

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological Seminary  
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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## The New Testament and Service Organizations

Baptists recognize the crucial role of the local church in accomplishing God's work during this age. The New Testament names the local congregation as “the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). It is constituted as the temple of God by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and it is therefore holy (1 Cor 3:16-17). All New Testament Christians are obligated to submit themselves to the authority of a local congregation, and all Christian work should be directly or indirectly accountable to one or more local assemblies.

Does this mean that organizations outside of the local church are unnecessary? Some Baptists have thought so. In fact, a few Baptists have even argued that institutions such as mission agencies or seminaries are downright unscriptural.

At times I have agreed with them. Service organizations can be truly dangerous. If they usurp the prerogatives and authority of the church they may actually place themselves in the role of attempting to dictate policy to local congregations. At such times, service organizations are worse than useless: they are disruptive and damaging to the work of God.

Not everything that is dangerous, however, is necessarily bad. An automobile is dangerous in the hands of an untrained driver. An airplane is dangerous in the hands of Al Qaeda. Duct tape is dangerous in the hands of Red Green. The fact that a thing can be a hazard does not necessarily mean that it should be abandoned.

Of course service organizations can become a danger when they go bad; so can churches. We do not stop planting churches, however. We recognize that they are instituted in the New Testament. What the New Testament authorizes, either by instruction or by clear and

continuing example, we are obligated to accept. Therefore, the question is whether the New Testament authorizes anything like a service organization.

A few years ago I had occasion to work through this question while listening to a lecture on the value of missionary field councils. The lecturer was arguing that field councils were useful things, but he was arguing largely from pragmatic considerations. I found myself refuting him within my own mind. Missionaries, I announced to myself, should be accountable to their sending churches, not to intermediaries. They should receive their instructions from their pastors or their home congregations. Their churches should decide where and how they are to minister. If we need a service organization, it should be an integral ministry of a particular local church. That, I told myself, was how things were done in the New Testament.

The last statement was the one that got me. No sooner had I proposed it to myself than I began to search my mind for biblical examples. The more I thought, the less the evidence seemed to square with what I was thinking.

The most complete account of missionary activity in the New Testament is that of the apostle Paul. Paul was sent out, originally with Barnabas, by the church at Antioch. The evidence in the book of Acts indicates that Paul remained accountable to that church, returning and reporting to it (e.g., Acts 14:26-28).

Antioch, however, was in no position to direct Paul and his companions during their missionary journeys. Communication was slow, and decisions had to be made quickly. Even if communication had been possible, people in Antioch could not be expected to know enough of Paul's circumstances to be able to direct him wisely. The bulk of the decisions had to be made by Paul's team as it traveled.

That team included people from more churches than just Antioch. Aristarchus and Secundus were from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derby, Silas from Jerusalem, Sopater from Berea, Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia, Timothy from Lystra. Wherever Paul went, he evidently recruited young men to travel and minister with him. Titus, Luke, Sosipater, Demas, Jason, Mark — at one time or another, all of these labored along with Paul in his journeys. About the only place that Paul seems to have gone without an entourage is Athens, and that was an emergency measure.

Paul almost always traveled with a team. He was certainly the leader in that team. His pattern, however, was to give other members of the team a voice in the decision-making process. This is illustrated with particular clarity in Acts 16:10, where Paul received the vision of the man of Macedonia, but (according to the text) "*we gathered that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel there.*"

Paul's team was composed of members of local churches. Presumably, each one was accountable to his own local congregation in the long run. In the short run, however, the team had considerable latitude to make its own decisions. It determined its own direction in ministry and managed its own personnel. Even Paul was not above submitting to direction, most likely from other team members, but certainly from a source other than his own local church (Acts 17:14-15).

The closer we look at Paul's team, the more it begins to resemble a missionary field council. It is an organization of Christians, but it is not a church. It has liberty to make its own

decisions and to plan its own direction. While its members are presumably accountable to their churches, they are immediately under the direction of the team.

In other words, what the book of Acts depicts is a more-than-embryonic development of a service organization. That being the case, it hardly seems right to dismiss all service organizations as anti-scriptural. The New Testament gives at least one clear example of a service organization that operates under apostolic authorization and receives the Lord's blessing. What God has ordained to permit, we ought to be cautious to condemn.

Of course, service organizations need to remember their place. They are not churches and they must not engage in churchly acts such as the observance of ordinances. They must always remember that they exist to serve churches; no service organization is ever an end in itself. If they ever begin to interfere in the affairs of sovereign local congregations, they should be dismantled mercilessly. If, however, they are willing to respect the primacy of the local New Testament church, then they can be a significant blessing. The New Testament proves as much. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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## Christ Crucified

Richard Crashaw (1613?–1649)

Thy restless feet now cannot go  
For us and our eternal good,  
As they were ever wont. What though  
They swim, alas! in their own flood?

Thy hands to give Thou canst not lift,  
Yet will Thy hand still giving be;  
It gives, but O, itself's the gift!  
It gives tho' bound, tho' bound 'tis free! ✕

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