

Called to Collaborate

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Christian Unity is the Key to God's Fullest Blessing and Provision

There is a new spirit of collaboration emerging in the 21st century as opportunities for the advancement of the gospel multiply. Recognizing the enormous need for our Lord's ministries of forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, and peace, some Christian leaders are overcoming historical rivalries and conceptual differences by working together to see God's purposes accomplished in their generation.

Recently the Christian Management and Christian Stewardship Associations formed the Christian Leadership Alliance to achieve common objectives. Christian Leadership Alliance, World Vision, Youth for Christ, Azusa Pacific University, and the Evangelical Christian Credit Union co-created the Engstrom Institute. Named in honor of one of the 20th century's most effective Christian collaborators, Ted Engstrom, the institute's goal is to provide Christian organizations training, resources, and models to reinforce their values and fulfill their missions.

In March, over 40 individuals representing ministry, business, media, education, and government met in South Africa to explore the creation of a Christian university to address the leadership needs of that continent. Dozens of other initiatives are surfacing as the Holy Spirit answers Jesus' prayer that we be one in heart and mission with him and his heavenly Father (John 17:21-22).

Collaboration is rooted in the kingdom principle of Spirit-directed and Scripture-anchored unity—a condition for God's fullest blessings and provision. As Christians we are best known and validated by our love for the world and particularly for one another. And that love is best demonstrated in our mutual support of and submission to one another. God appears to be opening a new door for collaboration rarely seen in the history of the church. Let me suggest some reasons for this resurgence of Spirit-led cooperation.

First, God's work is too large and complex to be accomplished without collaboration. With the world's exploding population growth, and the evidences of his Spirit's moving in emerging epicenters of the faith, we may be on the verge of the largest harvest of souls in Christian history. Some speculate that it's possible to see more people come to Christ in our children's lifetime than all of those who have come to faith since the day of Pentecost. In Africa alone, the vast majority of the continent may well be Christian in our lifetime, if current trends continue. And similar potential exists in Central and South America, India, and Asia. Anchored to the concept that "five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you" (Lev. 26:8), it is clear that this opportunity can be leveraged best by ministers and ministries working together. And where that is occurring, the harvest is coming in at 30-, 60-, and 100-fold.

Second, God's work is too important for it to be dependent upon any particular "jar of clay" (2 Cor. 4:7) for success. Church history demonstrates the dangers and disasters when a single individual, group, or movement assumes they can do all of God's work alone. The failures of prominent, visible Christian leaders too often frustrate the work of God's kingdom. Collaboration creates the context for disciplined accountability as well as for mutual support. Jesus sent out his disciples two by two. Paul needed Barnabas and Silas, as well as the Jerusalem Council, to confirm, clarify, and validate his work. Apollos needed the ministry team of Priscilla and Aquila teaching him the "more excellent way" (Acts 18:24-28).

In the apostle's "body of Christ" metaphor (1 Cor. 12:12-26), Paul exhorts believers to work together so as to avoid temptations that come from thinking we can do our Lord's work independent of the other and often less visible parts of his body. In my volunteer work with the Coast Guard, I came to understand the importance of teamwork and redundancy in the success of a mission. Multiple specialized skills are needed. Should the first unit fail, there is always a second, and often a third, ready and able to step in. Paul's emphasis on the variety of gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11; 27-31) illustrates the kingdom's preferred practice of equipping multiple mission "specialists" who can accomplish God's work when they have pooled their resources for the greater glory of the Giver rather than the gifted.

Finally, God's work is to be done on earth the way it is done in heaven. One of the defining doctrines of the Christian faith is the Trinity. From the foundation of time, God revealed himself in the form of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the Creation account, we are introduced to a Creator who declares, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). All of Creation is judged "good" except for Adam. Since it is "not good that man should dwell alone," the Three-in-One makes a "helpmeet" to work with and alongside Adam to reflect God's image and achieve his purposes. David needed a Jonathan and his "mighty men," Nehemiah enlisted Ezra, the Twelve Tribes required each other to occupy the land and accomplish the will of Jehovah. The Psalms of Ascent, sung on the way up to Jerusalem's Temple, crescendo to and culminate with "how good and pleasant it is" when his people gather, work, and worship together in unity (Ps. 133:1). If God's purposes on earth began with and were advanced through partnerships, we can assume that his work can be achieved best in such a collaborative context.

But if collaboration is so self-evident, then why is it so difficult to achieve? While there are several factors that frustrate collaboration, two seem to stand out in the history of the church: fear of compromise and issues of ego. When collaboration requires the compromise of the essentials of faith, it cannot be embraced. However, the challenge is to determine the real essentials. Too often, partnerships are broken or resisted because of clinging to distinctive practice or belief systems that have nothing to do with the eternal destiny of souls. For the sake of the kingdom, we need the commitment that if we can agree on the essentials of redemption, all else will be worked out in order to see the work of Christ completed.

The greater hindrance to collaboration, however, is ego — the presumption that my ministry and my movement have a preferred place in God's work. Collaboration requires that we care only that Jesus is lifted up and that in the end, he alone gets the glory. We who are called to declare the gospel must follow John the Baptist's model. Initially, John was the sole voice crying in the wilderness to "prepare ye the way of the Lord." Soon he needed to step aside, willingly decreasing so that the primacy of Christ increased (John 3:30). Like John, we might as well practice and get it right here since we will spend an eternity casting our crowns before him and having our voices united and blended in eternal praise.

In this season of unprecedented opportunity, we must be more willing to walk together out of our respective doors and into the fields ready for harvest. This great work is too large, complex, and important for us to achieve on our own. If our ministry is truly to be God's ministry, done his way, we should expect that it can best be accomplished when we determine to "let us" create, work, support, and serve in his image rather than our own. We are created and called to collaborate. Out of such collaboration will flow the anointing oil of the Spirit and the life-giving dew of Hermon (Ps. 133:2-3). And we will hear heaven's choir singing, "How good and beautiful when God's people dwell together in unity!"

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