

No Baptist Associational Family is Perfect. No Not One.

By

George Bullard

Executive Director

Columbia Metro Baptist Association

GeorgeBullard@ColumbiaMetro.org

At its best a Baptist association is a family of congregations in relationship with one another, on mission in its context and beyond. Just like all families, at times it is messy. Family members have the power to bless the family and the power to curse the family. At times a family member both blesses and curses.

Family relationships in Baptist associations have some similarities to the family interaction in the story of the prodigal or lost son in Luke 15. The three primary characters – the loving father, the prodigal son, and the elder brother – are examples of three types of congregations in Baptist associations.

The loving father is a large group – likely a majority – of congregations. They are proud of being Baptist. Faithfulness to Baptist long-term doctrinal distinctives and glocal (local and global) missional engagement are their hallmark. Each expresses their distinctives and engagement in ways that fit the past, present, and future of their congregation.

They seldom start or take part in the short-term family arguments that arise from time-to-time unless the family forces everyone to take a stand. They grieve about conflict in the family and yearn for restoration of relationships.

The prodigal son stands for congregations who may or may not have wandered away in one or more respects from their Baptist distinctives and engagements. From their doctrinal or missional centering – or both. They may be cultural enclaves, overly churching culture congregations, and have an expiration date for their vital and vibrant life.

Or they may be thriving congregations who want to go their own way and have put some distance between themselves and congregations who represent the loving father. At their extreme they may engage in rebellion.

Typically, the loving father congregations stay in a caring posture toward these congregations and use more of their power to bless than their power to curse. They want a closer relationship with prodigal son congregations. The loving father congregations express an inclusionary spirit rather than an exclusionary spirit. But some of these congregations hold the loving father congregations at an arm's distance. Whereas the loving father congregations want to embrace them.

The elder brother represents congregations who have a solid, even strict, adherence to what they perceive to be the core values of the family. They proudly display their Baptist doctrinal and missional convictions. For them the doctrinal and missional convictions are a bounded set. Many elder brother congregations are proactive concerning what they believe and how they express it in effective missional service.

At their best elder brother congregations serve as a role model in the family of what a faithful, effective, and innovative family member looks like. In excess they can, however, express the hubris characteristics of pride and arrogance. According to them, any congregation who wanders outside the boundaries as they define them, needs disciplinary action from the loving father congregations.

As with the prodigal son congregations, the loving father congregations stay in a caring posture toward elder brother congregations and use more of their power to bless than their power to curse. They want a closer relationship with elder brother congregations. The loving father congregations express an

inclusionary spirit rather than an exclusionary spirit. But some of these congregations demand that prodigal son congregations be disciplined and not treated as an equal to the elder brother.

The loving father congregations want the elder brother congregations to know their concern is heard. Yet they also want them to understand that families have a no-exit relationship with one another. This makes it very hard for the family to reject a member congregation. It brings great pain to do so. Thus, it happens very seldom and with great reluctance.

In every Baptist association, there will be prodigal son congregations and elder brother congregations as well as a majority who are loving father congregations. The distance between the prodigal son congregations and the elder brother congregations can be a great distance. That is why it is difficult for each to understand and appreciate the perspective of the other.

The loving father congregations are closer to the prodigal son and elder brother congregations. They have a greater understanding and appreciation for all congregations and the various stages of the spiritual, doctrinal, and missional lives they experience.

No Baptist associational family is perfect. No not one. Those striving for perfection engage all three perspectives of their family. They seek to increase the number of loving father congregations for a greater synergy of core doctrinal distinctives and glocal missional engagement.