AN ASSOCIATION OF ‘OTHERS’

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The Associational Principle, a crucial component of Baptist fellowship, has been more than a tool of denominational affiliation. In a world of Alterity (‘Otherness’), where Baptists were seen as the ‘Other,’ associations were emblematic as a foundation for democratization, identity, and fellowship. H.-G. Heimbrock has reminded those who study with him that “religious phenomena can be seen therefore, as expressions of difference, of wonder, and of transcendence.” I am in agreement with this notion and in this essay suggest that “Alterity” has mattered even more for Black Baptists, and hence the functioning of Associations have always been important for identity, as Baptists and as ‘Others.’ Associations are groups of institutional entities that have religious life as their objective.

All Baptists are faced with a crucial question about the decline of Associational life. Is this a sign of increasing secularity, in a cultural shift towards individuation, where cooperative relations are difficult? The answer is not unimportant, as we then must decide how do we really “see” what happens in associational life, and hence the churches that are foundational for this unity? To see this may be as much a question of method and perception as anything. Heimbrock theorizes that religion and religious life is an approach to perception, i.e. an attitude toward life and reality.

Alterity

One suggested origin of the word ‘alterity’ indicates it means ‘otherness.’ This “other” is not a description of simple individual differences, but the systematized construction of classes of people. J. Johnson expands this definition with crucial points to describe alterity (Johnson 1984):

- The distinction between self and other is a primary tool by which we make order out of the chaos of our daily perception. It is necessary for early childhood development, for example.
The construction of alterity takes a step beyond the basic ordering and sees not individuals but classes and categories. It proposes in this manner, other than ourselves is less than ourselves. . . . The categories of less than human has historically been defined to include different subcategories at different times, using as marker gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, sexuality, national origin, culture, religion, type of intelligence.

A final step in Alterity is to institutionalize these prejudices in our laws and customs. When laws, group culture, educational values, and social custom operate as if prejudices were truth, then we have racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, and so on . . . The actions we take based on this false order lead not to greater order, but to chaos.

A crucial aspect to consider when referring to alterity is identity, as F. Welz notes in referencing the “sociological concept of identity,” with origins in the American pragmatism of the eighteen-nineties (Welz 2000, 2). He traces this concept through time and would have us understand that by the sixties identity became crucially important during the cultural upheavals of the time, and additionally there was a turn to embrace the practicality of identifying markers, (race, gender, etc., as noted by Johnson) and it is at this point, from concept to practicality that alterity, or ‘otherness’ enters the picture. While I follow with agreement his historical sketch, I believe the foundations of the American Republic shows a vigorous attention to identity and ‘otherness’ from its inception.

The still controversial writing of M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, provides some insight into this link between identity and alterity, which can engender a tension in their relationship. One reason may be that the hidden aspect of the self is the other (Mensch 2005, 270).

The ‘other’ is ever present. The ego may make note of it, but this is ultimately a vision of self that is translated, transmitted, against a context of identity tension. That which is not self can be seen as an irritation to the ego need to control. But a reconciliation of the relationship of self and ‘other’ is most powerfully demonstrated via the unitary existence of individuality and ‘otherness,’ while simultaneously differentiating the individualities (Buber 1958, 62). M. Buber articulated the power and valence of relationship in this way: