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College Baptist Church

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### **Cooperation in the Gospel** Colossians 4:7-18

#### Affirmation #11: Church Cooperation

*"We believe that local churches can best promote the cause of Jesus Christ by cooperating with one another in a denominational organization. Such an organization, whether a regional or district conference, exists and functions by the will of the churches. Cooperation in a conference is voluntary and may be terminated at any time."*

Two weeks ago, in our study of the 12 Affirmations in the doctrinal statement of the Baptist General Conference, we studied the statement on Religious Liberty and heard scripture assigning primary responsibility for the eternal condition of our souls to each one of us individually. "We will all stand before the judgment seat of God," says Paul in Rom 14:10. And "each of us will give an account of himself to God."

Therefore the conference Affirmation states "that every human being has direct relations with God and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith."

For the same reason, individual bodies of believers have a responsibility before God for their own gathered life of faith as a local community. Look through the pages of scripture and you will not find any examples of churches being organized to answer to the authority of any persons or associations above the elders of the individual, local churches. God alone through his incarnation in Jesus Christ and his continuing presence in the church in the person of the Holy Spirit stands as the one authority to which the individual church is responsible.

His apostles, men who (as Peter says about himself in 1 Pet 5:1; and Paul in 1 Cor 9:1 and Gal 2) witnessed the resurrected Christ with their own eyes and who were commissioned by Christ to shepherd the church had a special role in communicating the Word of God to the church. That is certainly true. But when they wrote to the churches they shepherded they never pulled their own rank. They always wrote in the mode of persuasion, appealing to arguments and appealing to the rootedness of what they argued in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

They didn't hold churches responsible to follow them on the mere strength of their position as apostles. They called on their hearers and their readers, as Paul did in Acts 17:11 to be like the local church at Berea: to go back to the Word of God and to see whether what they were teaching would withstand the scrutiny of divine revelation, as the prophets and the apostles themselves had received it and argued it in their inspired written texts.

Two quick examples from some key apostles in the New Testament. If anyone had a claim to declare themselves authorities from outside over the local church, it would be the Apostles Peter and Paul.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas came to the the inland plains of Asia Minor and the cities there of Antioch of Pisidia and then Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (the cities that make up the province called Galatia). These are cities where he spent the most energy in his letters arguing for the authority he had from God as an apostle (read Gal 2!). But Acts 14:23 says he helped these churches to "appoint elders for them in every church." They weren't appointed over all the churches of a city or over a region or over a diocese. They were appointed "in every church." As a result, every church was equal to every other one.

And when Paul speaks of his own role over his churches he says things like 1 Cor 4:1f -- "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy."

Sometimes he is the founder of a church because he was the first evangelist to bring the people of a particular city to the Gospel. In those cases he calls himself a "father" or a "planter," or a "builder." But he says to those who want to put him up on a pedestal for that: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each" (1 Cor 3:5).

And when he sends Timothy to check on them, he doesn't say, He's your boss. He says "I sent Timothy to remind you of my ways in Christ" (1 Cor 4:17). Or, "receive [Timothy and Ephaphroditus] with all joy, and honor such men. Keep your eyes on those who walk according the example you have in us" (Phil 2:29, 3:17).

Or consider Peter, the apostle to whom the popes in Rome have looked for their original example. Peter wrote also to the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (all across the region we now call Turkey) and said (1 Pet 5:1-3):

"I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

Notice three things about what he says in those verses: His words to the local elders in every church (1) exhorted them on the strength of the trust they bestowed on him because he had earned their moral authority; he didn't demand obedience from them as if he held an ecclesiastical authority over them. (2) His exhortation to "exercise oversight" uses the term "episkopountes" from which our word "bishop" is translated. The local elders were assumed to exercise whatever authority, literally of "oversight," that is associated with the office we call bishop. (3) The place where he tells these elders to exercise their authority as overseers or bishops is in "the flock that is among you." It is a local authority, and one, he is very clear to say, to be exercised willingly, eagerly, not domineeringly, and by example not by rank.

Those who have this elder function, in other words, whether we call them elders, or bishops, or deacons (as we do at College Baptist), did not then, and cannot claim today to have the authority to rule over the affairs of other churches, because elders (or deacons) were to be appointed in "every church," and every set of elders is to oversee the affairs of those that are "among them."

So you say, then what about the council of apostles in Jerusalem? Paul went there with Barnabas and Titus in Acts 15 to hear their judgment about the requirements of the Jewish Law upon Gentiles. Weren't they sort of a Supreme Court for all the churches, since they were the disciples of Jesus himself?

There is a limited sense in which the answer to this was yes. Acts 15:6 says not only the elders of the church in Jerusalem were gathered together (what few Christians were left in the city once the Jews expelled them after the stoning of Stephen in ch.7). It says, "the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider the matter." The presence of apostles meant that they could issue a letter unlike any other council that ever met later and say, "It seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit." The presence of the assembled apostles at this council gave the teaching of the council a special claim to speak on behalf of the Holy Spirit with a Word of God, just as it does in the written Word.

And yet, when they sent the letter out from the council they addressed the other churches they wrote as "brothers," as equals under God whom they wanted (as v.32 says) to encourage and to strengthen.

The elders of the church at Jerusalem are present at the meeting because it is specifically their local church that some missionaries were saying authorized them to teach that Gentiles should be circumcised. The elders were there at the meeting not to make authoritative pronouncements over other churches. In fact they were there, 15:24 says, precisely to assure the other churches that "we gave [those missionaries] no such instructions!"

Peter, the apostle writes to the churches in Anatolia in the verses we read a moment ago and called himself "a witness of the sufferings of Christ," (that, together with Christ's commission, qualified him to be an apostle), but when he speaks of his role as elder or bishop his term in the letter was "fellow elder" (sumpresbuteros). In the same way, Paul called himself a "fellow worker" with the leaders in each local church.

Individual believers will stand alone before God at the judgment seat and have no one's faith and doctrine but their own to stand upon in pleading their lives before the Judge of all the Earth. And individual churches stand locally autonomous from all other churches, with responsibility in their own congregations to select trustworthy leaders and teachers. There is no warrant anywhere in the apostolic church and its biblical witness for the establishment of any collective authority outside of and over the local church.

At the same time, the God who said "each one of us will give an account of himself" at the judgment seat, and who directed his apostles to assign the authority of the local church to its own trustworthy teachers, also said, that "it is not good that man should be alone."

And so God ordained families to meet our needs individually by displaying pictures of Christ's love for his church. We looked at that theology of the family several weeks ago.

In a sort of analogous way, God led the early church under the direction of their elders and the apostles into voluntary associations of various sorts and for various reasons.

I've directed our attention to the closing greetings of Paul's letter to Colossae just to demonstrate some examples of voluntary cooperation among early congregations in a few concrete illustrations.

The city of Colossae to which Paul sent this letter is one of a little triangle of cities that stood about 100 miles up the Meander River from the large city of Ephesus, right about where the Lycus River flows into the Meander. If you'll recall from last summer, the water in this region plays a significant role in John's letter to one of these three cities in the book of Revelation. Across the valley to the north of Colossae lay the city of Hierapolis, and to the west and in the middle of both of them stood Laodicea.

Hierapolis, you may remember, was famous for its calcium hot springs that created the large and beautiful white travertine formations and that invited people from all over the empire to come and benefit from the supposed healing of the hot, mineral baths.

Colossae to the south was known for the cold springs that fed the rivers Lycus and Meander. But Laodicea in the middle, John said, wasn't hot or cold; just lukewarm. (Hierapolis: Hot / Colossae: Cold / Laodicea: Lukewarm -- do you suppose God in his providence planned in advance for these cities to be named in such a way that they would match up with the right words in the English language?)

My point this morning isn't to repeat John's message about how lukewarm the faith of the Laodiceans had grown by the closing years of the century when John was probably writing to it. I'm interested in the early cooperation of these three churches that found themselves so regionally close together that they could ally themselves for the accomplishment of some common purposes.

Start with Epaphras in 4:12. Epaphras, whose longer name is Epaphroditus (as we hear it in Paul's letter to the Philippians), is a native of Colossae himself. He is "one of you," just as Onesimus is (4:9). Epaphras is a missionary who travels with Paul, who gets sent by Paul from Paul's Roman prison to Philippi, and who, according to Paul's letter to Philemon from the Roman jail had been for a while in prison with Paul in the same jail (Philem 23). We don't know where he met Paul, but Paul says in Col 1:6-7 that Epaphras is the one who took the Gospel back to his home town and first taught it to the Colossians. Now, as he travels with Paul, he struggles for the church at his home in his prayers "that they would stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God."

But Paul says he doesn't just labor for his home church in Colossae. He labors also on behalf of the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. The "faucets" of all three of these temperature-cities are pouring out their support for Epaphroditus's missionary work. Epaphras has ministered in both those other churches and now they're cooperating in a little missionary society to keep him supported as he works to spread the gospel to other cities in other nations.

Churches cooperate in missionary societies to sustain the great work of world missions with finances and personnel and letter writing and other kinds of encouragement.

Back in the 19th century the founder of the Disciples of Christ (an offshoot of the Baptist church), Alexander Campbell, had argued for many years that religious liberty and local church autonomy meant that there should be no church associations of any kind. Eventually, though, he overcame his opposition and became convinced instead by what he called "five arguments for church cooperation." They're summarized there in this morning's bulletin meditation.[11](#)

The joint support of the three churches of the Lycus Valley for Epaphroditus's missionary work is an illustration of Campbell's first two arguments: We can be more effective in distributing the Bible and its message around the world when churches cooperate in that effort. And we can be comparatively far more effective in the great mission fields of the world, both at home and abroad, when churches are working together toward that same high purpose.

Paul mentions Onesimus as another native of Colossae who is travelling back to Colossae along with Tychicus, who is a missionary from down the river in Ephesus. You remember Onesimus. He is the subject of Paul's letter to another leader in the church at Colossae, named Philemon, who along with his wife Apphia is the slave-owner of this man Onesimus. Onesimus had sought Paul out over in his Roman prison, possibly when he was travelling on some business for Philemon. He was in some trouble with his master. He appears to have wronged him somehow (it has been popular to say he was a runaway slave, but his situation under Roman law seems better to fit a slave who was having some difficulty with his master) and he needed an intermediary to help arbitrate whatever the dispute might have been.

Paul does intervene for him in that letter to Philemon and to Philemon's church. How does he do that? Not by pulling apostolic rank on him, even though he might have had some right to do that (Philem 8). Instead, he appeals to Philemon's religious liberty and persuades him to cooperate voluntarily. "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will." (v. 14) "Consider me your partner," he'd rather say (v. 17).

Sometimes marital disputes in the family are best helped when a third party can step in to offer some neutral advice. Is the couple obligated to follow it. No, they could always just go on fighting if they'd rather. But their common purpose in wanting to patch things up prompts them to seek some outside help from a cooperative counselor.

As Onesimus's experience with one of the pillars of the Colossian church illustrates, even churches and their Christian leaders can benefit from the accountability that Christians in other, cooperating churches can offer when disputes come up.

That's Campbell's third point in the list of his five arguments. "We can do little to check, restrain, and remove the flood of imposture and fraud committed upon the benevolence of the brethren by irresponsible, plausible, and deceptive persons, without cooperation." That may word things a little harshly, since we'd rather think the best of our Christian brothers and sisters in the body. But consider a third man who gets mentioned both in the Colossian letter and in the letter to Philemon at Colossae. "Demas and Luke, my fellow workers, greet you," says Paul to Philemon (v.24). "Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas," says Paul to the Colossian church (4:14). And not much later, from the same Roman prison, Paul writes Timothy in 2Tim 4:10 and has to say that Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica."

Disputes arise in the church. With the cooperation of helpers from other churches, especially from those with whom we have already agreed to enter into an accountability partnership, those disputes can be settled the way they were for Onesimus in Colossae.

Better yet, we can benefit from the cooperating help of others in our associations of accountability to try to discover and anticipate and screen potential difficulties and to preserve a healthy ministry in advance.

This is one key reason we have spent a year last year in our church's life considering what association of church's we might best affiliate with -- that is, cooperate with -- before we began our pastoral search. The cooperating association of churches that we choose to join will be our major source of referrals as we go about our search for a new pastor. Why? Because the task of distinguishing between the "irresponsible and deceptive persons" that we wouldn't want as our shepherd and the faithful, soundly prepared, God-centered person that we do want to shepherd us is a task in which we want as many wise and cooperating hearts involved as we can muster.

The same accountability that screens potential difficulties and helps to preserve a healthy ministry in advance is what prompts us to do as we do in the practice of ordaining ministers. These are the men who will administer the church's particular means of grace, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, the preaching ministry, or of marriage, and funerals and the like.

Because we entrust the local leadership of the church with these shepherding responsibilities in serving the flock, and because we believe in religious liberty as Baptists, that "each church is independent and must be free from interference by any ecclesiastical or political authority," we affirm first that each Baptist church is invested with its own right and responsibility to ordain anyone that it believes the Lord is calling to the special ministries of the clergy.

But, second, we so value the help and the accountability of fellow churches in this important act of setting a man apart for the ministry that we are eager to invite those churches with whom we are associated, and in particular their own ordained clergy as their most suitable representatives, to participate in a council of examination of the life and the faith and the doctrine of any candidate whom we might propose to ordain and to give that title "Reverend."

I mention that role of cooperating churches because now that we have affiliated with a denomination in which I personally sense a greater doctrinal cooperation, I have begun to speak with the Deacon Board about pursuing that step of ordination myself. You can and ought to be in prayer as a church with me about this step and its process, because, as I have been laboring to make the scriptural case for it here, that responsibility to carry out the ordination lies in the hands of this church and its leaders as a body. It also will involve the participation of a host of invited clergy who would sit in council to examine me as a candidate.

Their role, I hope it would now be plain, is a serious one, but not finally the ultimate one. The role of the invited ministers representing their cooperating churches would be to examine me and to make a recommendation from that examination to this church. Upon that recommendation, this independent, local body then determines whether they will ordain me as a candidate.

How important is our religious liberty in that as an autonomous, local church? It's final. That's a principle that Baptists take from scripture. But how important is the help and recommendation of cooperating churches and their ordained ministers to the local church's process. I think most members of this congregation would say that it is crucial, and that without the judgment and accountability of others with more knowledge and experience than we have we would feel inadequate to our task.

That's the argument for church cooperation.

Paul goes on in 4:16 to tell the Colossians to send this letter over to Laodicea and have it read there. And he tells the Colossians to read the letter he sent to Laodicea. Church cooperation. As Campbell says in #4. "We can do little or nothing to improve and elevate the Christian ministry without cooperation."

Paul goes all through these Gentile churches gathering up a collection of money from each of them to take to Jerusalem because the Jewish churches there are experiencing a famine. That's church cooperation. Because as Campbell says in #5, "We cannot concentrate and direct the action of the tens of thousands in Israel (or anywhere else) in any great Christian effort, without cooperation."

Next Friday and Saturday, the Templetons and the Westblades and the Juroes will be traveling to Ludington for a day of meetings and celebration with the Regional Michigan association of the Baptist General Conference. We won't come back with any orders from them that the Conference imposes by its authority on our church. We have by our own votes locally agreed to conform our church constitution in certain ways to fit and to cooperate more effectively with this association with whom we voluntarily chose to affiliate.

The more I speak with those in this new Conference of ours, the more confident I am that our church has made an association that will be positive and encouraging for our local work as a church. I expect to make some time in the service next Sunday for some reports of fellowship and of the benefits of our cooperating in it.

But let's close today with our focus on the fundamental principle that commends the cooperation of churches to us. We seek out the help and encouragement of other churches and we desire ourselves to help and encourage our brothers and sisters in other churches for one supreme and ultimate reason: We hunger and thirst that God would reign on this earth and in our lives. We long that his glory would shine more brightly in more and more places across this globe and in our neighborhoods. It's because we desire so passionately to be seeking the Kingdom of God and his righteousness that we employ every means at hand to see God lifted up and worshiped. And that alone is why we remember that "two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil." "A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

How effective the church could be if it might ever cooperate together as one. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity."

1. We can do comparatively nothing in distributing the Bible abroad without cooperation.
2. We can do comparatively little in the great mission field of the world, either at home or abroad, without cooperation.
3. We can do little to check, restrain, and remove the flood of imposture and fraud committed upon the benevolence of the brethren by irresponsible, plausible, and deceptive persons, without cooperation.
4. We can do little or nothing to improve and elevate the Christian ministry without cooperation.
5. We cannot concentrate and direct the action of the tens of thousands in Israel, in any great Christian effort, without cooperation.

– Alexander Campbell, "Five Arguments for Church Cooperation." (1842)