

BAPTISTS and Voluntary Cooperation

*"Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."
2 Corinthians 8:3 (NIV)*

Baptists believe the Bible teaches that churches should be autonomous, that is, independent of any outside control by individuals or groups. Baptists also believe the Bible mandates that Christians should be involved in missions, carrying out Christ's command to take the gospel to the whole world. A single congregation, no matter how large, cannot possibly fulfill the Lord's command adequately.

Therefore, early Baptists faced a major dilemma: How could independent congregations fulfill the command of Christ to take the gospel to the entire world without forming some sort of connection among churches that possibly could undermine their autonomy?

After decades of prayerful deliberation, Baptists determined the answer to this question was "voluntary cooperation" among individual Baptists and Baptist churches.

The Baptist statesman James L. Sullivan described this as a **"rope of sand with strength of steel."**

The Bases for VOLUNTARY Cooperation

Voluntary cooperation rests solidly on other basic Baptist convictions. Voluntarism and freedom form a theme that permeates the Baptist symphony of beliefs and polities. For example, Baptists believe the following:

The Bible teaches the experience of salvation in Christ is voluntary. Faith cannot be coerced. Salvation results only from a faith response to God's grace gift of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10). No one can make this commitment for another. No one can force such a commitment from another.

Baptism is a symbol that a person has made a voluntary commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord. The New Testament reveals that baptism never should be coerced but always should be voluntary as a symbol of a person's having freely followed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

A person's decision to become part of a church also ought to be voluntary. According to the New Testament, only persons who have voluntarily believed in Jesus are to be members of a church. Furthermore, no one should be forced to be a member of a church.

Financial support of a church ought to be voluntary. The voluntary tithes and offerings of the members, not money from taxation, are to finance a church.

The voluntary nature of churches applies also to the relationship of churches to each other and to other parts of the Baptist denomination. Each church is

autonomous and as such is free under the lordship of Christ to determine such matters as who its leaders will be, what form of worship it will conduct and how it will relate to other Baptist entities. No individual, religious organization or government authority has a right to infringe on this freedom.

The Bases for Voluntary COOPERATION

The Bible sets forth the concept of voluntary **cooperation** among churches. The New Testament records examples of such cooperation among the earliest Christians and churches. Cooperation was for the sake of effective ministry to human need, for fellowship and for effective missions and evangelism.

For example, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about the needs of Christians in Jerusalem and appealed for the Corinthians to join with other churches in a voluntary collection to help meet the needs. He made it clear that this offering was to be purely voluntary. He was not commanding them to do this. No coercion was involved (2 Corinthians 8-9).

The New Testament also records that issues which threatened to divide the early Christian movement were dealt with through voluntary cooperation to discuss the issues. No one church or group of Christians could dictate to others what to believe, but they could develop recommendations out of prayerful discussions. These were not dictatorial demands but graceful suggestions (Acts 15). Another example of voluntary cooperation in the New Testament is the agreement that certain evangelists and missionaries would major on different people groups. Some would focus on the Jewish population and others would focus on Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10).

"One basic operating principle is voluntariness. ... The denomination is held together by fragile organization ties, but the common experiences, beliefs, and purposes that unite them are stronger than steel."

Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel
James L. Sullivan

The New Testament also indicates the early churches in the same geographical region had some sort of relationship with one another. The Apostle Paul wrote, "To the churches in Galatia" (Galatians 1:2, NIV). The Revelation given to John was directed to seven churches in Asia Minor, each of which clearly was autonomous but also related to the others (Revelation 1-3).

The Nature of Voluntary Cooperation

The voluntary nature of Baptist life, rooted in the teaching of the Bible, has obvious strengths. However, absolute independence of a church means that it lacks the powerful impact that can be made for the cause of Christ by a group of churches. But how can togetherness be achieved without sacrificing voluntarism and freedom?

Baptists have answered that question through voluntary cooperation of churches, through informal networks of churches and through organizations such as associations, societies and

conventions. However, this answer developed slowly, in large measure due to the Baptist suspicion of religious organizations beyond local congregations of believers.

The first step that Baptists took toward voluntary cooperation was the formation of associations of churches. The Philadelphia Association was formed in America in 1707. A few persons from Baptist churches gathered and

organized an informal fellowship modeled after similar organizations that had been formed earlier in England. Those who organized the association made clear that it had

absolutely no authority over churches. The association existed primarily for fellowship and discussion of issues confronting churches. Today, hundreds of such associations exist, and although they vary in function, each follows the model of voluntary cooperation with no authority over any church.

A second step of voluntary cooperation involved the organization of societies.

These societies had a single focus, such as foreign missions, home missions or publications. Individuals or groups became members by making a financial contribution to the society. Membership was strictly voluntary. Baptists could choose to support or not to support a particular society. Societies still exist in Baptist life, but another form of cooperation emerged: the convention.

The convention form of organization among Baptists developed in the United States in the mid-1800s. A convention differs from a society in that a convention solicits and combines support for various

efforts of the denomination, such as missions, education, benevolence and publications rather than for a single issue. Numbers of state and national conventions have been formed. The Cooperative Program was developed as a convention method of helping to finance Baptist ministries, such as schools, institutions for child and aging care, hospitals, and organizations for state, national and worldwide missions.

Conventions have no authority over churches. Baptists are free to relate or not to relate to a convention. Some organizations similar to conventions carry names such as "fellowship" or "union."

Conclusion

Voluntary cooperation among various parts of the Baptist denomination provides a means of effective service for the cause of Christ. Churches voluntarily associate with one another through organizations, such as associations or conventions, in order to carry out various ministries on a much broader scale than each church could accomplish by itself. **This relationship is in accord with basic Baptist beliefs.** The next article in this series will discuss the effectiveness of voluntary cooperation and the challenges involved in maintaining it.

For further information on voluntary cooperation see www.baptistdistinctives.org.

