

THE ASSOCIATION QUESTION



WHY SHOULD A
LOCAL CHURCH JOIN
AN ASSOCIATION?

JOSHUA COLSON

**The Association Question: Why Should
a Local Church Join an Association?**

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Introduction

We Are Better Together, whether talking about friends or family or church. Even churches are better together! In this short booklet, Joshua Colson has done a great job showing how a church can accomplish more by uniting with the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Ecclesiastes 4:9 reminds us, “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor.” That is the goal of association. An individual church can accomplish far more by working with other churches than it can on its own. Further, we as the body of Christ can accomplish more when churches join together. One church can do much, but thousands of churches can do exponentially more.

Ecclesiastes 4:10 also tells us *why* two are better than one. “For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow.” Inevitably, a church or pastor will face a difficult time. The NAFWB provides resources like counseling and coaching. The Shepherding Initiative offers support to churches without pastors. The denomination offers training online and in person to help churches and church members be better equipped for the ministry.

God never intended us to serve alone. Consider the “one anothers” in Scripture as well as the last part of Ecclesiastes 4:10. “But woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.”

An isolated pastor or church is vulnerable. As our Lord said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). It is safer and more productive to come together. It is also more enjoyable. Being part of a greater body also helps fulfill Jesus’ prayer on our behalf that we be one (John 17). Jesus said Christians working together in unity helps the world believe. It is beautiful to see diverse people come together to serve God, reaching and training others in the gospel, and giving of themselves.

So, if you read this booklet and feel God is calling you and your church to unite with the National Association of Free Will Baptists, please contact us, and we will be happy to guide you through the process. Doing so is good for you and for the Body of Christ. We are truly ***Better Together***.

The Association Question

by Joshua Colson

Why should a local church associate with Free Will Baptists? It's a question I encountered often when encouraging my own independent congregation to join the Illinois State Association, and subsequently, the National Association of Free Will Baptists.

In the pages that follow, I hope to answer that question in some depth. I will begin by laying some of the necessary groundwork. Then, I will conclude by answering the Whys and Hows of joining the association.

Who exactly are Free Will Baptists?

Doctrinal Beliefs. Free Will Baptists are disciples of Jesus Christ who believe Jesus died for all people and that all people, by grace, have the free will to accept or reject Jesus as Savior and Lord. This free will does not end after conversion; so, we believe one may truly commit apostasy by forsaking Christ. We reject the doctrine of *once-saved-always-saved*.

We believe disciples of Jesus ought to be baptized by immersion upon their profession of faith. Thus, we do not practice infant baptism as some other Christian traditions do; and we do not believe sprinkling is the proper form of baptism.

We believe baptized disciples of Jesus ought to freely covenant (join) together to form local churches that are fully autonomous (self-governing) under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In these local churches, the Word of God — which we hold to be inspired, inerrant, and infallible, our only rule of faith and practice — ought to be read, preached, prayed, sung, and “seen” in the ordinances.

While each local church is self-governing, Free Will Baptists have always believed local churches should associate with one another to

support one another in the training and ordination of ministers, the spreading of the gospel, missionary work, and more. A full statement of Free Will Baptist beliefs can be found in *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*

History. Free Will Baptist history takes root in the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the English General (Free Will) Baptists (1500s-1600s). The American story, however, begins in the 1700s when Free Will Baptists began to spread in America from two different bases.

Beginning in 1727, Free Will Baptists established churches in North Carolina and moved westward across what became the southern United States. Then, in 1780, another group of Free Will Baptists began establishing churches in New England. This movement spread westward across the northern United States.

The two groups existed independently of one another until the early part of the twentieth century. At that time, many northern churches voted to merge with the Northern Baptists to form the American Baptist denomination (1911). Northern churches that chose to remain Free Will Baptist organized into the Cooperative General Association of Free Will Baptists. In 1935, this group joined with Free Will Baptists in the south to form the National Association of Free Will Baptists.

Structure. As already noted, Free Will Baptists believe in the autonomy of each local church under the Lordship of Christ. This means each congregation governs its own internal affairs. The *Treatise* states, “The local congregation of believers is the only visible form of the ‘church’ founded by the direct authority of Scripture. Free Will Baptists, therefore, recognize the local church as the sole source of authority possessed and exercised within the visible church” (Part IV, Chap. I, Section I).

It continues: “The local church is an independent and self-governing body, with full authority to transact its business; choose its pastor and officers; receive, discipline, and dismiss members; hold free title to all its properties; and conduct all its internal affairs” (Part IV, Chap. I, Sect. I).

However, from the very beginning, Free Will Baptist churches have

always formed voluntary associations with one another for purposes of fellowship, accountability, the ordination of ministers, and the support of missions and education. “Free Will Baptist churches, while independent, do not practice isolation. They form associations with one another in several levels of organization,” explains the *Treatise* (Part IV, Chap III, Section I).

Before exploring these associations, the *Treatise* carefully reminds us, “These associations are *voluntary*, both at the beginning and in their continuation. The local church remains at liberty to withdraw from the association it has voluntarily joined” (Part IV, Chap III, Section I).

There are four levels of association for Free Will Baptists:

- 1. Local church.** Each local church is totally self-governing in its own affairs. That makes it the highest authority under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. None of the following levels are higher than the local church in an authoritative sense. Indeed, the *Treatise* states that “Each of the levels is said to be the *broader* or *larger* (not ‘higher’) than the former” (Part IV, Chap. III, Section II).
- 2. Local association or quarterly.** Regional churches form a local association, which meets at regular intervals. These associations have been called by various names throughout Free Will Baptist history: district association, local association, quarterly meeting (because they meet four times per year), or conference. These local associations assist local churches in the ordination of ministers and foster fellowship and service among churches in close proximity.
- 3. State association.** All local associations within a given state voluntarily join to form a state association of Free Will Baptists, which meets annually. The state association (or rather the churches and associations that comprise it) owns and operates state properties (offices, camps, etc.); facilitates church and state giving to international missions, home missions, children’s homes, Free Will Baptist colleges, etc.; and, in some cases, fields a promotional director and other state personnel to help churches find pastors, encourage and equip pastors and churches in their ministries, publish newsletters and magazines,

operate a state website, and, generally, to promote the work of all the churches that comprise the state association.

4. The National Association. All the state associations nationwide voluntarily associate with one another to form the National Association of Free Will Baptists, which meets annually. All ordained ministers and deacons in good standing with the Association are counted as standing delegates. Each state association is entitled to send a certain number of lay delegates to the annual meeting. Each church may also send one lay delegate to the annual meeting. The National Association (or, rather, the churches and associations that comprise it) owns and operates Welch College; IM, Inc. (international missions); North American Ministries; Richland Ave Financial, which offers retirement plans for ministers and associational employees; WNAC (Free Will Baptist women's ministries); D6 Family Ministry (Sunday School and church training); and the Free Will Baptist Foundation. Each entity works under a board of directors elected by delegates to the National Association. Delegates also vote on the budgets, charter amendments, etc. of these organizations.

As the *Treatise* explains, "These associations of churches at the various levels are all organized for cooperation among the churches. These denominational meetings serve for mutual edification and inspiration. They also provide opportunity for the churches to accomplish cooperatively what they might not be able to do individually" (Part IV, Chap. III, Section III).

We will return to the purposes and benefits of the local association in a moment. But first, I would like to answer some important questions.

Does the association have any power over the local church?

No. No level of association exercises authority over the internal affairs of the local church. To quote the *Treatise* once more: "The local church is an independent and self-governing body, with full authority to transact its business, choose its pastor and officers, receive, discipline, and dismiss members, hold free title to all its properties, and conduct all its internal affairs" (Part IV, Chap. I, Section I).

It is true the local association sets moral and doctrinal requirements for church membership in the association. If a church is found not to be in line with these requirements, the association can choose to “withdraw fellowship from the local church as a member of the association” (Part IV, Chap. III, Section IV).

As an example, let’s say X Church is a member of Y Association. Over time, X Church begins teaching that homosexuality is not a sin. The Y Association cannot interfere with the internal affairs of X Church, but the Y Association could — and would — vote to withdraw fellowship from X Church for its departure from biblical doctrine.

In similar fashion, because each local church “remains at liberty to withdraw from the association it has voluntarily joined,” if a local church disagrees with the direction of a majority of churches in any level of the association, it may leave at any time (Part IV, Chap. III, Section I).

Does the association appoint pastors?

No. The association does not appoint pastors in local churches. Each Free Will Baptist church is fully autonomous and thus has “full authority to...choose its pastor and officers” (Part IV, Chap. I. Section I). However, by virtue of being in a Free Will Baptist association, a national network of pastors becomes available to a church seeking a pastor.

Just as the local association sets doctrinal and moral requirements for a church’s membership, the local association also sets doctrinal and moral standards for ministers to be ordained and to remain in good standing. The local church is free to call whomever they please to be the pastor, and the local association will never interfere with this.

However, if a local church calls someone as pastor who is at odds with Free Will Baptist doctrine and/or morality, then the local association will refuse to recognize that minister’s credentials and may withdraw fellowship.

Does the association own the church's property?

No. Each congregation retains its own property. Again, "The local church is an independent and self-governing body, with full authority to transact its business, choose its pastor and officers, receive, discipline, and dismiss members, hold free title to all its properties, and conduct all its internal affairs" (Part IV, Chap. I, Section I).

This has always been the Free Will Baptist position. As a result, the problems recently experienced by churches in denominations like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church will never be experienced by Free Will Baptists.

Does joining the association require a name change?

No. Many churches in fellowship with the National Association do not even have "Free Will Baptist" in their official name. One of the largest churches in the denomination is simply referred to as The Donelson Fellowship or simply TDF. Another church in Michigan is called Central Oaks Community Church.

Some churches style themselves with a name, and then mention their Free Will Baptist identity elsewhere. For instance, one church refers to itself as Immanuel Church, Free Will Baptist. The National Association has no trouble with a church retaining its name when it seeks fellowship with the denomination.

Of course, if it was the pleasure of the congregation to change the name to include Free Will Baptist, that is fine, too. But it is absolutely not required.

Why bother joining the association?

Now we come to the question of why a local church should even bother uniting with a Free Will Baptist association. Allow me to share both biblical and practical reasons for this move.

Biblical Reasons. First, the formation of local church associations is thoroughly biblical. While each local church is self-governing under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, Scripture clearly demonstrates that local

churches in the New Testament organized themselves into larger bodies (associations, councils, synods, assemblies, regional partnerships, etc.). We know fraternal relations existed between churches in the first century, especially those in close proximity. For instance, Paul addressed his singular Epistle to the Galatians “unto the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2) and instructed the Colossians to trade letters with the church in nearby Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). Obviously, these local churches were cooperating and associating with one another.

Paul also speaks of ordination as taking place by a “council of elders” laying hands on an ordinand (1 Timothy 4:14). The multiplicity of *elders* — a term synonymous with *pastor* in the Bible — seems to presuppose the cooperation of several local churches in the task.

Of course, the most famous example of local churches associating with one another was when the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem convened a council in order to decide doctrinal and practical matters related to the membership of Gentiles in the churches (Acts 15). More examples could be given, but all of this suggests the practice of associational fellowship with other local churches is, indeed, biblical.

Practical Reasons. Not only is the practice biblical, but local church associations are also greatly beneficial to the local churches. Consider two ways local associations benefit local churches and the Kingdom of God.

First, local church associations “provide opportunity for the churches to accomplish cooperatively what they might not be able to do individually” (Part IV, Chap. III, Sec. III). Local churches constitute the visible body of Christ on earth. However, no single local church is able, by itself, to train, ordain, and equip pastors, missionaries, evangelists, etc. No one church can take up sufficient collections for the relief of the poor, run summer youth camps, send sufficient missionaries across the globe, and so forth. Yet multiple local churches can cooperate with one another to accomplish these sorts of tasks and more.

In terms of education and training, churches within local associations support one another in the training and ordination of pastors. Moreover, the National Association owns and operates Welch College to

train pastors, missionaries, and laymen for service in all sorts of fields, from medicine and biology to law, education, and much more. Pastors and missionaries around the world received training from this college, and today the college continues to produce graduates across fifty-plus varied programs of study.

In addition to Welch College, Free Will Baptists publish books, Sunday School curriculum, and provide a great deal of other resources for use in the local church. Every church needs books and curriculum. The only question is: who publishes them?

Free Will Baptists publish robustly biblical material aligned with the doctrinal beliefs of Free Will Baptists. But this material is only publishable when local churches associate to underwrite its production by purchasing the materials regularly and faithfully.

When it comes to missionary work, the local church has a definite responsibility for global missions. God's mission is not limited to the rural South and Midwest, where Free Will Baptists are strongest, or even the United States. No, God's mission encompasses the whole globe.

Every local church must be involved in God's mission of global redemption. Indeed, the local church is the body ordained by Christ to reach the world. Local churches call, equip, send, and support missionaries who establish local churches by gathering together new believers.

There is no global mission apart from the local church, and the local church that refuses to acknowledge and act on its position in the global commission isn't worthy of being called a church. Of course, local churches cannot, independently, call, train, equip, send, and support missionaries. Rather, we must join with other local churches to carry out this task. This is one of the primary reasons I believe associations of local churches are crucial. The churches that voluntarily associate to form the National Association are able to operate two missionary agencies — IM, Inc. (international missions) and North American Ministries (church planting). These agencies enable the numerous local churches that comprise the National Association to send and support missionaries all around the globe.

Free Will Baptist associations make it possible for councils of elders to ordain new elders. They make it possible to train pastors and send missionaries. They make it possible to evangelize young people at church camps each summer, to support men's and women's ministries in local churches, and even to provide retirement plans for pastors.

Simply put, associations highlight the fact that local churches are better together than they could ever be apart. No Free Will Baptist church can do alone what all churches can do together.

Now, the foregoing items are actions or ministries cooperating churches accomplish together, but I would be remiss not to mention a key, practical benefit to being in an association — a healthy defense. In our litigious culture, many organizations are in the habit of suing Christians and Christian organizations. It is only a matter of time before lawsuits are targeted at local churches that, for instance, refuse to allow their facilities to be used for a same-sex wedding.

Now, if an independent local church (not part of the association) is sued in such a scenario, they must face the lawsuit alone. I'd like to think that such a church would win the lawsuit, but the fact is, they may be bankrupted in the process.

But let's say a Free Will Baptist church in the National Association is sued for refusing to allow a same-sex couple to use its facilities for a wedding. This church would not be alone. It would be legally protected by its own statement of faith, constitution, and bylaws along with those of the local, state, and national association. Lawyers recommended by the National Association and its partner organizations would aid a local church in any such situation. In an association, no church faces these sorts of legal battles alone, spiritually or legally.

The second practical benefit of formally joining with the Free Will Baptists is local church associations "serve for mutual edification and inspiration" (Part IV, Chap. III, Sec. III). To be sure, the local, state, and national association each involve some level of formal business that is to be conducted. Yet each of these meetings is replete with prayer, singing, Scripture reading, preaching, and fellowship. Each meeting is

like a mini-revival. It is a true blessing to hear reports from missionaries and sermons from different preachers at each meeting. It is a double blessing to enjoy conversation over dinner with believers from other churches. We need to know and fellowship with believers beyond our individual churches. This is a little foretaste of Heaven!

What about relationships with non-Free Will Baptist churches?

Free Will Baptists do not believe we are the only Christians, and we gladly cooperate with churches and individuals from other Bible-believing churches and organizations to fulfill the Great Commission and extend the influence of Christ in society.

The rural church where I grew up has partnered with Southern Baptists on at least ten occasions for missions trips. A church I once pastored previously enjoyed many joint services and community outreach events with the conservative Methodist Church across the road. Additionally, departments of the National Association regularly invite Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, Conservative Methodists, Non-Denominational, and other believers to speak and participate in conferences, worship services, etc. And many denominational leaders serve on the boards of large parachurch and missionary organizations across a broad spectrum of the greater church. We are certainly not sectarian.

What is the process of joining a local association?

If the majority of a local church so desired, they would petition, by letter, their local association for acceptance. Upon receiving the request, the local association would appoint a committee of ministers to meet with the leadership of the petitioning church “for the purpose of examining the church as to its doctrine, character, reputation, fellowship, stability, and organization” (Part IV, Chap. I, Sec. III).

The committee would ensure the church agrees with Free Will Baptist beliefs and practices. This might involve an examination of the church’s founding or incorporating documents (statement of faith, constitution and bylaws, church covenant, etc.) and asking any relevant questions at an appointed meeting.

Provided the committee finds the church to be in agreement with Free Will Baptist beliefs and practices, it will make a motion to accept the local church into the association at the next scheduled meeting.

The associational body would vote on the motion, and, provided the motion passes, the church immediately would become a full member of the local, state, and national association with all of the same rights, duties, and privileges as every other church.

Most associations require annual membership dues. Often, this money underwrites the operating expenses of the local association and covers dues from the state and the national association, which helps meet legal fees and supports the annual expenses of the national convention.

Amounts and payment schedules are set by each association. Churches are encouraged to give more than the minimum amount, so the excess can directly support missionaries and cooperative ministries. And, I should mention in closing, I have never heard of a church being disfellowshipped for inability to pay dues. To the contrary, I have twice witnessed occasions where another church graciously stepped in when a local congregation was unable to come up with the amount. It's good to be in an association!

The F.A.C.E. of Free Will Baptists

Fellowship • Accountability • Cooperation • Encouragement

What are the benefits of joining an association? Why are we better together working with others to fulfill the Great Commission? Consider the many F.A.C.E.* benefits listed on the following pages.

Pastoral Support

- State and national offices
- Free, professional counseling for pastors and their families
- Mutual encouragement
- Zoom™ hangouts for pastors and pastors' wives
- Confidential pastoral support
- Pastoral coaching
- Mentoring of young pastors
- Pulpit supply
- Ministry to pastors' wives
- *Better Together Podcast*
- Global network of pastors

Church Support

- IRS 501(c)(3) tax exemption
- Pastoral search assistance

- Church health assessments
- Know Your Community™ reports
- Disaster Response Team
- A-V consulting
- Risk management and liability checklists
- National Center for Life and Liberty legal counsel
- Sample bylaws and policies
- Key document review
- Global network of churches
- Reporting forms
- Data analysis and reporting
- Cross-cultural ministries
- Operation Saturation
- Disaster response
- Military, DOD, and other chaplains
- International Missions (IM, Inc.):
 - Global missionaries
 - Strategic global partnerships
 - IMpact projects
 - World Missions Offering (WMO)
 - The Hanna Project
 - Short-term missionary opportunities
 - Perspectives (missions training course)

Great Commission

Support

- Cooperative support of missions
- North American Ministries (NAM):
 - Church planting

Academic & Doctrinal

Support

- Higher Education:
 - Welch College & Divinity School

* The F.A.C.E. acronym was developed by Chris Dotson, director, Tennessee State Association.

- Southeastern Free Will Baptist College
- Randall University
- Certificate, Associate, Bachelor, MA, and MDiv programs with 50+ college majors or minors
- Doctrinal accountability
- Access to top biblical scholars
- Free Will Baptist commentaries
- Position papers regarding critical doctrinal and social issues
- Theological Symposium (October)

Discipleship Support

- D6 Family Ministry Foundations:
 - FWB curriculum nursery through adult
 - Classic quarterly curriculum
 - D6 Family app and D6 podcast
 - Elements Kids Worship
 - Christian books from Randall House, Randall House Academic, D6 Family
- Top Reads for Busy Leaders (email)

- Books from Welch College Press
- A Free Will Baptist Catechism
- *As You Go* podcast from WNAC

Youth and College

Ministry Support

- Camps & retreats
- College scholarships
- Vertical III:
 - Church Training Service
 - Youth Evangelistic Team (YET)
 - Truth & Peace Leadership Conference

International Missions:

- College Missions Program (CMP)
- Overseas Apprenticeship (OA)
- IM high school teams (ETEM)

- Pastoral ministry internships
- *Shine!* Conference for girls
- Generation Servant retreats
- Partnership with Child Evangelism Fellowship

Financial Support

- Values-driven 403(b)(9) retirement plan
- Institutional investing for churches
- Church Extension Loan Fund (CELFF)
- Financial education and consulting
- Pastor salary package support/evaluation
- *re:invest* podcast and blog
- Grant opportunities
- Charitable giving
- Estate planning

Training Opportunities

- National Convention (July)
- State association meetings
- Local association meetings
- D6 Conferences (March-April)
- Pastor's Boot Camp (October)
- Leadership Conference (December)
- Rekindle (individualized church health training)

Events & Retreats

- Leadership Conference (December)
- Forum | Bible Conference (Welch College, March)
- Theological Symposium (October)
- Master's Men sports fellowship events
- WNAC retreats & conferences
- Master's Men retreats

Print & Digital Resources

- *ONE Magazine*, a free bimonthly magazine from the National Association
- Weekly graphics for social media platforms
- *Integrity: A Journal of Christian Thought*
- *De Doctrina* academic journal
- *PULPIT*, an occasional magazine for pastors

- *Treasure*: Bible Studies for Women
- FWB Historical Collection (Welch College)
- www.FWBHistory.com
- www.FWBWorship.com
- *Direction*: Bible studies for men

Taking the Next Steps Toward Association

Are you leading your church toward association? If so, we advise you not to be haphazard in your approach. Instead, consider following these simple yet important steps with your church:

- 1. Present the idea of association to church leadership, then share and discuss this booklet.**
- 2. Put out “feelers” to key people in the congregation regarding the idea of association.**
- 3. Go through the key points in this booklet with the entire congregation during a Sunday or Wednesday evening service.**
- 4. Take time to gauge the pulse of the congregation after these meetings through personal conversation and small group meetings.**
- 5. If response is positive, announce the church will vote on a constitutional change regarding associating in a forthcoming church business meeting.**
- 6. Encourage questions or suggestions prior to the meeting.**
- 7. Take the vote by secret ballot on a Sunday morning when the greatest percentage of the congregation is present.**

NOTE: The church may not react well to the initial proposal. Be patient and give the seed of the idea time to grow.

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