

*An Essay on the Power and Duty of An Association (1744)*

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That an Association is not a superior judicature, having such superior power over the churches concerned; but that each particular church hath a complete power and authority from Jesus Christ, to administer all gospel ordinances, provided they have sufficiency of officers duly qualified, or that they be supplied by the officers of another sister church or churches, as baptism, and the Lord's supper, &c.; and to receive in and cast out, and also to try and ordain their own officers, and to exercise every part of gospel discipline and church government, independent of any other church or assembly whatever.

And that several such independent churches, where Providence gives them their situation convenient, may, and ought, for their mutual strength, counsel, and other valuable advantages, by their voluntary and free consent, to enter into an agreement and confederation, as is hinted in our printed Narrative of discipline, page 59, 60, 61.

Such churches there must be agreeing in doctrine and practice, and independent in their authority and church power, before they can enter into a confederation, as aforesaid, and choose delegates or representative, to associate together; and thus the several independent churches being the constituents, the association, council or assembly of their delegates, when assembled, is not to be deemed a superior judicature, as having a superintendency over the churches, but subservient to the churches, in what may concern all the churches in general, or any one church in particular; and, though no power can regularly arise above its fountain from where it rises, yet we are of opinion, that an Association of the delegates of associate churches have a very considerable power in their hands, respecting those churches in their confederation; for if the agreement of several distinct churches, in sound doctrine and regular practice, be the first motive, ground, and foundation or basis of their confederation, then it must naturally follow, that a defection in doctrine or practice in any church, in such confederation, or any party in any such church, is ground sufficient for an Association to withdraw from such a church or party so deviating or making defection, and to exclude such from them in some formal manner, and to advertise all the churches in confederation thereof, in order that every church in confederation may withdraw from such in all acts of church communion, to the end they may be ashamed, and that all the churches may discountenance such, and bear testimony against the defection.

Such withdrawing from a defective or disorderly church, or that ought to be towards a delinquent church, is such as ariseth from their voluntary confederation aforesaid, and not only from the general duty that is incumbent on all orthodox persons, and churches to do, where no such confederation is entered into, as 2 Cor. vi. 16, 17. Now from that general duty to withdraw from defective persons or churches, there can no more be done, than to desist from such acts of fellowship as subsisted before the withdrawing, which is merely negative, and in no wise any thing positive. Churches, as they are pillars of truth, may, and ought to endeavor to promote truth among others also; which endeavors, if they prove fruitless, as they are but *mystico modo*, they may be withdrawn; the withdrawing, therefore, must be accordingly; which is only to cease from future endeavors, leaving the objects as they were or are. But if there be a confederation and incorporation, by mutual and voluntary consent, as the Association of churches must and ought to be, then something positive may and ought to be done; and, though an Association ought not to assume a power to excommunicate or deliver a defective or disorderly church to Satan, as some do claim, yet

it is a power sufficient to exclude the delegates of a defective or disorderly church from an Association, and to refuse their presence a their consultations, and to advise all the churches in confederation to do so too. A godly man may, and ought to withdraw, not only from a heathen, but from such as have the form of godliness, if they appear to want the power of it, 2 Timothy iii:5, by the same parity of reason the saints, in what capacity soever they may be considered, may withdraw from defective or disorderly churches or persons; but excommunicate they cannot, there being no institution to authorize them so to do. But in the capacity of a congregational church, dealing with her own members, an Association, then, of the delegates of associate churches, may exclude and withdraw from defective and unsound or disorderly churches or persons, in manner abovesaid; and this will appear regular and justifiable by the light and law of nature, as is apparent in the conduct and practice of all regular civil and political corporations and confederations whatsoever; who all of them have certain rules to exclude delinquents from their societies, as well as for others to accede thereunto.

We judge those things in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles to be imitable by an Association, viz.: 1st, their disowning of the erroneous and judaizing teachers, saying, to whom we gave no such commandments, verse 24; 2dly, the sending delegated persons of their own number, with Paul and Barnabas, to support their sentence in the place where the debate sprung up, verse 25; and a third thing followed in consequence thereof, viz., a delivering of the decrees to the other churches, to be observed as well as the church of Antioch, Chap. xvi.4. Consistent therewith, the practice of after ages is found to be; when, because they had no council, synod, or association to convene, of course they called a council, in order to make head against any error or disorders, when in a particular church, such things grew too big for a particular church peaceably to determine, as the case about circumcision was at Antioch. In such cases all the churches were looked upon as one church, and all the bishops as universal, because of the unity of the faith and conformity of practice which ought to be in the churches of Christ; though in all other cases, the several distinct churches acted independent of each other, as Cyprian relates the practice of his time, viz.: That the bishops were so united in one body, that if any one of the body broached any heresy, or began to waste and tear the flock of Christ, all the rest came immediately to its rescue. Cyprian, cited by Bingham, book 2, page 101. And the same author observes, that they disowned the faulty, and advertised all the churches of the same. And Mr. Crosby relates, that an Association in London did disown a certain disorderly church in London, and did caution all the churches they were related to, not to countenance them in any way, nor to suffer their members to frequent their meetings; and thus an Association may disown and withdraw from a defective or disorderly church, and advise the churches related to them to withdraw from, and to discountenance such as aforesaid, without exceeding the bounds of their power.

And further, that an Association of the delegates of confederate churches may doctrinally declare any person or party in a church, who are defective in principles or disorderly in practice, to be censurable, when the affair comes under their cognizance, and without exceeding the bounds of their power and duty, to advise the church that such belong unto, how to deal with such, according to the rule of gospel discipline; and also to strengthen such a church, and assist her, if need be, by sending able men of their own number to help the church in executing the power vested in her by the ordinance of Jesus Christ, and to stand by her, and to defend her against the insults of such offending persons or parties.