

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
15 August 2021

10:30 a.m. & 6:30 p.m. MT Worship
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Free to Be:
A People Who Share Baptist Affiliation and Identity - Part Two:
An Exploration of our American Baptist Identity and Associations (Regionally)
Eleventh Sermon in the 14-week summer series: *Free to Be*

Luke 10:1-3; Acts 15:36-41; Philippians 1:1-7; 4:15-20

New Revised Standard Version

Last week we heard from three leaders about what it means to be connected to a national body of churches called the American Baptist Churches USA. And as my predecessor the Rev. Dr. Brian Henderson loves to say, we learned that, “*there is more we can do together than any one of us can do on our own.*”

I would venture to guess that most of us are here at Calvary know that we need others – in crisis and in celebration. We are here because of our faith, and we because we have fears. Following Christ does not eradicate the chaos of our world. But it sure it helps to navigate these chaotic and stormy waters with others! And that’s a key reason why we need each other.

And what is true of individual people in a church; is *also* true of individual churches in the big “C” Church of Christendom.

Just as it helps in parenting to have a partner or support system around you to raise your kids, and just as healthy businesses need diverse teams of people with various skill sets to succeed, and just as an orchestra or choir is (by definition) a group of musicians making music together – ministry requires partnership and collaboration.

Following Jesus and building the *kin-dom* of God on earth as it is in heaven is not a one person – or one church – assignment. And so while we American Baptists strongly believe in the autonomy of the local church, we also believe in the concept of association – intentional partnering with one another.¹

In fact, according to the Standing Rules of ABCUSA, Calvary *must* be affiliated with

¹ From YouTube video, “Regional Ministries – An Overview” accessed on August 15, 2021 at

<https://www.abc-usa.org/how-we-serve/american-baptist-regions/>.

a smaller association of American Baptist churches – often called a Region – in order to be considered American Baptist. In other words, we cannot be American Baptist on our own – we are literally not allowed!

In this structure, 1.3 million individuals and 5,200 churches are divided into 34 American Baptist regions.² Regions are shaped by geography and/or by shared theology or mission and vision. Some are as big as many states put together, some regions are the size of a single state, and some are only as big as a city.³

So, what do Regions do?
Well, a lot of things actually.

Regions support the local church by helping churches walk through the process of finding a new pastor or helping them navigate other transitions or conflict. They serve as a resource for education training and mission partnerships. Regions can help a church find curriculum, provide training for deacons and trustees, and advice on matters of stewardship, worship, or organizational structure. They help local churches build relationships

with missionaries and organize quarterly or annual gatherings to celebrate the ministries of their local churches and provide opportunities for shared fellowship.⁴

Regions not only support the local church body, they also support local church staff members and other clergy – like chaplains. In many ways, the Region serves as the pastor to the pastors in local congregations. They help pastors by providing continuing education opportunities and financial support for conferences and retreats, mission study tours, and seminary. Regions help clergy have their ordinations recognized nation-wide. They help prepare pastors for retirement, educate about clergy tax policies, serve as an advocate for fair compensation and severance, and help clergy find new places of ministry.⁵

In summary, region ministry exists to help every local church and church staff member reach their full potential for the *kin-*dom of God. And they do that by facilitating relationships and

² Ibid.

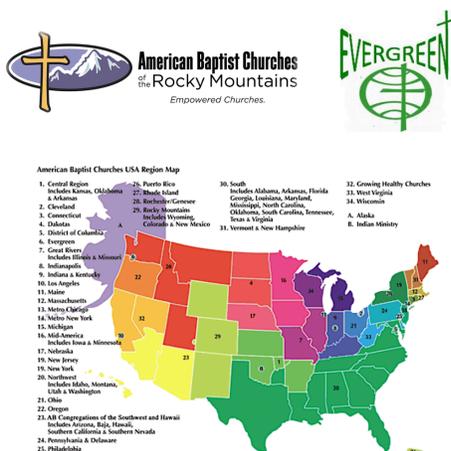
³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

partnerships with local churches in their local contexts.⁶

Needless to say – Regions are vital to our life as American Baptists! You have a map of all 34 Regions on the cover of your Order of Worship:



There are also two logos above that map. The one on the left is of our current Region – American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains, or ABCRM, for short, which is a *geographically* organized region including churches in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico. The logo on the right is of the Evergreen Association – a non-geographically based region that has churches in Washington, California, Utah, Idaho, Alaska, Colorado and a partner congregation in Venezuela. You will hear both

of these regions referenced later in the sermon.

Now, let's look at our scriptures for today, because they give us our foundation for associational mission and highlight the essential nature of partnership in ministry: whether going two by two to spread the gospel, deciding it's time to change partners, or the generosity of one church supporting the livelihood of a missionary helping other churches thrive. These three examples teach us that partnership in ministry can vary in purpose and in length.

Let's start with this short passage from Luke's gospel, where Jesus sends his disciples out two by two. It makes sense that Jesus does not send his disciples out on their own because Jesus himself didn't engage in ministry on his own! Jesus calls 12 disciples to form a team of leaders around him. If Jesus – God incarnate – doesn't do life or ministry alone, Lord knows we don't have a chance at going it alone – nor are we supposed to!

Even more, Luke 10 reminds us there were way more than just the 12 apostles. There were at

⁶ Ibid.

least 70, if not more! Jesus sends these 35 pairs ahead of him to go to every place that he intends to go (vs 1) to pave the way, so to speak, for his arrival into town. Controversial rumors were already spreading about Jesus; this was risky work,⁷ and so no wonder he says, *“I’m sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves”* (vs 3) – this work is not for the faint of heart! Jesus knows they will need moral encouragement, if not a literal “safety buddy” to look out for one another.

Not surprisingly, later in chapter 10, Luke records that the 70 who were sent out, return with joy, having seen people’s lives changed. So they were trained and commissioned as a large group together to be reminded, perhaps, that they were part of a larger movement and mission; then they were together in pairs to do the hard, nitty-gritty work of ministry door to door on their own; and then they came back together as a group of seventy to celebrate their successes and share stories of their adventures.

This pair-by-pair ministry, with the pairs being a part of a larger group, invites us to think about

our Baptist associational ministry in a “coming together” and “being sent out” and “coming back together” kind of way. When local church members and local church pastors attend annual gatherings with other church leaders and pastors – it offers a place of encouragement, a place to tell stories of success and struggle, and a place to learn from one another, and be inspired so that we come back to our own local contexts with new ideas or even just with a sense of *“I’m not in this alone; other people get how I feel and can relate to what I’m experiencing.”*

Calvary supports its pastors and staff in attending regional and national gatherings with other American Baptists – and for that – I am very grateful. But did you know all of our regional gatherings with American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains and our National Gathering with American Baptist Churches USA are open to *all* members of ABCUSA churches, not just pastors? And they are more accessible than ever. The biennial for ABCUSA was held virtually this past June, and our regional annual

⁷ Michael Rogness, “Commentary on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20,” *Working Preacher* (July 7, 2013), accessed on August 15, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-3/commentary-on-luke-101-11-16-20-3>.

gathering is coming up in September and will be held at New Hope Baptist here in Denver. I encourage you to engage in coming together with other American Baptists to learn from what they are doing and to share what you are experiencing here at Calvary. It's a biblical model that we see from the beginning with Jesus – even in the early days of his ministry.

Now let's turn to Paul – the ultimate church starter, in our second text today, which is from Acts 15. In this account, Luke gives us an example of a partnership in ministry that actually comes to end. But, of course, every ending, is also a beginning.

In a book entitled *Great Church Fights* which is about conflict in the Bible, the author Leslie Flynn tells a “story of two porcupines in the freezing north woods that huddled together to keep warm. But when they got close, their quills pricked each other and they had to move apart. They *needed* each other for the warmth, but they *needled* each other with their sharp quills.”⁸

Sometimes, when we are in close relationship with people, or even other churches, and even when we have shared in ministry together for many years, sometimes – even as close as we are (with all the “warm fuzzy feelings” of the good parts of the relationship), there comes a point when something gets prickly, when our differences are significant enough that a change is warranted – not because someone is right and another is wrong (necessarily), but because a solution cannot be reached and ministry still needs to be accomplished. Our human relationships work like this too. Sometimes the healthiest thing for all involved is to part ways. It doesn't mean that there is not grief there, it just means that it is time for a new chapter. I'm sure you can think of examples in your own life where relationships are no longer there because they did not allow you to be *free to be* who you felt you needed to be. Well, such is the case with Paul and Barnabas.

“Paul and Barnabas had just come away from the Jerusalem Council, where the core issue of salvation by faith in Christ [and

⁸ Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 38: When Personalities Clash (Acts 15:36-41),” *Bible.org* (August 9, 2013), accessed on August 15, 2021.

not through circumcision] had been affirmed. Both men firmly agreed about this and other central aspects of the Christian faith.”⁹ Both men were deeply faithful to Christ and to their calling, and they had a history of serving together. As scholar Steven Cole notes, “It was Barnabas who had gone to Paul and listened to his testimony when every Christian in Jerusalem was holding Paul at arm’s length. It was Barnabas who went to Tarsus to look for Paul to bring him back to work with him in the ministry at Antioch. And, of course, the two men had been set apart and commissioned together to go out on their first missionary journey.”¹⁰

And now Paul wanted to revisit these churches that they had started to see how they were doing. Both Paul and Barnabas had a heart for the wellbeing of the churches. “And yet these two teammates, who had labored together and suffered together for many years in the cause of Christ”¹¹ ended up parting ways because they disagreed about whether to include John Mark (otherwise

known as Mark) along on their second journey.

Essentially, Paul was upset that Mark had abandoned their first journey – bailing out early (and suddenly) when they got to Pamphylia, a difficult place in a mountainous region and Mark just left and went back to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). So based on that, Paul felt that Mark was not up to the task. Yet Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to give Mark a second chance – he thought he was still mentorable and moldable. “Barnabas is not bothered by the fact that Mark had returned to Jerusalem on the first journey. But Paul, however, most definitely remembers that Mark left before any of the cities had persecuted them. Mark had not seen the Jews of Antioch of Pisidia chase them through the cities of Asia Minor. Mark had not seen what happened in Lystra when Paul was stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. If Mark bailed out on the first journey before the going got really hard, what will happen this time when Mark experiences similar persecutions!”¹²

⁹ Cole, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Cole, *ibid.*

¹¹ Cole, *ibid.*

¹² Brent Kercheville, “Acts 15:36-41, Resolving Conflicts In Christ,” *Acts Bible Study (The Model*

Church) at West Palm Beach Church of Christ (January 22, 2006), accessed on August 15, 2021 at https://westpalmbeachchurchofchrist.com/new-testament/acts/acts_15-36-41.html.

There was a lot at stake here. One guy (Paul) was thinking of the mission at large and what was required to make the mission successful; the other guy (Barnabas) was looking more at a single man beside them and how to make that man feel included. Neither guy was definitely ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in this situation – you can probably argue both sides of the coin – the pros and cons. But the end result is that they couldn’t agree and Barnabas went with Mark to Cyprus and Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia. Paul was wise to choose Silas to be his new partner because “Silas was a man endorsed by the Jerusalem church, who could back up Paul in delivering the decisions of the Council to the various churches. And Silas was a Roman citizen, as Paul was, which was to their advantage in ministering in cities under Roman jurisdiction (Acts 16:37). They aligned in a lot of ways, even aligning differently than Paul and Barnabas had.”¹³

Just because they were at an impasse on this issue of whether to include Mark, that impasse did not negate or tarnish negatively their shared ministry

up until that point. And good ministry happened going forward, even as they went their separate ways. In fact, four men were out on mission now instead of just two or three, and more ministry happened in more places because of these two separate journeys. And – just because they disagreed on this – we don’t hear Paul speak badly about Barnabas or vice versa. In fact, “Paul himself later told the Colossian church to welcome Mark (Col. 4:10). And in his final imprisonment, Paul told Timothy to pick up Mark and bring him with him, because he was useful to Paul for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). And Paul spoke in a supportive way of both Barnabas and Mark (1 Cor. 9:6; 2 Tim. 4:11).”¹⁴ Paul supported them from afar, even as he carried on his own ministry in his own way, and vice versa.

Unity in Christ does not mean that we all have to work closely with one another all the time, because the ministry of Christ is beyond any one person or one church. While it is important to always do due diligence in working through conflict and differences, there are times when it’s okay to realize God

¹³ Cole, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Cole, *ibid.*

might be calling two people or two entities to accomplish ministry in different ways.

One example of this that our church leadership has been grappling with for five years is that our current region, the American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains, has a Statement that prohibits the ordination recognition of persons from the LGBTQ+ community; this statement is in direct conflict with Calvary's Statement of Inclusion, and has impacted several ordination candidates over the past several years, and it does not align with our understanding of church autonomy (churches ordaining who *they* see fit) and it does not align with our vision of being *Open to All, Closed to None*, and it's hurtful for many in our church who identify as LGBTQ+ or who are allies. Because of this, we have been seeking to find a resolution with ABCRM, and the process has been open and honest but no real solutions have surfaced.

You will be hearing more about this this week and in the coming weeks as Council has appointed a Discernment Team to bring this discussion to *you* – our congregation. We've been in conversations for five years with

ABCRM, a region that we have had decades of shared ministry with, and we are realizing it might be time to part ways “officially speaking” in order to be true to the ministry we feel God is calling us to. But we cannot discern this alone. We need your input and wisdom in listening to the Spirit about who God is leading us to partner with in ministry.

The good news is, ABCRM is supportive of our Discernment Process and understands why we are contemplating a change, and there is another Region, or Association called Evergreen, that we've identified as a viable option for us. In Evergreen, there is no statement one way or the other about being “Welcoming and Affirming”; member churches allowed to make their own decisions about ordination candidates; which honors local church autonomy.

To be clear, this regional discernment is not about whether Calvary is American Baptist or not. Rather, it is about the group of churches that we feel called to partner intentionally with in ministry in THIS season of our church's life. Joining a new region does not negate the years of shared ministry we've had with

churches in ABCRM nor does it prohibit future connections with those churches. But it would be a significant change – one that opens doors for inclusion and the ability to exercise our local church autonomy fully, and yet would also mean forging new relationships – just as Paul did with Silas, even as Barnabas Mark continued on their own path of ministry.

You'll hear more about this soon – but I encourage you, in your own discernment, to think about this passage in Acts and how there is no defined length to partnerships and sometimes change is necessary, even if difficult. Because we often think of “church splits” as embroiled in controversy and hurt feelings, I encourage you to imagine that sometimes parting ways, even when there is disagreement, does not have to include disparaging one another nor dismissing the importance of the relationship or each other's ministry. It can mean that each entity is listening to the Spirit's leading and following that accordingly. Listening to the Spirit's leading could also mean remaining in a relationship that has strains and struggles. That is why we discern together – to listen to God's Spirit for what is

most inclusive and inviting for all.

Finally, we have these uplifting words from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians that exemplify how pastors and missionaries need churches to support them and how churches need other churches to support one another.

It would have been easy to abandon Paul as too controversial or risky to support (he was in jail after all!), but the Church of Philippi was unwavering in their support.

Paul thanks the Philippians for sending him money when he was in Thessalonica and for supporting him in his ministry in Macedonia – and supporting Paul's ministry there was so important because the church in Macedonia, as we read in 2 Corinthians 8 – was the ultimate example of a church helping other churches. Even though the Macedonian church was struggling, they took up offerings for other churches in need – and gave with joy, willingly and freely. So for Paul to be supported while he was in Macedonia had a ripple effect on other churches too.

These passages from Paul reveal that we need each other. It is perhaps one of the earliest examples of the associational model of churches!

Just as Paul was supported personally for his ministry, ABCRM, our region, has personally supported pastors with great generosity, for many years, but especially this year. ABCRM sent bonus checks to pastors this year because of the difficulties of ministering in COVID (a period of trial and tribulation not quite like being imprisoned as Paul was – but perhaps not far off in terms of the loneliness and stress of leadership). The region also sent occasional cards with a Starbucks gift card in it to pastors, and just recently invited us to pick a nice gift from a top of the line selection of gifts to say thank you for our ministry. I chose a Shark Robot vacuum thing – that has already proved to be quite a blessing and time saver! (Our dog Deacon sheds a lot!) The Region also sent a bonus check to Calvary and every church in the Region to help boost our ministries – knowing that COVID was a difficult year. The Region's actions this year reminded me of the Macedonian church and the Philippian church.

Another way that churches support missionaries or global servants is by working together to pay their salaries. Global servants like Joyce & David Reed who we heard from last week, are responsible for raising 100% of their salary and ministry dollars. A church like Calvary cannot support them on our own. But our annual gift to the Reeds in our budget, combined with the gifts of other churches, helps them carry out ministry around the world – something Calvary could never do on our own!

A recent example of how churches support other churches, came last October when Roger Dickinson, who serves on the Missions Committee with the Region, sent me a text that said there are churches in Nicaragua and Dominican Republic that need our help. In the DR, a new church was \$10,000 away from paying off their mortgage but with the massive unemployment because of COVID-19 they had no way to finish off paying the mortgage and may have lost their brand new building. And the ABC churches in Nicaragua were desperate for money for food banks. So a lot of churches in ABCRM joined our financial

resources together to help these sister churches, and Calvary contributed \$500 to chip in. It is our regional connections that help facilitate these international partnerships between churches.

Regional connections also provide grants for ministry. In fact, Calvary and New Hope received a Pueblo Legacy Matching Grant a few years ago for our shared ministry with Stedman Elementary and for building relationships across different races, and Calvary just received another Pueblo Legacy Matching Grant from the Region to purchase new washers and dryers for our Bootstraps and Blessings ministry, so more community members can do laundry. What are these Pueblo Legacy grants?

Well, “in April 2016, the members of the First Baptist Church in Pueblo made the difficult decision to close. They desired to leave a legacy that reflected their years of ministry and so they voted to turn their property over to ABCRM, who sold it and after some other gifts were made, the balance of over a million dollars was divided into a five-part fund to be used for grants to support local

churches, pastors, and missions.¹⁵

The legacy of one church, and *their generosity* – even in the midst of a difficult, heart wrenching church closure, has continued to provide for significant ministry in our region. Again, churches helping churches – connected in partnership – through regional associations.

And a *very* local example of churches helping churches, is when University Hills Baptist Church sold Calvary their McManis pipe organ for just \$5,000 in 2010 (which is a *very* nominal fee for a pipe organ!) when they were closing because they wanted the organ to have a new home, and in turn, Calvary was able to pay it forward with a similar arrangement with our old organ pipes – giving them to First Baptist Church of Denver for a very nominal price so that no instrument was wasted or discarded, but rather we shared resources for the purpose of enhancing worship for the glory of God.

These are all examples from our region and churches local to us, but *every* region has stories and

¹⁵ Grant information accessed on August 15, 2021 at <https://www.abcrm.org/resources>.

grants and connections like this – it’s one of the many reasons why partnering together on the regional or associational level is so important – *“we can indeed do more together than any one of us can do on our own!”*

So let us be grateful for our shared American Baptist connections – and let us strive, always, to ensure that more and more people are included in these opportunities of mission and ministry.

In the words of St. Teresa of Ávila, whom Mary Hulst always quoted in her benedictions when she spoke or presided at meetings during his tenure as President of ABCUSA:

*“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but
yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which
He looks Compassion on this
world,*

*Yours are the feet with which He
walks to do good,*

*Yours are the hands, with which
He blesses all the world.*

*Christ has no body now but
yours.”*

May it be so for us – the Body of Christ here at Calvary – and

for all our siblings in our American Baptist family – in this region and beyond.

Amen.