

Growth of the Southern Baptist Idea of Cooperation into a Baptist Lifestyle.

Dr. Cecil Ray and Susan Ray, his now deceased daughter, have provided us one of our best sources on the Southern Baptist cooperative life-style. Their book presents its thesis in the title, Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World.

Dr. Ray says that "before we as Southern Baptists could adopt a lifestyle of cooperation, we had to learn how to harmonize two great loves - **love of freedom and love of missions.**" The **love of freedom** embodied itself in the autonomous relationship which Southern Baptists guard very closely between the churches and between the associations, conventions and agencies of the denomination. The **love for missions** forged the Cooperative Program which was, and still is, the greatest idea ever conceived for carrying out the Great Commission.

There is One Crowning Love, however, which supersedes our love for freedom and missions, and which energizes both autonomy and cooperative missions. That is **Love for Christ** and **Love for the Word of God**. Dr. Ray underscores this imperative in Baptist life also on the first page of his book. He says that "Only love for Christ Himself and for God's Word are more fundamental to our character and life." He says that this is "how we harmonize these two great loves. Few would credit this development to our own wisdom," he says. "Most people readily acknowledge that this lifestyle was a gift from God."

"Cooperation: The Baptist Way" is essentially the way of "**Love for freedom**" and of "**Love for missions**" harmonized through a sustained **Love for Christ and for God's Word**. These "loves" are **passions** which have embodied themselves in the **Practice of Autonomy**, and in the **Cooperative Program**.

THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

There is a significant statement concerning the Cooperative Program in the 1939 Report of the Executive Committee to the Southern Baptist Convention. "The Cooperative Program," it says, "is the greatest step forward in kingdom finances Southern Baptists have ever undertaken. It is believed to be sane, scriptural, comprehensive, unifying, equitable, economical, and thoroughly workable.

"It is based upon the assumption that all denominational causes will be included, and that all agencies and institutions will cooperate in its promotion, and that all pastors will represent and seek to secure regular, proportionate, and adequate support" from their churches.

These two benchmarks of Baptist life have proven to be the two rails of the track on which our Convention has become the greatest sending force in Christian world missions history.

It is of great concern to me that the Cooperative Program may cease to be what it was conceived to be and will lose its effectiveness if we allow it to break out of the boundaries which gave it existence and over seventy years of history-breaking success.

The Cooperative Program is a tool which most of us believe God shaped and gave Southern Baptists which by its very nature requires that all who participate in it be mutually agreed on the causes it will fund, both on state and SBC levels. The whole concept is that each participating state convention shall be mutually agreed with the SBC to receive the contributions from the churches in that state, and shall retain a percentage of the total as predetermined by the state and shall forward the balance to the SBC treasury which is administered by the SBC Executive Committee.

There is no question but that the vitality if not even the survival of the Cooperative Program depends upon the continuing voluntary cooperation of the state conventions.

Southern Baptists have demonstrated in the Cooperative Program the genius of a system which is built upon the necessity of mutual agreement, and which is sustained in each body by the carry over of convictions and practices from one into the other. The solidarity of the whole body of Southern Baptists is maintained by the prevailing beliefs and attitudes of its total constituency as it participates in one autonomous body and then the other.

Southern Baptist life is exceedingly complex due to the fact that the same people serve as constituents of separate, autonomous state and national conventions. The relationship between the state and national conventions is complicated by the necessity to preserve the autonomous nature of each convention while cooperating in ministries which depend upon offerings from the same churches.

The fact that the constituents of local, autonomous Southern Baptist churches are the providers for ministries at all levels of our cooperative work creates a necessity for cooperation in the collection and distribution of funds. There obviously could never be perfect agreement at all levels. A trust level must be maintained, and in order to do so there must be reasonable agreement and proven integrity in the way the funds are divided and distributed.

In a special committee report presented to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1918, this statement is found concerning the relationship between general SBC boards and state boards: "The matter broached here is a complicated one, arising out of the independence of our Baptist bodies which have the same constituency."

Messengers from the same churches, often even the same persons, convene both the state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention. They go to the State Convention and decide there what portion of the Cooperative Program dollars will remain in the state. Then they go on to the SBC annual session and decide there how the portion that is sent on to the SBC will be divided between the ministries and agencies of the Convention. These decisions are made both at the state and at the national levels. Therefore, Cooperative Program dollars do not belong exclusively to either but to both.

The point of concern is the mutual trust upon which the Cooperative Program arrangement rests. The local church has control of its offerings as long as they remain in hand. However, once these funds are remitted to the state convention, they are entrusted to responsible leaders to see that they are divided according to the agreements the messengers from the churches have reached in convention sessions.

If we encourage our churches to designate Cooperative Program gifts to preferred causes, rather than continuing to encourage them to give unitedly through the Cooperative Program to the causes mutually agreed on between the states and the SBC, **we will cease to have a Cooperative Program.**

In an extensive report presented at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Pittsburgh in 1983 by a special "Cooperative Program Study Committee," it was stated that the committee had addressed at length the matter of changing the structure of the Cooperative Program. This committee reported the following statement:

"There is strong feeling that we should not tamper with the Cooperative Program as it now exists. There is not much openness to change."

The SBC Peace Committee also later addressed the same issue at great length and recommended "that the Cooperative Program be continued unchanged."

Lynn Clayton, editor of the Baptist Messenger of Louisiana, wrote in an editorial several years ago the following statement: "Anyone who seriously proposes changing the structure or purpose of the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program should be studiously careful. The efficiency of the Cooperative Program, its widespread support and its delicate balance, are fit together with miraculous intricacies."

There is a delicate balance in the structure of the Cooperative Program, and in the voluntary participation of our Baptist people across the convention which only a great love for Christ and faithfulness to His Word will sustain.

Excerpt from Lecture on "The Pastor as Churchman"
By Julian M. Motley, Southeastern Seminary, Wake Forest, NC