

Sermon Notes "Cooperation"

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

We find ourselves today in article 14, which addresses the topic of cooperation. This speaks to how Christians should work together to accomplish the work of the Kingdom of God.

Let's look at what our doctrinal statement says and then we'll examine several aspects of this idea of cooperation.

Article 14 of the Baptist Faith and Message says

"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 the 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."

In simple terms it says that we should, when necessary, join with other believers to advance God's kingdom, but all the while respecting the autonomy of the local church and not compromising our doctrinal convictions in the process. As Southern Baptists we do this on several levels, at the local level we have an association of churches which work together to plant churches. At a state level we have a state convention with which we cooperate to plant churches and reach the lost in New Mexico, and at the national level we belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, which consists of more than 40,000 churches working together to reach our world.

For the purpose of our study we are not going to delve into discussions of denominational structure or church governance, but rather we are going to look at what the Bible has to say about those things which unify us or divide us as, both in our personal relationships and our kingdom endeavors. Along the way I want to show you how these truths apply to our lives, not only as a church, but as individual Christians.

I. Why We Can't Get Along?

When looked at on the surface, it would seem this is a valid question. After all, don't we all love Jesus? Don't we all want to do His will on this earth? I mean, aren't we all His children? Why can't we all just get along?

Perhaps more than any other day since the first couple of centuries of Christianity, we are living in a day of religious pluralism; a day when the most highly touted virtue is tolerance. Tolerance and acceptance are the mottos of the day. These fit hand in hand with the philosophy of the day, postmodernism, which sees all truth claims as being equal. Thus, when we, as New Testament Christians, because of deep doctrinal differences, refuse to join forces with others who also call themselves Christians, we come off as being intolerant, narrow minded and elitist. They derisively call us, Fundamentalists.

There are those within nearly every church, who in their spiritually adolescence, question why we cannot simply join hands with anyone who calls themselves a Christian. But, for all their sincerity, they have failed to recognize that we are bound, not by what seems right to us, not by what the world would dictate as being tolerant, but we are bound by scripture itself. We are bound by the word of God. And the scripture has a lot to say about unity; about with whom we are to associate. But it also has a great deal to say about who we should avoid, about with whom we should intentionally disassociate ourselves.

There are basically two realms wherein we are called to be circumspect, vigilant or cautious about our relationships. One is in the area of personal relationships and the other is in the area of our religious practice. Interestingly enough, the two have a way of influencing one another.

Beginning back in the book of Exodus and throughout the Old Testament, God is clear that His people should not sully themselves by allowing themselves to be in fellowship with the pagans around them. In Exodus 34, as God is making a covenant with the Israelites, He warns them against being in fellowship with the nations who occupied the Promised Land.

In Exodus 34:12-16 God says, "Be careful not to make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land that you are going to enter; otherwise, they will become a snare among you. Instead, you must tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, and chop down their Asherah poles. You are to never bow down to another god because the Lord, being jealous by nature, is a jealous God. Do not make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land, or else when they prostitute themselves with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, they will invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifice. Then you will take some of their daughters [as brides] for your sons. Their daughters will prostitute themselves with their gods and cause your sons to prostitute themselves with their gods."

God has always warned His people to keep themselves from being in intimate fellowship with those who are not believers. Invariably, when we are too close to the wrong people, they have a tendency to draw us away from the Lord.

Psalm 1:1 tells us, "How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path of sinners, or join a group of mockers!"

Proverbs 4:14-15 instructs us saying, "**Don't set foot on the path of the wicked; don't proceed in the way of evil ones. Avoid it; don't travel on it. Turn away from it, and pass it by.**"

Go through the Old Testament and you will find that the Israelites were consistently disobedient at this point and the compromise God warned would occur should they be in fellowship with the nations around them was the very thing which led them into sin. There's no greater example of this than Solomon himself, whose foreign wives caused him to compromise his walk with God and brought the practice of idol worship back into the land.

The New Testament carries this thought forward, warning us against being in league with the lost who surround us.

1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "**Do not be deceived: bad company corrupts good morals.**"

And **2 Corinthians 6:14** says, "**Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?**"

This speaks to who we are in business with, it speaks to who we marry; it speaks to every intimate relationship in our lives. Young people, before you start dating someone, one of the first conversations you have should be about what that other person believes about Jesus. If they don't believe in Jesus like you do, if they don't hold to a sound doctrine about who He is, don't date them. The bible does not advocate "missionary dating." You say, "Pastor, that's rather radical, don't you think?" Actually, it's not only radical, it's also scriptural. Don't be unequally yoked.

The scripture does not tell us we cannot befriend lost people or be acquainted with them, rather it tells us that our intimate relationships should not be with anyone unless they are committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to His truth revealed in scripture.

In **1 Corinthians 5:9-11** Paul writes the church at Corinth about this issue. And if there was ever a church which faced this issue it was the Church at Corinth. He says, "**I wrote you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - by no means referring to this world's immoral people, or to the greedy and swindlers, or to idolaters; otherwise you would have to leave the world. But now I am writing you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a reviler, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.**"

In **1 Timothy 6:3** and following Paul tells Timothy, "**If anyone teaches other doctrine and does not agree with the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness, he is conceited, understanding nothing...**"

And again in **2 John 9-11**, scripture clearly directs us not to be in fellowship with those who claim to be Christians but do not hold to sound doctrine. The scripture says, **"Anyone who does not remain in the teaching about Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God. The one who remains in that teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home and don't say 'welcome' to him; for the one who says 'welcome,' to him shares in his evil works."**

The clear teaching here is that we are not to be in fellowship, much less join in kingdom endeavors with those who do not hold to sound doctrine.

As Christians we cannot join in Kingdom activities with those who do not believe the truth about Jesus. What would we do together? How could we evangelize together when they don't believe in the atoning work of Jesus Christ? How could we build churches with those who don't see the Kingdom of God as we do? Who would we reach and what would we preach if Jesus were merely one of many ways?

This is why we can't all get along. Fundamental views of truth and falsehood separate us. Foundational differences over the nature of Scripture, the person of Christ, the nature of salvation, the eternal destiny of man and the end of the ages will forever be the line of demarcation between those of us who hold to biblical truth and those who are willing to compromise with the spirit of the age.

While the world may call us sectarian; while they may accuse us of intolerance and of being narrow minded; our concern should always lie with what Jesus tells us not with what others say about us.

The late Christian Missionary Alliance preacher, A. W. Tozer, spoke of this situation some 50 years ago in his book, *God Tells the Man Who Cares*. In His Chapter entitled, *Divisions Are Not Always Bad*, Tozer says:

"To divide what should be divided and unite what should be united is the part of wisdom. The first divider was God who at the creation divided the light from the darkness. This division set the direction for all God's dealings in nature and in grace. Light and darkness are incompatible; to try to have both in the same place at once is to try the impossible and end by having neither the one nor the other, but dimness rather, and obscurity. In a fallen world like ours unity is no treasure to be purchased at the price of compromise. Loyalty to God, faithfulness to truth and the preservation of a good conscience are jewels more precious than gold or diamonds. Power lies in the union of things similar and the division of things dissimilar. Maybe what we need in religious circles today is not more union but some wise and courageous division."

The reason we can't all get along is that we weren't meant to. Jesus Himself said this in **Matthew 10:34** when He said, **"Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."** We are the light of the world and were not meant to be mixed with darkness. That does not give us a license to be mean

for Jesus or to have a holier than thou attitude, we are still called to speak the truth in love, but at the same time we must be prudent in our relationships, both personal and ecclesiastical. But we need to bring balance to this truth about division. As

Ecclesiastes 3 says, there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.

What does God word have to tell us about joining in with other Christians to do the work of the kingdom of God? How does it direct us in terms of our personal relationships? Allow me to suggest three broad areas where we as Christians are to be united.

II. Three Areas Where Christians Can and Should Cooperate

A. United in the truth

The fellowship of the saints is not based on some type of sentimental feeling or on what the world would describe as doing good deeds. The fellowship of the saints, that thing which initially and most substantially unites us is the truth about Jesus Christ, not just believing it is true, but having trusted in Jesus and having His Spirit live within us. This is the foundation of our unity, the truth about Jesus which we have believed and His Spirit living within us who is in the process of transforming us into the image of Christ.

1 Peter 1:22-25 addresses this clearly when it says, "**By obedience to the truth, having purified yourselves for sincere love of the brothers, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again - not of perishable seed but of imperishable - through the living and enduring word of God. For All flesh is like the grass, and all of its glory like a flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower drops off, but the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word that was preached as the gospel to you.**"

And **Ephesians 4:13-15** says, "**Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's son [growing] into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. Then we will not longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. Ut speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head - Christ.**"

There are many superficial things which divide us, man-made things which have not eternal significance. But the foundational thing which unites all Christians, regardless of their age, race, color, language, or social standing, is that we all believe the same truth about Jesus; the truth revealed to us in the pages of Scripture, that He is the preexistent immortal God incarnate, born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died a vicarious death, rose from the dead and is coming again to judge the living and the dead. He is the one and only Savior of the world and there is no salvation except through His blood.

B. We are to united in the love of Jesus

We could spend all day in the scriptures which, over and over again command us to love one another, not merely in word, but in deed. In fact, the passage we read from 1st

Peter tells us that we are to love one another reverently and with a pure heart: With the right emotions and the right motives. When we hold the same truth, then we are all bound to the same commandment Jesus gave us in **John 13:34-35** where Jesus says:

"I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this will all people know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

This love is not only a commandment Jesus has given us; it is the essential identifying mark of an authentic believer. The person who does not have this love for his brother is not a true Christian. That's what John says in **1 John 3:10**, **"This is how God's children - and the Devil's children - are made evident. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother."**

If we are really and truly in love with Jesus, that love will inevitably flow over into our relationships with one another. We will love one another and it will be evident to those around us.

C. United in the work of Jesus

1 Corinthians 3:9 tells us that we are God's co-laborers. We are to join together to further the Kingdom of God. Cooperation in God's kingdom is working with people who share our faith, our values and our worldview. Allow me to suggest several ways we do this here at our church.

- As individuals and as a church we put this teaching into practice every week when we give our tithes and offerings. A percentage of every dollar you give here goes to what is called the Cooperative program, which is basically a vehicle which allows all 40,000+ Southern Baptist Churches to join their financial resources to support missions and Christian education around the world. As we give our dollars help fund more than 5000 missionaries on foreign fields and thousands more right here in North America. A portion of our money goes to support six theological seminaries. All of this is a cooperative effort through what we give.
- We put this teaching to practice when we serve alongside of one another here at the local church. Whether you are teaching Sunday School or singing in the choir, every time you serve here at the local church, you are practicing this truth, you are employing the biblical truth about cooperation. Each of us have a different spiritual gift mix and each of us are called to do that which is in consonance with our gifting. This is one of the ways we put this truth about being unified in service into practice.

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. What do your relationships look like today? Who are you close to and how are they influencing you? Are they drawing you closer to Jesus or pulling you further away? Are they encouraging you in the work of the kingdom or are they pulling towards the things of this world?