

Cooperation Article XIV

Christ's people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner. Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ's Kingdom. Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ's people. Cooperation is desirable between the various Christian denominations, 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.

Exodus 17:12; 18:17ff.; Judges 7:21; Ezra 1:3-4; 2:68-69; 5:14-15; Nehemiah 4; 8:1-5; Matthew 10:5-15; 20:1-16; 22:1-10; 28:19-20; Mark 2:3; Luke 10:1ff.; Acts 1:13-14; 2:1ff.; 4:31-37; 13:2-3; 15:1-35; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:5-15; 12; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 1:6-10; Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 1:15-18.

Key Text on "Cooperation"

- ❖ Surprisingly, there are no references from Proverbs.
- ❖ **Philippians 2:1-5:** "Therefore if *there is* any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let* nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. (not in the Scripture references above)

While Baptists began cooperating with other like-minded Baptist churches for Kingdom causes in the seventeenth century, “cooperation” became the defining watchword for Southern Baptists in the twentieth century. Cooperation provides the fundamental reason for the unique organizational life of Southern Baptists. It may be that Southern Baptists alone have an article of cooperation in their doctrinal statement.

What does the New Testament say about the topic of cooperation? Not a lot in direct statements. What we have are more along the lines of spiritual implications. First, the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem cooperated in a doctrinal question about the nature of the Gospel (Acts 15). Second, Paul encouraged the Macedonian churches to collect a financial offering for the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9). For Paul, the offering demonstrated the unity of the one Gospel for Jews and Greeks (Rom 15:27). Third, Paul received financial gifts from the church at Philippi to further the Gospel (Phil 4:10-23). He also anticipated help from the church at Rome (Rom 15:24). Thus, the New Testament speaks of cooperative partnerships in doctrine, benevolence, and Gospel extension.

Mark Rathel notes that *The Baptist Faith and Message* identifies the rationale for cooperation, defines the nature of cooperation, and provides limits to cooperation.

First, the *BF&M* identifies the missionary mandate of the Kingdom of God as the rationale for cooperation. Throughout their history, Baptists formed associations and conventions “for the great objects of the Kingdom.” Early Baptists realized that the Kingdom mandate necessitated cooperative ventures beyond the capability of a single local church.

By the mid-seventeenth century, associations became an accepted organizational feature of English Baptists serving the purposes of fellowship, clarification of Baptist doctrine and practices, mutual counsel, evangelism, and defense of Baptists against the charges of the

established church in England. Southern Baptists have favored a convention model supporting multiple missionary and benevolent causes. The convention model allows for accountability to the churches. The 1931 SBC annual meeting defined by limitation the nature of the convention. Churches, not individuals, associations, or missions societies, elected messengers, not delegates, to the annual SBC meeting now held in June of each year. Thus, the modern SBC is not a church (contra, for example, the United Methodist Church); rather, the SBC is a convention of churches. In its annual meeting it is a convention of elected messengers from cooperating churches.

Second, the *BF&M* recognizes the voluntary principle among Baptists as defining the nature of cooperation. The voluntary principle rules out an organic unity as well as a hierarchy outside the local church. Baptists affirm that all relationships are voluntary. As voluntary groups, associations, state conventions, and the SBC possess no authority over the local church or over each other. These voluntary groups exist for the sole purpose “to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people”—a statement that mirrors the original 1845 purpose statement when the SBC was formed in Augusta, Ga. Further, these voluntary relationships serve an “advisory” function. With full recognition of the autonomy of the local church, local Baptist churches may humbly seek out advice on key issues from sister churches.

Third, the *BF&M* provides limits to cooperation with other denominations. The *BF&M* establishes two limitations to interdenominational cooperation. First, the end or purpose of the interdenominational cooperative must be justifiable. Throughout much of the twentieth century certain groups, notably the National Council of Churches (NCC), espoused the goal of ecumenicalism, the organic unity of all churches. Southern Baptists have rejected an invitation for membership within the NCC for two main reasons. First, the SBC is not a church or a denomination; the SBC is a voluntary convention of churches. As such, the SBC cannot direct

the local churches to join the NCC. Second, organic unity of churches means the loss of core values of what it means to be a Baptist. Thus, Southern Baptists rejected the invitation of the NCC because the end was not justifiable and membership would violate our conscience.

The local church must make a decision about cooperation with other denominations. A local church must measure the goal in light of the core essentials of the Gospel.

A Few Selected Issues to Consider

Since the 1600's, Baptists have formed associations. An association is a group of churches that voluntarily join together for fellowship, encouragement and missions. Churches are the members of the association, but the association does not rule its member churches.

Churches may also choose to form a convention. In the United States, Southern Baptist churches have organized both state conventions and a national body, the Southern Baptist Convention (formed in 1845).

In 2000, the SBC celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Cooperative Program. This program was adopted in 1925 at the SBC annual meeting with E.Y. Mullins, president of Southern Seminary, moderating as president of the SBC.

Under the Cooperative Program, each church decides to send a certain percentage (or amount) of its undesignated income to the Cooperative Program. These funds are sent to the state convention where an approved percentage is retained for the state convention's use, and the remainder is sent to the treasurer of the Executive Committee of the SBC in Nashville, TN to be dispersed among the national entities such as the IMB, NAMB, and SEBTS.

The Cooperative Program was a major step forward for the SBC. The program provided more funds for Baptist institutions and agencies, and it also made systematic budgeting possible. The support our six seminaries receive makes it possible for students to study at a modest cost

compared to independent seminaries. The Cooperative Program has, in many ways, been the means whereby God has allowed us to expand nationally and internationally for the cause of Christ and the advance of the gospel.

The Christian and the Social Order

Article XV

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.

Exodus 20:3-17; Leviticus 6:2-5; Deuteronomy 10:12; 27:17; Psalm 101:5; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 8:16; Matthew 5:13-16,43-48; 22:36-40; 25:35; Mark 1:29-34; 2:3ff.; 10:21; Luke 4:18-21; 10:27-37; 20:25; John 15:12; 17:15; Romans 12-14; 1 Corinthians 5:9-10; 6:1-7; 7:20-24; 10:23-11:1; Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; Philemon; James 1:27; 2:8.

Key Text on “The Christian and the Social Order”

Exodus 20:3-17

Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Matt 5:13-16: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

1 Cor 6:9-11: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (Not in article)

James 1:27: “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

James 2:8: “If you really fulfill *the* royal law according to the Scripture, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” you do well.”

Five historic models provide guidance into the issue of “The Christian and the Social Order.” We note these before addressing the biblical themes and biblical principles found in the article.

First, selective Christians withdrew from the social order. The first monks emerged in the deserts of Egypt. Desiring to remain unstained by the worldly social order, these hermitic monks found that removal from the social order did not equal personal purity. In Western Europe, selective Christians applied the withdrawal strategy through the means of gathered communities (monasteries and convents).

Second, some Christians advocate bifurcated realms; that is, they separate Christian discipleship and engagement of the social world. Descendants of the Anabaptist tradition, such as Amish and Mennonites, avoid engagement with the social order. For instance, a faithful Mennonite will not serve in public office.

Third, some Christians elevated the “Social Gospel,” propagated by Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. Respected Baptist theologian Millard Erickson defines the liberal Protestant Social Gospel as follows: “a tendency to replace the gospel of regeneration with an emphasis on transformation of society through alteration of its structures.”

Fourth, some Christians united the Christian faith and the social order. For much of European history, Christendom, an impure union of society and Christianity, dominated culture.

Fifth, for the most part, Baptists favored a model of redemptive-prophetic witness to the culture. Through the transformation of individuals thru faith in Christ, the social order can be both confronted and redeemed. Full redemption, of course, must await the return of Christ and the full establishment of His Kingdom.

The *BF&M* details five principles regarding how a Christian relates to the social order.

First, rejecting union, bifurcation, withdrawal, and mere social gospel, the *BF&M* calls upon all believers to impact the social order for Christ—“to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society.” Jesus challenged disciples to function as “salt of the earth and light of the world” (Matt 5:13-16).

Second, rejecting the mere goal of societal transformation, the *BF&M* affirms the priority of individual transformation. All human plans for societal betterment fail to account for the radical nature of the human sin problem. Human sin infects all societal relationships. The Gospel transforms individuals from citizens of the domain of sin to citizens of the Kingdom (Col 1:13-

14). As more people enter the Kingdom of God, society itself experiences a measure of transformative power. An emphasis upon the Gospel without a concern for the social order renders the church without a voice in the public square. An emphasis on the transformation of the social order without the proclamation of the Gospel leaves people lost and separated from God.

Third, the *BF&M* enumerates numerous negative social sins which Christians individually and collectively should oppose. Racism rejects the dignity of human beings by prejudging individuals based on the color of the skin. Racism violates the nature of God; God does not show partiality. Literally, the lack of partially means “God does not receive face,” that is, God does not evaluate people based on externals.

The Old Testament prophets, particularly, Amos thundered against the sins of greed and selfishness. Greed led to perversion of justice for the poor. The Bible consistently details God’s concern for the poor and the responsibility of believers to show compassion to the needy (Deut 15:7; Gal 2:10).

In a social order permeated and saturated with false and destructive sexual ethics, the *BF&M* encourages Christians to oppose adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. God created sex for good purposes within the covenant of heterosexual marriage. Sin corrupted God’s good gift. Adultery violates the marriage covenant. The Bible consistently condemns homosexual activity as unnatural and even as an abomination. Pornography incites lustful attitudes and actions. Jesus admonished drastic action to remove the source of sexual temptation (Matt 5:29-30).

Fourth, the *BF&M* encourages Christians to defend the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. A functional view of humanity or “quality of life ethic” ignores clear

biblical teaching. Humans are not defined by functioning at a certain level. The mentally challenged as well as a dependent senior adult manifests God's image and glory. Essence, not function, sanctity not quality, properly defines what it means to be human. Humans possess a "sacred essence" created in the image of God.

Fifth, the *BF&M* states that Christians should impact every area of social order with the "principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love." Southern Baptists are not willing to repeat the errors of turn-of-the-century Social Gospel Protestant liberalism. All attempts at social reformation are doomed to failure, unless they are joined with the full-throttled preaching of a gospel that results in a "new creation" in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:17).

Southern Baptists do not take a break from doctrine in order to address a few political matters. This article recognizes that these injustices are often themselves theological claims – addressed not only to the world, but also to the members of our churches. In our history, the local Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan was far too often a member in good standing of the local Southern Baptist church. He was able to justify a hateful heart by assuring himself that black people aren't *really* made in the image of God.

Today, the neighborhood Planned Parenthood counselor is all too willing to assure the scared pregnant teenager that the fetus within her womb isn't *really* a human life. It's just tissue.

Gay rights slogans invariably include the theological assertion that God creates some human beings with an irreversible same-sex attraction. When it comes to sexual morality, Southern Baptist youth groups may hear from their pastors that "True Love Waits." But they also hear from their elected officials another voice that says as long as no one is hurt, what harm is there in any and all sexual acts and expressions?

This article seeks to remind Southern Baptists that a Christian worldview means more than avoiding R-rated movies. Believers in union with Christ will share his priorities. They will be angered by those mistreated by unjust court systems (Isa 11:4). They will oppose those who seek to snuff out the lives of the helpless (Ps 72:4). They will stand against those who counsel sinners that there is no hope for them to change (John 8:34-36). Above all, they will warn the powers-that-be that all social unrighteousness will end when the kingdoms of this world are crushed by the kingdom of our Christ (Dan 2:44).

** Much of this study draws on articles by Russ Moore and Mark Rathel.*