
Article XIV. Cooperation

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.

(Sermon Title)

Ephesians 4:11-16

Communication is always difficult. Making folks understand what you want them to understand. Letting them hear what you want them to hear rather than what they think they hear is always a problem.

(Story of man going to Houston, TX to see his granddaughter)

My assignment today is to talk about cooperation as part of the Baptist Faith and Message but the truth is that cooperation is a vital doctrine of all of the scriptures. If we do not understand this and we are not dependant one upon another we are going to miss much of the joy of what it means to live the Christian life. Let me call your attention to the book of Ephesians, Chapter 4 I want to us as my text for today, beginning with the 11th verse reading through verse 16. (read scripture) Robert Dale in his first book, in the forward "To Dream Again", said there are 4 ways to change things in the life of the church. The easiest, 1) Change Policy, adjust the way we do things. 2) Change personnel (new staff, new lay leadership) 3) create new programs, re-organize. These three things change how we do business in a church. But the 4th, define and act on the fundamental purposes of the church. Let me suggest to you that as I know Baptists and have now for 53 years of preaching ministry there has never been a day in Southern

Baptist life that we do not need to come to number 4 rather quickly and define the fundamental and the foundational purposes of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in a day and a time that we must do this, for to walk away is to sign a death warrant. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ can no longer be spastic in its understanding of biblical truth. We must come to grips with the fact that we are the people of God and as the people of God there are certain responsibilities that must be ours. So I want to dig around at the root, catharize the heart, talk to you simply about what does it mean to be a cooperating person in the family of faith. In his new book, David Dockery, *The SBC Consensus and Renewal*, makes one statement that scooped in my attention and held it for most of the rest of the book. He said, "Our times need a new generation that will both be convictional and cooperative." We don't have as much difficulty with convictional as we do cooperative. Sometimes we imagine that to have a conviction means that we cannot be cooperative. If you have any conviction in your life that does not allow you to cooperate with a brother there is something wrong with the conviction biblically. Because there can be no truth that cancels out another truth. If in fact we are to be the biblical people of God, cooperation is also a convictional part of our life. Our times demand that we put in perspective and to have a biblical understanding of not only what we are doing but why we are doing it. Only theological relevance, only doctrinal conviction will allow us to remain in the posture of impacting the world for Christ. We must understand why we are doing it. There can be no escape from individual responsibility and yet our life must be invested at the same time in the life of another person. We are seen as Christians in the grow cycle. Every life is an investment by God for God. It is not to be a grand individualism. It is to fit in the total and grapple with the personal integrity of the investment of my life. God needs leaders whose nerves have not lost their resilience by being overextended in the maze of mediocrity; leaders whose nerves still have maintained their resilience by pausing long enough at the power of God to create energies from God. God derived energies which cannot be exhausted even in an age where the culture cries out, "Let's all go crazy together." We must come to grips with that and understand that if we confront the culture it will not be by grand individualism it will be by cooperating as the people of God. It could well be that we have become so interested in what is going on in the world that we are not going into the world with the gospel of Christ. The world has taken advantage of our negligence regarding the gospel. The great commission is not only a plan, it is the only plan that Jesus gave us to cooperate one with another to take the gospel to the whole world at the same time. It is His last and most burning concept that He left behind for the redeemed. No one says it quite like S.M Lockridge in his sermon simply titled "Go" that he preached at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary as a student. He says, "Mission work was last and foremost the burning thought in mind of Christ during his earthly sojourn. And that eventful day on the summit of the Mount of Olives, while angelic chauffeurs were parking taxi clouds, the mind of Christ was occupied by the

thought of missions. This must have been a significant day in the life of our Lord. He had just redeemed the world. He was about to leave the world in which the genesis of sin had spent itself in an effort to destroy him. The world refused to give him a room in which to be born. There was no room for him in the inn. The world gave him not a single spot where he could call home. Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of God has nowhere to lay his head. Sin cried for his blood every step of the way from the manger to Calvary. Then angels must have been standing at attention along the boulevards of heaven ready to lead the possession to the right hand of the majesty on high. But as Jesus stood at the furthestmost outpost of the universe in the final business meeting with the church, there was just one proposition on his agenda and that proposition was go into all of the world and preach the gospel to every creature. I am here to tell you again we cannot go into all of the world and preach the gospel to every creature unless it is by and through the doctrine of cooperation. How do you get the gospel to all of the world at the same time, at one time all of the gospel to the world? It must be by cooperation. Now my heart is not for cooperation for those to have no convictional truth about the gospel. My heart is for cooperation between those who have convictional truths about the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the key ingredient for going into the world. We are not given again to grand individualism but rather to a body of believers. There is a place for "I" in our theology. That's the private place. But when it comes to the distribution of the gospel it is the "we" element that takes over. We must take scripture into all of the world. Therefore biblical doctrine must define us. John says in writing First John chapter one verse 5 – 11 something that defines us as far as gospel truth. John said, "This then is the story, this then is the message, which I have heard and declare I unto you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we walk in the light as He is in the light, we must have fellowship, one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us." Every time John describes the principle of forgiveness and the principle of redemption there is the "we" characterization. If we walk in the light as he is in the light. There is that "we" characterization that goes with the gospel. So I want to say to you in this idea of the unity of faith and the doctrine of cooperation, out of this passage, first of all there is the willingness principle that comes to bear in verse 13, "until we all come into the unity of the faith". Cooperation cannot be coerced, it can only be cultivated. If I coerce cooperation, it ceases to be cooperation. It must come as a result of what I believe. It must come as a result of who I am. So we come with a willingness, we all come rooted in the willing mind looking at other willing minds. That's what Paul is talking about as he writes to the church at Ephesus. You look at the willing

mind in the face of other willing minds, not cooperation, not coercion, not manipulation. We come because that is who we are as the people of God. We come because it is the right thing to do. I went back and looked at some of the illustrations in scripture about the church. The church is referred to as a building. That's the foundational part of the church. It's a building fitly framed together. That simply means every part of the building is dependant on another part of the building. They are fitly framed together. And then the church is spoken of as the body. That's the functionality of the church as the body of Christ. My hand functions one way, my eye functions another way but I have all these parts of the body and they function. That's the functionality of the church spoken of as the body. The building is foundational, the body is functional and then he speaks of the church as the bride of Christ. That's the fidelity of the church. That's like getting married. There is a measure of fidelity one to another. Nancy and I in June will celebrate 53 years of marriage. Now let me tell you folks, living with the Baptist preacher for 53 years is an accomplishment that God will reward on the other side. I guarantee. In fact, when we were married 50 years, I said to her, "Do you remember when I proposed to you, 50 years ago?" She said, "Yes I do. I remember what you said." I said, "I do to. I said 'Will you marry me and can you live with me 50 years?'" She said, "That's exactly right. 50 years are up, I'm out of here." But there has to be that understanding of the fidelity of the marital relationship. I guarantee you I did not say, when the preacher said, 'Do you take this woman' and I looked at her and said 'yes, 80% of the time.' That wouldn't work. It's a total commitment of the total life. That's fidelity. If you imagine marriage is built on love you are delusional. Marriage is built on commitment, not love. Love is like the mercury in a thermometer. One day it's up and one day it's down. You just thank God it's still in the thermometer. There must be that aspect of cooperation, the willingness, all of us, all unto the unity. He talks about in verse 11 that he has given some to be apostles. There were two qualifications for the apostles: 1) they must have seen Jesus and 2) they must have witnessed the resurrection. Those were the early apostles. There were the prophets. Those were the forth tellers. You have had enough theology and enough Old Testament to know that the prophets were not only the fore tellers they were the forth tellers. They were the ones that spoke the truth and as a result there are those, there are the evangelists. Not only the full time evangelists, not only those called out to do full time evangelism but the best I can ring out of this, a missionary in our day and time would be the equivalent of an evangelist in that day and time. It's not an either/or it's a both/and. It is not mission or evangelism it is missions and evangelism. If a missionary is not an evangelist and an evangelist is not a missionary, there is something wrong with the picture. It's not either/or it's both/and. It's like the pastor/teacher. It's not a pastor or a teacher it's the pastor/teacher. If as a pastor I don't teach my congregation something, I have missed what it means to be a pastor. If I don't teach them, I am the pastor/teacher, they learn from me. Every church ought to be a miniature seminary with the pastor as the head teacher teaching his

congregation the theological understanding of the word of God. Teaching his congregation not only the scripture but what the scripture means in terms of the totality of life as a result of that. We are pastor/teachers. They explain the doctrine. No distortion of faith. And then they are called shepherds. Those are the ones that kept the church going in the same direction at the same time, the shepherds of the church. Jesus calls himself a shepherd. He's called a shepherd more than one time. All of this is for the perfecting of the saints that you and I might in cooperation be the body of Christ, in cooperation the building of Christ, in cooperation the fidelity of Christ as the bride. This is the principle of willingness. Secondly, there is the all things common principle when we come in the unity of the faith. I am not for union. I am for unity when it comes to the church. You do not have to agree with everything I say and give me the privilege of saying it. Unity is not that we all walk in lock step. Unity is that we all believe in the same cause. And methodology may change but unity does not change. If you imagine that Nancy and I have agreed on every subject for 53 years, you can't have been married very long. But I guarantee you in 53 years there has never been a question that the marriage made two into one. I don't know when it happened but there was a day that I woke up and if someone had asked me where do you stop and Nancy starts, I would have no clue. Or where does she start and you stop, I would have no clue. The two become one. So it is in the doctrine of cooperation; all things in common. Two economic principles drive our stewardship. The two economic principles that drive our stewardship and drives our missionary and evangelistic enterprise in cooperation are these: 1) whatever a man acquires honestly belongs to him to do with as he pleases. That is not a biblical concept of stewardship. That is not a biblical concept that should drive your missionary giving. 2) All that I am and all that I have belong to God to be used for His glory. That is the proper understanding of the biblical motif of stewardship. Stewardship drives cooperation. Stewardship drives missions, drives evangelism, drives cooperation. As a result, I must come to the place that I understand that stewardship is a reality of the principles of God, it is a reality of the truth of God and whether I am in college earning a living or whether I am the Executive Director of the state convention earning a living, 1/10 of all that I receive belongs to God and the other 1/10 I am still responsible for how I spend. It does not change. It's like stealing. Stealing in a bad economy is just as bad as stealing in a good economy. It is still stealing. You don't have to explain to me but you don't know how much I make or you don't know how little I make. Listen I started college with 2 children, one child and another born soon after we got there. You don't have to explain to me how difficult it is to get through college. And I do not say this as a bragging point in my life, I say it as an example of truth. I never missed one tithe check all of the years I was in college and all of the years I was in seminary and I have never missed one since. Now is that because God requires that I give the tithe? No. It's because I am driven by the biblical principle of stewardship that demands the tithe of my life. I don't tithe so God will bless me. I tithe because it's right

to cooperate with God in stewardship. We cooperate with God in stewardship and we cannot get around it. The cooperation runs throughout all that we are and all that we do in the giving of the tithe and the offering. The centerpiece of all of this unity of the faith in cooperation for Southern Baptists has to do with what we call the Cooperative Program and it is rightly defined. It is the cooperative program. We can all do more together than we can individually. In fact, if we pooled all that we are doing individually we would never gain the same amount as we are doing together. As a result, we must understand that this cooperation bleeds itself down into our stewardship of giving for missionary enterprise. Do not misunderstand what I am about to say. I believe in the Annie Armstrong offering for Home Missions. I believe in the Lottie Moon Christmas offering for Foreign Missions. I believe in the state offering called the Maguire State Mission Offering but I am here to tell you were it not for the centerpiece of Southern Baptist life in cooperation called the Cooperative Program there is no way under God that we could keep 5,000 missionaries on the foreign field and 5,000 missionaries on the home soil and 10,000 seminary students studying either on campuses or in seminary centers around the United States and throughout the world. There is no way under God that we could support the ministry of The Baptist College of Florida were it not for that centerpiece of cooperation. When the 2,888 churches of the Florida Baptist Convention send a check to the state convention office in Jacksonville and we send a portion of that to this college and a portion of that goes for scholarships for our students. A buy down in scholarship, a buy down in funding, I am here to tell you this college could not exist long without the centerpiece of cooperation called the Cooperative Program. That's the centerpiece. If we come apart at the center, we are going to destroy the cooperation. Cooperation is the centerpiece of Baptist life. Well, then there is the equality principle. All come unto a perfect man. I mentioned earlier, I simply repeat it again, my plea is not for union where we all must do the same thing. My plea is for equality. My plea is for unity, maturity, all coming unto the mature man. BA Carson says, "We must draw a line in the sand even when it is unpopular to draw a line in the sand." And when we draw a line in the sand, in a document called the Baptist Faith and Message of the Southern Baptist Convention that simply means there are some areas subject to interpretation in the Baptist Faith and Message. No one would argue that. You come to the doctrine of the second coming or the statement on the second coming of Jesus Christ do you imagine that we are all going to agree on the second coming of Jesus Christ? I've been listening to some tapes by R.G. Lee, for whom this chapel is named. In one of his sermons he was asked "What language do you speak?" He said, "I speak some Spanish and a great deal of pre-millennial English." There is that understanding of how we are going to approach the second coming. But we are not going to fly apart at the center because we do not agree on how it is going to come to pass. As long as we agree on this one fact, Jesus is coming again. We must agree on that. He is coming again. And that is in the parameter of God's own keeping that he's coming again. Truth

demands cooperation. Distinction between orthodoxy and heresy must be maintained by the people of God. One way that happens, Paul writes to the church at Philippi. My favorite book of the bible, Philippians, and my favorite passage in Philippians is chapter 2 verses 1-11 where Paul simply says about this matter of cooperation what is the ????? (time 48:08- 48:10) what drives us even more in this cooperation. Paul says, "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." Then he comes to that verse that becomes the pivotal verse of the whole chapter. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." That is cooperation with the very Spirit of God in which we live. This entitlement to the Gospel to take into all of the world and confront the world with the living truth that Jesus Christ is alive. Living out scripture truth in our life will require cooperation. Doing mission work to the ends of the earth will require cooperation. Building our faith that we become like the building, the foundation, like the fidelity, the marriage, like the fidelity, the union between the two, the body, the functionality, all of those things require cooperation. The doctrine of cooperation is scrubbed into the biblical truth that we call scripture.

Closing Prayer

Dr. John Sullivan