

Harnessing Churches

The tendency of humans to organize themselves into large, ponderous institutions carries significant risks—especially in the area of religion.

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us” (3 Jn. 9).



In the late 1800s, enterprising miners using wagon trains hauled borax from their mines in Death Valley to a railroad spur over a hundred miles away. Each wagon train carried ten tons of borax and was pulled by twenty mules. One monster wagon train carried a 30-ton load pulled by 24 mules.

Mules can accomplish a great deal of work—especially when they’re harnessed together as a team. Humans have recognized the value of teamwork and have created enterprises that “harness” the energy and resources of people on a national or even global scale.

Religion is no exception to this phenomenon. The history of Christianity since the first century has been a long, complex story of consolidation and concentration of power. Catholicism is the ultimate example of centralized command and control, but many Protestant denominations are not far behind. The conferences,

synods, associations, councils, societies, and bureaucracies that comprise most denominations share one objective: to tie local churches together in a work that no one church can carry out alone.

Our own restoration movement has not been immune to this impulse. In 1831, Alexander Campbell wrote in his *Millennial Harbinger* that “a church can do what an individual disciple cannot, and so can a district of churches do what a single congregation cannot.” Eighteen years later, he was elected the first president of the American Christian Missionary Society, an effort to harness the resources of hundreds of local churches in the preaching of the gospel. In recent years, many Churches of Christ—who once opposed the Society—have begun pushing for more organic cooperation among congregations. Harness churches together, the reasoning goes, and great things can be accomplished!

There are two reasons why the attempt to harness local churches together is not biblical, even dangerous. First, it is based on a faulty premise, namely, that the body of Christ is comprised of local congregations. The body of Christ is composed of *individuals*, not churches (1 Cor. 12:27; Jn. 15:5; 1 Pet. 2:4-5; etc.). The leadership of each local church is specifically restricted to “the flock of God among you” (1 Pet. 5:2-3; Ac. 20:28). There is simply no scriptural precedent or instruction that allows churches to create authority structures beyond the local level.

Second, the concentration of power inherent in these extra-congregational schemes promotes a spirit of self-aggrandizement, as ambitious men vie for positions of prominence. It’s bad enough when a Diotrephes seeks dominance in a local church (3 Jn. 9). Imagine the damage that can be inflicted when self-important men wield power over hundreds of churches. In fact, you don’t have to imagine it; just observe the sorry state of modern Christianity.

When Jesus critiqued the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2-3), He addressed each local church separately. Each group was responsible for its own affairs. There was no hierarchy or governing council charged with enforcing God’s will. The independence of these groups isolated them from the problems of the others.

Local churches are not mules. They are autonomous groups that are perfectly adequate for the job the Lord gave them to do. Let us be content with the design He gave us.

— David King