

Interdependence – a Biblical Vision for Local Church Autonomy
Locating Ourselves as Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches
in relation to Other FEBC Churches¹

Introduction

If the first millennium ended with the church split in two, the second millennium is ending with the church split into thousands of pieces, autonomously governed, even competing, fighting like siblings.²

Thomas Oden's description of the fractured church should arouse considerable grief and repentance among Christians. The thrust of New Testament teaching regarding the church focuses upon its unity in Christ, with many different metaphors describing what such unity looks like. Inability within the Canadian reality to present the visible church as united in Christ converts directly into a diminished ability to pursue Christ's Great Commandment (Matthew 28:19-20). It was Jesus himself who said "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). The "one another" surely includes believers and leaders in other Baptist churches in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches (FEBC).

Fellowship Baptist churches in British Columbia and the Yukon have declared their desire to make a "God-honouring impact" in their various communities. However, this vision will only be achieved with celebration as churches discover new, Spirit-generated, biblically-sanctioned passion and intentionality to live before God with sincere interdependence. Pursuing the vision to "be" the church that Jesus died, rose again and ascended to create as its Lord does not involve creating new doctrine or adopting novel interpretations of particular Scriptures. Rather it requires believers, with repentant and hope-filled hearts, to rediscover biblical truth and creatively discern how to live it whole-heartedly, effectively, consistently, and perseveringly in the 21st century.

This paper seeks to outline biblical mandates, models and applications and propose specific theological constructions that will enable FEBC as part of the Church of Jesus Christ to **express a Christ-honouring, Spirit-empowered interdependence, to the Glory of God and the achievement of the Great Commission.**

Several premises guided the development of this **discussion paper**:

- i. Scripture always evaluates tradition; tradition represents the way previous generations of believers have sought to live their faith obediently in their cultural context. Christians value tradition because they believe in the priesthood of believers past and present. They constantly evaluate tradition in the light of Scripture to ensure that our assumptions and practices are true reflections of the Messiah's life and reign.
- ii. The New Testament writers, guided by the Holy Spirit, emphasized the community essence of the church – a group of people in eternal relationship with Jesus, Messiah and Lord, and with one another to the glory of God and for the accomplishment of his eternal plans. Being is fundamental and it is a personal and collective being. Relationships with other believers in the Kingdom matter to God.

¹ This discussion paper only focuses on defining the relationship between the body of Christ and its local expressions. Many other matters of ecclesiology are not mentioned. This revision incorporates suggestions made by Dr. Brian Rapske and Dr. Archie Spencer.

² Thomas C. Oden. *Life in the Spirit. Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 307.

- iii. The Messiah's community as his representative, his body, in this world and under the energizing leadership of the Holy Spirit is active, pursuing God's goals and living obediently according to his values. Doing is the necessary result of obedient discipleship and it is a personal and collective doing.
- iv. The biblical mandates, models and applications give primary shape to any systematic theological propositions Christians derive in order to guide the contextualization of biblical truth. Biblical theology informs systematic theology; systematic theology shapes contextualization; the process of contextualization sends us back to re-examine Scripture to make sure we have understood God's desires, values and goals as fully as possible.
- v. General human culture reflects a distorted, fallen humanity, yet God's truth can be found at times within it because of his general grace and providence.
- vi. All believers, while justified and sanctified in Christ, still wrestle with sin and selfish desires. Vocational Christian leaders struggle with issues of ego, ambition, power, and control. They must exercise great care in every situation to be Jesus' servants in humble submission to his values and mission, as difficult as this can be. Entrusted with spiritual direction, they have greater responsibility to model in word and deed the unity that Jesus prayed for and mandated among his followers.
- vii. In this age we struggle constantly with the tension between the church as Jesus intended it to be and the form which in fact it takes, with all of its "spots and wrinkles." This tension demonstrates itself in the relationship between the invisible and the visible church.

1. Brief Historical Contextualization

The B.C. region of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches was birthed in church division. Challenges in the 1920's to the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures, particularly in relation to materials in Genesis and the reality of the Virgin Birth, Miracles and Resurrection of Jesus, i.e. his deity, led some Baptists to disassociate themselves from other Baptists and start a new association of Baptist churches. This action was not done lightly or easily. However, those leaders and people believed that at least two fundamental principles of Christianity (i.e. the inerrancy of Scripture and the deity of Christ) were at stake, which, if churches failed to embrace sincerely, they would cease to represent Christ faithfully.

Three decades (1950's) later this group of church took a bold step and united with Baptist groups on the Prairies, in Ontario and in Quebec to form the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches. The decision had its own set of controversial issues, but in the end it was determined that we agreed upon core biblical beliefs and discerned that we could carry forward the Great Commission more effectively in Canada and globally if we worked together. Church planting and missions were the passions that encouraged our unity, set in the context of agreement around core biblical truths.

Again several decades into the future (1980's) the B.C. Region of our Fellowship agreed to work collaboratively with two other Evangelical Christian denominations and formed the Associated Canadian Theological Schools, to equip effective ministry leaders of pastoral leaders was the primary motivator, as well as recognition that these three groups agreed substantially about core biblical truths, defined by the term "Believers' Church."

During these 70-80 years of life as an association of Baptist churches other issues have emerged in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists Pacific (FEBPAC) which led some churches to disassociate. These issues concerned international missions and interference by other denominations.

Church planting, missions and to some degree leadership development continue to be key elements that encourage collaboration and association, based on continued commitment to Evangelical Baptist distinctives. Relationships among church leadership and engagement

together in developing ministry agencies to address significant social needs (seniors care, children and youth (camps), and abused woman) have also been a significant contributor to cohesiveness.

William Badke, referencing a former B.C. Regional leader, Don Reed, articulated four reasons “for the success of the BC Fellowship Baptists as a provincial cooperative body”³:

- i. Substantial agreement on doctrine;
- ii. Inviolable autonomy in which all boards and agencies are subject and accountable to the local churches;
- iii. Voluntary association in which all participation is free and uncoerced;
- iv. Compatible accord based on mutual trust, fellowship, and confidence, with respect to united emphases and philosophies.⁴

Badke observed that “today doctrine remains important, but there is definitely more diversity, and many of the old distinctions are held to less tightly. This has created a climate for growth. However, not everyone in the movement sees this diversity as a positive or healthy development.”

As this very brief historical overview indicates perspectives regarding the nature of church unity in the B.C. Region of the FEBC (FEBPAC) continue to develop. This discussion paper seeks to assist Fellowship leaders and people to discern:

- i. the biblical understanding of “autonomy” and its appropriate limitation and application in FEBC generally;
- ii. biblical boundaries for doctrinal diversity;
- iii. what “voluntary association” means practically in the life of the early church;
- iv. the place for and significance of “united emphases and philosophies.”

2. Biblical Mandates, Models and Applications

In the Gospels Jesus presents his vision for the "Messianic community" ("my church"⁵ Matthew 16:18) that God sent him to inaugurate. The followers of Jesus, i.e. those who put their confidence in the good news he proclaimed (Mark 1:15), as they persevered through the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, experienced Pentecost (Acts 2). When God through the Lord Jesus "poured out his Spirit", the Messianic community came alive. The people of God, pre-visionsed and planned by God in Eden and the Abrahamic covenant, was renewed in the new covenant Jesus established in his own blood. Jew and non-Jew linked together by faith in Messiah Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit formed the Messianic community, looking forward to the return of that same Messiah and the consummation of God's plan of salvation. True followers of Jesus today constitute part of this Messianic community, the "communion of the saints" (Hebrews 12:22-24), and we possess by virtue of our life in Christ "the unshakeable kingdom" (Hebrews 12:28).

The consistent sense about the church we get in Jesus' teachings focuses upon its shape and identity as the worldwide community that emerges from the proclamation of the Gospel, that bears Jesus' name and that lives obediently to his teaching. “Local church” is not discussed

³ William Badke, “First the Gospel: FEBBC/Y,” in *A Glorious Fellowship of Churches*, edited by Michael Haykin and Robert Lockett (Guelph, ONT: The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches, 2003), 229-230.

⁴ William Badke summarizes material here from Don Reed, B.C. regional ministry director 1978-1989.

⁵ Jesus' use of the term *ekklesia* here has to be understood in the context of Jewish Scripture and first century Jewish understanding. This term is one used by the Greek translator of Deuteronomy to describe the covenant congregation of Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 4:10(Greek text only); 9:10; 18:16; 23:1-2; 31:30). When Jesus used this term he was looking back as well as forwards. Just as God had established his *ekklesia* at Sinai and Israel formed it, so now the Messiah was forming his *ekklesia* by which he would fulfill his mission (Matthew 28:19-20). The Messiah's *ekklesia* is a re-visionsed people of God that incorporates Jews and non-Jews into the “body of the Messiah.”

per se,⁶ although many of his teachings do bear upon the way a contemporary local Christian community will operate (e.g. injunctions to be forgiving, leading by serving, importance of holiness, etc.).

Family terminology serves to describe internal relationships (e.g. Mark 3:34-35; Matthew 6:9; 7:11-12). External relationships tend to be dysfunctional due to the animosity of those who do not follow Jesus. The result is hatred, persecution, and suffering. Jesus has very little to say about the organization and structure of his assembly. It will have leaders, but they must exercise their leadership with great care (e.g. Matthew 23:1-10; Mark 10:40-45; John 10:7-18). Jesus desires no divisions within his assembly, but his prayer in John 17 seems to assume that powerful forces will seek to fracture its unity. However, these forces must be resisted as much as possible.

3. Life in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 1-15)

When the ascended Christ sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the immediate result is Gospel proclamation and 3,000 people responded, being baptized and “added” (Acts 2:41). Luke emphasizes their cohesiveness (cf. 2:44,46), based upon the “apostles’ teaching,” “fellowship,” and “breaking of bread,” and “prayer” (2:42). Growth continued daily and their unity continued (4:32 “one in heart and mind”; 5:12 “all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade”). We read in 6:7 that “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

One problem threatens this unity and it concerns the care for the widows (6:1-6), but the Holy Spirit enables the apostles to discern a good solution and bring consensus within the assembly to follow this solution.

External persecution causes the Messiah’s assembly, all Jewish Christians to this point, to be “scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1). Only a few, including the apostles, remained in Jerusalem. As they scattered, they proclaimed the Gospel (8:4). Samaritans became Christians and apostles came from Jerusalem to verify this. They asked God to enable the Samaritan Christians to receive the Spirit and God responded (8:17). Unity was demonstrated through the presence of the one and same Spirit of God.

In Acts 9:10 we read of a disciple in the city of Damascus, named Ananias. Jesus miraculously saves Saul of Tarsus, who becomes a powerful evangelist. God reveals by vision to the apostle Peter that non-Jews will respond to the Gospel and this is entirely consistent with God’s plans (Acts 10-11). The conversion of Cornelius and other non-Jews creates serious questions within the Jerusalem church. However, when Peter explains how God directed him, then the believers “had no further objections and praised God” (11:18).

The scattering continues to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Proclamation directly to Greeks occurred in Antioch. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to investigate (Acts 11:22-24) and he discerned God’s grace was operating there too. Barnabas recruited Paul to help him with ministry leadership in Antioch. After a few years, the Antioch church leaders (13:1-3) recognized a new ministry vision for Barnabas and Paul, sending them to Cyprus and the southern regions of Asia Minor. New churches came into being as more Jewish and non-Jewish people responded to the Gospel. They confirmed leaders within these new churches (14:23-24).

Again, controversy emerges as some Jewish Christians, particularly those associated with the Pharisees demanded that “the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). The debate draws Christian leaders from Antioch to Jerusalem to seek resolution. Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James all speak to the issue. At the end of it all “the apostles and elders with the whole church” decided to write a letter outlining some basic principles for Gentile believers to follow, which they believed the Holy Spirit enabled them to discern (15:28). The result is encouragement of the churches. The messengers receive “the blessing of peace” as they complete their mission (15:33).

⁶ It might be thought that Matthew 18:20 “where two or three are gathered in my name” refers to a local church context. However, probably Jesus affirms his presence with small clusters of believers who form his *ekklesia* in various parts of the world.

In these narratives Luke reveals how the Holy Spirit constantly pushed the early Jewish Christians to break boundaries and incorporate into the Messiah's assembly new believers who were Samaritans and pagans. These transitions were not easy, but the fabric of the Messiah's assembly was expandable, allowing them to be incorporated. Although followers of Jesus emerged in diverse geographical regions, the perspective of these early believers is the oneness, the commonality that binds them together in the Messiah and his Holy Spirit. The terminology used at 11:22 (the church/assembly existing in Jerusalem") and 13:1 ("at Antioch in the existing church/assembly") suggests that while there is one "Messianic assembly," it convenes in various places. As Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, completing their first missionary journey, they ensured that "in each church" there was leadership (14:23) and they "gathered the church together" in Antioch to report what God had done (14:27). Luke indicated that various problems challenged this unity (Acts 6 the distribution of food to the widows; Acts 8 the sharing of the Gospel with Samaritans; Acts 10-11, 15 the conversion of Cornelius and other Gentiles). However, in each case the Holy Spirit enabled the Christians and their leaders to discern solutions that sustained unity.

4. Paul's Vision for a Reconciled Church (Ephesians 3-4; Romans 14-15)

More than any other New Testament writer Paul has given shape to contemporary perceptions of "church." He used the term more frequently and probably used a wider variety of metaphors in order to give his readers deeper insight into his theology. We find little difference in essence to the way Luke understood the term.⁷ The breadth of Paul's vision for the Messiah's assembly is, however, astounding.

We limit our investigation of Paul's ecclesiology to understanding the way that the church in its geographical and other diverse expressions relates to the whole church. In Romans 14-15 Paul urged various groups within the Roman house churches to live together harmoniously. For him the bottom-line finds expression in Romans 14:17: "the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." "Disputable matters" (Romans 14:1) should not be allowed to break the peace the Messiah has established within his assembly. Paul urges believers to "pursue the things of peace and the things of mutual edification" (14:19). He warns believers not to "destroy the work of God for the sake of food" (14:20).⁸ At the conclusion of Romans his prayer is eloquent in its simplicity:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ....Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:5,7)

Paul's deepest desire is that the Messiah's church will demonstrate in the most profound and practical ways the reconciliation that the Messiah's death and resurrection have prepared for those who are justified.

In Ephesians, written perhaps five years after his letter to the Romans, Paul reiterates his vision of the Messiah's assembly. Jesus' death and resurrection have created "in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and in this one body reconciled both of them to God through the cross" (Ephesians 2:15), describing how Jews and non-Jews are now brought together into one people through the death and resurrection of the Messiah. One Spirit now unites them. This new "church/Messianic assembly" was designed by God to make known "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" his diverse and powerful wisdom (Ephesians 3:10). For Paul God has one "family in heaven and earth" that bears his name (Ephesians 3:14). The conclusion to this is that every believer has the responsibility to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" because there is one Spirit, one body, one hope, one Lord, one

⁷ Consider Paul's use of the term "church" in Galatians 1-2 and 1 Thessalonians 1-3

⁸ In Romans 14-15 Paul seems to identify "disputable matters" as dietary guidelines and the definition of holy days (including Sabbath), religious exercises that defined Judaism and which Paul now indicates are not definitive for the emerging Messianic movement.

faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:3-5). God gives gifts of people with their various abilities to his family so that “the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith” (Ephesians 4:12-13). It is in Christ that “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

For Paul there is only “one body,” even though it might be expressed in various cities. The one Spirit who inhabits all believers generates this essential oneness. God works through the whole body to help the whole body build itself up. This is his theological understanding. From time to time the body experiences difficulties. However, the Holy Spirit will protect the unity of true believers in Jesus, even though some might proclaim the Gospel from an attitude of envy and rivalry (Philippians 1:15). Yet even in that situation Paul urges believers and ministry leaders to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:2). It is ambition and selfishness that divide and destroy the body of Christ. Paul is always seeking to express the “ministry of reconciliation” in and through the life of the church (2 Corinthians 5).

5. Peter's Vision for the "Holy Nation" (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Peter’s vision for the church parallels that of Paul, a reality that should occasion little surprise. Primarily Peter used metaphors to communicate his understanding of the church, a word that he does not use. Through Jesus God created a new family, giving new birth to Jew and Gentile alike through the Gospel. In Christ God is building “a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5) and each believer forms one of the “living stones” that form its structure. As well, they function as the “holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). He borrowed language from Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 7:6 and Isaiah 62:12 to describe this new thing God was establishing as his people. Collective nouns such as “race, people, priesthood” define this entity formed from people who have experienced God’s mercy. This is covenant language which formerly described Israel, but is now applied in fresh ways to the emerging Messianic assembly.

Even though Peter writes to believers scattered throughout five different Roman provinces, they altogether form “the brotherhood” (1 Peter 2:17; 5:9). Mutual submission and humility are primary characteristics that enable these believers to serve and worship together “under God’s mighty hand” (1 Peter 5:6-7), as they “clothe themselves with humility toward one another” (1 Peter 5:5). Peter discerns one body.

6. Models that Support these Visions

Within the writings of Paul, Peter and the author of Hebrews, three models or metaphors provide powerful ways of thinking about the Messiah’s assembly:

- a. 1 Corinthians 12 -- the Body
- b. 1 Peter 2:4-5 -- the Living Temple⁹
- c. Hebrews 12:22 -- the City of the Living God.

While each metaphor adds distinctive nuance for understanding God’s intent with respect to his church, they each emphasize the collective unity that characterizes this entity. This unity ignores differences in geography, race, time, gender, etc. Although there are members of Christ’s body present virtually in every place, every time, and among all peoples, they form one body, not a dozen or a hundred. The expression of Christ’s body in one context may display some difference from other expressions, but that reality does not annul the fundamental principle of one body, one temple, one city of the Living God. The variations may represent diverse bodily members or temple functions or urban operations, but they still form one body, one temple and one city.

These metaphors also emphasize the mutual interdependence that God builds into this body/temple/city. Submission to Christ, submission to each other, humility, love, forgiveness,

⁹ In 1 Peter 5:2-3 the apostle used the metaphor of “the flock of God,” led and protected by “the chief shepherd.”

mutual service are all expected to find continuous and generous expression as the Holy Spirit actively shapes the Messiah's assembly around one Gospel.

As well each metaphor indicates that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The individual elements, however defined, serve the greater purpose and are happy to do so. There is no striving for inappropriate status or grasping for power because each acknowledges the Trinity as being the owner, Lord, and director. Within the Trinity is the head of the body, the high priest of the Temple and the king of the city.

7. Early Church Applications that Support this Vision

Although various events recorded in the New Testament test the limits of church unity within the early church's experience, two in particular are helpful for purposes of this paper, namely the dispute over the involvement of Gentile believers in the Messiah's assembly, and Paul's collection of funds for the Christians in the Jerusalem church. In one case, Peter, along with Paul and Barnabas are front and centre; in the second case Paul was the primary figure.

A. Dispute over Gentile Believers (Acts 15, Galatians 1-2).

As the Gospel spreads beyond the boundaries of Judaism and non-Jews receive the Gospel and become disciples of Jesus, a serious question has to be answered. Do such non-Jewish followers of Jesus have to become Jews in order to benefit from the Messiah's work, i.e. be circumcised, keep the Sabbath, adopt the dietary restrictions, etc.? Peter's experience with Cornelius, along with the vision from God, led him to conclude that the answer was no. Paul and Barnabas similarly held to that position. However, some Jewish Christians from the Pharisees in particular disagreed. To resolve this question the members from the church in Antioch travelled to Jerusalem and met in conference with the members of the church in Jerusalem. Critical parts of the debate can be read in Acts 15.¹⁰ By examining the Scriptures, reflecting on Peter's testimony to God's revelation, hearing of the conversion of non-Jews and their possession of the Holy Spirit, they concluded together that Gentile followers of Jesus did not have to become Jews. Their acceptance of the Gospel and obedience to Jesus would be sufficient. However, they did request (not command) that these non-Jewish believers abstain from certain practices that would make it difficult for Jewish Christians to associate with them and concurrently retain good relations with other Jews for purposes of evangelism.

The early Christians and their leaders rejected the idea that there could be two bodies of Christ, one Jewish and one Gentile. No, they had to find a solution that was consistent with the Gospel and would enable the fabric of the "one body" to remain whole. God's Spirit enabled their resolution. However, it seems that despite this achievement, some Jewish Christians may have rejected this position. Some of the opposition that Paul continues to experience in his ministry after Acts 15 seems to be based in such a perspective.

The seriousness of the issue cannot be diminished. The essence of the Gospel was at risk. God preserved the integrity of the fledgling Messianic assembly and of his Gospel. Probably Paul's statements in Galatians 1:6-10 indicate what he believed was at stake, namely the creation of a Gospel that was not in fact Gospel. For this he was

¹⁰ Some scholars consider Galatians 2:1-10 to refer to this same discussion. However, Paul never refers to the letter and its contents that result from the Acts 15 discussion, which is rather surprising because it would be a sure and certain answer to those with whom he is in conflict in Galatians. For this and other reasons Galatians 2:1-10 probably is more appropriately linked with Paul's visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 11:27-30; 12:25. Peter's actions described in Galatians 2:11-15 at Antioch perhaps then precipitated the Jerusalem conference. If Peter was confused, then others were as well and this issue needed resolution in order to protect, in Paul's view, the essence of the Gospel message.

prepared to confront even Peter himself. But note that Paul was only prepared to do this when the essence of the Gospel was being threatened.

- B. Paul's collection of funds for the Christians in the Jerusalem church (1 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15).

One of the less well-known projects that Paul initiates is a collection of funds to assist the believers in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). This project seems to arise from the request from Peter, James and John that as Paul went about his mission, he would "remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10). The references in 1 Corinthians indicate that he made request for help from the "churches of Galatia" (16:1). He repeats his request in 2 Corinthians 8-9, using the generosity of the Macedonian churches as an example (8:1-5; 9:1-5). As Paul returns to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey (Romans 15:25-29), he anticipates delivering a generous gift collected from Gentile believers for the benefit of Jewish believers in Jerusalem. In Paul's mind this blessing from the Gentile believers is a recognition of the blessing of the Gospel which they received from and through the Jerusalem church. For Paul this collection demonstrates the reciprocal "fellowship" that diverse groups within the Messianic assembly share. It shows peace and reconciliation expressed in the people of God to the glory of God. One in the Gospel, they are also one family in Christ.

8. Summary

The unity/oneness within the Messianic assembly/church of the New Testament was based in the relationship that every believer had with Jesus as Lord and Saviour, the residence of the Holy Spirit in every believer, and the placement of every believer in the body of the Messiah so that their gifts could serve and bring benefit to other believers, thereby enabling the whole body to bring growth to the whole body. Undoubtedly the spiritual leadership of apostles and other spirit-filled individuals (e.g. Barnabas, Priscilla, Stephen, Philip, etc.) contributed to the development and sustenance of this cohesion, even as this unity was tested by various events. Yet in the conflicts that emerged, we do not find only one or a few people prescribing what should be done. Rather God's Spirit works through various people to suggest ways forward that the people together discern as being the appropriate ways to proceed. While Paul may work with house churches to discern and appoint elders, it is always in concert with the Christians in those house churches. The approach seems to be rather consensual, based upon mutual discernment.

House churches get established in many different places both within and without Palestine. Each one has status as part of the Messiah's assembly, even as it meets in a specific location, but also each one is encouraged to see itself as part of the whole body, with responsibility for the growth of the whole body. This responsibility for growth extends beyond the local house church to embrace aspects of the church's development throughout the world. For example, Paul expects the house churches in Rome to help me with his intended mission to Spain (Romans 15:24).

All leaders in the early church regard obedience to God to have priority over obedience to Caesar. In this they declare that human political structures cannot control the ultimate loyalty of God's people. Believers respect the authority that civic leaders wield for the common good (1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13), but they will not use obedience to civic/religious powers as an excuse to disobey God. In this they discern the essential autonomy of the church from political interference, although the word "autonomy" is never used in the New Testament in such contexts.

House churches behave like cells in an extended network. There is local leadership that cares for the spiritual welfare of the believers. The believers collectively in that place form and represent the Messiah's body, i.e. the people of God, the saints. Where multiple house churches exist in one city (e.g. Rome), there is no sense in the New Testament that these are "independent" entities. Rather the whole tenor and ethos of the New Testament documents focuses upon oneness, unity, inclusion in the re-established family of God. There seems to be

considerable freedom to express their Kingdom identity in worship and service, so long as the essence of the Gospel is fully embraced. Mutual love, humility, submission and forgiveness are the norms for this community of reconciliation.

9. Theological Implications

A. The "Fruit of the Spirit" -- empowerment towards interdependence (1 Corinthians 13)

The Holy Spirit fosters interdependence and oneness. The entire framework of the "fruit of the Spirit" focuses upon good relations within God's family. Despite human differences, Paul argued that we are "all one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28). In Christ we possess the promised Spirit. This same Spirit enables us "to bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) as we live obediently before the Messiah. A strong belief in the presence, power, and purposes of God's Holy Spirit will direct us to serious interdependence as the people of God. Paul is very clear that "the works of the flesh" generate strife and division (Galatians 5:19-21), with strong implications regarding Kingdom inheritance. An underdeveloped doctrine of the Holy Spirit and sanctification might suggest that division within the body of Christ is quite tolerable, in fact may even be considered virtuous. This does not seem to be the mind of the Spirit Whose goal and desire is for God's people to enjoy fellowship with God and with one another.

B. The values of humbleness, forgiveness, and submission.

Jesus' teaching about Kingdom greatness always emphasized humility (Matthew 18:1-5), frequently using a child as an example. He demanded that his followers learn how to forgive one another and practice it (Matthew 18:21-35; 6:14-15). In his discourse about life in the body (Ephesians 4-6), Paul requires that believers "submit to one another in fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Peter urges similar interaction (1 Peter 5:5-7), with clear warning that God resists the proud.

Are these principles valued among God's people with the result that they condition all relationships and behaviours? Do cultural values of independence, personal freedom, and status overwhelm believers' desire and capacity to follow Jesus obediently and live humbly, forgivingly and submissively? Oneness and unity cannot flourish where these virtues are absent.

C. Vocation and Submission.

God through Jesus Christ "calls" people to himself and commissions them into his service. In this fundamental sense every believer possesses a calling, one that guides the entirety of life. How this calling finds expression varies from person to person, but this variety contributes to the welfare and health of the whole body. When a believer acts in obedience to his or her calling and applies it in specific directions, it requires a heart of humbleness, service and submission. God's gifting is for the good of the body, not personal advancement. Being a Kingdom agent will most likely result in suffering, not status.

In some cases believers apply their calling vocationally in forms of ministry leadership. Believers are to respect those who give themselves to such vocation (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15). Concurrently those who engage in such vocation must always struggle to serve humbly and submissively, for the sake of Christ, because they too experience temptations to abuse and misuse the trust they have received. This applies both within the congregation context, as well as among the larger denominational family.

Paul urged the elders in the Ephesian church to "keep watch over yourselves" because "even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard" (Acts 20:28, 30-31). In the 21st

century these words apply to pastors, elders, and denominational leaders. It is a fact that most church divisions (i.e. within denominational contexts) arise because of differences among leaders. The guardians of the body's oneness primarily then are the vocational ministry leaders. If they do not take this responsibility with appropriate seriousness and consider the unity of the church to be one of God's passions, then interdependence will not be sustainable. Personality clashes are not sufficient basis for church divisions.

D. Dealing with theological diversity -- boundaries and boundary protection.

From the perspective of the early church the primary boundary marked the distinction between followers of Jesus and everyone else. Baptism became a primary means by which a person confessed loyalty to Jesus Christ and moved within the boundary of the church, i.e. the Messiah's assembly.

The New Testament also makes it clear that it did not take long before some who confessed to be within the church boundary demonstrated by their teaching or sinful activities that in fact they were not part of the body. 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, Jude, 1 John, 3 John all speak to this issue. Paul counseled the Corinthian church in several matters related to church discipline (1 Corinthians 5-6). He also engaged aggressively those who would teach "another Gospel" (Galatians).

Church leaders today must exercise careful discernment, but without being hopelessly naïve on the one hand or unduly suspicious of everything on the other hand. As Jesus put it, leadership has to have the wisdom of serpents and the innocence of doves. The most precious commodity that sustains Christian interdependence is trust and this must be nurtured carefully over time.

The issues over which early Christian leaders were prepared to divide were all focused on matters of fundamental doctrine.

- i. Galatians – the definition of Gospel
- ii. 1 John – the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ
- iii. 2 Peter and Jude – the nature of sin and the deity and lordship of Jesus
- iv. 2 Timothy – denial of a future resurrection

The FEBPAC group of churches divided from other Baptist churches because they discerned that belief in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture was under attack. The oneness of the body of Christ should be sustained, unless a primary tenet of Christian faith is being dismissed. In FEBPAC the definition of what is a primary Christian belief is expressed in the Articles of Faith. Doctrinal unity then is fostered by such theological coherence. On matters that are not addressed in the Articles of Faith people within FEBPAC have freedom to hold diverse perspectives.

In all cases it is the respective churches meeting in convention that give discernment in regards to such matters, not any individual ministry leader. Listening carefully to what the Spirit may be saying to the churches becomes part of this discerning process. Such procedures lodge the decision-making about such matters in the hands of the churches who are the constituent members of FEBPAC. Whether a particular church decides to continue to be part of FEBPAC after the churches have spoken on an issue is a matter for that church to decide. Conversely, if a church refuses to acknowledge the discernment of the other churches, then the churches may vote to dismiss that church from membership.

Scripture and its interpretation function both to define boundaries, as well as to centre believers around the core beliefs of Christianity. We should think it is necessary to choose between Scripture's function as boundary or as centre. It functions in both ways simultaneously.

E. The Perpetual "Coming to Expression" of the Invisible church in historical/social reality of the Visible church. In a manner comparable to the development of

personal sanctification, the community of faith is also in process of seeking to express the perfection of the invisible church, as found in the “communion of the saints.” Despite our best efforts and most pious desires the visible church always “falls short of the glory of God.” However, this reality does not alleviate believers from bending every effort to expressing the perfection of the Messiah’s ‘body.’ This includes the beauty of unity which the Holy Spirit zealously spurs God’s people to radiate, to the glory of God.

F. Interdependence in service, but decentralization of authority.

The term “autonomy” often is associated with congregational forms of church government. “By autonomy we mean that the local congregation is independent and self-governing. There is no external power which can dictate courses of action to the local church.”¹¹ Such statements are right in what they affirm, but are dangerous in what they do not affirm. Considerable history has transpired since the writing of the New Testament documents which reflect the life and practices of the early church. It would be naïve and irresponsible to ignore such developments. And so it is appropriate in our ecclesiology to affirm that local churches are self-governing. Biblical principles already reviewed indicate that independence from national or civic political interference must be guarded. Similarly where a “church” becomes associated with a national government and assumes an authority over every expression of Christianity within national borders, such authority is not biblical and does not express the oneness of the body of Christ that the Scriptures exemplify. So we guard this aspect of independence.

However, the biblical principles also require local churches not to be so independent as to void or annul a demonstrated oneness among believers that the Holy Spirit desires and Christ himself prayed for. Autonomy should be never used as an excuse to avoid the necessary and missional interdependence among believers that Jesus died to create and lives to implement. To use one biblical principle to annul our obedience to another is to fall into the trap of Pharisaism – something Jesus himself denounced (Mark 7). Our love for God cannot be used as an excuse not to love our neighbours as ourselves – and this includes fellow believers. Conversely, our love for neighbor cannot get in the way of our love for God. True Christianity will be found in the appropriate alignment of both principles for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission.

The principle of self-government operates within the larger principle of the oneness of the body of Christ, the mandate to serve one another, Christ’s command that we love one another for the sake of the Gospel, and the greater need of the unsaved to hear and see the truth of the Gospel.

Conclusion

Revelation 7:9-10 describes the vision John saw in heaven where “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.... They cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.’” The “communion of the saints” describes the unity of God’s people throughout all time and all space, worshipping and serving God. The New Testament anticipates that God’s people on earth will to some degree express this “communion,” generated by his Holy Spirit. Satan’s strategy obviously seeks to thwart and destroy God’s intention for his people. However, we have Jesus’ own words that “the gates of Hell will not prevail” against his assembly. God will achieve his purpose.

¹¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 1078. This definition is common in other systematic theologies.

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The challenge for the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century is to discern, express and celebrate in appropriate ways its oneness. Unity without uniformity; diversity without division; oneness without onerous authority. Mutual, agape-based interdependence will best model the desire of Jesus Christ for his followers. Leaders who demonstrate humbleness, service, and submission will foster this oneness. By such Holy Spirit-led collaboration churches can become living demonstrations of the Gospel in their service for one another and in their mission within the world.

As God enables FEBPAC to move forward, sustaining interdependence will require a continuing conversation about whether the Articles of Faith in fact constitute a summary of key theological truths around which our churches rightly discern their unity and continued discernment about which Christian ideas are to be categorized as “disputable” and those which are essential to defining Kingdom living.

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