

## *Association Discussion Meeting Report*

On 29 June Trinity Grace Church hosted a second discussion meeting in Ramsbottom in order to consider the establishment of a national association of confessional Baptist churches. Over 25 men from 14 different churches gathered to pursue *holding communion together* under the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Confession of Faith so that we might enjoy the *peace, increase of love, and mutual edification* promised in God's Word. We thank God for the peace and unity granted to us in our proceedings and the earnest desire expressed for God to be glorified by our communion together. Three papers were presented to direct us in how we ought to live out confessional associational life.

We were pleased to have Dr. Robert Oliver present the first paper on our confessional heritage. Dr. Oliver has been a bulwark for Baptist confessionalism throughout the years and has been a great encouragement to us in the pursuit of an association. He helpfully traced the origins of "particular Baptists" from the Reformation up to 1660, explaining how our confessional heritage emerged from the heart of the reformation and English puritanism which sought to reform the church according to the word of God. Dr. Oliver demonstrated how in 1644 it was necessary for seven churches to defend their faith against erroneous accusations, as they were "*commonly, but unjustly called anabaptists,*" by writing and publishing a confession of faith. This providential persecution caused these churches to openly confess their orthodox, reformed, and congregational theology. From the very beginning, our forefathers in the faith held communion together and subsequently founded formal associations to uphold their confession of faith. In the same way, we desire to uphold our confession by walking in the footsteps of our forefathers in forming an association of churches, and providentially we believe now is the right time to confess our faith together, so that we might preserve our faith in a wicked and perverse generation and so that our churches might "enjoy the good and prosperity" granted in communion together for generations to come. (2<sup>nd</sup> LCF 26.14)

Our second paper was presented by Oliver Allmand Smith, pastor of Trinity Grace Church, on the practice of associationalism. What does associational life look like according to our confession? What principles can be drawn on how we ought to associate? Oliver answered these questions by presenting 15 affirmations from 2<sup>nd</sup> LCF 26.14 & 15 that we should seek in associational church life and desire to implement.

1. We desire an association of churches, not just men.
2. We desire an association of all the members of the churches, not just the prominent, influential, or gifted.
3. We desire an association that recognizes that places and callings, gifts, and graces belong to the churches, not an association.
4. We desire an association that prays for the good and prosperity of all the churches and their members, not a select few.
5. We desire an association which acknowledges the providence of God as the primary guiding principle of its decision-making, not the schemes and plans of men.
6. We desire an association committed to peace, increase of love and mutual edification of each and every one of our churches, not growth in numbers, resources and success.

7. We desire an association which recognizes difficulties and differences, and is committed to dealing with them, not one that ignores them and does nothing about them.
8. We desire an association that really cares for the peace, unity and edification of all of its churches, not one that writes off certain ones and lets them struggle and even die.
9. We desire an association that really cares for each and every member of the member churches.
10. We desire an association that stands for truth and order and that acts as such, not one that uses independency as an excuse for inaction.
11. We desire an association that is according to the mind of Christ that continues to be reformed according to his mind, rather than the celebrity pastor.
12. We desire an association that is committed to sending messengers for communion and council of churches for the resolving of difficulties and differences, rather than leaving each church to their own resources or individual members.
13. We desire an association where the churches are willing to give and receive advice with openness and honesty, rather than dealing with difficulties and differences behind closed doors where the elite can maintain control.
14. We desire an association really committed to the independency and autonomy of the local church.
15. We desire an association completely committed to being confessional as the best way to uphold a biblical ecclesiology.

We believe that these biblical affirmations represent the mind of Christ as it is expressed in our confession of faith. Therefore, what we need is an association of churches that is thoroughly committed to our confession of faith and sincerely, humbly and earnestly desires to live out our confession together as churches.

Our final lecture was given by Josh Williamson, pastor of Newquay Reformed Baptist Church, on the confessional necessity of missions and evangelism. Rather than hindering the work of missions, our reformed theology necessitates, motivates and guarantees the success of the churches mission in the world. Josh asserted that if we are committed to the truth of our confession faith, then we must then be committed to and zealous for the advancement of the gospel. Our confession makes this explicit in chapter 20 *of the Gospel and the Extent of Grace Thereof*, as the broken covenant of works, the nature of sinful man, and the insufficiency of natural revelation to save, necessitates special revelation and the preaching of the gospel. Moreover, what God has planned from eternity in the Covenant of Redemption and Christ has accomplished in the history of redemption, is ordinarily brought to fruition in the life of sinners through the foolish means of preaching. Therefore, it is incumbent upon our churches to cooperate in the work of missions. A confessional association must be resolved to support, commend, and encourage our churches in the work of missions, both nationally and abroad. While associations don't send men, as this is the work of local independent churches, we ought to labor alongside one another with the gifts and graces God has granted to us through prayer, council, accountability and financial recourses.

It is our hope that confessional churches would partner with us in an association for the sake of the gospel, the mutual wellbeing of all our churches, and the glory of God in the world. Lord willing, Trinity Grace Church will host a third discussion meeting in the autumn to discuss the implementation of our confession in associational life. We conclude this report with an

exhortation from the report of the 1690 General Assembly of churches which urged the churches to engage in this good work of laboring alongside one another in confessional associationalism.

“As it is our privilege to be in a capacity to do good in our generation, so it is our duty and will be our crown and glory to lay out ourselves and our talents, not only spiritual, but also temporal, speedily, while the power is in our hands, and faithfully, to the utmost we can...So with our earnest desire to you and prayers to God for you, that our hearts may be affected with and engaged in this good and great work, with all others we are called to, we remain your servants for Jesus sake.”

May our gracious God be pleased to unite our churches in *this good and great work* and to grant to us this same resolve, so that our God would be “*glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*”