

Week 25

Cooperation

Key Verses

John 17:22-23 The glory which You have given Me I also have given to them, so that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and You loved them, just as You loved Me.

+ Introduction

The word “church” often describes a specific local congregation of believers, as in Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas. But it also refers to the Body of Christ, which, as the Baptist Faith and Message states, “includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.” ¹ As we approach the topic of cooperation, both definitions of “church” are involved. Cooperation refers not only to how members of a local congregation relate to and serve one another but also how that congregation interacts with other like-minded congregations to perform missionary, educational and benevolent ministries. This cooperation is voluntary and reflects the spiritual harmony of God’s people as they work together for common goals.

Cooperation begins when the people of God see themselves as God’s “co-workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9). Take a closer look at 1 Corinthians 3, and the need for cooperation becomes clear. Even though united in disciple-making and ministry, there was conflict between the followers of Paul and those of Apollos. Charles Swindoll observes that Paul’s message in this chapter is to remind the church that “individual sowers are not independent of each other, but interdependent on each other and mutually dependent on God Himself, who alone can produce healthy fruit in the gospel ministry.” ²

In this lesson, we will focus on when and how believers are to join together with others who share the same faith, values, and worldview. We will look first at what cooperation is not: it is not compromise, and it is not conformity. Then we will consider what cooperation is and how cooperation is reflected in the church’s command to look outward to the world and become what God intended it to be. In a message on cooperation, one writer said

The word of God is clear. We are to love the truth, love one another, and love the lost so much that we join with other Christians to reach them. ³

+ Cooperation Is Not Compromise

While cooperation is desirable within the church and between churches, the Baptist Faith and Message warns that this should only occur “when the end to be attained is itself justified, and when such cooperation involves no violation of conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and His Word as revealed in the New Testament.” Cooperation cannot – and should not – take place where there are foundational differences over the nature of Scripture, the person of Christ, the message of the gospel, and the eternal destiny of man. In other words, cooperation is not a “treasure to be purchased at the price of compromise.”⁴

A fascinating illustration of this is the contrast between Paul’s reaction to the false teaching in the Galatian congregation and the impure motives of some teachers in the church in Philippi.

GALATIANS 1:6-8 *I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel,⁷ which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!*

Why such strong language? There is only one gospel, and that gospel does not change. Paul strongly rebuked the Judaizers in Galatia for teaching a different gospel, thereby perverting the gospel message. The congregations had been thrown into a state of turmoil as the Judaizers had “garbled the gospel message into a message of works.”⁵ According to John Stott, “the glory of Christ was at stake,” and what was being taught was “derogatory to the finished work” of Christ.⁶

PHILIPPIANS 1:15-18 *Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will;¹⁶ the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel;¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.*

While Paul was under house arrest in Rome, he had to count on others to carry on the work of spreading the gospel beyond the cities he and the other apostles had already reached. In the church at Philippi, while some preached from impure motives, Paul was able to rejoice because “the authentic good news about the true Jesus is still being proclaimed.”⁷ Paul was able to see God at work in them, and he was encouraged that believers were strengthened and Christ was honored. Today, we can learn from Paul’s response. Any individual or group whose teaching is not consistent with the plain teaching of the New Testament should not be accommodated. John Stott declared that such teaching must be rejected, “however august the teacher may be.”⁸

+ Cooperation Is Not Conformity

In His high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus not only prayed for His disciples, but He also prayed for all those who would become His followers over the years and centuries to come.

JOHN 17:20-21, 23 *"I am not asking on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word, 21 that they may all be one; just as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may [a]believe that You sent Me. ...²³ that they may be perfected in unity ..."*

Jesus prayed that the church would be characterized by six things: joy, holiness, truth, mission, unity, and love. A characteristic of the church is that it includes "people of all cultures who are brought together into its fellowship and all national, racial and other barriers are broken down."⁹

This unity is not strictly organizational, nor is it meant to require conformity. Boice observed that "there should be diversity among Christians, diversity of personality, interests, lifestyle and even methods of Christian work and evangelism. Uniformity is dull, like rows of Wheaties boxes."¹⁰

Interestingly, the church is never told to create unity. True unity is produced by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul admonishes the church to "preserve the unity of the Spirit." It is not something we produce by ourselves, but we are instructed to maintain the unity that is already there.

Besides differences in viewpoints and personalities, there are differences in gifts within the church. (A future lesson in this First Things First series will focus on spiritual gifts.) The diversity of gifts has one common purpose, however, and that is *"for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12). The word "equipping" is the same word used in the gospels to describe the disciples mending their nets. Just as the disciples mended their nets to strengthen them and prepare them for further use, the diversity of gifts equips the church for service by making it strong and getting it ready for action. The church needs both unity and diversity to function effectively.

A certain kind of unity and a certain kind of diversity are necessary for the health of the church. Without unity of relationship to Christ through the work of God's Spirit, there is no church at all. On the other hand, without diversity, the church cannot be healthy and will certainly not function properly, any more than a body without arms or legs.¹¹

✦ Cooperation Equals a Caring Community

As the brain is the control center of our physical life, Christ is the source of life and power in His Body, the church. This power, when appropriated, results in maturity, authenticity, and spiritual growth within the church.

EPHESIANS 4:16 ... *from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

In his commentary on Ephesians, John MacArthur explains that "where His people have close relationships of genuine spiritual ministry, God works; and where they are not intimate with each other and faithful with their gifts, He cannot work."¹²

Ray Stedman's important work, *Body Life*,¹³ written in 1995, develops the analogy of the church as the body of Christ, with Jesus as the Head and believers as the members. Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12 are all key passages that explain the interdependence of members within the church and their dependence on the "Head" to equip them for ministry and service.

Conflict in the church can undermine the church's effectiveness, destroy the lives of individual members, and bring the credibility of the gospel into question. As Stedman explains, the genius of the church is that rich and poor gather on the same footing, without distinction or favoritism.

To successfully reach the community beyond their walls, the church needs to cultivate a spirit of cooperation by practicing the "one another" passages in the New Testament. These include

- Live in harmony with one another – Romans 12:16
- Be devoted to one another – Romans 12:10
- Accept one another – Romans 15:7
- Build up one another – 1 Thessalonians 5:11
- Bear one another's burdens – Galatians 6:2

None of these practices are possible without first heeding Christ's command in John:

JOHN 13:34-35 *I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another.*

Love is the greatest mark of the church. Love is the mark that gives meaning and without which the church cannot be what God intends it to be. Love is active and dynamic. There is nothing stagnant about the kind of love Jesus proclaims. In fact, it is the same word used in John 3:16 describing the kind of love God had for the world when He gave His only begotten Son. We are to love with that kind of active, dynamic, sacrificial, and life-changing love that sets us apart from other people. We are not set apart because we are different in our looks, bank accounts, skin color, or education; instead, we are set apart because we love others as Jesus first loved us.

✚ Cooperating in The Great Commission

James M. Boice stated that, unfortunately, "Christians are no longer especially known as those who do good to others. Some of us seldom do anything particularly good for anybody."¹⁴ But a healthy church recognizes that there are three experiences people need if they are to grow into mature Christians:

- Good Bible teaching to give them theological and spiritual stability.
- Deep and satisfying relationships with each other and with Jesus.
- A need to experience seeing people come to Christ.

Churches may cooperate in a number of ways, and especially to accomplish gospel purposes. Often, churches can do together what no one church can do alone. Churches such as Second cooperate with other churches or ministries through giving and through missions.

Giving. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul writes about an offering established for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Implicit in the collection was Paul's desire to create a sense of unity and brotherhood between the two branches of Christianity, Jewish, and Gentile. He admonished the Corinthian church to complete their collection for the offering, saying, "*Finish doing it also, that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability*" (2 Corinthians 8:11).

Today, whether we give to support missionaries or Christian ministries that care for those in need, we acknowledge our responsibility to "look beyond the needs in our own particular congregation and to show concern for God's people in other places."¹⁵ Consider that our church helps supports over 80 local missions that have a like-minded worldview. As a church, we cooperate with other individuals and congregations that support some of those same local missions. Through our cooperation, the gospel of Christ has a much farther reach in this community.

Proclamation. Warren Wiersbe, in *So That's What a Christian Is*, presents twelve pictures of the dynamic Christian life. One such picture is that of the King's ambassador, referring to 2 Corinthians 5:20, which says that we are to be ambassadors for Christ. Wiersbe states that every Christian is an ambassador for Christ, whether he knows it or not.

We are called to be a missionary (one who is sent) and an ambassador (one who carries a message) as we share the gospel and seek to lead people to faith in Christ. An ambassador has to stay in touch with headquarters and work together with his leaders to cooperate with them. He must also work in harmony with other officials to not jeopardize the mission. While we are not responsible for the way people respond to the message, we will be held accountable for how faithful we are to the task entrusted to us.

Jesus was very clear in expressing The Great Commission to His disciples; this is the mission statement of our church.

MATTHEW 28:19-20 *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Remember, the disciples were made up of a diverse lot; a tax collector, a zealot, fishermen, and others. They each had a sphere of influence to proclaim the good news to as they lived out their lives. God calls us to cooperate with one another in this life-changing message of hope, forgiveness, and eternal life.

+ Conclusion

Several pictures of the Christian and the church that we find in the New Testament clearly illustrate how important cooperation is to fulfill God's role for us effectively. Two especially convicting word pictures in Wiersbe's book refer to the Christian as a stone in God's building, and as seeds in a loaf of bread (the church). Wiersbe states,

"if each member of a local church would discover, dedicate, and discipline his or her spiritual gifts, and put them to work for the glory of God, we would see our churches grow and experience a new dynamic."¹⁶

If one purpose of the church is to provide bread for those who are hungry and share the Bread of Life message with those who need to hear it, we must accept our responsibility to cooperate with others in meeting these objectives. Wiersbe offers a word of challenge when he declares that "too many churches are nothing but jars of grain. God wants to crush that grain and put the dough into the furnace so he can make a loaf that is united to His glory."¹⁷

Returning to the prayer of Jesus in John 17, we read

JOHN 17:22-23 *The glory which You have given Me I also have given to them, so that they may be one, just as We are one;²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and You loved them, just as You loved Me.*

God the Father loves us, and through the Holy Spirit, God dwells in every believer. When we live and serve together in unity and cooperation with other believers in sharing and communicating the love of God, people will get a glimpse of that love revealed through us.

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¹ *Baptist Faith and Message*, LifeWay Press, Nashville, TN, 2007.

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Insights: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, Tyndale House, Carol Stream, IL, 2016.

³ www.lifeway.com/articles/foundations-faith-cooperation

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Insights: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Tyndale House, Carol Stream, IL, 2017.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1968.

⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Insights: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1986.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1986.

¹³ Ray Stedman, *Body Life: The Book That Inspired a Return to the Church's Real Meaning and Mission*, Discovery House, 1995.

¹⁴ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*.

¹⁵ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1988.

¹⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *So That's What a Christian Is*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988.

¹⁷ Ibid.