

Acts 15 and Our Association of Churches - 2017-07-09

Call to Worship: Psalm 34:3

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 27:5-17

Sermon: "Acts 15 and Our Association of Churches" Acts 15:1-36

Benediction: Psalm 133:1

## INTRODUCTION

This church is a member of the Texas Area Association of Reformed Baptist Churches. Last week I had the responsibility and privilege of traveling to preach at one of the other churches in our association of churches, Santa Teresa Baptist Church, which is located just over the New Mexico border from El Paso, Texas.

That Baptist churches would be in association with one another, and actively supporting one another, is not something new at all, but dates to the 1600s, the century of the birth of the modern Baptist church movement, most notably in the general assembly in London, 1689, when our Second London Confession of Baptist Faith, published in 1677, was endorsed by an assembly of messengers from more than 100 churches.

That Baptist churches *in America* would be in association with each other is not something new, either. Five Baptist churches in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware colonies organized the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707. Four churches in South Carolina organized the Charleston Baptist Association in 1751.

That Baptist churches *in Texas* would be in association with each other is, likewise, nothing new, but dates back to the pioneer days of Texas. The first Baptist association in this area was the Sister Grove Association, organized with four churches in 1853, and within ten years including churches not only in Fannin County, but also Hunt and Grayson counties.

That Baptist churches in Texas would be in association with one another, *and be 750 miles distant from one another*, is, perhaps, somewhat novel. However, since we can now drive or fly from one to the other in less than a full day, sitting in perfect air-conditioned comfort, we are for practical purposes closer to one another than were some of the churches in the pioneer days. As you know, before about 100 years ago, when most such travel was on foot or on horseback, the distance did not need to exceed 25 miles to be a whole day's travel. So we are, for practical purposes, not farther from the church in Santa Teresa today than would churches have been within the Sister Grove association in the 1860s.

When the founding churches of our association were holding meetings in 2006 through 2008 to organize the new association, we considered the possibility that churches so distant shouldn't try to associate, but that we should form multiple new associations for the different regions of Texas. In the future, that yet may be done. But the Reformed Baptist Churches that hold firmly

to our 1689 Confession, and are in Texas or the nearby states, are still so few that we decided to form just one Texas Area association, to serve for the present, until the churches multiply in the future, God willing.

The association was founded January 18, 2009, in an assembly of six churches, including this church, the church in Santa Teresa, which I just visited, and the Reformed Baptist churches in Van, Willis, Mansfield, and Palestine. Since then, several new member churches have been added: Reformed Baptist churches in Conroe, Fort Worth, Duncanville, Waco, and Georgetown. There are also more churches that have been visiting with us, and may be joining the association in the near future.

I hope to explain to you today that the relationship we have with the other churches in our association is not something extra or unnecessary or man-made, but is our way of acting out what we see the churches of the first generation doing, as recorded in the bible, especially in Acts chapter 15.

At this point, I'll give some of the other churches a little well-intentioned ribbing. Some of them have formed what they call the Acts 29 Network. You know, the book of Acts has 28 chapters. Their reference to "Acts 29" is their way of saying that they are attempting to be faithful in carrying on the work of Jesus Christ in His churches as recorded in Acts chapters 1 through 28. And so those churches, in their imperfect way, are seeking to serve the Lord, and we, in the churches of our association, in our imperfect way, are seeking to serve the Lord. But whereas they are citing Acts 29, which is not actually part of the bible, I'll cite Acts chapter 15, which is part of the bible, as guidance for how the churches are to associate with one another in the work of the Lord.

## TEXT

Acts 15:1-36

## BODY

- I. Our association of churches exists partly because of the reality that controversies inevitably arise in the churches (15:1-2a)

Acts 15:1-2 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (2)  
Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them . . .

- A. In the time that Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch, the controversy arose when Judaizers tried to impose Old Covenant ceremonial law-keeping on the Gentile Christians.

- B. In the 1689 General Assembly in London, there were questions in the churches about
    - 1. whether the Sabbath is rightly observed on the first day of the week or on the seventh day of the week
    - 2. whether baptism is necessary before church membership
  - C. Likewise, controversies come up in the Reformed Baptist churches of our association
    - 1. just as in the time of the apostles, the question of what Christians are to do about the Old Covenant laws
    - 2. just as in 1689, questions of how the sabbath commandment is rightly to be observed
    - 3. dispensationalism
    - 4. pentecostal/charismatic practices
      - a) phony speaking in tongues
      - b) phony words of prophecy
      - c) phony miraculous healings
    - 5. points of Theology, such as the impassibility of God
    - 6. the practice of infant sprinkling by our theological cousins the Presbyterians
  - D. The pastors of the church often find themselves in no small dispute with people advocating controversial doctrines, because of our intense concern for maintaining the gospel of Jesus Christ.
    - 1. controversial doctrines often distract the church's attention from the gospel
    - 2. if false doctrine wins out, it can corrupt the gospel message, sometimes so much that what is preached in the churches is no gospel at all
- II. The churches send messengers to hold meetings to seek help from one another in settling those controversies (15:2b)

Acts 15:2 . . . they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

- A. Over the years, it has become so well known that controversies come up in the churches, that we do not wait to meet until a new controversy has come up. We meet regularly, four times per year, and are ready to deal with the various controversial doctrines when they arise.
  - B. Then additional meetings are called for when there is some acute problem that one of the churches needs help with.
- III. Incidental to meeting, the churches of our association prompt each other to have joy in the Lord by describing God's gracious work among them (15:3)

- A. You see that in this verse Paul and Barnabas were not even at the meeting yet, but their description of the work of God's grace brought joy to their brethren even along the way
  - B. This is much of the operation of our association, as brothers and sisters bring joy to each other by describing the work of God's grace among us, entirely outside the official meetings of the messengers
  - C. APPLICATION: You might consider this the next time it is announced that there is a conference in the Fall or a family camp in the Spring, or our association's annual meeting for supper and worship in January. We usually spend those times rejoicing over what we have heard of God's grace from our friends in the other churches.
- IV. The churches receive one another's messengers (15:4a)
- A. For pastors and other Christians who have been struggling with controversies in the local church, to be received by their brothers who understand is very, very comforting and encouraging
  - B. We sometimes have referred to this as coming in out of the wilderness to an oasis.
  - C. Messengers from churches that are not members are welcome guests, and are received very warmly.
- V. The churches' messengers report to one another what God has done with them (15:4b)
- A. This is a main feature of our four meetings each year
  - B. Each church sends a letter ahead of time, reporting how the church is doing, and asking for prayer
  - C. In the meeting, the messengers share more, especially if there is something particularly joyful or painful or sensitive or urgent
  - D. The messengers of guest churches, who are not yet members of the association, have opportunity to share and ask for prayer
  - E. The messengers pray for each other and the churches
- VI. The churches meet to confer over controversies that arise (15:5-6)
- A. There is always some strong teacher or group of teachers putting forth a controversial doctrine, which is causing controversy in one or more of the churches (5)
  - B. The church's messengers meet to consider the doctrine (6)
    - 1. at one meeting a messenger brings the controversy to the group's attention
    - 2. someone with expertise or interest in that subject volunteers or is assigned to study into it, and to bring a lecture for the next meeting
    - 3. at the next meeting, the lecture is presented, and the group discusses the issue afterward
  - C. No matter what else is said, the voices that rule are those whose recorded words are the Word of God
    - 1. Peter (15:7)
    - 2. Paul (12)
    - 3. James (13)

- D. Controversial questions are answered from well-established leading principles from the scriptures, such as
  - 1. not imposing Old Covenant ceremonial laws on the church (10)
    - a) this is stated in our confession, Chapter 19 Of the Law of God, paragraph 3 “God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws . . . all which ceremonial laws . . . are, by Jesus Christ . . . abrogated and taken away.”
  - 2. believing in salvation through faith by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ for Jew and Gentile the same (7-9; 11)
  - 3. the prophecies of the Old Testament, about future blessings on Israel and the Gentiles, are fulfilled in the present age in the blessings of God on the church in Jesus Christ
- VII. The churches in association agree on the truth from the scriptures, and publish their judgments on the controversies they have considered, for the benefit of the churches (15:18-29)
  - A. Here you see that a verdict was proposed, with which the churches agreed (18-22)
  - B. That verdict was then published in writing (23-29)
- VIII. The pastors and other members of the churches can then return to the various churches to preach the truth, which causes rejoicing and encouragement in the churches (15:30-31)
  - A. For example, the controversial question of Sabbath keeping came up years ago. one of the brothers, Jason Montgomery, studied into it, and taught us from the Puritan tradition, as summarized in our 1689 confession. Many now in the churches of our association rejoice in weekly observance of the Lord’s Day, resting from our usual work and worshiping with the church
  - B. For another example, the controversial question of what should and should not be done in the church’s worship service came up years ago. I was assigned to study into it and address the group, which I did, learning and teaching the Puritan tradition of the Regulative Principle---what the Lord has commanded us to do in worship, we do; anything else we might think of doing, we refrain from adding to the worship service. This has been a source of great joy and encouragement to many of us who had spent time in churches where so many things had been added to the worship service.
- IX. The churches of the association maintain an ongoing sharing of preachers (15:32-34)
  - A. Judas and Silas had been at Jerusalem, now they have traveled to preach for a while at Antioch
    - 1. After a while Judas returned to Jerusalem
    - 2. Silas stayed
  - B. Each church in our association has its own pastor, but the churches send and receive each other’s pastors and other gifted preachers to fill various needs
  - C. This is especially applied to those older, more experienced pastors who have proven exceptionally faithful and helpful.

- X. The latest controversy being settled, the churches could go on teaching and preaching the word of the Lord (15:35)
  - A. We do not delight in polemical preaching, having to disprove false doctrines in favor of the truth
  - B. We delight in being able to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ free of controversy
- XI. The churches maintain an ongoing concern for each other's welfare, and send preachers to check on them and help them (36)
  - A. Paul and Barnabas (separately as it turned out) went to check on the churches
  - B. Pastors have travelled to preach in some of the other churches
    - 1. San Angelo
  - C. Pastors have come here to check on us
    - 1. Larry Vincent near the beginning, before the association was formally organized
    - 2. Jarrett Downs a few years ago
  - D. Recently I was sent to help in the church in Santa Teresa
    - 1. Dave had throat cancer, which was cured by radiation
    - 2. That radiation badly damaged his jaw, which then required a reconstruction surgery
    - 3. He has been away from our meetings for a long time, unable to travel
    - 4. By God's grace he can speak, but he is somewhat weak and needs time to heal up from the surgery
    - 5. By God's grace there are brothers in the church who can preach, but they are limited in the time they can devote to it
      - a) Frank - away proposing!
      - b) Jonathan, a deacon - busy with work and family
    - 6. So the pastors of the association churches, in our most recent meeting, decided to send some of us to visit and preach
      - a) I went last week
      - b) Jason Montgomery of Faith Community Baptist Church in Fort Worth goes next week

## CONCLUSION

- Our association of churches exists partly because of the reality that controversies inevitably arise in the churches
- The churches send messengers to hold meetings to seek help from one another in settling those controversies
- Incidental to meeting, the churches of our association prompt each other to joy in the Lord by describing God's gracious work among them
- The churches receive one another's messengers
- The churches' messengers report to one another what God has done with them
- The churches meet to confer on controversies that arise
- The churches in association agree on the truth from the scriptures, and publish their judgments on the controversies they have considered, for the benefit of the churches
- The pastors and other members of the churches can then return to the various churches to preach the truth, which causes rejoicing and encouragement in the churches
- The churches of the association maintain an ongoing sharing of preachers
- The latest controversy being settled, the churches can go on teaching and preaching the word of the Lord
- The churches maintain an ongoing concern for each other's welfare, and send preachers to check on them and help them