

Working Cooperatively for the Kingdom

09 Jan 2014 by Daniel Dow

By Kenneth Hemphill

I had a college friend who played basketball in prep school with Pistol Pete Maravich. My friend could also score with the best of them. Their prep school program had several other athletes who had been selected by major college programs.

When I heard him list all the “stars” on his prep team, I asked if they ever lost a game. He smiled and indicated that they didn’t even have a winning season. How could that be possible? The answer was surprisingly simple. There weren’t enough basketballs to go around. They were all shooters gunning for their own stats, and no one truly valued teamwork.

When I think back on that conversation, I wonder if the same is not true of the church. The church-growth movement has made several positive contributions to the modern-day church, but it has also had its downside. I am afraid that the exaggerated emphasis on “growing my church” has produced a spirit of competition rather than one of cooperation.

We sometimes behave as if a few “superstar” churches are all that is needed to advance the Kingdom. The truth is, God has designed every church, whatever its size or location, to work in cooperation with other like-minded churches for the advancement of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth. No single church working alone can reach its own Jerusalem, much less the ends of the earth. When churches work cooperatively, their strength is not added together but is actually multiplied. We would be astounded by what we could accomplish together if we truly didn’t care who got the credit for it! Truth is, we need to pray for such growth that only God can get the credit for it.

FROM ANTIOCH TO JERUSALEM WITH LOVE

If you have been reading these articles during the last year, you know that I have a great appreciation for the church in Antioch for numerous reasons. I especially appreciate that this church was characterized by a generous spirit and a cooperative strategy. In Acts 11:27-30 we are told that a prophetic messenger predicated that a severe famine would impact the Roman world. The response by the church in Antioch was both spontaneous and generous: “So each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea” (Acts 11:29).

The offering for the saints in Jerusalem, which was apparently ignited by the gift from Antioch, was a mammoth task that was a focus of Paul’s ministry for nearly a decade. In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul appealed to the church at Corinth to join with the churches from Galatia in this cooperative venture. “Now about the collection for the saints; you should do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches” (1 Corinthians 16:1). In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul spoke of the generosity of the churches of Macedonia to challenge the Corinthian community to complete their offering for Jerusalem. Paul insists that the Macedonians “begged us insistently for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of the saints” (1 Corinthians 8:4).

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul indicated that he had been boasting to the Macedonians about the readiness of the Corinthians to give to this great cause. The readiness of the Corinthians to give had actually stimulated the Macedonians to give (verse 3). Paul tells the Corinthian believers that this cooperative ministry would not only

supply the needs of the saints, but that it would produce thanksgiving to God and cause others to glorify God (verses 12-15). Here's the bottom line: Cooperation enables churches to stimulate one anther to good deeds and thus advance the Kingdom in a manner that no single church could accomplish.

When we read about Paul's travel plans in Romans 15:25-29, we discover that the cooperative offering was a grand success. "Now, however, I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (Romans 5:25-26). An offering birthed by a single church took on Kingdom proportions as several churches worked in partnership, each stimulating the other to good works. If we are serious about Kingdom advancement, we must jettison our arrogant desire to do it alone and rediscover and nurture the biblical pattern of cooperative ministry.

COOPERATION AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE LETTERS OF PAUL

We don't know all the details about the collection and distribution of the letters of Paul, but it is apparent that these letters to the churches were a stimulus for cooperation. When you think about the challenging circumstances of first-century Christianity, where persecution was common and communication was difficult, you can begin to understand the necessity of cooperation for personal encouragement and Kingdom advancement. The early churches had no option but cooperation.

The letters of Ephesians and Colossians provide an example of the distribution of several of the Pauline letters for mutual encouragement. The general tone of the Ephesians letter and the lack of personal remembrances make it unlikely that Ephesians was written to a single congregation. Notice, for example, that in Ephesians 3:1-2, Paul introduced himself by including a reference to his ministry to the Gentiles. Such an introduction would hardly have been necessary in a letter to the church where Paul ministered for at least two years (Acts 19:1-20).

While Paul was in prison, he came into contact with Epaphras (Colossians 4:12), a leader in the church at Colossae (Colossians 1:7-8). Epaphras must have shared with Paul concerning the heretical teachings that were creating difficulties for his church family. Thus, Paul wrote Colossians at the request of Epaphras. After writing the letter to the Colossian church, Paul seized the opportunity to write a more general and positive letter designed to stop the spread of similar heretical teachings to other local churches.

I would suggest that Paul dispatched Tychicus, a beloved brother and a faithful servant with these two letters (Colossians 4:7). Tychicus was also accompanied by the slave Onesimus, whom Paul felt compelled to return to his owner, Philemon. Tychicus and Onesimus landed at the port of Ephesus with the letters we call Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. Paul left the letter we now call Ephesians in Ephesus with the instructions that it should be shared with other churches in proconsular Asia.

It would have been natural for a letter intended to strengthen and unify the churches in Asia Minor to originate from this seaport location which had been the focal point of Paul's ministry in Asia. It is possible that the original route for the distribution of the letter was the seven churches mentioned in Revelation — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. It is possible that these churches

had banded together for communication and mutual support, functioning much like a modern-day association of churches.

I think it is highly probably that the distribution of the Pauline letters was designed to encourage and unify the early churches. Cooperation is a vital necessity for the health of the individual church and for the advancement of the Kingdom. In the hostile environment of the first century, cooperation was not an option. I would suggest the same is true today.

THE ATTITUDE FOR COOPERATION

We tend to be "loners" with the "I can do it myself" attitude. When we work alone, it is tempting to claim the credit for what is accomplished. Some churches today expend energy and resources for global advancement only in settings where they can control what is accomplished and take the credit for the accomplishment. It is easy to rally people to give when we can build something, take a picture of it, and then boast that "we did this." It is harder to get people involved in a project that is so large that no one can take credit for what is accomplished. But a global strategy requires Kingdom thinking and Kingdom cooperation which ultimately allows God to get all the credit. We sometimes forget that He is the only scorekeeper that matters.

No single passage describes the attitude necessary for cooperative ministry better than Philippians 2:1-11. Paul begins with several rhetorical questions whose answer is "yes." "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy …" (Philippians 2:1). Since these are all true, what should be the attitude of our heart and mind? "Fulfill my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, sharing the same feelings, focusing on one goal. Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:2-4). Paul then illustrates the Christian attitude by reference to the mind of Christ.

What if we really took this passage seriously? What would change about how we do church and missions? Do you think the spirit of church business meetings would change? Does your church have one mind and one goal? Do we see more rivalry than we see cooperation?

SEVEN REASONS WE MUST SEEK COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

- It is biblical. The Bible is full of examples where cooperation is the norm for those who are one body in Christ.
- It provides for strength and stability. The wise king Solomon declared, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts … a cord of three strands is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).
- It promotes unity in diversity. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compared the church to the human body which has many diverse but equally important parts. The diversity of the body parts is

actually fundamental to its unity.

- It enables strategic thinking which enables us to maximize effectiveness and minimize waste. Paul's desire to unite the churches in Achaia and Macedonia demonstrates the need for strategic thinking.
- Missiologists tell us that about 1.56 billion people remain who have little or no access to the Gospel. We can ill afford to duplicate effort and waste the King's resources by failing to work cooperatively to complete the task of world evangelization.
- It provides a biblical model for other churches. When you read 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 you will discover that Paul wanted the generosity of one church to provide a model for other churches. By working cooperatively in our mission strategy we can ensure that the churches we plant have the DNA to be cooperative.
- It enables Kingdom advancement. For the sake of the Kingdom, we must be willing to move beyond church growth to Kingdom advancement.
- It ensures that God will receive all the glory. We sometimes get so caught up in our little world of ministry that we forget that all we do has a single aim — the glory of God.

Can we afford to do any less than our best when we serve the King of kings and Lord of lords? Too much is at stake for us not to work cooperatively.

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Originally published in The Baptist Press (September 26, 2007). Reprinted with permission.

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James nava
12 Aug 2022 at 11:49 pm

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