

## Association Discussion Meeting Report

We give thanks to God for our first association discussion meeting held on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021 at Trinity Grace Church in Ramsbottom. Eighteen men from seven different churches gathered from Cornwall, London, Leicester, and the Greater Manchester area in order to discuss the establishment of a national confessional association of churches. Providentially, a seminary class in Ramsbottom had to be postponed until the autumn enabling men already committed to attend to gather to discuss associationalism. The Lord blessed us with great unity and fellowship in the gospel and in our common confession of faith as we discussed holding communion together under the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession of Faith. The day consisted of three lectures as well as profitable discussions after each one.

The first lecture was taught by Oliver Allmand-Smith, a pastor of Trinity Grace Church Ramsbottom, on the biblical and confessional necessity of formal associations. He argued how our forefathers in the faith upheld both the independence and the interdependence of the churches of Christ Jesus. Our ecclesiology is to be grounded upon the Lordship of Christ so that his power, will and authority guides us in all things, including inter church relations. Holding communion together then isn't about pragmatism in order to achieve a common goal but done according to the mind of Christ. Oliver gave five reasons why we ought to have formal association of churches. The confession itself requires formal associations, as "holding communion together," (2LCF 26:15) means formal, organic fellowship of churches. The Scriptures upon which our confession is grounded necessitate formal associations. Although the Scriptures don't use the precise language of associationalism, and there is not one proof text to establish this doctrine, the doctrine is necessarily contained in the Scriptures established upon apostolic example. Moreover, the men who framed the confession of faith formed associations, as did the later generations of particular Baptist churches who sought to strictly subscribe to the confession of faith. Since formal associationalism is biblical and confessional, the dangers of informal associations far out weight any perceived danger of associations.

Our second lecture was taught by Jonny Woodrow, a pastor of Christ Church Loughborough, on the practical necessity of associations. His past ministerial experience in evangelicalism and the training of men using various models of discipleship enabled him to give a helpful critique of informal fellowships. He walked us through Acts 15 as an apostolic model of "congregational churches enacting formal associations for purposes of the preservation of orthodoxy, pastoral care and the mission in the churches." After establishing these key ingredients of our ecclesiology, he then critiqued three common models in light of our confession: the pastor's fraternal, the ten-point statement of faith network and the values led network. These various approaches lack accountability, congregational polity, and substance which establishes fellowship and ministry upon individual pastors rather than upon churches. What is needed is a formal association of churches, united under a robust confession of faith, where churches are held accountable to that confession, and moreover, where they are built up together in the faith. "Here is the practical necessity" he stated, "if we love the flock of the Lord and want to see more people come into the kingdom to be grounded in the whole counsel of God and nurtured in the context of biblical polity and ministry, we will want to see this kind of association, if only for the health of our own churches!"

The final lecture was given by Brett Shaw, a missionary working alongside Trinity Grace Church, who taught on the necessity of confessional theological education. One of the purposes

and benefits of associating together is for the training of men under our confession of faith. While Baptists have benefited from the training currently offered by confessional Presbyterian seminaries and other evangelical institutions, there is a need for confessional Baptist training under our own confession of faith. Our confession teaches a specific covenant theology which produces a distinct ecclesiology and sacramentology, which we believe is thoroughly faithful to the whole council of God in scripture, yet if we do not train men in this context, it may be lost entirely. We must entrust our men with our confessional standard which we believe to be the best summary of the doctrine of Scripture so that “they would be able to teach others also.” Our desire here at Trinity Grace Church is to establish formal theological education by an association of churches.

After each lecture, we engaged in thoughtful discussion seeking to wrestle with our subject in an associational manner by offering the churches represented the opportunity to deliberate on matters together for the collective good of our churches. We discussed the difference between association, denomination and informal fellowships. Many people fear an association infringes upon the independence of the local church, but sadly what they have in mind is not biblical associations but denominational power. Any association of churches which fully subscribes to the confession of faith must recognize the great need to uphold the independency of the local church in all we do. A few churches who attended are currently undergoing reform towards confessionalism and it was expressed how an association of confessional churches could be a help to further reform our churches. An association is not the last element of an already well-ordered church, but an essential aspect of our ecclesiology for the wellbeing of our churches. It was also discussed how we might help our churches retain the good deposit of our faith by fully subscribing to the confession of faith. Without an association of churches who confess, embrace and teach the confession of faith we believe this faith could be lost. In all these things we were helpfully exhorted and encouraged to spiritually hold to our confession of faith, so that the truths that we hold so dear and embrace wholeheartedly would be lived out in our churches to the glory of our great God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is head over the church, and he has instituted the local church by calling us out of the world to himself to walk together in these particular societies, and he has established that these churches associate together “for our peace, increase in love and mutual edification.” (2LCF 26.14) Therefore, we press on in the Lord to seek to hold communion together among confessional Baptist churches. A second association discussion meeting will be held on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> June at Trinity Grace Church in Ramsbottom (DV) to further discuss these matters and we hope that many more like-minded churches would partner with us in this endeavor. We conclude with a prayer of our forefathers in the conclusion of preface of the 2<sup>nd</sup> LCF, “We shall conclude with our earnest prayer that the God of all grace will pour out those measures of his Holy Spirit upon us, that the profession of truth may be accompanied with the sound belief and diligent practice of it by us, that his name may in all things be glorified through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.