

Church Cooperation

Introduction. According to Webster's Dictionary, "cooperation" means "the act of cooperating; joint operation; concurrent effort or labor." Today we see all kinds of cooperation between both denominational churches and churches of Christ. But how did New Testament churches work together? Did two or more congregations combine or pool their funds and centralize their control under one agency as a means of cooperation or did they act independently and concurrently with each other in their efforts to accomplish the same goal?

As with many issues that tend to divide groups, the principle in 1 Corinthians 14:33 continues to stand. When we carefully study the New Testament scriptures, they will give us the true answer to these issues. The question that this kind of study poses is what are you going to do with the evidence? Will you believe it and hold to it or not believe it and promote actions that are against God's will?

I. ***One Church Cooperated And Helped Other Churches In Time Of Emergency***

- A. The church in Antioch contributed to needs of the brethren in Judea in a time of famine (Acts 11:27-30). This incident is not the same as the needy saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9), for that was many years later.
- B. How did Antioch carry out the cooperation with these "brethren in Judea?"
 1. The money was raised by the disciples in Antioch contributing "every man according to his ability." Since the disciples in Antioch constituted the church and since they contributed into a common fund (joint action), it is only reasonable to conclude that this was congregational activity.
 2. Paul and Barnabas were chosen by these disciples as messengers to take these funds to the "brethren which dwelt in Judea."
 3. These funds were delivered to the "elders" among the "brethren in Judea."
 - a) Elders were congregational officers who were qualified men chosen from among the congregation (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-9; Titus 1:6-9; Acts 6:3).
 - b) Since the "brethren in Judea" constituted of several congregations (Galatians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 2:14), we conclude that the funds were delivered by the messengers into the hands of the elders of every congregation where there was a need and they distributed those funds.
 - c) There is no reason to conclude or basis upon which to even pre-

sume that the "elders" in this passage meant the elders in Jerusalem only.

- (1) Unless Jerusalem only had elders and no evidence to that effect can be found. If we are to presume, the presumption would be that all congregations in Judea had elders since that is God's desire (Acts 14:23).
- (2) If the Jerusalem elders took charge of the distribution of funds among all the congregations of Judea, they most certainly acted "outside" of their own congregation and "over" the other congregations in which they made this distribution and that would authorize elders in a territory over many churches which is an "episcopacy" like denominations have and which cannot be justified in the word of God (1 Peter 5:2).

II. ***Many Churches Cooperated And Helped One Church In Time Of Emergency***

- A. We do not know what brought about this need, which was different than the first benevolent need we studied (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9).
 1. It may have been the persecution and dispersion had impoverished them or in "selling their houses and their lands" to meet the early crisis in the church they may have become destitute.
 2. Whatever the cause there were so many destitute saints in Jerusalem that the church there could not meet the need. There is certainly no record to indicate that these needy saints were not members of the Jerusalem church nor is there the slightest indication that they had gone out and gathered up destitute saints from all over Judea and other provinces in order to do this work and therefore had "created" the need.
- B. Gentile churches to whom the gospel had gone out from Jerusalem were called upon to reciprocate by sending to their need (Romans 15:25-28).
 1. Thus Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia contributed upon instruction from Paul (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9).
 2. Macedonian brethren gave beyond their ability because of their deep consecration and upon their own accord and asked Paul to accept this gift in behalf of the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).
 3. The Corinthian brethren had been the first to make a "beginning a year ago" when they had been stirred to do so by Titus (2 Corinthians 8:6-10).
- C. Paul exhorted Titus to go ahead of the rest into Achaia, taking with

him "the brother" (2 Corinthians 8:18) and "our brother" (2 Corinthians 8:22).

1. These other brethren had been selected by the churches to travel with the group as their messengers to take their contribution to Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:19-23).
 2. However, Paul had sent them beforehand into Achaia and he wrote the Corinthian brethren urging that with the help and encouragement of these brethren they get their previously promised offering ready so that his boasting of their readiness would not be in vain (2 Corinthians 8:18, 22; 9:1-5).
- D. Each church raised its own funds by each of its members contributing their proportionate part on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). This was the day that the saints assembled to break bread (Acts 20:7). By contributing when they had "come together," they collected the money in a common fund.
- E. Each church, acting independently, chose its own messenger to entrust with its contribution that would be taken to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:19-23).
1. Several churches may have approved the same messenger but each church had the responsibility and right of choosing its own (1 Corinthians 16:3).
 2. There is not the slightest indication of a convention of many churches in which these messengers were elected in a joint action. This would constitute a denominational convention or association, and would therefore be wrong.
 - a) If these men had been chosen by churches convened to take collective action they would have constituted a separate body and would have performed a function the local church could not perform.
 - b) If this were the case, a "convention," "association" or "conference" would be justified to function over the churches and for them distributing benevolence among the members of the Jerusalem congregation.
 3. Each church entrusted their contribution to their own selected agent or messenger and he became responsible to them and the Lord for faithfully delivering it to Jerusalem. There is not the slightest hint of these separate contributions losing their identity in a "pooled" or "combined" fund. This was concurrent but independent action by each church and is a binding New Testament pattern.
 4. No church sent its money through another church. There was no "sponsoring" church to receive or forward the funds. All the churches who had a part in this contribution for Jerusalem sustained an equal relationship to the work being done. It was not a

created need or a promoted work which they had undertaken and which they were not able to discharge.

- F. In the absence of any information to the contrary, we are forced to conclude that when these messengers, including Paul, brought funds from these various churches to Jerusalem and delivered it into the hands of the elders of the church (Acts 11:27-30).

III. ***Churches Cooperated In Supporting Paul While He Preached***

- A. Paul took wages from other churches and Philippi was among the churches that supported him (2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 1:3-5; 4:10-18).
1. In the example of the Philippian church we learn how these funds were sent to Paul (Philippians 4:15-18). They were sent directly to Paul by their individual messenger Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25).
 2. This constitutes a New Testament pattern. It authorized only the "direct" method and excludes the "indirect" method. In every instance the contributing church sent directly and never "through" another church.
- B. In both evangelism and benevolence, the local church raised its funds, selected its messenger and sent directly to the work being done.
1. Where is the passage setting forth either command, example or inference that any New Testament church ever sent a contribution through another church to be forwarded to the work being done?
 2. Where is the command, example or inference in a passage of scripture authorizing many churches to pool their funds, combining them and centralizing their control under one eldership for the purpose of "promoting a good work?"

Conclusion. The New Testament scriptures furnish us a complete pattern for congregational cooperation. The practice of a church "promoting a good work" and soliciting funds from other churches to pay for it is unknown to the New Testament. Where is the passage? The practice of one church "sponsoring" a work and many churches "combining their funds and centralizing the control over those funds" in one church and under one eldership cannot be found in the scriptures and hence has no divine authority but is a perversion of God's plan. Where is the passage? The denominational practice of building and maintaining an outside human organization as a means of congregational cooperation is certainly not authorized in the scriptures and must be therefore sinful. Where is the passage giving churches of Christ this right?