

Now What? 6 Cooperation

Sometimes I have trouble remembering what I preached and I spend hours studying and putting messages together, so I often wonder how much the average worshipper retains. I'm just curious, among all of us, if we can remember the health and growth factors that made the early church so strong and effective in spite of so much suffering, poverty and persecution. (clue- We've covered six)

Health and growth factors -

Convinced of the resurrection

Filled with the Spirit

Christian culture- love, integrity, and generosity

Pastors and deacons were appointed

Mission minded

Strong families

I'm quite confident that these factors are relevant to us today. And, if they are true of us, we will see the same health and strength as the early church and possibly even somewhat similar patterns of growth.

There is one more element of health and strength that I would like for us to consider this morning before we move on to another morning worship focus: **cooperation**. As I look at the history of the early church through the book of Acts and the

letters to the churches, I see a much greater level of cooperation, support and unity among all the churches than we see today.

Even with such extremely limited communication and slow, tedious travel between the local churches as they began to spread in Asia Minor, there is a good bit of evidence of unity, mutual support and cooperation for the sake of the kingdom of God and His glory. Certainly each of the fledgling churches had their flaws and issues, but this interconnectedness among them must have been a great source of strength and health as they struggled to mature and develop. It would probably be a reasonable assessment to say that Paul personally, and through his letters by the Holy Spirit, was instrumental in establishing and maintaining the support and cooperation that existed between the churches.

Let's begin today in Acts 11, then we'll look at some of the letters...

²⁷ In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the time of Claudius. ²⁹ So each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul. Acts 11:27-30 (HCSB)

Remember, the first church was planted in Jerusalem (in Judea) with the apostles serving as the pastors/leaders. The church flourished as thousands were being saved in and around Jerusalem. The apostles began to spread out more and more to

the regions beyond eventually leading to the salvation of gentiles. With heavy persecution growing in Israel and intentional movement toward carrying the gospel further and further away from Jerusalem, the church at Antioch actually became a new center for sending out missionary, church planters like Paul and Silas. We don't know the formal role these "prophets" filled in the church at Jerusalem, but it is obvious that they were led by the Spirit to warn the other churches about the coming famine.

"Each of the disciples" is not referring to the original disciples which are now called apostles. Once the original disciples began to be called apostles, all followers of Christ began to be called disciples (a student or follower of Christ). This is consistent throughout the rest of the New Testament. So, it was all of the believers at the church in Antioch who "determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea." *Why, if the famine was going to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire, should one church take an offering for another church?*

*spirit of unity-One church, one body, one Spirit. The body takes care of itself.

*The church in Jerusalem was already suffering from severe persecution. Add famine to that....

***Unselfish, cooperative spirit, compassion, love**

So we see, even very early on, the love, support and connection between the church of Jerusalem and Antioch. And bear in mind, the church at Antioch, located 300 miles north of Jerusalem, was made up of a large number of gentiles while the

church at Jerusalem was almost entirely made up of Jewish Christians. This was good!

1 Now about the collection for the saints: you should do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches. **2** On the first day of the week, each of you is to set something aside and save to the extent that he prospers, so that no collections will need to be made when I come. **3** And when I arrive, I will send those whom you recommend by letter to carry your gracious gift to Jerusalem. **4** If it is also suitable for me to go, they will travel with me. **1** Cor 16:1-4 (HCSB)

Now we see, probably several years later, another offering being taken, each Sunday, primarily for the purpose of sending it to Jerusalem for the church there. No other purpose is stated for the regular Sunday offering. Paul revealed that he had instructed the churches in Galatia to do the same. And, they were to send people from their own congregation to deliver the gift.

It appears that it was the church at Jerusalem that suffered the most in those early years. And, from scripture and history, we know that the church at Jerusalem, because of the intense persecution, became less and less of a significant role as the center of Christianity. So, it was the children taking care of the mother church.

Why did Paul choose to send the gift by carriers from the church at Corinth? My guess- He wanted to get to see and know each other so the bond would be strengthened between the churches.

This is one of the reasons we are forming our Mission Team- to create a closer bond between us and those whom we love and support.

1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia: **2** during a severe testing by affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed into the wealth of their generosity. **3** I testify that, on their own, according to their ability and beyond their ability, **4** they begged us insistently for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, **5** and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves especially to the Lord, then to us by God's will **2** Cor 8:1-7 (HCSB)

Though experiencing great poverty themselves, we find the churches of Macedonia “begging for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints.” It isn't revealed who exactly the “saints” were but it seems that the Macedonians wanted to give money and “themselves” to this need outside of themselves, saints at some other church(es). That was the spirit that seem to permeate the early church. And be sure and note that it didn't start and stop with giving. Giving generous offerings was coupled with giving of themselves.

This reveals a second purpose of our new Mission Team- Go to, work alongside, serve and minister with and to those missionaries and ministries we support.

Healthy Church factor: Cooperation/unity

1. Impact on the community

One of the most consistent and outstanding elements of the Muslim religion is their extreme animosity toward each other. The Shiites and Sunnis hate each other and they both hate the Kurds. I would guess that more Muslims have been killed by other Muslims than by any and all other non-Muslims combined, at least in recent history. And that should be an embarrassment to a religion that claims to be the true way to God.

We shouldn't be surprised. This is typical carnal human nature void of surrender and obedience to the one true and living God through His Son Jesus. This is what a culture is like when it is void of the one true God. Those in America who are striving to make this country a godless nation would be wise to consider the state of affairs in every Muslim or communist controlled country. There is chaos, corruption, violence, and fear.

This matter of unity and cooperation is another reason why the church was so effective, strong and spread so quickly. When non-Christian people began to see Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, rich and poor, men and women, loving, supporting, trusting, serving and encouraging each other, treating each other as brothers and sisters, that made an extreme impact. There had never been a culture like that and never will be. And they not only behaved that way toward each other, they acted that way toward their neighbors and even their enemies.

35 By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35 (HCSB)

And this love must go way beyond a handshake and a hug. It must be a lifestyle of cooperation, respect, support and working together

2. Efficient use of funds and personnel

This is the number two reason that I am a Southern Baptist (#1 doctrine). The quality and magnitude of our mission organizations prove that cooperation works, honors Gods, is most efficient, and keeps our missionaries on the field and effectively serving without fear of losing support.

Within our SBC Cooperative program- Ministries are not duplicated. There is balance and even distribution of resources and personnel. There is very low overhead. And, smaller churches can have an integral part of the great work of supporting more than 10,000 full-time missionaries around the world plus tens of thousand more volunteer and short mission endeavors.

⁴² The Lord said: “Who then is the faithful and sensible manager his master will put in charge of his household servants to give them their allotted food at the proper time? ⁴³ That slave whose master finds him working when he comes will be rewarded.

Luke 12:42-43 (HCSB)

God bless the Cooperative Program!

3. Needs are met

In regard to the sacrificial offerings of the Macedonian churches.....

¹² For if the eagerness is there, it is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ It is not that there may be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality^[4]— ¹⁴ at the present time your surplus is

[available] for their need, so that their abundance may also become [available] for your need, that there may be equality. ¹⁵
As it has been written: **The person who gathered much did not have too much, and the person who gathered little did not have too little.** 2Cor 8:11-15 (HCSB)

This push for “equality” is not the same as what our president is trying to shove down the throats of the American people in the name of “social justice.” Our president is trying to force hard working Americans to cough up more taxes than they (we) are already paying in order to sustain and increase entitlements. This is creating a form of bondage and dependency on big government that is unhealthy for the long term health of our economy and our democracy. Entitlements may buy votes but they erode the spirit of the “American Dream.” And now, more than ever in our history, a whopping 41% of all Americans rely on Uncle Sam for some kind of assistance. This is unreasonable and unsustainable.

Paul was encouraging that believers voluntarily give what they could to relieve the suffering of brothers in other churches. This pattern of generosity, particularly in relieving the suffering of the poor, was established almost in day one of the early church where believers sold property and possessions and laid the proceeds at the disciples feet. It is the church who should be relieving the suffering of the poor and oppressed, not the government. If the church cares for the poor and suffering, it creates a dependency on God rather than government.

4. Model Character of Christ

⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, a man, Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself—a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time. **1** Tim 2:5-6 (HCSB)

Christ totally “gave Himself” for us. When we cooperatively give and serve outside of our own spectrum of “need,” we demonstrate and live out in front of the world the sacrifice and generosity of Christ. We make Christ known most effectively through our unselfish, sacrificial giving and service outside of our own building.

Fact: Americans, thus Christians in America, are in the top 1% of income earners in the world. If you or your family gross \$25,000 per year or more, you are in the top 1% of income earners in the world. That’s most everyone in America. This means that most of the rest of the churches in the world, our brothers and sisters, the saints, average less than \$3600 per year. We have a scriptural and moral duty to endeavor to send and personally deliver relief in the form of offerings and cooperative work with our sister churches around the world. The church as a whole world-wide is suffering more than it ever has.

If we refuse to share our wealth, time, talents and energy with our sister churches around the world who are struggling to make Christ known where they are planted, at the risk of their lives, we are misrepresenting the character and nature of Christ. But, if we cooperate with each other, our Southern Baptist Convention, and other ministries of like faith and purposes, we can make a difference. It must start right here!

Pray for FAITH Riders **Buick, Duncan, Gugliemini,
Reeder**