associational in their prayer meetings. You can attend as many of their prayer meetings as you want and you will never tell which churches they associate with. Visit their homes and attend their family prayers and again you will not hear them praying for any pastors except their own. Surely, there is something wrong with that. That is totally unbiblical. Often, this is because, when inter-church correspondence reaches the pastor’s office, that is where the information ends. Everything is seen as merely administrative, and so from the pastor’s desk it goes either into his waste paper basket or into his out-tray for filing. And so the ordinary church members have no clue as to what to pray for even if they tried to pray for other pastors and other churches. Brethren, this ought not to be!

Sadly, many church pastors do not bother to share inter-church prayer concerns sent to them in church prayer meetings. It has been my sad experience on more than one occasion that, having sent out prayer letters to sister churches and having received an overwhelming answer to prayer, I have rung up an elder in a sister church to share the latest news only to find that the brother had no clue about the prayer request in the first place. The information had been marooned in the pastor’s in-tray for months! In one case I even accused such a brother of not attending prayer meetings in his church, but he assured me that he did. But how come he never heard about this issue? “Well,” he said, “each time the pastor comes in to lead the prayer meeting, all he does is share briefly from God’s Word and then asks for prayer requests, and we proceed to pray.” “What about the prayer letters we have been sending you for the last two years?” I

asked. To my utter shock his answer was, "We have never heard anything about any prayer letters." Well, that broke my heart. Often we pastors are the chief culprits in hindering the free flow of information between our churches. We tend to feel that inter-church communication is really inter-pastor communication. We think "it is for me," but that is not right. It is for the people of God. It is public property. The people of God ought to know the prayer concerns that their brothers and sisters have written to them, unless you think that such information is poisonous to their souls or a sheer waste of their precious time.

The *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* makes it clear that inter-church prayer concerns are supposed to be the burden of all Christians and not just of the pastor. The Confession says (and I quote again), "As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification" (chapter 26, paragraph 14). The church, with all its members, must be intensely concerned about what is happening among the churches. Therefore, our church prayer meetings and our family prayers must include inter-church prayer items.

For instance, when you have gone out of town or perhaps for some other reason you end up worshipping with a sister church, you should share at the next church prayer meeting how you found the brethren there. Share some of your observations that may have left you rather burdened about things there. Share also some of the encouragements you found there. That is the way it ought to be. Do not wait for the pastor to be the one to always share what he found where he went to preach. (Sadly, in many cases, pastors also just sneak back into church after preaching at another sister church with no inter-church information for the prayer meeting). Many members are ever on the move, visiting various churches due to the nature of their jobs, but the church never benefits from their exposure in the wider ecclesiastical world. This must stop. Stand up and testify so that the brethren may pray for the churches you visit.

Lastly, let us ensure that the needs of those among us who are labouring in the ministry of the Word are communicated to other churches for their prayer support. For instance, let us make sure that we are letting the churches know about our pastor's internal and itinerant ministry. Let us also share with sister churches what the Lord is doing through those in our midst who labour in the Word. Let us not just ask them to pray; let us also tell them about God's gracious interventions in answers to their prayers.

It is as we share prayer concerns with sister churches and as we learn to pray for one another that the next stages of inter-church associational life will naturally come about. Inter-church projects will arise out of this growing relationship of prayer for one another. Also inter-church pastoral counsel will grow out of a feeling that we can do more than just praying for the situation in which our brethren are. Our own experience has taught us a few lessons that we can share with them. So, the lessons in the next few chapters necessarily grow out of what we have learnt in this chapter. Let us pray for one another, and before we know it we shall be doing much more together.

## **THE BONDS OF INTER-CHURCH PURPOSEFUL COOPERATION**

The inter-church bonds of purposeful cooperation flow from the bonds of information and prayer. If these two are biblically implemented, purposeful cooperation will necessarily flow. It is as we know about the burdens our sister churches are carrying, and the barriers they are facing, that we pray for them. And it is as our hearts join theirs in prayerful support, that we will look at our own resources and do what we can to remove the burdens and to overcome those barriers. This is the biblical sequence. And it is an inevitable sequence because Christ spreads his resources and gifts among the churches in such a way as to ensure inter-church dependence. Yet, this sequence is being overlooked in much that is being done in the name of “inter-church projects”. A lot of churches are officially involved in all kinds of inter-church activities in which the members have no clue what is going on and have certainly no prayer interest in the matter.

For instance, when we used to belong to the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, we used to co-own a Bible college in Ndola called the Theological College of Central Africa (TCCA). On paper it was our college, but if I were to pick on one of you and ask you what that college was all about and what information you last heard from there, you would probably be as knowledgeable about it as you might be about my grandfather. In other words, you would be completely blank! If I were to ask you when you last prayed for this venture, if you are a white person you would begin to turn red with embarrassment because it never even crossed your mind that this was a venture to pray for. Why? It is because there was precious little or no information flowing from TCCA, or from EFZ about TCCA, and consequently there were no prayers going up to heaven for that institution from your heart. Our ownership was merely organisational and not really spiritual. At this stage I am not interested in who is to blame for this lack of information. All I am saying is that if an inter-church project is to be truly an inter-church project, information must flow and prayer must result from this information. It is only after this that you would expect real and spiritual inter-church cooperation in a project.

For instance, three of our churches here in Lusaka are working together toward starting some kind of Preachers College. I have already been asked by my fellow pastors to prepare some information to be sent out to our sister churches. These sister churches will be praying with us, and as they pray with us, they will begin to see areas in which they could perhaps help us. They may include us on their budget or they may ask one of the church secretaries to handle our correspondence and filing. All this will be an outcome of the information sent to them and the prayer burden it creates in their hearts. This was the experience of the New Testament churches, and I want to prove that to you under three sub-headings. The New Testament churches expressed their inter-church associational life by:

1. Setting up inter-church teams,
2. Helping needy churches, and
3. Supporting preachers.

Let us look at each of these from the Scriptures.

### **INTER-CHURCH TEAMS**

Due to the terms of reference in the Great Commission, the work that we have of spreading the gospel is very big work. The fact that most of our churches are merely meeting places, and we seem to see nothing wrong with that, only goes to show how spiritually backslidden we are. And it explains why we never think seriously about working together. Otherwise if we were to take the Great Commission seriously, we would soon see that we need to work together with other churches. Thankfully, the churches in the New Testament took the Great Commission seriously and consequently saw the need to work together. Thus they formed inter-church teams to do specific projects as assigned by the churches interested in those projects. There are a few examples mentioned in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians and in the book of Acts. Let us consider the first example. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-5, the apostle Paul wrote. "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have

to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me. After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia.” The background here is that there was a famine in Judea, and Paul, together with other brethren, was collecting funds to send to sister churches there for their relief. The churches were cooperating together in this relief effort. Once the funds were collected from the churches, Paul was to give a letter of commendation to some brothers to take the gift to Jerusalem.

The second example is in 2 Corinthians 8:16–24. In that passage, the apostle Paul wrote:

I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. 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, which we administer in order to honour the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

In this passage, the apostle speaks of a “brother” in verse 18 and of “brothers” in verse 23 who were appointed by a number of churches to join the team taking the gift to Jerusalem. Again this was clearly a cooperative effort by the churches.

For instance, if a number of our churches in Lusaka wanted to send some money to a church, say on the Copperbelt, whose building had collapsed and its pews totally destroyed due to a fire, and there was need for urgent financial supply, what would we do? Either all of us would start

making bank transfers on our own or we could appoint a brother or two to go around the churches to collect the cash and cheques and drive to the Copperbelt to hand over the much-needed funds. And so we would work together in that rebuilding project. If we opted for the latter, the churches would have to agree on the brothers to be appointed and it would be a joint effort. That is what the churches did in the New Testament.

The last example is in the book of Acts. In Acts 20:4–5 we read, “[Paul] was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas.” This is referring to the team that was labouring with the apostle Paul at this point in his ministry. It was a team of nine people altogether (if you include Luke, the author, and the apostle Paul himself) and they were not all from the same congregation. Various churches were able to set aside a brother or two to go with the apostle Paul as part of his ministry team. In this ministry team not everyone was a preacher. Some individuals were in charge of the food, others were in charge of the money, etc. Doctor Luke was busy writing down the history of what was happening, and of course you had the apostle Paul, the great preacher who was leading and being supported by the team. They worked as a team and they achieved a lot together. For the purpose of our study what I want us to notice is simply that they were not all from the same church. This point needs to be appreciated. God’s manpower is not limited to one congregation. You will discover that some of the people who could best do certain things are not necessarily in our local church. We may know of a certain brother or a sister who goes to another church and is highly gifted in just the area that we are interested in. Surely, we can join hands and work together, especially if we are in the same town, in order to achieve certain ends to the best possible standards.

There was a time when somebody asked me, “Is it alright for our singing group to have a member of another church to join us.” Why not? You can have people from various churches coming together in order to achieve a certain clear objective. We can see this in the biblical example of Paul’s apostolic team. We did the same thing with respect to our conference ministry this year by co-opting a brother from Lusaka Baptist Church, Mr. Marlon Banda, into the team. He was not blindly chosen by

lot, but rather because he had certain qualifications that made the team feel he was suitable. To begin with, he was the one who, while worshipping at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for a season, first suggested to Dr. Peter Masters the idea of him coming to Zambia to speak at a conference. This personal contact was very important for us. Secondly, Mr. Banda had a car! Only one member of the conference ministry had a car, and knowing how big Lusaka was, we figured we could do with another car while organising the conference. God often works like that. We will not be sufficient in ourselves to do all the work that we might need to do. Therefore, these ministry teams will have to be combined from a number of sister churches that we might undertake the great work that has to be done for the sake of the gospel.

Notice that these teams did not become an end in themselves. They were necessary working teams. Sometimes parachurch organisations take on a life of their own and become an end in themselves. To justify their continued existence they keep trying to convince churches that they still need their services. What we are looking at here in all the biblical examples were church initiatives that were related to real needs that could best be done by inter-church working teams. They did not form some permanent structures that became an end in themselves. Sadly, today very few churches are thinking of forming biblical inter-church working teams. The only places where churches are working together are in parachurch organisations. Yet, these organisations have taken a life of their own and are no longer accountable to any church. You do not even know who sits on their boards because you are never party to their appointment. All they want is your money and prayer support. Often, if you knew who the people were who sat on those boards you would never want to give them another dollar because you know them to be of highly questionable beliefs, practices and lifestyles. That is the problem with parachurch organisations. They are just not accountable to the churches and are often hijacked by mavericks who do not want to be accountable in local church structures. So when you go to their annual meetings you are shocked to see who their chairmen are—the very individuals you would certainly not want to represent you. That is the exact opposite of the brother in 2 Corinthians who was chosen by the churches. The churches were not going to be surprised to find him carrying their money to Jerusalem

because, through their church structures, they participated in his appointment.

We will need to bring working teams together, especially if we are going to be involved in some city-wide or nation-wide evangelistic work. It can be very difficult for one church to be able to deal with specialised evangelistic work like city-wide crusades or semi-permanent ministries to college and university campuses or running youth camps (including the development and running of actual campsite facilities). Churches can recommend some of their members to get together into working teams. These would take up various portfolios according to their areas of giftedness and before you know it there would be great work being done. The churches would feel more at liberty to pour in their financial resources because they know the individuals who are part of the team and they can trust them to look after their money and get good speakers who are worth supporting with their money. There are a few examples like this around the country. For instance, Kitwe Chapel and Riverside Chapel in Kitwe used to have joint evangelistic meetings across a whole week every year with the aim of reaching their city with the gospel. They would begin on a Sunday in one church and go up to Tuesday. Then taking a break on Wednesday they recommenced on Thursday and went right up to Sunday in the other church. They formed an inter-church team to organise this. That is how it should be. Much good was done for the city of Kitwe through this inter-church cooperative effort.

### **HELPING NEEDY CHURCHES**

One area that the working teams were involved in was that of giving material assistance to needy churches. Cooperation is often required in such situations in order to ensure that God's resources are equitably spread among the churches. We see this in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15, where the apostle Paul wrote, "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.'" Equality among the churches, as can be seen in our text, is an expression of brotherly affection. It arises

from the fact that we are one in Christ—organically one. When information flows and you receive news to the effect that the church which you have been relating to is in desperate need of a building or transport or hymnbooks, you may first want to simply pray for them. But as you do so, the words of James 2:14–16 come to mind: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” Inevitably, you will begin to look at your own resources. Perhaps you have two cars or an extra bicycle or extra hymnbooks. Your heart will urge you into practical action. It is not that in giving them you will now start walking while they are driving, or singing from memory while they now have hymnbooks. Rather you are bringing them to the position where you are, or at least close to that position. “That there might be equality” among the churches—that is the whole idea. Of course, I am not saying that just because you have cars in the city you should also send cars to pastors in the villages. To have village pastors driving Toyota Land Cruisers because pastors of churches in the big towns are driving similar vehicles is crazy. How will they maintain them in the first place? So the idea here is more of equity than actual equality. If the needy churches are fighting for their lives while others have more than enough to spare, then there is something wrong. That ought not to be the case.

As said earlier, this action arises from brotherly affection. Even in our natural families it is like that. We do not all live at the same economic level. Just because my sister drives the latest BMW from South Africa as the Managing Director in some big company somewhere in town, does not mean that although I am an accounts clerk working somewhere else, I will also be reporting at my work place with the latest BMW from South Africa. No! I will most likely still be walking to work or catching a minibus. But the day I am in desperate need, because my child is ill and I cannot afford the hospital bill, my sister will not just say, “I hope God helps him.” No, she will do something about it. You can be sure about that. Why? It is because she cannot be herself as long as in her mind she knows that I am hard-pressed and she knows that she has the capacity to help me. That is what brotherly affection is all about. It is there in the natural family and it

is there in the spiritual family as well. You cannot be at peace with yourself and say, "We have a nice pastor, a nice church building, and nice church cars. Well, too bad that our brethren are in dire straits financially. We will only pray for them." You cannot do that if there are genuine and biblical inter-church associations between churches. You will feel that you are responsible to try and bring about this sense of equity.

I raise this point because, although right now we are on the receiving end materially, it is only a matter of time before the tables will be turned. Other churches have been giving us finances, especially towards our building project. They have not done so because they are swimming in money. It is because they are seeing that we are in need. Of course, they are not expecting us to put up a structure which will look like theirs in the developed world. They know that they are in a well-to-do situation compared to us and, therefore, we will put up something simpler. But the point is that we are under stress and they feel they are obligated to do something about it because of their brotherly affections toward us, and thank God they do! Most of the money we have put into our building project is not from us. It is from sister churches across the world. But may God have mercy on us so that, when we have built our structures, we may not say, "Let us now enjoy ourselves. Let us now beef up our accounts and buy bonds in the Bank of Zambia so that we can become a very big and wealthy church." God forbid that we should ever start thinking like that when other churches are being planted all over the country who will soon also be needing buildings. Brethren, it is our responsibility to help needy churches. In fact, we should not wait until we have finished our own building project before we start helping churches that are more needy than ourselves. There are some churches that may be in a worse situation than ourselves, who may be in need of emergency help. When one-off situations needing help come to our attention we ought to respond to them immediately.

We also need to mention here that for inter-church associational activities to be truly biblical and meaningful, even in the area of helping struggling churches, we must involve the ordinary members of the church as much as possible. What do I mean by that? Perhaps two biblical examples will help to illustrate what I mean. The first is 1 Corinthians 16. We have already referred to this text before. There was a famine in Judea

and money was being collected from the churches in Europe and other parts of Asia in order to help reduce the impact of this famine among the churches in Judea. In 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, the apostle Paul wrote, “Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, *each one of you* should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me” (emphasis added). Paul did not want this gift from the churches to be a mere administrative matter which only the leadership of the church would be aware of, perhaps until it is reported in a members meeting later on. He wanted each one of the members in Corinth to be involved. And notice that he says that this is what he told even the churches in Galatia. If we could use a more modern setting, he was essentially saying that since they were informed (there is information again being foundational), they should now prepare to take a special collection on Sundays. This was to be announced earlier so that the brethren were prepared to put something into this extra “offering bag” that would be doing its rounds in the congregation. This was to be over and above the normal offering that took place during the worship service. This one was specifically to go to the churches in Judea. And so as the bag passed around, the people would be expressing their brotherly affection to their brethren who were in need. They probably would have prayed concerning this matter as soon as they heard about it, but now they were responding in a practical way.

That was also the point that Paul was making in 2 Corinthians 9:1–2: “There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.” Paul was not saying to the Corinthian church that he was boasting about them because their elders or deacons were good at signing very fat cheques to help other people. No, he was saying that he praised them because when they heard about the needs of their sister churches they were very ready to give and they did so generously as individual Christians. It is this testimony that now stirred “most of them” in

Macedonia to also become generous in their individual giving. Paul was saying that he was coming back for another collection and wanted to just make sure that they were ready for it so that their previous testimony may not be thought to have been false. "I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given" (2 Corinthians 9:3–5).

This is an important point in inter-church associations. We as church leaders must allow and encourage individual church members to participate in giving their time and their money. It is not right that our deacons should be signing cheques and sending them to help other churches or individuals in other churches while the membership is clueless as to what is happening until they hear about it in a report at the next members meeting. If we were to sign church cheques, let it be because we are topping up the figure raised. As we learn to share prayer needs from sister churches, we should from time to time challenge the members to respond materially to material needs. It must be at a personal level. Let us seek to work like that.

A few modern examples might be helpful here. Our brother, David Straub, the coordinator of the Reformed Baptist Mission Services in the USA came to Zambia two year ago to speak at our annual conference. He later returned and visited a number of our churches. After his second visit, when he returned to the USA, he challenged the churches there about the material needs of the pastors in Zambia. He had stayed in our homes and seen the way we were living. He wrote to me later saying that the giving by the ordinary church members of the congregations where he went far exceeded his expectations. I was one of the beneficiaries of that gift, together with a few other pastors. David mentioned that the gift came from individual church members who were moved to give. That is the way it should be.

Another example should suffice. At the beginning of this year I went with my entire family to South Africa when I went to preach there. How did that happen? Well, a church which could have easily paid for my whole family to fly to South Africa from its church coffers, decided they wanted to involve the whole church in this project. So they committed themselves to a special weekly offering “to enable Pastor Mbewe to come with his whole family” and minister in South Africa for a whole month. They knew that getting me there with the whole family meant that I was not going to be homesick. Sure enough the money was raised, the tickets were purchased and my family travelled to South Africa. As I said earlier, that church could have easily paid my family’s passage to South Africa from its normal income, but they decided to involve the entire membership. One result of this was that when we arrived, the membership all felt a part of our visit and really went out of their way to spoil us with their hospitality.

Our ordinary church members ought to be involved in this way if inter-church associations are going to mean anything at all. We have too many administrative funds floating between churches today while the ordinary church members have no clue about it. Situations arise that call for love to go into action, but we do not give our members the opportunity to express their brotherly affections toward such needy situations. It is all administratively done, as if it was the regular budgeted support for ZAFES or Scripture Union. I repeat, there is nothing wrong with topping up the efforts of our people from the church’s coffers, but let us ensure that as much as possible our inter-church associations are intensely personal.

### **SUPPORTING PREACHERS**

The financial and material cooperation between the churches was particularly evident in the way the New Testament churches supported their missionaries and preachers. Here are a few examples. Paul often supplied his own needs. He said that very clearly in Acts 20:33–35, “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Often Paul was involved in making tents in order to raise money for his own needs and

*Conrad Mbewe*

for the need of others. However, different churches often financially supported him at different times and to different degrees.

In Philippians 1:3–6, Paul wrote, “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” In Philippians 2:25 he again wrote, “I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.” From this passage of Scripture it is clear that when the Philippians could not be with Paul (see verse 29) to help him in his ministry they sent one of their number, Epaphroditus, to go and minister to him. How did they do this? They took a special collection among themselves in the church in Philippi and gave it to Epaphroditus to take to Paul who was in jail at that point in his ministry. Epaphroditus went there, encouraged Paul from the Word of God, gave him the material resources that he needed, and stayed with him a couple of days giving him the much-needed fellowship. Paul was very thankful to the Philippians for this kind of support even while he was in prison. Epaphroditus risked his life on that journey to help the apostle, and Paul said that such men ought to be honoured.

In Philippians 4:15–18 we find that this relationship of helping the great first-century preacher of the gospel with his ministry was not a temporal one. This church was committed to it. Paul wrote, “Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.... I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” That was the Philippian church! No wonder Paul could say, “You have been my partners in the gospel from the first day until now.” They would take a special collection for him again and again, and send it to him to assist him in the work of the gospel that he was doing.

A good example is what has just recently happened among us here in Zambia. A pastor in Livingstone has just had a house break-in. This news has been shared among the churches, including ourselves. We have prayed about it, but should that be all? Of course, not. Prayer will not replace the stolen items. Should we simply get the deacons to send a cheque to him and you will only know about it at the next members meeting? Preferably not. We should announce that a special collection, a love offering, shall be taken on Sunday and sent to our brother and his family. That is the way we should be supporting our needy pastors. If the leadership of the church wants, they may top up the gift. Something like that is what was happening to the Philippian church from time to time. Funds raised from the members were sent to Paul to help him in his ministry. If he were in the modern world we would say that he would go to the post office and find in his box a small slip saying "report at the window". At the window he would receive an envelope with a postal order in it of K15,000 or something like that from the Philippian church. In that way, once he wrote back to the church, his letter could be read without being prefixed with some long story about how the leadership decided to use church funds to help Paul. No one would be surprised at the contents of Paul's letter because they had participated in raising the much needed money themselves.

We see the same thing in 2 Corinthians 11:7-9. Paul wrote, "Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so." Who were these brothers who came from Macedonia? The answer is there for us in Acts 18:1-5, "After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching,

testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” So, the brothers that came from Macedonia were Silas and Timothy. What help did they bring from the Macedonian church? Well the Macedonian church sent money and they also sent individuals (Silas and Timothy) who provided the backup system in Paul’s ministry. So Paul was able to exercise a 24-hour job in preaching the gospel because these brethren provided everything that he needed by way of resources. There is the ministry team concept again. Here were people providing the support while Paul concentrated on the preaching.

Clearly, Paul was receiving support from various churches. We noted earlier that the Philippian church was supporting him, and now we are reading that he was also receiving help from the Macedonian church as he was labouring in Corinth. Paul’s support was coming from different churches, and also sometimes he worked with his own hands to support himself. There is nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with those who are involved in preaching receiving support from different sources. But if, as a result of this, such individuals begin to live above everybody else, as it happens in some churches, there must be something wrong not only with the churches but also with the fellow himself. That is where the problem lies. If a preacher of the gospel is as spiritual as Paul was, he would use some of that money to help the weak. He would also use some of it for ministry rather than enhancing his own economic status. Many churches, recognising this danger, have come up with a rule that the Lord’s servants who are in missions should only get help from the sending church. All help must be channelled through them. It was not like that in the New Testament. What matters is that the Lord’s servants are accountable for all the funds they receive.

The support of preachers must not be limited to crisis events in their lives. Paul again and again exhorted the churches to financially underwrite the expenses of itinerant preachers of the Word. Let us see a few of these examples. The first is Titus 3:13 where the apostle Paul wrote to Titus saying, “Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need.” What did he mean when he said that Titus should help them on their way? It is the equivalent today of giving someone transport money plus extra pocket money so that as they travel you are sure that they will be able to meet

any eventualities along the way and reach their destination safely. A domestic example will help here. If your daughter came to you, and she was invited to a youth camp in another city, and the camp fees were K2,000, would you give her exactly K2,000 plus perhaps the exact equivalent for the bus fare to the camp? I doubt it. You would quickly think of eventualities along the way and would top up that amount with perhaps another thousand kwachas. Then you may think that at that camp there may be little goodies like cookies and biscuits and soft drinks and even books, and so you would top it up with a little more. Finally when you give your daughter the money she will see that it is certainly much more than she really asked for. If she were to say to you, “Dad, this is more than I asked for!” You would say, “I know. I just wanted to make sure you had everything you need on your journey and at the camp.” That is how our churches should also think.

Being an itinerant preacher myself I have seen the difference in many churches in terms of the way they handle travelling preachers. In some churches, when they give you the travelling expenses refunds and the honorarium, you really say, “Lord, I do not deserve this.” But in some churches after they ask for your ticket, they give you exactly twice the amount that is on the ticket, to pay for your travel to and from their town, forgetting that you also had to travel from your home to the bus stop and you will need to do that when you return to your city. Apart from that, on the long trip you also had to eat and drink something at Kabwe or Kapiri Mposhi in order to keep fresh and alive. Apart from that, surely, a worker deserves his wages! The list is endless but these brethren do not think like that at all. Such churches need to hear this biblical teaching—“make sure they lack nothing”. Preachers should not get off at the inter-city bus station after a preaching trip and start asking themselves how they will get home. Churches should ensure that travelling preachers are well catered for.

Paul says exactly the same thing in Romans 15:23–24: “But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.” Again it is the same principle. Paul was expecting that during his stop-over on this

way to Spain, the brethren in Rome would put together the various items that a travelling preacher would need and give them to him. Rome would be like a refuelling station and it would be the Christians in that city who would look into the replenishment of the wherewithal that Paul needed for his journey. We often do this when preachers come to Lusaka on holiday. We plead with them to preach for us, but often the matter ends there and we do not think of assisting them on their journey. We think to ourselves that if they came here on their own, surely they should know how they will get back. The Roman Christians could have also said the same to Paul. But that is wrong. We should also ask ourselves how we can make their visit to Lusaka and their return trip easier with our own resources. They have fed us with the life-giving Word, surely it would not be asking too much for us to also bless them in a material way?

The last example I wish to give is in 1 Corinthians 16:5, where the apostle Paul wrote, "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go." Again the apostle Paul is making to the Corinthians the very same appeal he made to the Romans, which he also made to Titus. In each of these cases the word which the apostle Paul used, which is translated "assist" or "help" (Gk: *propempō*), has the imagery of escorting or delivering someone to the end of a journey. It has to do with ensuring that someone's journey will be undertaken from point A to point B successfully. So, it is more than seeing me up to the bus station, then singing me a hymn as I am getting into the bus, and then saying bye to me. It is providing me with what I will need for the journey up to my next port of call. That is what it is all about. The apostle John commended Gaius for the excellent support he gave to visiting preachers in 3 John 5–8. He wrote, "Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth." Gaius was well-known for this kind of hospitality to itinerant preachers.

We will have to learn to do this if the Great Commission is to be most efficiently carried out. Pocket money in the preacher's pocket and good hospitality in Christian homes may be as important as the Spirit's unction upon a travelling preacher. Preachers getting stranded along the way, because a coach has broken down between Lusaka and Kitwe and they could not hire another car, is not the best way to show that we really want our preachers to have trouble-free trips. Yet, this will definitely happen if all the money we give them is equal to the coach fare.

Tied closely with sending preachers on trips, well-provided for, is ensuring that these itinerant preachers have good Christian hospitality when they are among us. It is a scandal when a preacher is coming into town and a church is failing to find suitable accommodation for him in one of their homes. That ought never to happen. The fact that it does happen says a lot about the terrible state in which inter-church associations have fallen among us.

When the apostle Paul was about to go to Colosse he wrote the following words to Philemon: "And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers" (verse 22). The guestroom may or may not have been Philemon's own home (though I would like to believe it was). Because Philemon was a leader in the church he could have prepared the guestroom in another home. It should be the same with us. We ought not to be stranded in finding homes to host preachers. Our domestic doors ought to be wide open. The moment our pastor knows that a preacher is coming into town, he should simply pick up the phone and ring one or two Christians saying, "Any space in your home? We've got a preacher coming into town for a few days." The answer should be a ready "Yes!" instead of a long drawn-out silence that suggests that you are quickly thinking of excuses for why it will just not be possible this time, although you "would have really loved to host him". For the next few days even the children enjoy having the preacher being around because the menu in the home drastically improves as the lady of the home goes out of her way to earn a prophet's reward. Even that rooster that had been making noise behind the house may soon be saying its last prayers because the meal it was meant to be a part of has finally arrived! Jesus' words must be taken seriously: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.

Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:40–42).

## **CONCLUSION**

We read in an earlier chapter that each church and all its members are obligated to pray constantly for the good and prosperity of all Christ's churches everywhere and to help forward everyone who comes into their district of calling by the exercise of their gifts and graces. We also read that, when churches are planted by the goodness of God, they ought also to hold fellowship among themselves to promote peace and increase in love and mutual edification. That is what we read from the *1689 Confession Baptist of Faith*. Therefore, we ought to ask ourselves whether there are areas being made known to us in the letters from other churches to which we can respond beyond just praying. It may not be from letters but from visits that we make to other churches. Do we see things which we have in abundance that others do not have and desperately need? If we do, then we ought to go beyond praying for them. They could be involved in a church building project and are really struggling to move ahead due to lack of resources. Or perhaps they could have a church member who is failing to pay his way through his theological training. All these possible situations may be calling us to do more than simply praying. They may be calling us to put some money together and send it their way as a practical expression of our inter-church association.

There is also the area of evangelism through the print and electronic media. To try and get onto the electronic media on our own as individual churches is next to impossible. Ought we not to join hands as churches? I trust we are doing that already in a small way. But up to now we are getting support from the church coffers without the involvement of ordinary church members. Let the people get involved. Let them pledge some money regularly which can then be collected by assigned individuals. That way there will be a greater sense of commitment by the members to this project of reaching our world through the electronic media.

Another area of concern in which we need to apply what we have learnt in this chapter is that of the recent spate of house break-ins, especially among the people who are serving the Lord. Again we ought not to turn a blind eye to this and feel justified in simply praying for them. Surely this demands more than just prayer. We must respond cooperatively, ensuring that individual involvement is jealously guarded. Let us as it were “keep our eyes open” in prayer meetings, because some of the needs that are mentioned from sister churches are not merely spiritual. They belong to the category of items that we can do something about.

I have already given the example of Mount Zion Baptist Church in the UK and how they responded in action when they saw the mining students in their town buying Banner of Truth books in large quantities and sending them home. They thought of the pastors in Zambia and started the Zambia Book Fund in conjunction with us. In that way they are now supplying fifty British Pounds worth of books to about thirty pastors and Bible College students every year. Now that is something! The last time I got a report, they had spent approximately 3500 British Pounds through us in the last two years. That is plenty of money. In order to raise it, they had written to other churches in the UK asking for partnerships in this project. Through this inter-church communication, the project has become known among the churches in the UK. When I recently showed up in Mount Zion Baptist Church, they gave me the pulpit to preach. People there already knew about Kabwata Baptist Church and about Pastor Mbewe. Right before my very eyes they took a special offering in support of our building project. I came back with the money and it has since been turned into brick and mortar. That is a church applying the principle of purposeful cooperation in inter-church associational life.

Let us use worldly wealth for the furtherance of the gospel beyond our immediate local church. When God blesses you economically as an individual, do not just think of buying a new lounge suite or perhaps trading in your black-and-white TV for a colour TV. I am not suggesting that to do so is wrong, but what I am saying is that we should not just think of such mundane things. Ask yourself about the needs in other churches. Ask yourself about the needs that may have come through the prayer requests. Say to yourself, “There is this preacher coming in next month to preach at our church; can’t we host him for a meal after the

Sunday service and then give him a small gift to send him on his way?" Ask yourself questions that will enable you to use worldly wealth to gain friends for all eternity (see Luke 16:9). And remember that these questions must be asked at an individual level. Of course the individuals you will invite to your home and bless in this way will go back to their churches saying, "Kabwata Baptist Church is full of love. The brethren there really love others in a very practical way. There is hospitality and care there." What they will not realise is that you are only fulfilling your inter-church associational responsibilities. They fulfilled theirs by coming to bless you spiritually, and you are fulfilling yours by blessing them materially. So, use your money and your time that way.

Time is a gift from God. It is a very important commodity. You could use it very well in inter-church cooperation. It could be used to bless other churches too. You could be part of an inter-church team doing the Lord's work in other more needy churches. For instance, we can get some of our students when they are on holiday and send them over to Livingstone to help with the church there for a whole month or two. We could take a special offering for one or two months to raise the money for their bus tickets and to contribute something towards the groceries in the homes where they would be staying in Livingstone. Some of that money could be given as a gift to the pastor in Livingstone to help him and his family with their domestic needs. While in Livingstone the team would also share with the church how the Lord is blessing us as a church and some of the struggles we are going through. When they return, they would also share with us how God is blessing the church in Livingstone and some of the struggles they are going through. This information would be fuel for inter-church prayers. That is inter-church associational life! Let us not wait for some organisational structures to be put up and even then only get active when our pastor has been appointed the General Secretary or Archbishop of this organisation. Think about your time, your money and your energies. Think about how those God-given gifts can be utilised in inter-church purposeful cooperation.

## **THE BONDS OF INTER-CHURCH PASTORAL COUNSEL**

The bonds of inter-church pastoral counsel grow out of the preceding two bonds that we have just examined (prayer and purposeful cooperation). Information must first flow between our churches, and it is out of that context that we will know one another as churches enough for us to seek one another's pastoral counsel. A good example is what has recently happened among us. As elders, we are thinking of revising our church constitution. Instead of reworking the wheel, we have decided to get constitutions from other churches as working documents. Which churches have we approached for this? Firstly, it is obviously those churches that we have come to know over the years because we have been communicating with them regularly. We have come to know enough about them to know the quality of church life that they have. Secondly, it is churches that we have been praying for and which have been praying for us. When we send them our prayer letters, we often receive letters from them acknowledging receipt of our prayer letters and sometimes even assuring us of their prayerful interest in our work here. Sometimes these churches, through their pastors, respond to some of the issues we have raised in our prayer letters by way of warnings and encouragements. In other words, there is already a relationship of prayer and mutual concern between us. In some cases we have already begun to do some things together by way of inter-church projects. Some of them may have already sent us financial support toward our building project. So it is people we know, people with whom we share our mutual woes, people we have been co-operating with in various ventures—those are the people we fall back on when we need spiritual counsel and advice.

### **COUNSELLORS AND COUNSELEES**

Some churches will be more mature, more experienced, more gifted, and more equipped than others and, therefore, they can be a source of counsel and advice toward other churches. This is what we see in Acts 15:1–6. The Bible says:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Part of the reason why the church in Antioch decided to defer the matter to Jerusalem was simply because the people who were teaching that Gentiles should be circumcised came from Judea. So, it only made sense to have the matter settled there. Another reason was simply the fact that the church in Jerusalem was more mature. It was the first to be planted and so it only made sense that important matters such as the one at hand should be referred back to them for discussion. It is not always true that older churches are more mature because some churches either stagnate or backslide. But as a general rule you expect more experience and therefore more maturity in older churches. So you can refer to them for advice just the way in which young Christian, when they have a problem, go to older Christians for counsel. Young Christians should be reticent about giving advice on spiritual matters until they have been around in the kingdom a little longer. I am ashamed when I think of some of the advice I used to give when I just got converted. I ought to have kept my big mouth shut in those earlier days. We all have the tendency to feel, because someone has come to ask us for advice, we should give it—even if we really know very little about that particular problem. In the end I was merely adding my ignorance to the person’s ignorance, and none of us got the wiser for it. Thankfully, most of us with time learn to go to mature people, those who lead Bible studies or occupy the pulpit, to seek spiritual counsel. As it is with individual Christians so it is with churches. You go to the more mature churches to seek spiritual counsel.

Another reason why Paul and Barnabas were asked to go to Jerusalem to seek advice there was what you would call “the apostolic factor”. You will notice that the Bible carefully says that they went to consult “the apostles and elders” in Jerusalem. We no longer have Apostles today, and so we can only apply this event to ourselves in a general way, which is what I am doing here. There are some things in this chapter that we cannot reproduce today. The apostles would speak with an authority that no Christian on planet earth today has. The apostles were in the foundation of the New Testament church. So they were not only giving pastoral counsel or advice; they were specifically putting their foot down and insisting on the way things ought to be in all the churches. No wonder, therefore, they could say, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements ...” (Acts 15:28). We need to be very careful in inter-church pastoral counsel that we do not carry with us an authority which is not ours. We do not have apostles any more in the churches. Yes, as elders we will put our foot down over matters within the confines of our own local churches because we have oversight over the congregation of God’s people. We must insist on certain doctrinal standards and church order in the local church. But when we are dealing with other churches we cannot do that. The most we can do is to give advice to them. If they reject it, they have rejected it. If they accept it, thank God they have.

### **DOCTRINAL QUESTIONS**

Notice that there were essentially two issues that needed sorting out in this meeting with the apostles and elders. The first was a problem of doctrine. You will recall that the issue that brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with the brothers from Judea was that the latter were teaching that “unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved.” This matter needed to be resolved. Inter-church pastoral counsel, therefore, must deal with matters of doctrine. That is a very important observation to make today because it is the one area that people do not want to hear about in present-day inter-church associations. When you bring up issues of doctrine, they say you just want to divide the association. That is most unfortunate. Once should ask, “If we cannot discuss doctrinal issues in our inter-church association, then

what are we going to be doing? What are we there for?” Inter-church associational meetings are the right place to iron out our doctrinal differences. The matter may not necessarily be handled in a meeting with everyone, but at least it can be tabled there and then referred to the right forum for discussion and debate.

On this matter, I thank God for Central Baptist Church in Chingola who, about two years ago, saw the need to come up with a meeting at which pastors of Reformed persuasion would come together once a year to argue out doctrinal issues. That forum has really been helpful in keeping us together. At those meetings, one pastor presents a paper on a doctrinal issue and when he finishes the rest of us “bring out our canons and fire on him” with questions. He has to defend his position. If he discovers that most of the pastors are opposed to the position that he has taken, he goes back home to do more homework in that area. That is the way it ought to be. It ought to be safe enough in inter-church associations for people to sit and talk over doctrine.

### **CHURCH ORDER**

The second problem dealt with at this Jerusalem council was one of church order. What do I mean? If you read further in Acts 15, you discover that the brothers who went to teach in Antioch from Jerusalem did not do so with any authorisation from the home church. Thus when the matters of doctrine were resolved the apostles and elders wrote to the church at Antioch as follows: “We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing” (Acts 15:24–27). The brethren at Jerusalem were not content to simply rectify the doctrinal problem but also pointed out the irregularity in church order. That easily happens in churches and can happen even here at Kabwata Baptist Church. Men may have some personal doctrinal convictions, which are not representative of the church’s position, and upon being invited to preach at another church would use that forum to share these convictions. The result is that people would think that is what we believe here at Kabwata

Baptist Church. Hopefully, they would come to check with us as elders of the church before labelling us as heretics.

Difficulties related to church order may take other forms. Sometimes it is an issue of a spirit of rebellion. Some stubborn members who resist being accountable to church leadership in one church could, through their informal fellowship with your members, start having a similar effect upon them to the extent that your church begins to also be polluted. You just find that your members become unmanageable. Their minds have been polluted by people from another church. The best place to start is by sitting together with the leadership of the church where the influence is coming from so that the problem is discussed and its root cause is dealt with. The aim is to restore church order. This kind of forum is something that we lack between our churches. I have been a church pastor for about six years now, and it has been long enough for me to realise that inter-church leaders' meetings are extremely sensitive. You do not raise issues about other churches whose leaders are present even if those issues are affecting your church. Everyone may know what the issues are, and outside the meeting they may have been talking about it in small groups, but you dare not discuss it openly with everyone around. You just pray together about the Lord's work generally and talk about some common projects in which you could work together. I have serious problems with this because it borders on hypocrisy. You know that there is a problem between your churches in the realm of church order; surely, this is the best forum to talk about it! Inter-church leaders' meetings are the best place to know what is already being done about the problem, to know who the culprits are, to get to the root of the problem, and to arrive at a common way forward. So, in inter-church pastoral counsel we are to deal with not only matters of doctrinal concern but also matters of church order.

### **TEMPORAL ISSUES**

It is interesting to notice that when it came to the solution to the problem, the leaders came up with rules of conduct that included local and temporal issues that were mainly related to restoring peace between Jews and Gentiles. They said, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not

*Conrad Mbewe*

to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things” (Acts 15:28–29). Why did they only pick out these few rules of conduct? Why, for instance, did they not list the full Ten Commandments but only pulled out the one that forbids sexual immorality? The reason is simple. Their interest in coming up with this list of rules was to deal with the issues that were causing converted Jews to stumble because they were being openly done by their Gentile brothers. Today, you hardly hear sermons in churches on abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, not eating meat from strangled animals, and so on. Whereas they are almost non-issues to us today, they were very big issues to the church in those early days as they sought to find middle ground for Jews and Gentiles to worship together. These issues were threatening to split the church and so they had to be handled.

Many converted Jews, who had lived all their lives under the Levitical laws, still felt that all of them ought to be observed by anyone who was to enter into a relationship with God. So, they were pushing for the Gentiles to carry that load on their shoulders, which by the way, they themselves had failed to carry. The apostles and elders examined this and felt that it would not be right to support such a move. Instead, they asked the Gentiles, for the sake of their Jewish brothers and for the sake of church unity, to observe a few dietary restrictions so as not to cause unnecessary offence to converted Jews. Sensitivity to their Jewish brothers was part of Christian love. They also looked at the many Gentiles believers, whose backgrounds made them see nothing wrong with things like polygamy, having concubines, etc., and they came up with rules of conduct that dealt with that; hence the inclusion of a clause to abstain from sexual immorality. Marriage must be monogamous, and there must be chastity outside marriage, and fidelity within marriage. Obviously there were other areas of sanctification that both Jews and Gentiles needed to deal with, but these were the areas of church order that were threatening unity and peace in the church, and so they dealt with them.

Why do I raise this point? It is because there are some issues in the realm of doctrine and church order that may be relevant to the churches today but which may be totally irrelevant to the next generation. We must

deal with them under inter-church pastoral counsel. For instance, when our spiritual forefathers were coming out with *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, the Charismatic movement was not an issue, but it is a very big issue today. So, when they penned the Confession they did not have to include doctrinal statements to safeguard the churches against their doctrinal and practical errors. There were no altar calls in the churches in those days calling people to go forward to receive the Holy Spirit. Life was more straightforward in those days; they got saved and that was it. But today everything is being packaged in little bits and pieces. You can pick up one item in the parcel of salvation and leave out others until a more convenient time. You can have Jesus as Saviour without having him as Lord. You can have salvation without having the Holy Spirit. What should we do about all this? Many church leaders would rather say nothing about it. They say, "We should not talk about such things, you know. We are Baptists." While they are trying to keep quiet about these things, their churches are a bloody battlefield and before long they experience a split. Silence is never the answer. We need to sit down as church leaders and deal with the current crisis, even if our forefathers never dealt with it. We should go to those churches that seem to have handled the problem well and find out from them how they have managed to steer clear of all the confusion that we are experiencing in our church. In ten years' time, that may not be an issue. It may all be gone, but that does not mean that it was not necessary to handle it ten years ago. In every period of history, new issues come up, and so we ought to be willing to consult one another over these matters.

## **TWO LEVELS OF PASTORAL COUNSEL**

It is important to also notice that in Jerusalem, the matter that was being sorted out was handled at two levels—at oversight level and at ordinary church members' level. At oversight level that is where all the discussion took place. Notice in the following quotation the distinction made between the rest of the church and the leadership of the church: "When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed *by the church and the apostles and elders*, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and

required to obey the law of Moses.’ *The apostles and elders* met to consider this question” (Acts 15:4–6, emphasis added). The issue was discussed thoroughly in a meeting that was only attended by the warring parties together with the apostles and elders. It is not clear as to whether those who were of the circumcision party were included in the discussion, but certainly Paul and Barnabas were because they were at eldership level. It just seems to me that at some stage some representatives of the circumcision party should have been present to represent their cause properly. It was a lengthy discussion that covered almost an entire chapter. It was a very open and educative process.

A similar thing happened among us recently. You will recall that we had a very difficult discipline situation about a year ago when our eldership comprised only two of us—Dr. Msiska and myself. The first thing we did as elders was to consult. We consulted fellow elders across the country. We got their advice. It was a united voice urging us not to handle the matter privately but to bring it to the attention of the church. We proceeded to do so and brought the matter before the whole church. After that, we now needed to commence the disciplining process. Again, we went back into consultation with fellow elders. This time we limited it to the leadership of Lusaka Baptist Church and Nyumba Yanga Baptist Church, partly because we knew that whatever we did was going to affect our sister churches who were nearest to us. This was a matter of church order which had the potential to spill over into other churches. We called them together and laid the problem before them. We showed them what we had done thus far, where we were at that point, and what we were planning to do at the next meeting which was scheduled for the following Sunday. We made it clear that we valued their counsel. They gave us their advice, which we found very helpful. Thus, when we stood before you as elders to say what the way forward was to be, we had the full benefit of the wisdom of a multitude of counsellors at eldership level. You were not party to any of these discussions. In fact, you did not even know that we were consulting at eldership level. Your turn came later, and that is what we now proceed to notice from the biblical narrative.

When the apostles felt that they had reached consensus, they then invited the rest of the church to lay before them their conclusion so that the matter would be owned by the whole church. After the lengthy

discussion was concluded, the Bible says, “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22). In this way, the matter was communicated as a position taken by the church in Jerusalem, through its leadership of course. Notice also that there was some response expected from the churches to which the communication was sent. We are told in Acts 15:30–31, “The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.” So, although the matter went with apostolic authority, the brethren went along with it willingly. It was not pushed down their throats whether they liked it or not. Leadership in the New Testament always carried God’s people *with* them.

The same thing happened in Acts 6 when the first deacons were appointed in the church. It was clear that the apostles had already discussed the matter and reached a conclusion. It was this conclusion that they brought to the church. “It would not be right for us,” they said, “to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2–4). They spelt out the way forward. What was the church’s response? The Bible says, “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism” (Acts 6:5). The word “proposal” is a little unfortunate because the apostles were not bringing a proposal that was to be voted on, as it were. They brought their conclusion and tabled it before the brethren for their opinion too. Rather, the verse literally reads, “This word pleased the whole group.” In other words, they were happy with the decision that had been made by the apostles. Thus, when they went on to choose the seven deacons, they were doing so willingly. Leadership must always be by consent.

What this means is that even in inter-church counsel there is some membership involvement. It may not be as active as the previous areas but it is still as real. The church should not just find itself doing things just because those things were arrived at during some inter-church eldership

meeting. The church must own what its leaders have decided. So, when your elders come with “a way forward” from such a meeting, ask yourself, “Does this plan conform to the principles of Scripture, as I know them?” If you are in doubt, then ask for further explanations. Do not just swallow whatever your elders say, as if you were a Roman Catholic Church and they have come with a papal bull from Rome. When your elders come with a decision made elsewhere, they should be able to give reason for it so that your obedience is an informed obedience from the heart.

### **ADVICE AND AUTHORITY**

In chapter 26 and paragraph 15 of *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* it says, “In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.”

Notice that there are two areas in which inter-church pastoral counsel is applied—the areas of “doctrine and administration”, *i.e.*, doctrine and church order. Also, notice that it is not every church member who is involved in discussing these matters. The churches are to do so “by their messengers”, *i.e.*, they choose spiritual and mature men who go to such meetings to consider the questions at hand. Notice also the level of authority that the decisions made at such meetings carry. Their role is to “give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned.” Their role is purely advisory. It is a meeting for mutual counsel. Just in case this is not clear enough, the Confession goes on to state that “these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches

themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.”

Let us apply this to the consultation that we had with sister churches over our recent difficulties. What this paragraph in the Confession means is that the counsel we were given was not binding on us. We could have overlooked their counsel and gone on to do as we please. Similarly, once the matter was made public in our church, they too could say to their members, “You are likely to hear this from a few members of Kabwata Baptist Church. We had a meeting with their elders and after much discussion we felt that it was the best thing to do in the interest of the peace and unity of that church. So if any of you have further questions please feel free to see any of us for further clarifications.”

In other words inter-church counselling meetings do not have any special Christ-given authority so that what they resolve must be applied by the churches. They cannot discipline the church if it does not follow their pastoral counsel. Of course, the churches may disassociate themselves either from the erroneous position that the church they are counselling has taken or from the church itself altogether, depending on how serious the matter is. They are not a church court and so cannot impose their decisions upon the church in question.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let us consider a few areas of application as we conclude. Firstly, young churches like ourselves will only be wise to seek out the advice of more mature churches. However, the pastoral counsel should only be accepted if it is biblically based. Unfortunately, sometimes all the counsel one gets in such circumstances is simply, “Be careful.” That is never good enough. We must go to the Scriptures and show the principles by which we are advising a certain line of action. Sadly, what the “be careful” advisors are often saying is simply that if they were in your shoes they would keep clear of such issues. To them, dealing with issues of church order is like pulling a dog by its ears. It is asking for trouble. That, sadly, is never really helpful. When a younger or less-mature or less-equipped church comes to you for advice, do not simply tell them what works and what does not work. You should open the Bible to them and show them the way forward from biblical principles in the sacred pages. As the work of Reformation is

growing in the country, we are finding that although we ourselves are a young church, younger churches are coming to us for pastoral counsel. This is usually in the realm of applying Reformed theology to congregational life. We also should be careful not to simply give them pragmatic answers. We should open the Bible and talk about the mind of Christ in Reforming church doctrine and church order. This cannot be over-emphasised.

Secondly, in inter-church pastoral counsel we must distinguish between what the Word of God is saying and advice based on the general principles of Scripture and applied by experienced counsel to such a situation. I am very concerned that we do not turn our own judgment over a matter into a veiled “thus saith the Lord.” Let me explain the difference. In 1 Corinthians 7:25–28, the apostle Paul says, “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” That first statement, “I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgement as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy,” is making the distinction I want us to learn. Paul felt disqualified to make a command in the matter because there was no precise judgement in Scripture on the crisis that was there in Corinth, whatever that crisis was. Hence, all he gave was sanctified advice based on the general principles of Scripture. Now, if an apostle could do that, who are we to think that it is beneath us to do so?

Another example that we have in Scripture is in 2 Corinthians 8:10–11. There the apostle Paul says, “And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.” The general principal of Scripture is that we are morally bound to make good the promises we make. But how the Corinthians were to go about it, Paul was only willing to advise. Paul had authority which he could have used to insist even on the mechanisms to be used to fulfil this

promise, but he was not willing to enter a province where God had not given him specific instructions. We too ought to differentiate between what is biblical and what may wisely arise from biblical principles. If your church for some reason begins to think that during the collection of the offering you should not be singing any hymns, you may have a good reason for doing so arising from your application of some general biblical principles. Yet you cannot give chapter and verse to insist that the churches you are in inter-church counsel with should go and do likewise.

Finally, as elders we need to realise that one of the bonds that ties our churches together is that of inter-church pastoral counsel. Let us plug into the maturity and the experience of pastors, elders and churches that have been ahead of us and those that have been around much longer and are proving from the information flowing to us to really be churches that are God-glorifying. Let us freely argue out our doctrinal issues and issues related to church order, so that we can return to our people with solutions that have been well-tested. That way we will not be reversing decisions passed in the church every other week as painful experience keeps teaching us the error of our ways. We will prevent this embarrassment by learning to consult others. According to Proverbs 11:14, “many advisers make victory sure.”