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DEVELOPING A PLAN TO INCREASE UNDERSTANDING
OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM AT GREENHORN
VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH IN RYE, COLORADO

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Jeffrey William Moats
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DEVELOPING A PLAN TO INCREASE UNDERSTANDING
OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM AT GREENHORN
VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH IN RYE, COLORADO

Jeffrey William Moats

Read and Approved by:

Faculty Supervisor: George H. Martin

Second Reader: J. Keith McKinley

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To my family who endured the struggle with me as I toiled over this opus.
To the thousands of Southern Baptist missionaries all over the world. May our Lord
be pleased to use our cooperative efforts to continue to make disciples
of all nations and peoples for his glory alone.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| PREFACE | vii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Context | 1 |
| Rationale | 2 |
| Purpose | 4 |
| Goals | 4 |
| Research Methodology | 4 |
| Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations | 5 |
| Conclusion | 6 |
| 2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REASONING FOR COOPERATION | 7 |
| The Beginning of Ministry to the Gentiles | 7 |
| The Beginning of the Cross-Cultural Cooperative Church Effort (Acts 11:19–30) | 10 |
| The Church in Antioch Cooperating in the Great Commission (Acts 12:24–13:3) | 13 |
| Cooperating in Leadership | 14 |
| Cooperating in Worship/Service | 16 |
| Cooperating in Fulfilling the Great Commission | 17 |
| Doctrinal Unity Important for Cooperation (Acts 15:1–35) | 18 |
| Doctrinal Division (vv. 1–5) | 19 |
| Hammering Out the Doctrine of Salvation (vv. 6–21) | 20 |
| Doctrine Delivered (vv. 22–29) | 24 |

| Chapter | Page |
|---|------|
| Doctrine Received (vv. 30–35) | 25 |
| Conclusion | 25 |
| 3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE | 27 |
| The Birth of the Convention | 27 |
| Future Thoughts and Concerns | 34 |
| Conclusion | 44 |
| 4. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION | 45 |
| Phase 1 | 47 |
| Phase 2 | 48 |
| Phase 3 | 50 |
| Sermon 1: “Foundations of Great Commission Cooperation” (Acts 11:19–30) | 50 |
| Sermon 2: “The Church Cooperating with God and with One Another” (Acts 12:24–13:3) | 56 |
| Sermon 3: “Unity in Mission” (Acts 15:1–35) | 67 |
| Sermon 4: “Tools in the Toolbox” (Part 1) | 78 |
| Sermon 5: “Tools in the Toolbox” (Part 2) | 87 |
| Conclusion | 99 |
| 5. EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT | 100 |
| Evaluation of the Project’s Purpose | 100 |
| Evaluation of the Project’s Goals | 101 |
| Goal 1: Assess | 101 |
| Goal 2: Develop Preaching Series | 102 |
| Goal 3: Increased Cooperative Program Understanding | 103 |
| Goal 4: A Plan for the Future | 105 |
| Strengths of the Project | 105 |
| Weaknesses of the Project | 107 |
| What I Would Do Differently | 107 |

| | Page |
|---|------|
| Theological Reflections | 108 |
| Personal Reflections..... | 109 |
| Conclusion | 111 |
| Appendix | |
| 1. COOPERATIVE PROGRAM UNDERSTANDING SURVEY | 112 |
| 2. CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC..... | 115 |
| 3. A LONG-TERM COOPERATIVE PROGRAM PLAN..... | 117 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 120 |

PREFACE

I would like to thank my family for encouraging me through this process. I am grateful for their faithful prayers and love. I also want to thank all my brothers and sisters who helped me by participating in this project in any and every way. You have blessed me with your gracious friendship.

Jeff Moats

Rye, Colorado

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical churches around the world seem to recognize the mission of the church as defined by the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and Acts 1. An excellent tool for fulfilling this commission through Southern Baptist churches is the Cooperative Program. This strategy for cooperating churches to collectively carry the gospel to the world has successfully spanned decades but seems to have fallen out of favor in recent years. With this reality in mind, an urgent need exists to help member churches of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) understand the value and beauty of the Cooperative Program in stewarding the Great Commission and Great Commission resources.

Context

Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church (GHVBC) is an established SBC church aligned with the Colorado Baptist General Convention. In 2019, GHVBC celebrated fifty-five years as a constituted church. The church is located in the rural Southern Colorado town of Rye where it has a strong community presence with around 50 to 60 people in attendance for church each week.¹ Attendance of this size may not seem impressive until one also knows the population of the town is only 206 people.² The church building is visible and easily accessible from interstate 165, which runs through town. Interstate 165 is also part of the Frontier Pathways scenic and historic byway, which receives a fair

¹ These attendance numbers were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. More members stay at home and watch services online now because of the virus risk. Current attendance average is around 15.

² United States Census, “Rye town, Colorado Profile,” accessed January 30, 2023, https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=Rye%2C+Colorad&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset_=UTF-8.

amount of visitor travel through the year. Six miles northeast on Interstate 165 is Colorado City. Colorado City had a population of 2,193 at the 2010 census. San Isabel is ten miles to the northwest on the same interstate but is an unincorporated town, which was not included in the census. The population of the surrounding area suggests there is potential for future church growth.

Missional giving is already part of the annual focus at GHVBC, but not in a traditional Southern Baptist way. The church supports two missionary families on a regular basis, but neither of these families was commissioned by a mission board of the SBC. The church financially supports these families through church budget, prayer, and individual giving.

One couple in the church has started a non-profit organization for the purpose of being on mission. Each year this couple sponsors projects locally and leads a short-term international mission trip. The mission trips have supported evangelical churches in other parts of the world but have not been in cooperation with Southern Baptist Mission Board missionaries.

Rationale

Members of Southern Baptist churches in decades past seldom heard about missionaries and mission efforts that were not supported through Cooperative Program efforts. As a result, Southern Baptist missionaries with the North American Mission Board (NAMB) and the International Mission Board (IMB) did not have to compete with other missionaries for support. Now, open access to information through the internet has allowed missionaries from assorted mission agencies to reach people all over the world in all denominations and conventions. SBC church members may be aware of evangelical mission efforts in several locations around the world, but they seem less informed and unconcerned about whether those efforts are a part of the Cooperative Program effort to fulfill the Great Commission.

I am grateful for the increased global awareness that is prevalent at this time in America. Current generations are seeing global barriers removed. One example of increased global awareness is public school classrooms having discussions with classes in other parts of the world via internet connection. Social media platforms of all kinds have also increased global awareness, making global issues quickly accessible from nearly any cell phone or computer.

The enhanced global perspective has filtered into the church as well. Churches have greater access to tools for learning about other countries and the people who inhabit them, and church members seem interested in learning. Many evangelical mission agencies are also bombarding church members with mission opportunities through internet marketing and social media.

In contrast to an expanded worldview, general knowledge about how SBC churches fulfill the Great Commission seems to be lagging. SBC church members are being drawn into many avenues of support for missional effort that are not connected with the SBC and the Cooperative Program. My concern is the Cooperative Program might cease to exist or become largely irrelevant if SBC churches do not do a better job of promoting Cooperative Program efforts to impact the world for God's glory. Declining giving percentages to the Cooperative Program throughout the SBC justify this concern. In the mid 1920s, SBC churches on average gave roughly 11 percent to the Cooperative Program. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, giving was down to 8.8 percent.³ An article published in 2023 reported that the average Cooperative Program giving has dropped to 4.59 percent.⁴ The tragedy of a cessation of the Cooperative Program would not be the end of a program, but of the lack of impact made for the kingdom of God

³ Timothy George, "The Southern Baptist Cooperative Program: Heritage and Challenge," *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 2 (1985): 11.

⁴ William Thornton, "Average CP percentage and a Few Other New Stats: 2023 Book of Reports," *SBC Voices*, May 17, 2023, <https://sbcvoices.com/average-cp-percentage-and-a-few-other-new-stats-2023-book-of-reports/>.

through the loss of this particular program.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to increase Cooperative Program understanding among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado.

Goals

The following goals were established toward the successful completion of this project.

1. The first goal was to assess the current level of Cooperative Program understanding among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church.
2. The second goal was to develop a five-week preaching series on the missional effort of the Cooperative Program.
3. The third goal was to increase understanding of the Cooperative Program among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church.
4. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to further increase awareness and engagement with the Cooperative Program at GHVBC.

Research Methodology

Four goals were established to determine the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess the current level of Cooperative Program understanding among members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. This goal was measured by administering a survey to members during the Sunday service.⁵ Success of this goal was considered accomplished when fifteen members completed the survey.

The second goal of this project was to develop a five-week preaching series on the missional effort of the Cooperative Program. The Cooperative Program involves more than the missional efforts of churches, but this plan focused specifically on how the Cooperative Program helps churches and individuals fulfill the Great Commission.

⁵ See appendix 1. All the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

Attainment of this goal was measured by a leadership panel who used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the teaching plan.⁶ The goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, then the material was revised until it met the standard.

The third goal for this project was to increase understanding of the Cooperative Program among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. Goal fruition was determined by administering a post-test after the preaching series, and comparing responses to the pre-test, to measure the change in Cooperative Program understanding.⁷ This goal was considered successfully met when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a statistically significant positive difference in the pre- and post-test scores.

The fourth project goal was the development of a ministry plan to further increase awareness and engagement with the Cooperative Program at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. This goal was considered complete when a plan had been developed and delivered to the leadership team of the church.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

Cooperative Program. The Cooperative Program is the SBC's unified plan of giving through which cooperating Southern Baptist churches give a percentage of their undesignated receipts in support of their respective state conventions and the SBC missions and ministries.⁸

This project had two limitations. First, the attendance of the participants for all five lessons was a limitation. The highest attendance numbers were around 50 to 60

⁶ See appendix 2.

⁷ See appendix 3.

⁸ "Statistics: Cooperative Program," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://www.sbc.net/missions/the-cooperative-program/about-the-cooperative-program/>.

people when I first began serving at GHVBC, and these attendance numbers are a relatively small sample number. However, numbers dropped significantly after the COVID pandemic and made the sample number even smaller. This limitation made it a challenge to obtain the goal of fifteen members participating in the project, but it was achieved.

Second, the accuracy of the surveys was dependent on the willingness of participants to honestly answer the survey and be willing to take two surveys.

Delimitations were established for this project. First, the project involved only members and regular attendees at GHVBC. Second, the project was conducted during the worship hour. This project only included members and regular attenders of GHVBC. Finally, the project included participants age fifteen and above.

Conclusion

Ajith Fernando recognizes in his commentary, “Developing models of partnership . . . is a vital need for the church today.”⁹ Global cognizance and zeal for Great Commission ministry are laudable traits among church members, and the Cooperative Program is an effective tool for fulfilling this global zeal. However, the Cooperative Program may cease to exist or be greatly diminished if future generations are not made aware of Cooperative Program support plan and mission opportunities. Chapter 2 will lay a biblical foundation for working together to fulfill the mission of sharing the gospel with all the world.

⁹ Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 359.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REASONING FOR
COOPERATION

God calls his people throughout Scripture to proclaim the gospel message to the rest of the world. While this is not exclusively a New Testament idea, Matthew 28 and Acts 1 certainly remind Christians of the call to tell others about Jesus the Messiah. The fulfillment of this clarion call is gloriously realized through the church when God's people collaboratively work toward that goal. Because the book of Acts is a record of the first churches carrying out the Great Commission, this chapter will examine three different portions of Scripture from the Acts to establish this position.

The Beginning of Ministry to the Gentiles

The Holy Spirit is powerfully active throughout the Acts of the Apostles. John Polhill comments,

The role of the Holy Spirit is part of the emphasis on God's providence in Acts. . . . In a real sense, the church was born of the Spirit at Pentecost (chap. 2) just as the infancy narrative of Luke's Gospel shows how Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit. The parallel does not end there. Just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22) and continued to abide with him throughout his ministry (Luke 4:18), so the Spirit was the constant companion in the life of the young church. The Holy Spirit is a gift to every believer (Acts 2:38) and comes as a special endowment of power in times of crisis to enable a bold witness (cf. 4:8). The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures that the Christian community saw being fulfilled in its own time (cf. 4:25).¹

Early chapters focus especially on the evangelistic efforts in reaching Jews with the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Chapter 8 is the first time a gospel presentation to a Gentile is mentioned, as Polhill notes, "The Gentile mission, for instance, actually began

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 64.

with Philip. Then it was initiated anew by Peter with Cornelius (chap. 10). Finally, it was taken up fully by the Antioch church (11:20).² But even that incident was not an intentional effort by the church. In Acts 8:26, Luke informs, “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’” Philip went because he was dispatched by an angel, not because he was commissioned by the church. The context suggests Philip gave no consideration to evangelizing anyone other than fellow Hebrews. He was not a rogue church member doing his own thing either. Philip was obeying a command from a messenger of God. Philip’s obedience led to an opportunity to share the gospel message with a eunuch from Ethiopia. Although Philip was not commissioned by the church for this missionary effort, he was obeying God’s command. As a result of Philip’s obedience, the Ethiopian heard the good news, believed in the Lord Jesus, and was saved by the grace of God.

It is not certain if the church would have supported the evangelization of a Gentile eunuch, but it is certain the church was not the sending agency. Although the church was not collectively involved in this effort, one man’s act of obedience resulted in the gospel being carried to Ethiopia. This gospel interaction with a Gentile also set the stage for intentional outreach to Gentiles later in the book of Acts.

The next encounter with a Gentile is when Peter takes the gospel to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius was “a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort” (v. 1). From the context of Peter’s dream in chapter 10, one can deduce that Cornelius was not a Jew because Peter identifies him as one “of another nation” (v. 28). Further interpretive support for Cornelius being a Gentile is in the response of the apostles in Acts 11:1–18. After listening to Peter’s report of what happened with Cornelius, the apostles and the church replied, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (v. 18).

The church was happy to hear Peter’s report about the gospel impact on Gentile

² Polhill, *Acts*, 62.

lives. They rejoiced that God had granted Gentiles repentance and salvation. However, the church was not the sending institution behind this gospel encounter either. God directly commissioned Peter for this mission, and the church was about to become more collectively involved and cooperative in fulfilling the Lord's Great Commission.

A quick survey of commentary outlines suggests differences of opinion exist as to when ministry to Gentiles actually begins in the book of Acts. Ajith Fernando's outline in the NIV Application Commentary has the ministry "to the Ends of the Earth" beginning in 11:19,³ F. F. Bruce places the beginning of Gentile ministry in Acts 9:32–12:24,⁴ while David Peterson sets Gentile salvation in Acts 10:30–48.⁵

Darrell Bock contends that the gospel goes out to a Gentile and his household for the first time in Acts 10:1–11:18.⁶ Bock's outline of the book of Acts places gospel proclamation to Gentiles in a portion of Scripture beginning in Acts 10:32.⁷ However, Bock points to Philip's encounter with the eunuch as part of the gospel going to Judea and Samaria.⁸ An Ethiopian would certainly be counted among the Gentiles so one wonders why this encounter would not be included with the gospel going to the Gentiles.

When the gospel is presented to the household of Cornelius, his family is living in Caesarea in a region of Samaria. Bock classifies this as a Gentile gospel encounter because the recipients are Gentiles even though the encounter took place in Samaria. With the Ethiopian the classification appears to be based on the location of the encounter rather than the ethnicity of the gospel recipient. Bock's distinction about the

³ Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 43.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), ix.

⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), ix.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 380.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, viii.

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, vii.

location of the evangelism instead of the national heritage of the person hearing the gospel seems awkward. Why classify one gospel encounter based on its location and another based on the heritage of the people hearing? Philip would certainly have been able to discern the eunuch was not a Hebrew by the level of melanin in the eunuch's skin and therefore would have considered the eunuch a Gentile. Labeling the encounter with the eunuch as the initial presentation of the gospel to Gentiles seems more consistent than imposing the region of Judea and Samaria on the providential connection with a Gentile from Ethiopia. Although the collective church was not yet intentional about reaching Gentiles, the Holy Spirit was very intentional in bringing the gospel to this Gentile eunuch.

Bock's introduction to his commentary on Acts 9:32–12:25 notes, "This section of Acts transitions from Peter to Paul, from Jerusalem to Antioch, from outreach to Jews to Gentile inclusion."⁹ I agree that there is a transition in this section, but I suggest the transition is the church becoming collectively supportive of the outreach to the Gentiles. When Peter presents to the church what happened with Cornelius, the church not only celebrates but also begins sharing the good news of Jesus with the Gentiles (Acts 11:1–25). John Polhill states, "The significant new development in chap. 10 is that Peter became committed to the Gentile mission. His testimony would be instrumental in leading the mother church in Jerusalem to endorse the Gentile mission and thus lend it legitimacy and continuity with the ministry of the apostles (11:1–18; 15:7–11)."¹⁰ Peter's commitment to the Gentile mission leads the entire church to embrace cooperative mission efforts to the Gentiles. Attention now turns to Acts 11:19–30 for examination of the text as it relates to cooperative mission effort.

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, 374.

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 249.

The Beginning of the Cross-Cultural Cooperative Church Effort (Acts 11:19–30)

Acts 11:19–21 records followers of Jesus were scattered because of the persecution that arose after Stephen was stoned for preaching about Jesus as the Messiah. Some of the scattered church traveled into Gentile lands but continued to preach Jesus solely to the Jewish population of those areas. Some of the dispersed Jews from Gentile territories of Cyprus and Cyrene were also daring enough to present the gospel to Greeks in Antioch.

Some English translations use the word “Hellenists” instead of “Greeks” in 11:20 as a literal translation of the original language. Polhill comments, “There was an extensive Jewish community in Antioch,” but this does not necessitate using the word “Hellenist” in the translation.¹¹ Plenty of English translations exist that opt for “Greeks” instead of “Hellenists.”¹² Significant contextual evidence also exists for understanding these people to be Greeks instead of simply Greek-influenced and Greek-speaking Hebrews. Verse 19 recalls the dispersed disciples sharing the gospel exclusively with Jews. Immediately following this verse by saying the disciples began sharing the same good news with Greek speaking Jews would not be a substantial contrast in the context. I agree with David Peterson who suggests “Greeks” “as an easier reading introduced by copyists to clarify that these were truly Gentiles.”¹³

According to Acts 11:21, a significant number of Gentiles believed what was being preached, and Luke allows his readers to know the outcome is the Lord’s work by recording, “The Lord’s hand was with them.” The church in Jerusalem is the very first church formed by those who sat under the direct teaching of Jesus. One can understand why that church would be concerned about the veracity of the gospel among Gentiles who did *not* sit under the direct teaching of Jesus. The Jerusalem church wants to be

¹¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 269.

¹² For example, NASB, CSB, the NIV, and the LSB.

¹³ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 353.

certain these Gentile believers are believing the same message and in the same Lord rather than promoting and believing in some distorted form of the gospel. The Jerusalem church may have also wanted to see if what they heard in Antioch was the same as Peter had reported in Acts 11:1–21.

In Acts 11:22–24 the church in Jerusalem sends the Son of Encouragement to the Gentiles to verify the authenticity of the new church and the message they had received. This visit from a member of the church in Jerusalem is an example of cooperative effort. One can see in this example a cooperative effort to promote the same gospel message and to encourage the church toward good health in the faith. The Son of Encouragement lived up to his name and character.¹⁴

In the first century, when Barnabas arrived, he embraced the new Gentile believers as part of the church and encouraged them to be faithful to the Lord and the message they had received. He then departed for another town where he invited Paul to join him in the work in Antioch. This is another example of cooperative effort by the early church because Paul was in Tarsus at the time. In a spirit of working together for the advance of the gospel, believers in Jerusalem sent Barnabas, and Barnabas got his Christian brother, Paul, to help in the discipleship at Antioch. Churches from two different parts of the world collaborated to help a third church grow strong in the faith. Verse 26 says that Barnabas and Paul spent an entire year meeting with this new church to disciple them in the gospel. Working together, these believers helped the church members grow in faith and equipped the church for gospel influence. Southern Baptist churches work in similar cooperative fashion through their missionaries. IMB and NAMB missionaries are not only planting new churches but are strengthening and encouraging existing churches.

¹⁴ The SBC, in a similar manner, asks its missionaries to sign a document saying they are in agreement with the Convention's statement of faith, known as *The Baptist Faith and Message*. This is a means of assuring the same biblical beliefs are being communicated by each of the commissioned missionaries of the SBC. A core statement of beliefs helps promote a spirit of cooperation in communicating the gospel to a lost world. The first church understood this need for unity in the gospel and the SBC strives to continue in a similar vein of unified proclamation and cooperation today.

These missionaries do not all come from the same church, but they represent churches spread across the country and are sent into all parts of the world to fulfill the Great Commission by means of Cooperative Program funding.

Finally, while Barnabas and Paul were still with the believers in Antioch, the Gentile disciples had an opportunity to give back to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:28-29). A great famine was predicted in Jerusalem by the power of the Holy Spirit and the disciples in Antioch agreed they should help the church that sent them help in the person of Barnabas. The Antioch believers took an offering to help the Jerusalem church during its time of famine and they sent the assistance by the hands of Barnabas and Paul. The fledgling church that began as a result of gospel proclamation through some scattered Jerusalem Christians was seeking to give back to the Jerusalem church. This serves as another example of the spirit of cooperation that is part of the church DNA. The Gentile church wants to help other Christians in need and help advance the gospel. There is no mention of ethnic differences between the two churches, only a desire to help fellow Christians. As a result, both churches continue in the ministry of the Great Commission.

This same spirit of working together for the kingdom of God is how Southern Baptist churches are encouraged to work together for the kingdom through the Cooperative Program. Churches and associations of churches cooperate for kingdom growth rather than competing with each other.

The Church in Antioch Cooperating for the Great Commission (Acts 12:24–13:3)

While Barnabas and Paul were discipling believers in Antioch, Acts 12:1–23 records persecution of the apostles at the hands of Herod. Rather than quenching the Christian movement, Acts 12:24 records, “The word of God increased and multiplied.”

Acts 12:25 serves as a reminder of the famine relief sent to the Jerusalem church from Antioch. Acts 11:19–30 records the inception of this collaborative disaster relief effort. Barnabas and Paul were sent as representatives with the collection from the

church in Antioch. The gift from Antioch certainly would have been received as a welcome gift to sustain the physical bodies of the church in Jerusalem. The gift also would likely have strengthened the spirit of the church members for further Great Commission ministry as they reflected on how God was meeting needs in Jerusalem through a fledgling church in Antioch. After delivering the gift, Barnabas and Paul proceeded on their way back to the church in Antioch where they had just spent a year discipling this new, primarily Gentile, church.

The young church at Antioch seems to already have a good understanding of the blessing of working together with other churches. Antioch had been blessed by the Jerusalem church sending Barnabas to them. Barnabas brought Paul from Tarsus as another blessing to Antioch. Then Antioch returned the blessing by sending financial aid to help the Jerusalem church to continue their gospel ministry. The early verse of chapter 13 shows more ways in which cooperating was a part of the DNA in the Antioch church.

Cooperating in Leadership

The church members mentioned in the beginning of Acts 13 formed a beautiful collective of varied backgrounds worshipping and ministering together in the Antioch church. The diversity of the leaders mentioned in verse 1 was a testimony to the cooperative spirit that crossed ethnic and cultural boundaries within the church. Peterson comments, “What is most obvious is the ethnic diversity of the leadership of this church.”¹⁵ No less than five different origins were mentioned as prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. Barnabas was mentioned first, and from Acts 4:36 the reader knows he was from the island of Cyprus. The next person mentioned in the text is Simeon who was also called Niger. Ajith Fernando notes, “Simeon is a Jewish name, but he is called Niger, meaning black.”¹⁶ This nickname may have indicated the color of his

¹⁵ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 374.

¹⁶ Fernando, *Acts*, 373.

skin and point to ancestry from Africa.

Lucius of Cyrene is the next leader in the text. Cyrene was in North Africa and Fernando identifies it as present-day Libya.¹⁷ Manean follows Lucius in the text, and he is noted as a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch. Manean is a Jewish name but as the NASB translates, “He was brought up with Herod the Tetrarch.” Not only was Manean a lifelong friend, but he was also a man of considerable means and influence, having been reared in the same house as the king. Saul is mentioned last. Acts 9:11 identifies Saul as hailing from Tarsus and the reader knows he was an educated Jew. Acts 22:3 identifies Saul as a Jew from Tarsus and tells of his education under the tutelage of Gamaliel according to the strictest adherence to the law of God.

This leadership portrait is a colorful reminder of the kind of worship described by the apostle John in Revelation 7:9–12 where one reads about “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (v. 9). The ethnically diverse leadership team also serves as a reminder to churches that they are called to reach all peoples of the world. Christians are called to worship the Lord Jesus Christ together with people of all colors, languages, and nations. As Revelation 7:9 reminds, eschatological worship of the Lord will be a multicultural, collaborative gathering. The church at Antioch reflected this intention through the cooperative diversity of their leadership.

The ethnically and socially diverse group of leaders was working and worshipping together regardless of their different cultural backgrounds and skin tones. This cooperative attitude in leadership eventually displayed itself in other cooperative areas of church life such as worship, and Great Commission ministry. A cooperative mindset in the local body is crucial for encouraging a spirit of cooperation with other churches for the sake of fulfilling the Great Commission. When diverse members of local churches cannot work together with each other, they will not likely work together with

¹⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, 373.

congregations from different regions or with different backgrounds. As the name implies, the Cooperative Program depends on a spirit of cooperation that embraces and transcends differences.

Recently, Southern Baptists have been able to celebrate increased ethnic church diversity. The greatest growth changes in the SBC have been among ethnic congregations for the last two decades with African American congregations making the greatest advance in the first decade of the twenty-first century and Asian American congregations leading the way in the second decade of this century.¹⁸

While true ethnic diversity is increasing among the SBC churches, individual congregations may not be experiencing a cultural blend. Even the report mentioned above segregates the statistics by ethnic congregations, instead of a congregation of variety in culture and color, there are African American congregations, Asian American congregations, Hispanic congregations, and Anglo congregations. The SBC still has great room for improvement to overcome what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. labeled in 1963 as the most segregated hour.¹⁹

Cooperating in Worship/Service

The diverse group gathered to worship and fast. Different interpretations are offered in commentaries about who the pronoun “they” identifies in Acts 13:2. Peterson concludes the reference is a meeting of the leaders described in this verse even if the entire church is involved in the commissioning later in chapter 14.²⁰ Bock suggests verse 2 likely refers to a congregational worship,²¹ and Polhill agrees: “In v. 2 ‘they’ likely

¹⁸ “Ethnic Fellowships Dashboard,” Great Commission Relations and Mobilization Ethnic Research Portal, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://baptistresearch.com>.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “11 A. M. Sunday Is Our Most Segregated Hour,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1963.

²⁰ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 375.

²¹ Bock, *Acts*, 439.

refers to the entire Antioch congregation gathered for worship.”²²

The word translated “worship” is only used three times in the New Testament and two of those times it is translated “service.” Peterson notes that the word “was generally used of public service rendered by someone to benefit others . . . though the verb and related terms were also employed in the LXX in a technical sense to describe priestly service to God.”²³ It seems best to understand that the leaders of the church were serving in their leadership capacity during a corporate service when the Holy Spirit directed that Paul and Barnabas should be set apart for a future ministry.

Polhill states, “That they were fasting indicates the church was in a mood of particular expectancy and openness to the Lord’s leading.”²⁴ F. F. Bruce concurs the church in the New Testament seemed especially open to communication from the Holy Spirit during times of fasting.²⁵ Little wonder the church was able to hear from the Spirit while they were united in heart and mind worshipping and fasting. This spirit of unity and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit is a fruitful seed bed for united cooperation in the Great Commission.

Cooperating in Fulfilling the Great Commission

Acts 13:3 is the first record of missionaries being sent out by the church. This church was setting a precedent for other churches in the first sending service. The service was certainly not an ordination service, for the apostle Paul considered himself ordained as an apostle by the Lord Jesus in chapter 9. Polhill rightly observes, “In modern terms it was a commissioning service for the two missionaries.”²⁶ The church in Antioch is

²² Polhill, *Acts*, 249.

²³ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 375.

²⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

²⁵ Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 245–46.

²⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

cooperating with the Holy Spirit of God who called Paul and Barnabas to minister to the Gentiles and cooperating with each other as they affirmed the call of the Holy Spirit on this ministry. The church in Antioch became the first sending church in the mission to other Gentiles. Their spirit of cooperation in leadership and in worship yielded the fruit of cooperation in the Great Commission. This same kind of submission to and cooperation with the Holy Spirit is portrayed each time a Southern Baptist church recommends one of its members to IMB or NAMB. These churches not only yield in cooperation with the Holy Spirit who is calling out members for missionary service, but they are also working in collaboration with all SBC churches to support the mission.

An amazing precedent was set by Antioch in their sacrificial attitude for fulfilling the Great Commission. The church graciously and willingly sent out their best teacher and their best encourager in Paul and Barnabas. Churches do well today by prayerfully sending out their best and brightest to the unreached and unengaged people groups of the world rather than hoarding those human resources for their own benefit. A recent article asserts, if churches are serious about giving sacrificially so that all the world may hear the gospel of Jesus, then they must be willing to sacrificially release, not only their finances, but also their best members in a cooperative mindset to make disciples of all the world.²⁷ The church in Antioch is a spectacular example of sacrificial cooperation in Great Commission work. Through the Cooperative Program of the SBC, local SBC churches and church members also have opportunities for sacrificial cooperation to advance the kingdom of Christ.

Doctrinal Unity Important for Cooperation (Acts 15:1–35)

Shared core beliefs are common among businesses and non-profit organizations. Shared core beliefs and values help keep the organization focused on the main things and

²⁷ “Dear Local Church: Send Your Best to the Mission Field,” Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, accessed August 26, 2024, <https://abwe.org/blog/pastors-send-your-best/>.

encourage an atmosphere of unity. The same can be said for shared common beliefs for the church. Common beliefs allow churches to work together in unity toward common goals. Common beliefs for churches are called “doctrines,” and many churches have some form of doctrinal summary statement. For the Southern Baptist Convention, this summary statement is called *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

Acts 15 is an important chapter in which the early church defines the essential doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. The unity forged by this shared belief encouraged great cooperation among the churches for the future.

Doctrinal Division (vv. 1–5)

After the shocking positive response of Gentiles to the proclamation of the gospel, questions and differences began to arise in the early church about what is or should be required of Gentiles who convert to become followers of Jesus. A group within the Christian community was promulgating the necessity of Gentile converts to submit to the Old Covenant teaching and traditions of Judaism if they desired to be part of the New Covenant community. Therefore, this group was demanding Gentiles be circumcised and submit to the whole law of Moses.

The problem with these demands is that Peter, Barnabas, and Paul had not made such demands in their ministries to Gentiles. Bruce comments, “The whole issue had to be debated and decided at the highest level. Otherwise, there was grave danger of a complete cleavage between the churches of Jerusalem and Judea on the one hand and the church of Antioch and her daughter-churches on the other.”²⁸ The issue of circumcision and keeping the law of Moses created “no small dissension” (v. 2). The word “dissension” is translated from the Greek word *stasis*, which is also translated “insurrection” or “riot” in the ESV. Luke uses this word more than any other author in the New Testament. Six occurrences

²⁸ Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 287.

are in the book of Acts (15:2; 19:40; 23:7, 10; 24:5) and two occurrences are in the book of Luke (23:19, 25). Only two other times is the word used in the New Testament, once in Mark (15:7) and once in Hebrews (9:8). David Allen proposes that Luke wrote Hebrews from Rome after the death of Paul and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.²⁹ If Allen is correct in his assertion that Luke is the author of Hebrews then Mark is the only other New Testament author to use this word.

The same Greek word is used to describe the activities of Barabbas as an insurrectionist in Mark 15:7 and to describe the response from the crowd in Acts 19:40. Acts 24:5 also shows this Greek word is often understood as an activity punishable by the reigning Roman government. These references help the reader understand how heated the debate must have been when Paul and Barnabas heard the report of Pharisees demanding the circumcision of Gentile converts.

Polhill observes that the moral law given through Moses was never in question, but the ritual aspects of the law such as circumcision and food restrictions seemed strange and arbitrary to most Gentiles. Polhill concludes that to have required such ritual tradition would have killed effective ministry to Gentiles and adds, “The stakes were high in the Jerusalem Council.”³⁰

Doctrinal differences can severely hinder collaborative Great Commission efforts. The evidence suggests this was not a minor difference of opinion but rather a loud, passionate, and heated debate. If the church was going to remain a cooperating body of believers, they would have to settle this question and teach a unified message about the essentials of salvation.

²⁹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary, vol. 35 (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 48.

³⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 324.

Hammering Out the Doctrine of Salvation (vv. 6–21)

The leadership of the church gathered in Jerusalem to hear the arguments about this heated debate. Some commentaries suggest the whole church was present, but all do not agree on this. Peterson concludes the whole assembly refers to the entire congregation of the church. He alludes to verses 4 and 22 of chapter 13 and suggests, “‘The whole multitude’ is equivalent to ‘the church’ in vv. 4, 22.”³¹

In contrast, Fernando says, “We cannot be sure whether the whole church was present at this meeting.”³² Those who contend the whole church had gathered point to the words, “All the assembly” in verse 12 as their evidence the whole church heard the debate.³³ However, those same words may be applied solely to the elders and apostles who had assembled for that day. The word translated “assembly” in the ESV is the original word *plethos*. This word can mean congregation but most of the other words used to translate are generic terms that can refer to any size or number.³⁴ The context clues seem to point back to verse 6 as the antecedent, which would mean the whole group that heard was the group of the elders and apostles.

Because Luke says Barnabas and Paul “were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders” in verse 4, he seems to intentionally differentiate between the larger group in verse 4 and a smaller group (apostles and elders) in verse 6. We may not be completely certain who is included in the “whole assembly” of verse 12, but it seems possible Luke was referring to the whole group last mentioned in verse 6 as the antecedent rather than the entire congregation.

Peter is the first to testify concerning the issue and he relates the events from

³¹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 428.

³² Fernando, *Acts*, 415.

³³ Bock, Bruce, and Peterson all contend the entire church assembled to hear the discussion about Gentile requirements for salvation.

³⁴ *Plethos* can also mean group, number, people, crowd.

Acts 10 with Cornelius and his household. Scholars suggest as many as ten years had passed since Peter visited Cornelius and shared the gospel with all in his household.³⁵ Enough time had certainly passed for news about the conversion of Cornelius to have spread throughout the Christian community. Peter is reminding them what they have already heard about the extraordinary event of Gentile salvation. Peter recalls God is the one who made the choice to send the gospel to the Gentiles through him (v. 7), and God affirmed their saving faith by sending the Holy Spirit on them just as he had done with the Jews at Pentecost (v. 8). Peter says God did not make a distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles when he preached to them, and to demand adherence to the customs of Moses would be putting God to the test. Peter calls the church to cooperate with God and the work God is doing among the Gentiles. God cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith and the Jews should not put a burden on the Gentiles that they have not been able to keep themselves (vv. 9–10).

Peter concludes in verse 11 by saying, “We believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” God saved the Jews by his grace and not by their keeping of the law. The unity of these two very different cultures and people will also be accomplished by the grace of God rather than observance of Mosaic law and tradition. Peter wants to cooperate with God in the work of reaching Gentiles with the gospel and not be found testing God by adding requirements for salvation.

As noted previously, “all the assembly” does not demand the entire church was present, but it does at least communicate the entire population of verse 6 was present “to consider this matter.” Regardless of who was present at the time, the entire gathered group became silent when they heard Peter’s defense for salvation by grace alone through faith alone. The cacophony of verse 2 had become a din of silence.

Barnabas and Paul break the silence by sharing their own testimonies of what they have seen God do among the Gentiles. Perhaps their testimonies *in Jerusalem* were

³⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 499; Polhill, *Acts*, 326.

similar to what they had been sharing on their journey *to* Jerusalem. Readers are not given the detail of these testimonies, but it was important to Luke that his readers understood the missionaries to the Gentiles spoke up for the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles. The signs and wonders were affirmation the work was truly from God. “That God would work miracles in the midst of the Gentiles is another divine indicator for the Gentiles’ inclusion,” says Bock.³⁶

James speaks next and, as Ajith Fernando notes, “from what he says and the way he says it, it becomes obvious that he is now the leader of the church in Jerusalem.”³⁷ The fact that he spoke last and had such a definitive role in the council denotes the seniority or primacy of James’s leadership role in the church according to Peterson.³⁸ Bruce espouses, “The church’s readiness to recognize his leadership was due more to his personal character and record than to his blood relationship to the Lord,” and, “when he said, ‘Listen to me,’ they listened.”³⁹

James summarizes and sanctions Peter’s experience from witnessing to the Gentiles. Luke, the inspired author of the book of Acts, poetically uses the same wording for James’s summary that he used in his Gospel account to speak about God visiting Israel to redeem them (Luke 1:68). Luke uses this word for heavenly visitation (*episkeptomai*) more frequently than any other New Testament author. A majority of uses are translated into some form of the word “visit” in the ESV.⁴⁰ Just as God visited the people of Israel to redeem them, Luke records James as saying God visited the Gentiles to redeem them. Peter’s eyewitness testimony of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles verifies the visit is from God. James now directs the council to the Word of God

³⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 502.

³⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, 417.

³⁸ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 429.

³⁹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 292.

⁴⁰ See Luke 1:68,78; 7:16, 23; 15:36.

by quoting from the prophets.

The primary text quoted is from the Greek translation of Amos 9:11–12. Commentaries speculate portions from other prophets are added at the beginning and end of this quote as well.⁴¹ While these speculations are possibilities and not certainties, the quote from Amos is certain.

James interprets the events with Peter and Cornelius as fulfilling the prophecy in Amos. As Bock reminds, Amos is not the only prophet to speak about the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of God.⁴² James affirms the testimonies from Peter, Barnabas, and Paul through the truth of God’s Word and the authority of God’s Word seems to end all debate.

Doctrine Delivered (vv. 22–29)

The whole process of clarifying the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Jesus Christ alone has been a collaborative effort from the beginning of chapter 15. The delivery of the final decision to the Gentile churches continues in the same vein. The collective group of elders and apostles along with the whole church (v. 22) thought it good to send the decision to Gentile churches by the hands of Barnabas and Paul along with representatives from the Jerusalem church.

The decision to send emissaries from the Jerusalem church was a wise move that added veracity to the decision communicated in the letter. This move made it more difficult for people to claim Paul and Barnabas only heard what they wanted to hear because the letter and the messengers from the Jerusalem church all said the same thing. Peterson notes that the Jerusalem church was also hoping to heal any possible strains between the churches.⁴³ The content of the letter (vv. 23–29) suggests Peterson’s

⁴¹ There is no need to delve deeper into these speculations for the purpose of this chapter. For further reading consider commentaries by Bock, Bruce, and Peterson.

⁴² Bock, *Acts*, 503.

⁴³ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 437.

assessment is accurate. The Jerusalem church appears to comfort and reassure the Gentile church by letting the Gentile church know they are aware of the current concern and they did not commission the messengers nor the message of their concern. The Jerusalem church desires to proceed in ministry with Gentile believers in a spirit of cooperation united by the essentials of the gospel of grace and the Holy Spirit of God.

Doctrine Received (vv. 30–35)

The letter was delivered, and it brought joy and encouragement to the Gentile churches. The Gentiles seemed eager to avoid those offenses mentioned in the letter and they must also have been pleased to know they would not have to keep the Torah and the covenant sign of circumcision. The Gentiles were not only encouraged by the letter but also by Judas and Silas, members of the Jerusalem church, who encouraged with their many words, or “long message.” Unity in fellowship between the Jewish background believers and the Gentile background believers was solidified through unity of doctrine.

The council that met in the Jerusalem church was important for future unity of the worldwide church. Peterson astutely notes, “However, the aim of the council was not unity at any cost.”⁴⁴ The council wanted to protect Christian fellowship between churches of different cultures and guard the integrity of scriptural authority at the same time.

Conclusion

The council that met in Jerusalem had a significant impact on the cooperation among these churches. The council’s impact on Christian community is seen at least in two ways. First is the obvious example of conflict resolution. The church leaders listened to testimony of how God was working and they sought to interpret the events through the truth of Scripture. The unity of the churches centered around their unity on the truthfulness of God’s holy Word. Their unity was built on the foundation of biblical doctrine.

⁴⁴ Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 442.

Second, the council's decision also set a precedent on what impact tradition and culture should have on the life of a follower of Jesus. The council's answer communicated culture and tradition did not have to be forfeited to be a follower of Jesus if culture and tradition were not contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Polhill writes, "They did not cease to be Jews when they became Christians."⁴⁵ This truth is gargantuan. No one must forfeit the cultural identity of their unique people group to become a follower of Jesus. Each person is still called to repent of their sin regardless of what culture they come from, but culture does not have to be totally abandoned to follow Jesus. Everything good about each culture and each people group was created by our good God and for his glory.

⁴⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 337.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

The Cooperative Program has not existed from the beginning of the SBC. This chapter will show how the stated purpose of the SBC led to the inception of the Cooperative Program as a means to fulfill the SBC's stated purpose and address some future concerns.

The Birth of the Convention

The SBC began when

messengers from missionary societies, churches, and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination in various parts of the United States met in Augusta, Georgia, May 8, 1845, for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent intention of our constituents by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of the gospel.¹

The newly formed convention of churches was not slow in putting the stated purpose into practice. Almost immediately, leaders were selected for the Foreign Mission Board and the Domestic Mission Board. J. B. Jeter was selected for the former and Basil Manly was selected for the latter. These men quickly got to work forming strategies to be implemented by SBC churches for the fulfillment of this one sacred effort.

The stated goal of worldwide gospel propagation clearly points to an original intention of cooperation for the purpose of reaching lost souls with the good news of the gospel. Gospel proclamation has been a focal theme of Southern Baptist life since the inception of the Convention. However, from the beginning of the SBC until the establishment of the Cooperative Program, this cooperative vision was more like a free

¹ "Constitution," The Southern Baptist Convention, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/>.

for all than a united effort. Each missional cause and agency was fighting for time in the pulpits of churches to ask for financial support. Each entity was busy seeking support for itself and seemingly not considering the needs of other missional causes. Cecil Ray and Susan Ray comment, “The more numerous the mission causes and institutions became, the more overwhelming the burden of appeals became for the churches . . . the complaint was too many appeals; simply hearing them interfered with the pastor’s pulpit ministry and trying to respond to them all caused frustration.”² Therefore, instead of working together to fulfill the Great Commission, they were, perhaps unwittingly, working against each other as they vied for the same finances from the same churches and church members. Sadly, much of the money collected was spent on expenses associated with gathering more funding. As an example, in 1876, the Domestic Mission Board (now called the North American Mission Board) collected \$19,000 for missions, but 44 percent was spent on administration, the largest portion of which was spent on agents.³

Brand and Hankin also report that agents employed to raise support for the mission boards were inconsistent in their visits to churches. Some churches might go two or three years between visits from a fundraising agent. At the same time, bigger churches with bigger budgets would find themselves inundated with multiple agents all vying for time and a slice of the budget pie.⁴ The goal was commendable, but the methodology was inefficient and far from reaching the cooperative vision of global evangelization cast by the inaugural convention.

Within the first fifteen years of the SBC, discontent with the agency system had already been indicated. A variety of other means was employed to attempt to raise the necessary funds to support the Convention’s two mission boards. Annual appeals at

² Cecil Ray and Susan Ray, *Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World* (Nashville: Stewardship Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 24.

³ Chad Brand and David E. Hankins, *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: B & H, 2005), 91.

⁴ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 91.

conventions and association meetings and designated representatives making appearances at local churches for some of the missional causes are among the varied efforts. However, a system better than the agency method had not yet been developed.

Conceptual groundwork for the Cooperative Program was laid by I. T. Tichenor who was elected secretary of the Home Mission Board in 1882. Tichenor not only rescued the struggling Home Mission Board, but he also made several contributions to the SBC. His philosophy of planned and systematic giving to home mission work laid the foundation for the later inception of the Cooperative Program.⁵

While Tichenor may have laid the foundation, Kentucky Baptists claim the Cooperative Program was born in the Bluegrass State. According to the Kentucky Baptist Convention website, the concept was born at First Baptist Church in Murray, Kentucky. The pastor of the church, Harvey Boyce Taylor, developed the concept for First Baptist Church Murray around 1900, which he called the “box plan.” At that time, “Work beyond the local level was supported through special appeals. Most of the schools and mission boards sent field workers to the churches for special offerings. This was not only costly and inefficient, but many worthy mission causes were neglected.”⁶

Discontent with the agency method of funding missional efforts of the Convention spawned the search for a better plan of supporting the Convention’s collaborative evangelism effort. The early twentieth century saw slow progress in seeking a better tool for developing and distributing the finances necessary for global gospel propagation. The 1908 convention selected an Apportionment Committee to set state goals for church giving to support the Great Commission effort at home and on foreign soil. This committee established some good practices for the future of the Cooperative Program and the committee continued until 1919. In the 1913 convention, a committee

⁵ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 91.

⁶ “Cooperative Program History,” Kentucky Baptist Convention, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://www.kybaptist.org/cooperative-program-history/>.

was appointed to study the organizational structure of the SBC to see if it was best suited for “soliciting, combining, and directing the energies of Southern Baptists for securing the highest efficiency of our forces and the fullest possible enlistment of our people for the work of the Kingdom.”⁷

In 1913, Taylor was named chairman of a committee to consider the unification of Baptist work across the state for the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky (now the Kentucky Baptist Convention). He toured the state promoting the unified approach to a unified budget for Kentucky Baptist work. This plan to support all denominational work throughout Kentucky was adopted by the state Convention in 1915. “Kentucky’s adoption of the unified budget plan directly influenced the 1925 inauguration of the Cooperative Program, the national channel for mission giving of Southern Baptist churches.”⁸

The 1919 Southern Baptist annual convention implemented a program that laid the groundwork for the Cooperative Program. The president of the Convention that year was J. B. Gambrell, and he called on Southern Baptists to adopt a program to help Southern Baptists toward their Great Commission goal. His “deep conviction” was to see SBC churches active in Great Commission work and in giving as “a new demonstration of the value of orthodoxy in free action.”⁹ A Financial Campaign Committee was appointed at the convention to direct the convention-wide effort to raise \$75,000,000 over a five-year period for the purpose of funding the Great Commission efforts through Southern Baptist churches and boards. Quotas were set for each state and contributions were budgeted for SBC boards and entities. Promotions were scheduled to disseminate information and encourage financial and prayerful involvement in the campaign. The week of November 30 through December 7 was a special convention-wide emphasis

⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, *SBC Annual* (Nashville: Marshall and Bruce, 1913), 70.

⁸ “Cooperative Program History.”

⁹ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 93.

week named, “Victory Week.”¹⁰ A canvas was taken of members of every Southern Baptist church to garner pledges toward the \$75 million goal. Pledges that year surmounted \$92 million and by the time of the 1920 annual convention, over \$12 million had already been received. The \$75 Million Campaign was off to a tremendous start, but by the campaign’s end only \$58.5 million had been collected as reported by the Conservation Commission of the 75 Million Campaign.¹¹

More than one factor contributed to the collection shortfall, but one significant factor was a depression in the United States in 1920. Many of the Southern Baptist churches were rural churches with agriculture being the predominant occupation. Farmers were the hardest hit by the depression and at the time, 23,000 out of the less than 26,000 churches were small and rural. Urgent appeals from Southern Baptist leaders were made to Southern Baptist churches and church members to fulfill their pledges. There was a sense that failure was unacceptable and all that was needed to meet the campaign goal was a little more self-denial and sacrifice.

Two famous and influential missional ladies were coming of age during the formative years of the SBC and its Cooperative Program. Annie Armstrong (1850–1938) and Charlotte “Lottie” Moon (1873–1912) were both calling on Southern Baptists to work together to see the Great Commission carried out at home and abroad. These ladies knew if the gospel was going to reach all the people in all parts of the world it would require the help of every member of every church to see the mission accomplished. Lottie was serving as a missionary in China and corresponding with friends and churches about the great need for more missionaries and support for the gospel work. She was not shy in calling on Southern Baptists to be involved in the Lord’s work as this following quote indicates: “Why should we not . . . instead of the paltry offerings we make, do something

¹⁰ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 94.

¹¹ “The Final Report of the Conservation Commission of the 75 Million Campaign,” in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1925), 22.

that will prove that we are really in earnest in claiming to be followers of him who, though he was rich, for our sake became poor?”¹²

Annie’s greatest contribution was her tireless writing of letters to request financial support for missionaries in the United States. One source stated Annie wrote as many as eighteen thousand letters in one year.¹³

Annual Southern Baptist mission offering emphases would eventually be named after these women. The Annie Armstrong Offering for North American missions is collected every year around Easter while the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions is collected every December. These special offerings are a part of the cooperative effort to support Southern Baptist missionaries and mission work with 100 percent of the collected monies going directly to the missionaries on the field.

At the end of the \$75 Million Campaign, many Southern Baptists saw it as a failure because it fell short of the goal. However, there is more than one thing to be thankful for from this historic endeavor. First, although the goal was not obtained, nearly sixty million dollars were collected. This total is more than the total of all gifts to the denomination for the previous seventy-four years combined. Also, nine thousand churches that had never before contributed to convention causes contributed for the very first time during the campaign.

The campaign also introduced new ideas and means for funding Great Commission work for the future. The campaign established a prototype for the future Cooperative Program, including a unified budget and an every-member mentality of contribution.¹⁴ To this day Southern Baptists are still promoting the every-member

¹² Lottie Moon, “From Miss Lottie Moon,” *Foreign Mission Journal* 19.5 (December 1887): 2, accessed August 12, 2024, http://media2.sbhl.org.s3.amazonaws.com/missionjournals/fmj/1887/fmj_1887_12.pdf.

¹³ Kristen White, “Who Is Annie Armstrong,” *Lifeway*, January 1, 2014, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/church-giving-who-is-annie-armstrong-easter-offering/>.

¹⁴ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 94.

mentality as a means for supporting and empowering missionaries for the work of advancing the kingdom of Christ.

Perhaps the most concerning problem from the \$75 Million Campaign was the financial failure to operate based on funds collected rather than funds pledged. Churches and associations began to build their operating budgets based on the pledged amount in excess of \$92 million. When collected funds failed to even meet the \$75 million goal, many churches went into debt during one of the greatest financial crises in America and were not able to recover.

In 1924, the SBC met in Atlanta and called on churches to accomplish two things: finish collecting for the \$75 Million Campaign and canvas every member for pledges for state and convention-wide efforts for 1925. M. E. Dodd chaired the Committee on Future Program in 1924. The goal of the committee was to create a stable, substantial, and permanent financial support for the work of the SBC. Dodd and other SBC leaders believed this would provide for the financial concerns of the SBC.

The SBC meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1925, approved an historic program for funding missionaries and ministries of the convention. Although eight decades of time had passed since the forming and stated goal of the SBC, it was still struggling to carry out the goal of “one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.”¹⁵ The “Co-Operative Program of Southern Baptists” was introduced at the 1925 meeting as a program intended to accomplish the holy endeavor of gospel propagation.¹⁶ While the concept of cooperation in worldwide gospel propagation was a part of the original DNA in the SBC, until the Cooperative Program there was no good model for how to make this goal a reality. This new program helped the SBC fulfill its vision of “eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination” in a more efficient and

¹⁵ Frank Page, “The Cooperative Program and the Future of Collaborative Ministry,” in *The SBC and the 21st Century*, ed. Jason K. Allen (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 9.

¹⁶ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 3.

effective manner.

In principle, the Cooperative Program was a simple way toward a unified budget for the “One Sacred Effort.” Churches were to canvas their members in the fall and receive pledges for the next year’s budget. Individual churches would then vote on a percentage of their budget to be forwarded to the Cooperative Program through the state convention office. The pledged commitments from individual churches of the state would then be used to create the budget for the state convention and its programs.¹⁷ State conventions would send a percentage of their budgets on to the SBC. The target percentage was 50 percent of the state budget being forwarded to the SBC. The largest portion of the SBC budget was directed to missions with international missions receiving the biggest share.¹⁸

This unified and cooperative effort brought an almost instant increase in efficiency for the SBC, and the Cooperative Program became an instrument by which the convention was able to achieve great success in missions and church growth into future decades. The new cooperative funding through the Cooperative Program was hailed as the greatest advance in kingdom finance ever taken by the convention.¹⁹

In 1927, the Business Efficiency Committee completed its work and made the Executive Committee of the SBC responsible for the administration and distribution of the Cooperative Program. Obstacles would have to be overcome in the future of the Cooperative Program but as Chad Brand and David Hankins state, “An undependable, uneven, inadequate support system of the past was fashioned into the Cooperative Program.”²⁰ Long time Baptist leader and executive committee member Albert McClellan also noted the Cooperative Program as “a significant fulfillment of the one sacred effort

¹⁷ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 97.

¹⁸ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 97.

¹⁹ W. W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845–1953* (Nashville: Broadman, 1954), 230.

²⁰ Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 3.

clause of the 1845 Constitution.”²¹

Future Thoughts and Concerns

In his foreword to *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists*, Morris Chapman assessed the Cooperative Program as the most effective vehicle for carrying out the “one sacred effort” of the SBC.²² Other Southern Baptist leaders have expressed a willingness to move to a different model of funding Great Commission work if it could be proven to be a more effective and efficient long-term model. And, as Frank Page notes, “To this point no one has stepped forth with anything that would come close to the efficiency and effectiveness of the Cooperative Program.”²³

A concern for the future of the Cooperative Program is that members of SBC churches will forget about the Cooperative Program and how it advances the kingdom of God. Concern for the lostness of souls seems to be a compassionate reality for many people but Southern Baptists could be in danger of losing the Cooperative Program as an effective means for fulfilling the Great Commission if we are not careful. From the pulpit to the pew, Southern Baptists need to be regularly reminded of the significant impact the Cooperative Program makes.

This concern for informing Southern Baptists about the Cooperative Program is not new. In an article published October 1930, E. P. Alldredge wrote,

Underneath, and all around, and all through the financial difficulties and problems of Southern Baptists is the problem of informing our people. The only possible explanation of our Baptist record is that practically 70 per cent of our people do not know even the fundamental facts about the needs of our denominational work or their ability to supply those needs.²⁴

²¹ Albert McClellan, quoted in Cecil Ray and Susan Ray, *Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World* (Nashville: Stewardship Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 54.

²² Morris Chapman, foreword to Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, x.

²³ Page, “The Cooperative Program,” 20.

²⁴ E. P. Alldredge, “Our Financial Problems—The Way Up and Out,” *Home and Foreign Fields* 24, no. 10 (1930): 3.

Allredge's concern remains a concern for the SBC today.

My wife served as a Journeyman with IMB after graduating from college. While she was serving in Southeast Asia, she became acquainted with missionaries from other organizations who were serving at the same international school. She shared with me how some of these missionaries would not be able to get back to the United States to share with churches because their funding ran out. She also told me about the regular stress they would experience wondering if they would receive enough funding from month to month just to meet their living expenses.

In contrast, because of the generous and cooperative giving of Southern Baptist churches, travel for SBC missionaries to and from their field of service is paid for by Cooperative Program dollars. SBC missionaries also receive a monthly salary and benefits to provide for their needs on the field of service. When SBC missionaries speak to SBC churches, they are free to thank God for what they have seen him do in their mission field and to thank SBC churches for making it possible. No plea is made for money to keep missionaries on the field or so that they may get back to the field. Regular financial provision through Cooperative Program funding is incredibly freeing for both churches and missionaries. Tragically, this stable support could be lost if SBC constituents are not educated and reminded of the effective and efficient tool called the Cooperative Program.

Cooperative Program financial support allows Southern Baptist Missionaries to stay on the field and minister long-term. Speaking of a church plant in Lisbon, Portugal, an IMB missionary said, "This new church didn't start because of a single person. We are reaching the nations, together: You participated through your prayers, financial gifts and sending missionaries—long and short-term."²⁵ Southern Baptist missionaries are empowered to stay for long ministries by the regular support of the Cooperative Program. To quote again from the article, "Together, Southern Baptists send IMB missionaries to

²⁵ "It's Not Every Day a New Church Starts in Portugal," IMB, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.imb.org/stories/its-not-every-day-a-new-church-starts-in-portugal/>.

be steadfastly present among those who have never heard. This presence cultivates church planting and multiplication.”²⁶

Cooperative Program financial support is not only at work internationally through IMB, but it is also at work through NAMB in North America. The Madden family, church planters in Weymouth, Massachusetts, saw God save an addict named Eric: “God not only saved Eric, but also transformed him into a leader in the new church. Today, Eric is leading the church’s recovery ministry and helping others give their lives to Jesus and overcome addictions.”²⁷ The article continues by noting how Cooperative Program support helped the Maddens: “Your support through the Cooperative Program helped Noah graduate from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary debt-free, so he could begin serving Jesus as one of our church’s missionaries in New England.”²⁸

These testimonies are from just a few of the missionaries supported by the Cooperative Program. The 2022 statistics report more than 3,000 IMB missionaries and more than 2,000 NAMB missionaries for a total of 6,001 missionaries combined.²⁹ Full financial support for this many missionaries would not be possible if not for the Cooperative Program. Small congregations such as Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado, would not be able to support a missionary, but because of the Cooperative Program, even a church with average attendance of only fifteen people can be part of supporting more than 6,000 missionaries. Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church even enjoyed the blessing of having missionaries come to the church building and share what God is doing through them because of the support they receive through the Cooperative Program. Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church got to know some of those 6,000 missionaries

²⁶ “It’s Not Every Day a New Church Starts in Portugal.”

²⁷ “Noah and Tarin Madden,” CP Stories, SBC, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/52-sundays/noah-and-tarin-madden/>.

²⁸ “Noah and Tarin Madden.”

²⁹ “Fast Facts: What We Do,” SBC, accessed 28 April, 2024, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/fast-facts/>.

by name and pray for them by name. These blessings and benefits are because Southern Baptist churches partner together for the Great Commission through the Cooperative Program.

Losing the Cooperative Program because of lack of interest or lack of awareness would be a tragic loss for the SBC and for all people groups who might have benefitted from this cooperative Great Commission effort. A concern for the future of the Cooperative Program has grown out of recent events in the SBC. The annual meeting of the SBC in New Orleans of June 2023 may have a significant impact on the Cooperative Program. Two issues expected to come to the floor of the convention are related to the biblical office of pastor in Southern Baptist churches, but the deeper issue is the infallibility of the Bible. *The Baptist Faith and Message* says, “The Holy Bible . . . is totally true and trustworthy . . . and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinion should be tried.”³⁰ Based upon the totally true and trustworthy standard of God’s Word, *The Baptist Faith and Message* declares there are only two church offices, and “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”³¹ If Southern Baptist messengers vote to allow females to serve in the office of pastor, they will be voting to ignore the biblical qualification to serve in that office. If the SBC messengers vote to ignore the biblical qualification for pastors, they will likely see a large number of churches withdraw from the SBC and its Cooperative Program based on difference of doctrinal conviction. However, the grave concern is not a pragmatic concern about numbers; rather, it is a concern for biblical veracity. SBC churches that hold to the inerrancy of Scripture will not be able to cooperate with a convention and with mission boards that do not hold to that same standard. If the SBC

³⁰ Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2000), 7.

³¹ Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000*, 13.

compromises on the aforementioned issue in 2023, it will likely compromise on other biblical directives in the future.

Another concern for the future of the Cooperative Program is an individualistic mindset. Page notes this mentality is an impact of our individualistic culture that has influenced churches. Many churches now seek to do their own work their own way and still desire to remain in the SBC.³² This independent pragmatic mindset sees little or no benefit in belonging to the SBC or even local associations because they are able to fund their own evangelistic events and missionaries. When a church is large enough to send out and fully fund their own missionaries, they do not understand why they need the SBC. Perhaps the church has forgotten the words of our Lord Jesus who said it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Perhaps these churches have forgotten a time when their church was first starting and needed the help of the other churches to begin or to continue ministry. Perhaps their building was built by SBC volunteers or SBC volunteers helped with neighborhood canvassing. Churches can be tempted to forget how they were helped in their time of need once they prosper and believe they have enough of their own resources to do the Lord's work. This was most recently verbalized by Rick Warren in an interview with Russell Moore. Warren said, "We don't need the Southern Baptist Convention. They need the 6,000 purpose driven churches that are in the Southern Baptist Convention in our fellowship. But we don't need the Convention."³³ This mindset promotes an unhealthy idea that the SBC needs megachurches, but the megachurches do not need the SBC. This would be like Gentile churches in the book of Acts growing to the point where they said they did not need the church in Jerusalem. Instead, what is seen in the Bible is encouragement for Gentile churches to bless the church in Jerusalem from where all the Gentile churches began (see Acts 11:19–30; 2 Cor 8:1–5).

³² Page, "The Cooperative Program," 16.

³³ Russell Moore, "Rick Warren Reflects on His Legacy," *Christianity Today*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/russell-moore-show/rick-warren-legacy-saddleback-sbc-purpose-driven-life.html>.

A program should not be protected simply for the sake of preserving a program. Ronnie Floyd said we become distracted from our mission of reaching the world, “When our goal is preservation of our traditions and ways rather than propagating the gospel.”³⁴ However, because Southern Baptists have still not found a better way of funding Great Commission work, the SBC should not only preserve the Cooperative Program but individual churches should also promote the Cooperative Program regardless of the size of the church. After all, church resources are from the Lord who is the giver of every good gift, and churches are merely God’s stewards.

The greatest danger of an individualist ministry mindset is sinful pride. The attitude that says, “We don’t need your help” is dangerously close to lacking the humility called for in the Bible. The apostle Paul warns, “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment” (Rom 12:3). Peter admonishes in like manner: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Pet 5:5). Proverbs exhorts, “It is better to be of lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Prov 16:19).

Another danger of an independent ministry mindset is the probable return to an agency style of mission funding. Churches not working with a collaborative group of other churches may still be intent on fulfilling the Great Commission, but their members will have to raise their own full financial support. Without the cooperative support of a convention of churches, members who are called by God to serve as missionaries will look for time in pastors’s pulpits to ask for the necessary means to serve as missionaries. There is also a probability they will look for bigger churches with bigger budgets just as was true at the beginning of the SBC. In addition, when members of SBC churches ask SBC congregations to financially support them as independent missionaries, they are

³⁴ Ronnie Floyd, “Kindling Afresh the Gift of God: Spiritual Renewal, Strategic Reinvention, and the SBC,” in Allen, *The SBC and the 21st Century*, 160.

inevitably taking money away from Cooperative Program giving in some form. Why would churches, and church members who are called out to serve as missionaries, want to repeat that less efficient and less effective model? Why would they want to take money away from a highly effective program of funding rather than work within it?

Related to the above issue is the idea of a church supporting Great Commission missionaries who are not being sent by SBC cooperative mission boards, namely NAMB and IMB. Plenty of good and healthy Great Commission organizations exist and they are good and effective at carrying the gospel to the world, but many are independent, or “faith” missionaries. These missionaries must seek not only a prayer base but also a financial base to help keep them on the mission field. They invest much of their time and energy developing a financial support base so they may continue to serve the Lord on the mission field as their expenses and costs increase.

SBC churches and church members often help support non-SBC missionaries as a part of fulfilling the Great Commission. In doing so, they take money away from the Cooperative Program that could be used to send SBC missionaries and faithfully provide for them while they are on the mission field. Missionaries who are sent out by organizations other than IMB and NAMB may go to any church and any denomination to ask the church and its members to support them, but SBC missionaries rely solely on the generous giving of SBC churches. The SBC and its missionaries are not the only group with the true gospel, and they certainly have been blessed to work alongside these other Great Commission organizations. However, as stewards of the Lord’s money, financial contributors should ask if they are using the Lord’s money in the best way to do the Lord’s will of making disciples among all nations. The Cooperative Program of the SBC and its mission boards has proven to be a most efficient way to obey our Lord’s commission.

One way to encourage more Southern Baptist church members to regularly support SBC missionaries financially is through better personal connections between missionaries and congregations. Southern Baptist missionary and missiology professor

John Mark Terry has said in his *Introduction to Missiology* class at Southern Seminary, “Money follows people, not programs.”³⁵ People are more eager to invest in the ministry of a person they know than to invest in a program to support thousands of people they do *not* know. Church members want a relationship with their missionaries. While social media posts and email newsletters are helpful, people really want to sit across the table and talk to their missionaries. They want to share a cup of coffee or a meal with their missionary families. These kinds of relationships encourage more willing and generous financial support as well as more regular prayer support. The International Mission Board has been taking intentional steps to help missionaries connect with SBC churches. Churches that have been minimally involved or perhaps disengaged altogether with the Cooperative Program have become a specific focus of IMB missionaries on stateside assignment. This effort is good, but it also needs the support of local pastors and local associations to help churches remain connected with IMB and NAMB missionaries when missionaries are not available to meet face-to-face with congregations.

Another way to generate a more personal connection between missionaries and churches is for the pastor to lead a team on a short-term mission trip. When church members serve the Lord together alongside NAMB or IMB missionaries, they develop a stronger bond with the missionaries. After the mission trip, church members can stay connected through email and social media platforms. Team members will also be more in tune with missional opportunities in their own immediate ministry context when they return. NAMB president Kevin Ezell notes, “We’ve found that when any church simply engages in mission outside of its context, it helps members of that church see the local needs around them more clearly.”³⁶

³⁵ John Mark Terry, “Introduction to Missiology” (unpublished class notes for 32960 – B, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Winter semester, 1994).

³⁶ Kevin Ezell, “Every Church on a Mission: The North American Mission Board in the Twenty-First Century,” in Allen, *The SBC and the 21st Century*, 186.

An added benefit of short-term mission trips is they allow the pastor and the members of the trip to strengthen their bonds of Christian fellowship with one another. Living together and serving together on these trips draws team members closer together as they share common struggles and victories.

A great deal of responsibility for Cooperative Program awareness rests on the shoulders of the local church. Pastors need to educate their congregations on the benefit and excellence of the Cooperative Program and how it helps every Southern Baptist church be part of the Great Commission work collectively accomplished by the SBC. Many of the people I have had the privilege to pastor did not understand that Southern Baptist missionaries are funded differently than all other missionaries. Many also did not understand theological education through Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries is greatly discounted for members of Southern Baptist churches. This cooperation allows Southern Baptists to be trained and educated for gospel ministry at an affordable rate through the help and generous giving of all other Southern Baptists.

I am encouraged by some recent happenings in the SBC that I believe will help all Southern Baptists better appreciate the jewel of the Cooperative Program. First are the Cooperative Program summits or retreats. In 2024, this summit met in Orlando where pastors encouraged and prayed for one another. Charles Grant serves as the executive vice president of convention relations and advancement with the SBC Executive Committee. In a *Baptist Press* article written by Brandon Porter, Grant said, “The Cooperative Program retreat focuses on the latest challenges of promoting giving through the Cooperative Program while hearing updates and stories about best practices from their peers.”³⁷ Cooperative Program retreats such as these could afford pastors the much-needed opportunity to be refreshed and encouraged. They also refresh pastors’ excitement about the blessing of cooperating with other churches for the sake of advancing the

³⁷ Brandon Porter, “CP Summit Helps Leaders Pursue Partnership, Joy,” *Baptist Press*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/cp-summit-helps-leaders-pursue-partnership-joy/>.

kingdom of God.

A second recent happening is the inclusion of Cooperative Program courses being offered or required at Southern Baptist seminaries. For example, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary requires students to complete courses CP100 Cooperative Program Seminar, 26200 Southern Baptist Heritage and Mission, or Cooperative Program Course 42490 to graduate.³⁸ New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary also requires students to complete a Cooperative Program course prior to graduating.³⁹ These courses give Southern Baptist seminaries an opportunity to excite students about the blessing, beauty, and benefit of the Cooperative Program before the students leave their campuses.

Finally, Leslie Peacock Caldwell reports, “Close to 330 participants representing 76 countries met in Asia for the first Global Senders Forum on April 16–19. The International Mission Board hosted the event but shared leadership responsibilities with other Baptist and like-minded sending organizations.”⁴⁰ The coronavirus pandemic prevented this event from happening sooner, but IMB leaders have been dreaming about this forum. Caldwell continues,

Some of these participants realize they have traditionally been receivers of missionaries. Now they know they must be missionary senders if the Great Commission is going to be fulfilled. We are all a part of the body of Christ. . . . We can do more together! We are eager to see what God will do among global Baptists because of this gathering.⁴¹

This excitement can be carried back to local congregations all around the globe and inspire a more worldwide spirit of cooperation. What a beautiful example of cooperation and

³⁸ “Preparing for Graduation,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://inside.sbts.edu/academic-records-registrar/graduation-preparation/>.

³⁹ “COOP5000 Syllabus,” New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, accessed April 24, 2024, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nobts.edu/_resources/pdf/Online%20Learning%20Center/Online%20Course%20Syllabi/Graduate/Online/Cooperative%20Program/COOP5000%20syllabus.pdf.

⁴⁰ Leslie Peacock Caldwell, “Global Senders Commit to Be Stronger Together,” IMB, April 22, 2024, https://www.imb.org/2024/04/22/global-senders-commit-to-be-stronger-together/?utm_campaign=newsroom&utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=social&utm_content=20240423.

⁴¹ Caldwell, “Global Senders Commit to Be Stronger Together.”

love it is when Southern Baptists partner with Global Baptist congregations to reach unengaged unreached people groups with the gospel of Christ.

Conclusion

For the Cooperative Program to remain an effective and efficient tool for carrying out the Great Commission, SBC churches need to be able to work together in Christian amity. If churches in the SBC are not able to agree on a doctrinal confession (*The Baptist Faith and Message*), then it will be difficult for churches in the future to work together to plant more churches.

Individualism must also disappear because no one church should be trying to spread the gospel by themselves. All members must work together as the body of Christ, for the glory of Christ and the advance of his kingdom.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Having explored and established biblical and theological foundations for collaborative Great Commission effort of the Cooperative Program, as well as the historical perspective and future prospects of the Cooperative Program, this chapter will explain the process of helping members of the Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado, better understand the Cooperative Program through an expository preaching series. The need for this project began while I was still pastoring in what is known as the Bible belt. I was pastoring a Southern Baptist church, but I discovered that some long-time members did not truly understand how the Cooperative Program funded the Great Commission efforts of the SBC. Because we had a missions education program and had begun a new members class, I was confident the church could help members grow in their understanding of the Cooperative Program.

When the Lord called my family to serve him at GHVBC in Rye, Colorado, the concern about ignorance of the Cooperative Program intensified. The church was an established church of more than fifty years in the community, but it was the only SBC church around for twenty miles and it was a very eclectic group. The church had members who had been Southern Baptist all their lives, and people from Assembly of God background, United Methodist background, and non-denominational background.

GHVBC was involved with missions but not strongly tied to the Cooperative Program. The church supported vocational missionaries from two other organizations whose prayer cards were posted on the bulletin board in the foyer. Newsletters from those

missionaries were also shared during Sunday school, but the members did not know any SBC missionaries by name.

The church was familiar with the Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon special emphasis offerings for missions, but few members seemed to understand the difference between the SBC method for supporting missionaries and the method of all other mission agencies. The church wanted to support missions and missionaries as evidenced by the prayer and financial support for the two non-SBC mission families. Also, the church supported a summer missionary for Campus Crusade for Christ and more than one summer mission trip through a non-profit mission organization started by a family in the church.

The purpose of this project was to increase Cooperative Program understanding among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado. Four goals were established to help increase Cooperative Program understanding. The first goal was to assess the current level of Cooperative Program understanding among the members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. The second goal was to develop a five-week preaching series on the missional effort of the Cooperative Program. The third goal was to increase understanding of the Cooperative Program among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to further increase awareness and engagement with the Cooperative Program at GHVBC.

These four goals were implemented in order. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, like many churches in our area, we were simply trying to figure out how to keep ministering to church members. Some church members returned to worship in person at the church building, but others stayed home from fear of COVID-19. This had a big impact on regular attendance numbers. Also, shortly after returning to regular worship services in the church building, a church member left and took other key families with him. This impacted regular attendance numbers down to about fifteen persons for Sunday

worship. I began working toward the goals of this project in 2021, once the church stabilized.

Phase 1

This project began in 2018, while I was still ministering for the Lord at a church in Texas. By the end of 2018, it became clear that the Lord was calling me and my family to serve him in Colorado. I spoke with my supervisor about the upcoming transition, and we agreed it would be better to wait and begin the project at the church in Colorado. I emailed the Professional Doctoral Studies (PDS) office and requested interrupted status while my family and I moved to Colorado. On April 1, 2019, interrupted status was granted from July 1 to December 31, 2019.

I began serving the Lord at GHVBC in April 2019. Early conversations with church members and leaders indicated mission involvement but a disconnect with Cooperative Program missions and missionaries. Prior short-term mission trips from the church did not have ties with Southern Baptist missionaries nor Southern Baptist pastors on the international mission field. I began to preach through the book of the Acts of the Apostles in 2020 as preparation for the sermons of this project.

I emailed the PDS office about the change of location and desire to change the project to match the new place of ministry. PDS office gave permission for the necessary changes on October 14, 2020. I spoke with the church about my project and their participation in it and they were happy to help me achieve this goal.

Ethics forms were emailed to my supervisor and PDS office approval was received on April 22, 2021.

Phase 2

I continued to preach through the book of Acts, laying a foundation for the Cooperative Program sermon series. I administered the first assessment of Cooperative Program understanding on November 28, 2021, and preached the first sermon of the

Cooperative Program sermon series from Acts 11:19–30 after the assessment was complete. During the introduction of the sermon I quoted, “The purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent intention of our constituents by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of the gospel,” from the SBC constitution. The collaborative spirit of the diverse characters in the biblical text made easy application for the spirit of cooperation that is foundational to the SBC Cooperative Program and necessary for reaching lost people of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Inclement weather and holiday travel plans of some members necessitated postponing the remainder of the preaching series until January 2022. In December, I reviewed the results of the initial assessment given to the church members. I also prepared the second and third sermons during the month of December but preached Christmas related sermons during that month. The sermon series for increasing understanding of the Cooperative Program continued in January of the next calendar year.

During phase 2, I also reached out to people I wanted to include as my “experts” to ask for their help in viewing my Cooperative Program sermons and giving feedback after viewing the series. At that time, all who were asked were willing to provide feedback for the sermons.

Phase 3

Preaching the sermon series for better understanding of the Cooperative Program at GHVBC resumed January 9, 2022. Sermon 2 was the first sermon in the series preached in the 2022 calendar year. Because so much time had lapsed between the first sermon in the series preached on November 28, 2021, a review of the first lesson was even more important than usual. The text for sermon 2 was Acts 12:24–13:3. This text displays a great spirit of cooperation within the church and how it influenced church leadership. Church leaders in this biblical text were from different ethnicities and

backgrounds but served together for the glory of Christ. Leadership mentioned in these verses was also willing to send out valued members of the church in obedience to the Lord's Great Commission.

Sermon 3 was preached the following Lord's Day, January 16, 2022. Acts 15:1–35 was the text for sermon 3 with a theme of unity in mission. After much deliberation, an important decision about the necessities for salvation was agreed upon by the church in this text and Great Commission work continued to flourish. This is the kind of unity we should strive toward in the SBC so that cooperation results in unified Great Commission effort strengthened by agreed upon doctrine.

During the following week I prepared and then proclaimed sermon 4 on the Lord's Day, January 23, 2022. Sermon 4 used a compilation of verses to remind the church how God has equipped and empowered them for fulfilling the Great Commission. I also mentioned the Cooperative Program as a plan for doing Great Commission work. Time was also invested in the fourth sermon explaining how Cooperative Program dollars are collected and allocated.

Preparation for sermon 5 began on January 24, and sermon 5 was completed January 29. Sermon 5 was a continuation of sermon 4. Sermon 5 was proclaimed from the pulpit at GHVBC on January 30, 2022. The main points from sermon 4 were repeated in a kind of highlight review of sermon 4 and then two new points were added for sermon 5. The added points in sermon 5 addressed the history of the SBC and the Cooperative Program and then looked to the future of the Cooperative Program. Manuscripts of the five sermons are included in this chapter.

Final assessment for Cooperative Program understanding was intentionally delayed until February 6, 2022. I wanted to remove the impact of the recency effect and determine how much information the members of GHVBC would retain one week later. I distributed and collected the second assessment before the worship service began on February 6, 2022.

**Sermon 1: “Foundations of Great Commission Cooperation”
(Acts 11:19–30)**

God has called all Christians to make disciples all over the world (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). This call on the Christian life is often referred to as the Great Commission. Significantly, this commission from the Lord Jesus Christ is recorded in some form in every Gospel account as well as in the book of Acts (see Matt 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–48; John 20:21). The SBC was formed in large part for the purpose of collaboratively propagating the gospel. The following quotes from the SBC constitution highlight the evangelistic purpose of the Convention:

The messengers from missionary societies, churches, and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination in various parts of the United States met in Augusta, Georgia, May 8, 1845, for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent intention of our constituents by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of the gospel and adopted rules and fundamental principles which, as amended from time to time, are as follows:

Article II of the SBC constitution goes on to clarify,

It is the purpose of the Convention to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States and its territories for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad and any other objects such as Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God.¹

Beginning in Acts 11:19–30, this study explores the biblical basis for the SBC Cooperative Program. The study also presents how the Cooperative Program helps Southern Baptists fulfill the Great Commission.

A summary of chapter 10 and the early verse of chapter 11 will be helpful before delving into Acts 11:19–30. Peter was in deep prayer and the Lord gave him a vision. In this prayerful vision, the Lord showed Peter all kinds of animals and told Peter to get up and eat. Peter refused on the grounds that he had never eaten anything unclean. The Lord responded to Peter and said that Peter should not call unclean what the Lord

¹ “Constitution,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed September 04, 2023, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/>.

made clean. God used this time of prayer to convince Peter of the command of sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. While Peter was still in prayer, messengers arrived at the house where he was staying and asked him to come to the house of Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian cohort. Peter shared the gospel with all who were in Cornelius's house and Acts 10:44 records, "The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word."²

The apostles and the church in Jerusalem heard what happened and they questioned Peter about presenting the gospel to the uncircumcised. After Peter testifies about what happened, the church rejoices together that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles also (Acts 11:18). Having now arrived at Acts 11:19–30, notice the reason the gospel is carried to more Gentiles.

*The Reason the Gospel Is Carried
to More Gentiles (v. 19)*

The apostles and the brothers, as they are called in Acts 11:1, seem to be very comfortable sharing the gospel in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Even Peter had to be strongly convinced to leave and share the gospel in the home of a Gentile. Although Jesus had specifically told his disciples they would be witnesses for him in all the world, context suggests the disciples may have never left the Jerusalem area if they had not been driven out by persecution. They were not sent out by the church; they did not say, "here am I, send me" like Isaiah did in Isaiah 6:8. Instead of humbly yielding to the Lord's commission to go into all the world, they had to be chased out of their familiar environment by people who wanted to kill Christians. Even when the disciples were reluctant to go to Gentile territory, Jesus fulfilled his promise from Acts 1:8 that the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come on them and they *would* be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

² Unless otherwise noted, all sermon Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible.

Is GHVBC willing to go into all the world in obedience to the Lord's command, or will GHVBC need tribulation or persecution to push the church into obedience? What will it take for GHVBC to be willing to step out of comfortable lives and familiar surroundings to take the gospel to people who are not like GHVBC? What will it take for the church to be willing to SEND out some members to take the gospel to other cultures and languages?

Having noted the reason the gospel was carried to more Gentiles, now consider the restricted gospel delivery to the Gentiles in Acts 11:19–20.

*The Restricted Gospel Delivery
to the Gentiles (vv. 19–20)*

Even after the church was driven into Gentile territories, they were still restricting gospel witness exclusively to Jews who had been dispersed. Verse 20 explains that some of the dispersed disciples eventually spoke also to Greeks. Many translations use the word “Hellenists” instead of Greeks. The people who came from Cyprus and Cyrene in verse 20 were Greek speaking Jews. Greek-speaking Jews sharing the gospel with other Greek-speaking Jews would not be newsworthy, but sharing the gospel with Gentiles was shocking to the apostles and the Jerusalem church, as shown in chapters 10 and 11. Therefore, the larger context of chapters 10 and 11 suggests the reader should understand these Hellenists to be Gentiles, not simply Greek-speaking Jews.

Is GHVBC restricting gospel witness only to people who are like them? Is GHVBC willing to take the gospel to people of different backgrounds and different languages? Is GHVBC only inviting people to church who look like the rest of the church membership or are we willing for the church to be multi-ethnic?

The disciples moved into Gentile territory with the gospel due to the persecution that was arising. Gospel proclamation was initially restricted only to Jews, but eventually some brave souls shared the gospel even with Gentiles. Now consider the response to the gospel by the Gentiles.

*The Response to the Gospel by
the Gentiles (v. 21)*

The Jews may have been hesitant to share the gospel with Gentiles, but the response of the Gentiles demonstrates they were not slow to believe. The Holy Spirit inspired words of verse 21 remind us that the cause behind the great number of conversions was not the presentation style of the Jews nor the great desire of the Gentiles. Rather, verse 21 relates that “the hand of the Lord” was with these evangelists and the reason for their faith in Jesus.

One reason often given for not sharing the gospel with other people is related to the response of the people who hear the gospel. It may sound like the question, “What if they ask me questions I don’t know the answers to?” or “What if I mess up the presentation?” The truth is, people are not saved by smooth presentations, nor by impressive looking digital tools for presenting the gospel. People are saved by the hand of the Lord working through the gospel, which is the power of God to salvation for all who believe (Rom 1:16). May the Holy Spirit stir GHVBC to obedience in sharing the gospel and to faith in trusting the Spirit for the results.

While this historical event has little to do with the Cooperative Program, it does point to cooperation as a core value in fulfilling the Great Commission. Witnessing opportunities are a collaborative effort where the Holy Spirit works in people, through people, and even in spite of people, to bring saving faith. Salvation is wholly of God, but God commissions his people to share the gospel with others so that by hearing they may believe and by believing they may be saved (Rom 10:13–14). To him be all the glory.

Because the hand of the Lord was on them, the Gentiles responded in faith to the gospel message. Now look at the response of the Jerusalem church when they hear the news of Gentiles becoming followers of Jesus.

The Response of the Jerusalem Church (vv. 22–26)

The church now begins to get involved in the collective effort to make Gentile

disciples and teach them to obey all Jesus had commanded. The Bible does not communicate the motivation behind sending Barnabas to Antioch, but one can be fairly certain the Jerusalem church wanted to verify the Gentiles had truly repented and were growing in their understanding of the gospel. The Jerusalem believers were being faithful to the Lord's command to teach these new disciples all that Jesus had taught them. The church sent Barnabas, one of their best encouragers, to teach and encourage this new group in Antioch to obey all Jesus had commanded.

Barnabas disciplined and encouraged so well that a great many people were added to the church in Antioch by the grace of God (v. 24). Evidently the ministry had grown to be too much for Barnabas or perhaps he simply wanted to encourage a friend, so he sought the help of Paul. Barnabas had also disciplined Paul and helped the church receive Paul as a genuine follower of Jesus. Now Paul was going to help these Gentile believers grow in faith in a way similar to how he was helped. Paul from Tarsus, Barnabas from Jerusalem, working together to advance the kingdom of God and disciple new Gentile believers. This mindset of working together to fulfill the Great Commission is the spirit behind the Cooperative Program. Southern Baptists can do more together for the kingdom of God than any one church or individual can accomplish on their own. Collective ministry effort such as the picture painted by these verses is part of the beauty of the Cooperative Program. All churches of the SBC work together for the glory of God to see lost souls evangelized for Christ and new believers disciplined in Christ through the Cooperative Program.

To be more specific, this kind of cooperation happens through the Cooperative Program when the SBC sponsors church plants and revitalizations. Cooperating churches help financially to sponsor the effort to plant or revitalize churches. Cooperating churches may also have an opportunity to send out a church planter or some other members to be part of the church plant/revitalization team. Some church members may serve for a period to help develop leadership in the church plant/revitalization and then return to their home

churches, like Paul and Barnabas did. All of this is made easier for the church planting and revitalizing teams because of cooperating SBC churches working with and giving to the Cooperative Program.

The Jerusalem church investigated what was happening among the Gentiles and sent members to help with discipleship. Now ponder the response of the Antioch church when they heard about an upcoming famine in Jerusalem.

The Response of the Antioch Church (vv. 27–30)

While Barnabas and Paul were ministering to the church in Antioch, more members from the Jerusalem church came to visit. During their visit they also brought news of impending famine in Jerusalem. When the believers in Antioch heard of the coming hardship for the Jerusalem church, they wanted to help monetarily those who had helped them spiritually.

Another beauty of the Cooperative Program is the manner in which all churches in the SBC have opportunities for giving and receiving blessings of finances. Churches give to their respective state conventions which in turn give to the Cooperative Program. When the time comes that a church needs assistance, it can request help from its state convention. Other churches in the local association and the state convention may also send help directly to the church in need when the Holy Spirit leads them to do so.

A cooperative spirit understands Great Commission work is God's kingdom work and we are all in it together. Does GHVBC consider it a blessing to be able help others in their time of need to advance the kingdom in their area of ministry? Is the church willing to send out teams to start new churches and help with disaster relief in other areas for the sake of advancing the kingdom of God?

Acts 11:19–30 has shown an effective collaborative evangelistic foundation in the early church. The Southern Baptist Cooperative Program was built upon this kind of biblical foundation for the sake of fulfilling the Great Commission as effectively and

efficiently as possible. May God’s Holy Spirit move GHVBC to be faithful and obedient to his leading in doing their part to reach their neighbors and the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Sermon 2: “The Church Cooperating with God and with One Another”
(Acts 12:24–13:3)**

Some explanation is in order for the second sermon on the Cooperative Program. Programs are simply tools God gives to accomplish his goals and his purposes. Tools do not save people and tools do not disciple people, but God can use people equipped with tools to accomplish his tasks. The Cooperative Program is a very biblical and efficient tool for fulfilling what God has called all to do: fulfill the Great Commission.

Sermon 1 began by giving some history of the SBC. It was formed in 1845, and their stated purpose in the Convention constitution was “for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent intention of our constituents by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of the gospel.”³

When the Convention constituted, Southern Baptist churches were scattered all over the country, and nothing was pulling them together except a common thread of doctrine. In 1845, these churches united and formed a Convention of cooperating churches, saying, here are some core doctrines that we believe, and we agree on. They got together as a group of cooperating churches, and the following is recorded as their stated purpose in the minutes and in the constitution: “We gather together or form as an organizing plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination

³ “Constitution, “The Southern Baptist Convention, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/>.

in one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.”⁴ That IS the one sacred effort: getting the gospel out to the rest of the world. *That* is why Southern Baptist churches convened and came together as one convention, one group of churches—so that they could better fulfill the Great Commission!

In 1925, the SBC created a program called the Cooperative Program because they realized that even though they had the right heart and right mindset to take the gospel to all the world, they were not being very efficient in the way they were getting it done. They discovered that while missionaries (or their representing agents) were in the US speaking to churches to gain support, around 50 percent of what was raised was spent going to other churches to ask for money—they were spending half of everything they made just to go to other places to ask for more money. The SBC wanted a more efficient tool, and they prayerfully developed the Cooperative Program. The Cooperative Program now gives SBC churches an opportunity every week to fund all the Great Commission efforts of the SBC. Through the Cooperative Program, the SBC began funding missionaries so that they would have the finances necessary to go and propagate in North America and the rest of the world.

Sermon 1 noted how the church in Jerusalem was starting down this road of Great Commission ministry in Acts 11, and the Jerusalem church was reaching out to Gentiles, but they were not really united as a group. The whole church was not supporting outreach to Gentiles yet, but God was using some individuals from that search to reach out to Gentiles. Then, the Jerusalem church received word that Peter had brought the gospel to the Gentiles and that many Gentiles had believed. The church in Jerusalem wanted to make sure they were hearing the same gospel and believing in the same Lord. They sent some people to investigate the veracity of the claim that Gentiles were being saved by faith in Jesus. Barnabas was one of those people. Barnabas recognized the

⁴ “Constitution.”

Gentiles had heard the same gospel, were believing in the same Lord whose name is Jesus Christ, and had been baptized into the same faith. Barnabas gets behind the outreach to Gentiles, supports it, and reports back to the church, and then Barnabas and Paul go to Antioch where this Gentile church had started.

The church in Antioch knows there is a famine on the way, and they want to bless the Jerusalem church that sent the gospel to them and sent the person who brought the gospel to them. The church in Antioch gratefully sends disaster relief (famine relief) to the church in Jerusalem, which surely must have strengthened the faith of the church and encouraged them to continue sharing the gospel with all people.

A kind of encouraging and enabling ministry similar to what the Antioch church did for the Jerusalem church happens through Southern Baptist Disaster Relief teams today. Southern Baptist Disaster Relief is an example of the effective collaboration of the Cooperative Program blessing. Southern Baptist Disaster Relief teams are in every state and those teams get deployed nationwide and sometimes to other parts of the world to help people during times of crisis or tragedy. Those disaster relief teams might bring soup kitchens, showers, or washers and dryers for people to do their laundry. Teams may offer blankets to those whose homes have been destroyed by floods, fires, tornadoes, or other disasters. They might have chainsaw crews, mud out crews, or do whatever families in the impact zone may need. These are only some of the ways Southern Baptist churches are part of relief efforts through the Cooperative Program funded Southern Baptist Disaster Relief ministry.

Also, a new ministry called Send Relief is a collaborative effort of IMB and NAMB. Send Relief focuses on compassion ministries as an avenue to bring the gospel to communities. To quote from their webpage,

Send Relief has identified communities' most pressing needs by partnering with churches, local organizations and government officials. The insight these experts have provided creates a unique opportunity for volunteers to have the most transformative impact possible through various community building projects. We want to make it as easy as possible for you to serve these cities in Jesus' name, so

Send Relief staff will provide team trainings, prayer guides, debriefings and rallies to help encourage volunteers in their next step on mission.⁵

Send Relief not only ministers during weather crises, but they have specific ministry focus areas such as fighting human trafficking and helping refugees. Send Relief offers local churches the opportunity to send volunteer mission trips to target cities and help spread the gospel in these focus ministries and focus cities.

Acts 12:24–13:3 is a brief passage that portrays the church cooperating with God and with one another within the church. Acts 12:24–25 reads, “But the word of God flourished and multiplied. After they had completed their relief mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem taking along John who was called Mark.” This church was being persecuted. The beginning verses of chapter 12 relate that Herod had arrested some of the believers and put them in jail. According to verse 2, Herod had also executed James, the brother of John. Later in the chapter, Herod sat before the people and spoke to them. When he finished speaking the people said he was God and not a man. God instantly struck Herod down and he was eaten by worms! (Acts 12:20–23). Then, verse 24 records, “But the word of God flourished and multiplied.” The church continued to grow even though Herod was persecuting the church. Not only did the church grow, but it was thriving and multiplying despite persecution, because God was in control.

Verse 25 conveys that Barnabas and Saul had completed their mission having taken the relief money to the church in Jerusalem. They are coming back to Antioch and bringing with them John who is called Mark. Acts 13:1–3 relates how the church in Antioch was unified in leadership, cooperating in worship, and cooperating in the Great Commission. The church in Jerusalem had demonstrated a cooperating spirit by sending Barnabas to help them grow in the faith. Barnabas sent for Paul who worked with Barnabas to disciple the Gentile church and the Antioch church cooperated with the

⁵ “Send Relief Serve Tour,” Send Relief, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.sendrelief.org/serve-tour/>.

Jerusalem church by sending aid during a famine to encourage and strengthen them for future ministry. In a spirit of cooperation, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch for more worship and discipleship with the Gentiles and in 13:1 the church is cooperating in their leadership.

Cooperating in Leadership

Acts 13:1 reads, “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers:” Some people proclaim the Word of God and others explain the Word of God, and both kinds of people and gifting are important to the church. Both roles are leadership roles in the church, and Luke records that there were both prophets and teachers in Antioch. The Bible then lists five who were among these prophets and teachers—the proclaimers of the Word God and the explainers of the Word of God. First is Barnabas, the son of encouragement. He had just helped on the relief effort to the church in Jerusalem. Now he is back in Antioch as one of the prophets and teachers but he was originally sent to Antioch from the Jerusalem church.

Next is Simeon, who is called Niger and the word Niger, means “black,” so most commentaters say that he probably came from North Africa and was very dark skinned. Third is Lucius of Cyrene. Cyrene is in Africa on the northern coast, so he most likely would have had dark skin as well.

Next is a leader named Manaen who is a close friend of Herod the tetrarch. The word used there to talk about someone being a close friend means that they probably had the same wet nurse growing up. They would have been brought up in the same nursery by the same woman. He is a friend of Herod, which indicates a Greek cultural background. Luke paints a colorful picture of church leadership in Antioch with two Jews, two North Africans, and a Greek, all working together for the glory of God and the good of his church.

The Bible records diversity of culture, diversity of race, and diversity of

ethnicity, but it does not record division related to the diversity in church leadership at Antioch. The Bible does not communicate any differences of opinion that create division among the leaders. There is no record of one person or one group of people in leadership demanding their way. The leadership is working together to teach and proclaim the Word of God and all its truth. They were leading together as a diverse leadership team, not working against one another. Every good team should work together in such a way, which is what we see happening in Acts 13:1—a group of people from different backgrounds, even different nationalities, cultures, and languages, all working together to lead the church. And excellent example of cooperation in leadership.

What does cooperating diversity in leadership look like in the SBC? Every year at the annual convention meeting SBC messengers from cooperating churches elect an SBC president. The president may be nominated from any SBC church. The SBC also has an Executive Committee that carries out the SBC's operation in the time between one convention and the next. These Committee members may also be appointed from any SBC church.

SBC mission boards and seminaries have boards of trustees who oversee the operation and the handling of the stewardship entrusted to them by the church, and they hail from churches all over the country. This is a sample of the way the spirit of cooperation is at work in SBC leadership. People from different cultures and different parts of the country working together to accomplish the one sacred effort of the SBC: the proclamation of the gospel in all the world. Acts 13:1 records a diverse and cooperating leadership, and then in verse 2 the church in Antioch is cooperating in worship.

Cooperating in Worship

“As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2). The Christian Standard Bible uses the word “worship,” while other translations use the word

“service” because they both come from the same root word. Acts 13:2 relates, “They were worshiping the Lord and fasting.” Who is “they” in verse 13:2? Is it the church or is it just the five leaders mentioned? Some commentaries suggest the whole church because that is how the episode begins in verse 1—“Now in the church in Antioch”—and included in that church would be the five who were the prophets and the teachers. The entire church is worshiping and serving the Lord together, and it is interesting that service and worship, which come from the same root word, can be translated two different ways in English. In the Greek language it would have meant the same thing—to serve is to worship and to worship is to serve. There was no delineation in the minds of the first readers of this text. The leaders in the church were worshiping the Lord together with the rest of the church as they used their gifts to proclaim and explain the gospel.

In Colossians 3:23 Paul reminds, “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people.” In that verse Paul is talking to bond servants and he says they should serve masters as if serving the Lord. But Paul certainly was not only writing to the slaves. Paul calls himself a slave of the Lord in the letter to the Romans (1:1), and in 1 Corinthians Paul reminds the Corinthians they are bought with a price. Every follower of Jesus is to serve as if serving the Lord who purchased their redemption by his blood and minister as an act of worship to the Lord.

Living with this mentality is sometimes very challenging—when heading to the office to put in an eight, or ten, or twelve-hour day, how often is that thought of as an act of worship? Yet the Bible calls Christians to this manner of life, especially when serving one another in the church. In Acts 13, the church in Antioch is living this kind of life. The church was worshiping and serving the Lord and they were fasting. They did not simply forget to eat, they intentionally committed to going without food and invested extra time in prayer as they worshiped the Lord together.

The church was cooperating in service to one another and cooperating in worship with one another. This manner of living and worshiping together is reminiscent

of what was happening earlier in the book of Acts. Acts 2:42 records that when the church gathered “they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.” Then, in Acts 6:4 the apostles said, “We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” That is what the church is supposed to focus on, that is what the church is focusing on in Antioch: they are worshipping the Lord, they are focused on that worship, they are fasting, and they are focused on the Lord. While the church is focused in the Lord in worship, they are in a perfect posture to hear from the Holy Spirit.

John McArthur Jr., in his commentary on Acts 13:2, writes, “An important feature in discerning God’s will for the future is to do God’s will in the present.”⁶ The church in Antioch was busy doing God’s will. Because they were busy doing God’s will, they were in the perfect spot to hear God speak to them about their future ministry. As they are worshipping the Lord together, serving the Lord together, and fasting together, the Holy Spirit says, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

It is important to understand that God is the one who does the calling; God is doing the setting apart. God says give me Barnabas and give me Saul because I have work for them to do (Acts 13:2). A church can be tempted to lay claim on their most gifted and talented members and resist God when he calls them away for some mission or ministry. Barnabas and Saul would have been the most talented among the people in Antioch; they would have been considered the cream of the crop in the church, and God tells the church in Antioch that he has plans for Barnabas and Saul in some other place.

The Lord had already said that Saul “is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites” (Acts 9:15), and in Acts 13:2 the Holy Spirit makes that

⁶ John MacArthur Jr., *Acts 13–28, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 6.

call clear to Saul and the church in Antioch. While Barnabas and Saul are working together with this Gentile church in Antioch, it is the Antioch church that becomes the launchpad to send them out to reach other Gentiles with the gospel. Jews and Gentiles are working together to reach more lost people with the gospel.

Had Barnabas and Saul been to other places? Absolutely! They had been sharing the gospel, and now God is getting ready to send them out on this great mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The leadership in the Antioch church, the five that were mentioned in 13:1, devoted themselves to prayer and worship. The rest of the church is also devoting themselves to prayer and to the apostles' teaching. They are in the perfect place to hear from God.

In the SBC's collaborative effort to spread the gospel globally, God selects individuals and calls them out from their local churches. Some are called to serve as pastors, while others are destined for missionary work. These individuals are then sent beyond their local congregations to minister elsewhere. However, the responsibility of discernment also falls upon the local church in this process.

The local church plays a crucial role in the screening process. It is critical to ask relevant questions about those expressing a desire to spread the gospel, such as their level of involvement and commitment within the church community. Are they actively participating and contributing, or merely occasional attendees? Additionally, their understanding of biblical doctrine and the integrity of their lifestyle are important considerations. While being blameless does not imply perfection, it does indicate a genuine commitment to confessing sin and growing from past mistakes.

Moreover, the readiness of individuals to witness for the Lord in their current environment reflects their potential effectiveness elsewhere. This underscores the significance of the local congregation's involvement in evaluating candidates who believe they are being called by God for specific tasks. Regrettably, some churches neglect this responsibility out of sheer enthusiasm when someone expresses a calling. However, it is

crucial for the local church to actively engage in discernment. The church must confirm the authenticity of an individual's calling before endorsing them to seminaries or mission boards.

The example of the church at Antioch illustrates the importance of readiness to discern and respond to God's calling as they come together unified in their commitment and their understanding of God's will. Through worship and fasting, they positioned themselves to hear God's voice clearly. When God spoke, they were prepared to offer their best people for his service. While God calls individuals, the local church has a pertinent role in discerning and affirming those called to serve God. By actively participating in this process, the church ensures that those sent out are well-prepared and equipped for the tasks ahead. The church must be working together with the Lord and with the people whom God raises up. And that is what they were doing in Antioch. There is cooperation in the leadership at Antioch, there is cooperation in worship and in service at Antioch, and then in verse 3, we see cooperation in the Great Commission.

Cooperating in the Great Commission (13:3)

“Then, after they had fasted, prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them off.” Then, after they had *fasted and prayed*,” God speaks to the church. The church is in a great place to hear because they were worshipping and obeying the Lord. The Spirit speaks and says, I want you to set apart these two men of God, to do the will of God, or the work of God, in response or obedience to the call of God. And he raises them up, calls them out, and the church does not just send them on their way. Instead, the entire church stops and prays because they know what is at stake in taking the gospel to other parts of the country and other parts of the world. The church knows what kind of opposition the gospel faces. They have already seen people executed and imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. They know it is not easy work, so the church fasts and prays for Saul and Barnabas before they send them out in obedience to God's call. The church members lay

their hands on Saul and Barnabas as a sign of agreement that the church agrees with God and that these people are called by God to do the work of God. It is a very selfless church and a very submissive church that can send out their best people to do God's work in some other location. This is the kind of selfless and submissive spirit seen in the church at Antioch. This church was demonstrating a great spirit of cooperation as they sent out Saul and Barnabas in obedience to God's commission.

The word at the end of verse 3 that is translated "they sent them off" could also mean they released them. And that is a good way to understand what is happening. The church in Antioch is releasing Saul and Barnabas to do the work God has prepared for them. All the resources of the church truly belong to the Lord, not to the church. The building is God's building. The classrooms are God's classrooms. The people are God's people. Because all the resources belong to God, God may do whatever he likes with his resources. So, when God says send out your best members for church planting and evangelism, it is best for the church to say, yes, Lord. The Antioch church released God's people to do what God had called them to do. This release is a selfless act of obedience in cooperating with God's plan to reach the nations with the gospel.

Local SBC congregations today also have opportunity to release good members of the church for the mission of God. Every time God calls someone in an SBC church to a vocational ministry, other SBC churches get to cooperate not only with the people God calls out, but also with other Southern Baptist churches who help to support the Cooperative Program.

Cooperative Program money helps reduce tuition to make college and seminary training more affordable for ministers and missionaries. Cooperative Program dollars pay salaries for missionaries in North America and internationally. Southern Baptist churches cooperating for the Great Commission work together to send out ministers and missionaries to the places God calls them to serve. For the glory of God and for the advance of God's kingdom, Southern Baptists release finances and friends to

cooperate in the Great Commission. That is what the church was doing in Antioch. They had cooperating leaders who were cooperating in worship, in service, and cooperating in the Great Commission.

Later, the Antioch church sends out Barnabas and Saul as missionaries. Luke writes about Saul and Barnabas' missionary journeys in the following chapters in Acts. We have opportunities to do that today as we hear reports from the missionaries we send out. Some we know by name because they have been here to speak to us, or we have seen their video on the screen as they shared with us. What a blessing it is to cooperate with so many churches, to send out so many missionaries, that Christ may be made known.

Sermon 3: Unity in Mission (Acts 15:1–35)

Unity in mission is a major theme in Acts 15:1–35. The previous sermon from Acts 12:24–13:3 discussed how the church was cooperating to get the gospel out even to Gentiles. The end of Acts 13:3 records that the church sent out Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary trip. Beginning at Acts 13:4 and scanning subheadings in the Bible through chapters 13 and 14, one can see an overview of the journeys of Paul and Barnabas. These missionaries go to Cyprus, then they go to Antioch of Pisidia, which is a different Antioch from the Antioch that sent them out, and then Barnabas and Paul go over to Iconium, Lystra, Pergamum, Pisidia, and Pamphylia.

When the reader arrives at chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch, the church that sent them out. Acts 15:1–5 relates how the advancing mission to the Gentiles meets resistance.

Advancing Mission Meets Resistance

The Word of God records,

Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. When they had been sent on their way by the church,

they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles and the elders, and they recorded all that God had done with them. But some of the believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.” (Acts 15:1–5)

When the gospel begins to advance God’s people often meet resistance because when the gospel begins to advance the devil is not happy. When the mission begins to gain ground, the devil will rally his troops to fight against God’s people. Resistance such as this is what is happening in Acts 15. Luke writes that some men came down to Judea and began to teach the brothers, who are new Gentile converts in Antioch. They begin to teach circumcision as a necessity for genuine conversion to Christianity. This false teaching is a form of diabolical resistance intended to slow or stop the advance of the gospel.

Paul and Barnabas catch wind of this false teaching and begin to engage these teachers of false doctrine in some serious argument. There was huge debate, a heated argument which Paul and Barnabas were heading up by insisting Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved by faith in Jesus. The church in Antioch appointed other members to go with Paul and Barnabas to the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem to settle this issue.

The church meets resistance as it advances. The text records that some men came down from Judea, but those who came down from Judea were believers also. The church meets resistance from other believers who are saying Gentiles cannot be Christians unless they become Jews first. The resistance comes from others who call themselves followers of Jesus. Paul and Barnabas get involved in this argument over the doctrine of salvation. It is a serious argument; probably a passionate argument. The church does not want this debate to create division because when there is division the church cannot advance the kingdom of God. Therefore the church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem to talk to the church and all the apostles who are part of

the church there. The goal of their visit is to find out if what Paul and Barnabas are doing and teaching agrees with what the Jerusalem church understands to be the truth from Jesus. The Antioch church did not want to distort the true gospel, so they sent Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem to get answers. Along the way Paul and Barnabas stop in some other churches and share what God has done through them. This is the purpose of all gospel ministry—to share what God has done—and that is what Paul and Barnabas are doing along the way. As they pass through towns on their way to Jerusalem, they stop in churches. They share what God has been doing among the Gentiles. Acts 15:3 says that the testimony brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters, along the way to Jerusalem.

The work in Antioch also meets resistance. Resistance does not always come from outside the church; this time it is from other believers. In contrast, as Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem they are received well and the news about what God is doing through them among the Gentiles is also received well. When Paul and Barnabas get to the church at Jerusalem, the church receives them well. But there is still an issue that needs to be debated, and it serves as a kind of bookend on this section. Acts 15:1 reads, “Unless you’re circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Then again, at the end of verse 5, the Bible records, “It’s necessary to circumcise them and command them to keep the Law of Moses.” Circumcision is the issue. One could suppose the reason motivating the demand for circumcision was a bad or impure motive, but it does not appear to be. A group called Judaizers really wanted everybody to become Jews first, saying otherwise they could not become Christians. Looking back on this issue from the perspective of today, it seems obviously wrong to demand circumcision for followers of Jesus. However, the church is hammering out an issue of their new faith. This is the first time an issue such as this has ever come to the attention of the leaders of the church, and they want to figure it out together.

It could be, though, that the reason or motive behind this issue was pure. The Law, the Prophets, the Writings, this is the inspired Word of God. And if Christians are

followers of God through faith in his Messiah Jesus, then the covenant given to Moses should be obeyed. One can understand the reasoning. The problem is the line of reasoning is not biblical. The sign of circumcision for the New Covenant is a circumcision of the heart performed by the Holy Spirit of God (Rom 2:28–29).

In verses 1–5 the mission meets resistance and next in verses 6–21 the debate for unity is seen.

The Debate for Unity (15:6–21)

Although the mission met resistance, Paul and Barnabas and their testimony about what the Holy Spirit was doing among the Gentiles was received well by churches along the way. Paul and Barnabas are on their way to the church in Jerusalem to debate the issue of circumcision; specifically, do Gentiles who become followers of Jesus by faith have to be circumcised? Is circumcision a matter of obedience to the law of God or not? Paul and Barnabas were sincere in their desire to know what the church in Jerusalem would say. Paul and Barnabas wanted to know what they were passing on to other disciples was theologically correct.

Theology, what one believes about who God is and who one is in relationship to God, is frequently hammered out when the church is facing heresy. When heresy begins to arise, God’s people will start to pound out true doctrine on the heresy. God’s Word is the standard for truth. God’s people press into the Bible and test the heresy against truth and thereby solidify their belief. That is what the church doing in verses 6–21. This debate brings up the theological question, “Do Gentile converts have to be circumcised if they’re going to be followers of Jesus?”

The church gets together to debate this question while aiming for unity. In the advance of the Great Commission, they want to make sure they are sharing the same truth and the same gospel message. These Christians want to have a common understanding of what is required for salvation.

Acts 15:6 reads, “The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.” They meet with the whole church, but the apostles and the elders, the leadership of the church, gather to consider the matter. “After there had been much debate, Peter,” who is one of the leaders of the church, the rock of the church, “stood up and says to them, brothers and sisters, you’re aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth, the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe” (Acts 15:6).

Peter is referencing when he went to Cornelius’s house and preached the gospel to a house full of Gentiles (Acts 10). The church did not send Peter out, he was commissioned directly by God’s Holy Spirit. The church body was not behind the mission trip to Cornelius’s house. In fact, when they heard Peter had taken the gospel to the Gentiles, they were concerned. Peter had to defend why he brought the gospel to the Gentiles. His defense was that he was not going to tell God what to do, and it was God who sent him. God confirmed that he sent him by giving them the same Holy Spirit the Jews received. God saved the Gentiles by faith, just like the Jews (Acts 11:1–17).

Peter defended the mission to the Gentiles, but the whole church was not behind him at the time. The church wanted to question Peter about taking the gospel to Gentiles. Eventually the church agrees God wants the Gentiles to hear the gospel and be saved (Acts 11:18). That is what Peter is talking about in Acts 15:7. The Gentiles believed, and verses 8 and 9 read, “God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.”

By faith he cleansed their hearts. The gospel message is not about cleansing the outer man but cleansing the inner man. That is why the circumcision of the New Testament, the new covenant, is not a circumcision of the flesh, but a circumcision of the heart as Paul writes in Romans 2:29. It is not about the outer man, it is about the inner man; about the transformation that takes place when God gives new birth to a soul. Peter says that the Gentiles were cleansed in their hearts, just like the Jews were cleansed in

their hearts. God did not make a distinction. It does not matter what the level of melanin is in their skin. It does not matter about their cultural norms, background, or ethnicity. God does not make those distinctions. God cleansed their hearts by faith just like he cleansed the hearts of Jews by faith.

Now, verse 10 reads, “Why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples’ necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in the same way they are.” Part of what is decisively addressed amidst the controversy surrounding circumcision is initially articulated by Peter. He rises to interject, urging a pause for reflection. Recalling the recent profound experiences with Gentiles, Peter emphatically insists that God has unequivocally extended salvation to them, just as he did for all believers, solely through faith and grace. Peter emphasizes that souls are redeemed through faith and grace alone. Verse 9 underscores the purification of hearts through faith, while verse 11 reaffirms their salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, Peter passionately presents this truth.

Barnabas and Paul stand up in verse 12 and give their report. These missionaries described all the wonders and the signs that God had done through them as they ministered among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). After Barnabas and Paul finish, James, who is the leader of the church there in Jerusalem, responds in verse 13, “brothers and sisters, listen to me. Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name.” James is pointing back to Peter’s testimony. Peter reported how God first intervened to take a people for his name from among the Gentiles.

The words of the prophets agree with what James has just asserted. In verses Acts 15:16–17, James points back to Amos 9:11–12. The prophet Amos says, “After these things, I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent.” God said he was going to give David a great house and a great name and that David would have a son who would sit forever on the throne (2 Sam 7:9–16). But David’s house was a mess. After David’s son

Solomon, it was all downhill in a hurry.⁷ And Solomon was not exactly great, even though he was the wisest and richest of kings in all of Israel's history. There are flaws in Solomon's life because of his marriage to not just many wives but to many pagan wives, which led to his downfall (1 Kgs 11:1–8).

The kingdom was a mess, but God restored and redeemed it. He redeemed the dynasty of David through Jesus, who is in the line of David. He was rebuilding that family name. He was rebuilding the house of David. God says he will rebuild its ruins and set it up again so the rest of humanity may seek the Lord. Who is the rest of humanity? Amos' response is quoted in Acts 15:12 where Amos says, "Even all the Gentiles." Reaching out to the Gentiles so that they too might become worshippers of the One True God is not a New Testament concept exclusively. Amos says that even the Gentiles would be called by the name of God, by the name of his Messiah, and would become worshippers of him. It is the Lord who makes these things known even from long ago. God says it is a part of this plan to include the Gentiles in the redeemed, in the saved, and in the born again. It has always been his plan.

James says, because of what they heard from Peter, because of what they heard from Barnabas and Paul, and because of what they hear in the prophets, "Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turned to God" (Acts 15:19). James sees this concept of works, especially this work of circumcision, as a weight that should not be carried. He says the church should not create this kind of difficulty for those among the Gentiles who turned to God, "But instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from anything that has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:20).

⁷ See the histories in 1 and 2 Kgs for more on the downward spiral of the kingdom after Solomon.

Now all these forbidden practices mentioned in verse 20 have to do with the Pagan religious rituals of the day. The church writes to the Gentiles to say they are not going to put any extra burdens on them but the church is calling these Gentile believers out of the pagan practices of their past. The Gentiles are exhorted to not continue to live like pagans. They are instructed not eat the food that is sacrificed to polluted idols.

Abstention from all sexual immorality is one forbidden act mentioned in the letter to the Gentiles. This includes not only things like homosexuality but all sex outside the boundaries of marriage. God's people should not have immoral affairs, which includes no sexual relations before marriage. Sexual immorality was also part of the Pagan worship rituals and James says not to follow in the pagan ways. Followers of Jesus should not live like the pagans and sexual immorality was identified with pagan lifestyle.

Other abstentions mentioned in the letter from the church to the Gentiles is strangulation and abstaining from blood. Both acts have to do with eating meat that still has the life blood in it. This act was forbidden by the Lord all the way back in Genesis 9:4. When James bans eating meat from animals that have been strangled, his concern is about the life blood still being in the meat. When an animal is strangled and then eaten, the life blood is still in the meat and that is why he includes strangulation as forbidden. God says his people should not eat anything with blood in it and abstain from the eating of blood itself (Lev 3:17). All of these are excluded because these practices are what pagans do. God's people should not act like pagans because they have been transformed by the power of the living God and by his Holy Spirit. God calls his people to come out from among the unbelievers and be pure (Isa 52:11). That is also what James and the church are asking of the new Gentile believers, and it is what the apostle Paul will write to the church in Corinth (2 Cor 6:17).

The church wants to ensure there is unity in what is believed, they want to make sure there is unity in what is preached, and they want to make certain there is unity in what is practiced. The church carefully hammers out biblical doctrine and tempering it

on a false doctrine of works salvation.

The church was hammering out what is essential for salvation when they met in this council. Christians are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done on the cross to pay for sin. Religious works and rituals do not save souls, but those who have been saved by faith in Jesus should no longer live like the unconverted.

Every year each state Baptist Convention and the national Southern Baptist Convention of churches get together for a business meeting. Part of what happens at those meetings is debate—the battle over issues. Debate occurs over what the Convention agrees upon so that Southern Baptist congregations can move forward together. As much as debates are disliked, the importance is evident. It is crucial to be in agreement as the gospel is advanced collectively. Unity in mission requires unity in message, which in turn relies on unity in doctrine or beliefs. Therefore, hammering out these matters is essential. Years ago, a team of Southern Baptists collaborated on a document known as *The Baptist Faith and Message*. This document summarizes the shared beliefs of Southern Baptists. Southern Baptist churches, missionaries, and pastors can collectively affirm these essential doctrines based on the Word of God. The ultimate authority is God’s Word, where these doctrines are outlined. Together, agreement is reached, and these beliefs are cherished.

Consequently, church planters, missionaries, and ordained pastors are expected to uphold this message. Both NAMB and IMB require missionaries to affirm *The Baptist Faith and Message*. This ensures a level of confidence in their adherence to Scripture as outlined in *The Baptist Faith and Message*. Unified gospel proclamation is imperative. Trustees and mission boards oversee the doctrinal integrity of missionaries and seminaries. If deviation occurs from the agreed-upon beliefs of cooperating churches, then corrective action is taken, and discipline may follow if necessary. This mechanism ensures accountability for unity in the gospel message. Despite autonomy within the Convention, accountability among brothers and sisters is maintained and necessary. Acts

15 illustrates this desire for accountability among early Christians. Believers engaged in discussions and debates with fellow believers and church leaders to ensure the truth was taught. Agreement was sought before progress was made. Cooperation with other Southern Baptist churches, mission boards for missionary and church planter deployment, and seminaries for pastor and preacher training exemplifies this kind of unity in action.

In Acts 15 one can see this idea of unity and mission. One can also see that the mission met resistance as it was advancing, and then there was debate for unity so that they could make solidify unity in the gospel proclaimed and unity as they advanced missionally. Finally, verses 22–35 note a declaration of unity delivered.

Declaration of Unity Delivered (15:22–35)

Acts 15:22–23 records,

Then the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers. They wrote: from the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the brothers and sisters among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

These words are written from the perspective of the leadership of the church, the apostles and elders, along with the whole church. The letter is written with the authority of the whole church and it proclaims,

Since we've heard that some without our authorization, went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled hearts, we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you, along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas who will personally report the same things by word of mouth. For was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you, besides these requirements: that you abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:24–29)

A letter declaring doctrinal unity is written and delivered to the church in Antioch by Paul, Barnabas, and representatives from the Jerusalem church. The letter is a brief declaration that all the church unanimously agreed circumcision was not required for Gentile Christians. Because the decision was written, it is enduring documentation of the

decision. Because representatives from the Jerusalem church helped deliver the decision, it was less likely for people to accuse Barnabas and Paul of hearing only what they wanted to hear. The decision is delivered in person by church planters and by church partners. Paul and Barnabas are the church planters and then there is Silas and Judas, who are the church partners, partnering with Paul and Barnabas to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and partnering with the church in Antioch to take that message to the rest of the Gentile world. These messengers carry the message personally, deliver it in person to this church in Antioch, and what happens as a result is recorded in verses 30–31: “They were sent off, went down to Antioch and after gathering the assembly they delivered the letter. When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.” When they heard the decision they rejoiced, and the reason they could rejoice is because this was God’s decision. Verse 28 says, “It was the Holy Spirits decision and ours.” The church walking in agreement with the Holy Spirit causes rejoicing in the church and brings much encouragement.

Continuing in verse 32, “Judas and Silas encouraged the church in Antioch and, strengthened them with a long message and after spending some time there, they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them.” These ambassadors of good will went on a short-term mission trip. The purpose of their mission trip was to deliver the essential doctrine on salvation and to encourage the church in Antioch with the message in the letter.

The Old Testament temple had a court for the Gentiles as the only place where the Gentiles were permitted to go into for worship. Another court further inside was for the Jews and a curtain separated the two courts because the Gentiles were not permitted into the court of the Jews. But now there is no separation because that is all been stripped away through faith in Christ (Heb 10:19–22). They bring this letter of good news to the church in Antioch and encourage them. After they encourage the believers in Antioch, Judas and Silas are sent back home with a blessing of peace from the church in Antioch,

and they take that encouragement back to the church in Jerusalem.

One of the great benefits of short-term mission trips is being able to encourage believers in another place and to receive encouragement from other Christians because of the faith seen in them and because of what God is doing through them. Then, the encouragement and enthusiasm is taken back to the sending church.

According to verse 35, “Paul and Barnabas along with many others who remained in the Antioch teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord.” These followers of Christ were teaching and preaching the word of the Lord because the word of the Lord grows people in the faith. It is the Word of the Lord that changes lives. The Bible says the word of God is the power of God to salvation for all who believe, for the Jew and the Gentile (Rom 1:16). Paul and Barnabas stay to teach and preach in order to help the church grow healthier and stronger in the faith. The advancing mission met resistance. Then there was a debate for unity. Finally, there was a declaration of unity delivered to the church, and that declaration created great joy which is why the Scripture declares, “Behold, how good and how blessed it is when brothers live together, in unity.”⁸

May the Holy Spirit help local churches live in unity with one another. May he help Southern Baptists live in unity with other churches in the SBC. May he also help the members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church to encourage one another and build one another up, for his glory. Amen.

Sermon 4: Tools in the Toolbox (Part 1)

The Great Commission is the mission the Lord Jesus has given to all churches and all Christians in the world. Individual churches may word their mission statements in slightly different ways, but most evangelicals should agree the Great Commission is THE mission of the church. Tools are needed for the mission and a pursual of selected

⁸ Psalm 133:1, CSB.

Scripture verses will help one get to know the equipment, the power, and plan to complete the Great Commission.

The Equipment Is the Holy Word

Second Timothy 3:16–17 reads, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” This second letter to Timothy was written by the apostle Paul. He writes to encourage Timothy who is now pastoring one of the churches planted through the apostle Paul. Paul warns Timothy that tough times are certain to come as he pastors the church but there is a tool for equipping Timothy to navigate through the tough times. That tool is the Holy Word of God.

Multi-function tools have existed for some time. They have different names and come in different shapes and sizes, but they all have multiple functions. One example would be the Swiss Army Knife, which includes more than just a knife. It may also have a toothpick, a pair of tweezers, screwdrivers, and scissors or a drill. Another example is the Leatherman tool, which comes with its own pouch to put on a belt, but it is small enough to fit in a pocket. A Leatherman tool may have eighteen or more functions in one pocket-sized tool. The whole thing is useful, but different parts are used at different times depending on the need. The concept is that a person will be well equipped for any task they might face.

In a similar way, Paul says the Scriptures not only equip a person for many things, but for every good work. Paul begins by saying all of Scripture is inspired, or breathed out, by God and all of it is useful. Therefore, all of Scripture is inspired and all the Bible is useful. Different parts are more useful at different times, but the whole Bible is profitable. Then Paul tells Timothy what the Bible is useful for, as if he were opening his multi-function tool one part at a time and explaining what it is best suited for.

The first function Paul mentions is teaching. The original word for teaching is

didaskalia. The English word, “didactic,” comes from this root and means, “designed or intended to teach.”⁹ Paul commends Timothy for following his teaching in 2 Timothy 3:10 and now he encourages Timothy to use Scripture as his textbook for teaching others.

Teaching is also mentioned in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:20 where Jesus says, “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” As the church goes out and talks to people about Jesus and about life in general, the church should be using the Bible as the primary teaching tool.

Scripture is also good for rebuking and correcting: rebuking—telling what is wrong; correcting—pointing toward what is right. The Bible equips the church for knowing what is right and what is not right in the eyes of the Lord. The Bible is where souls can find what is pleasing and what is not pleasing to the Lord who is their final judge.

Lastly, Paul says Scripture is profitable for training in righteousness. The Word of God is intended to be taught. The goal of the teaching is a right walk with God and a right standing in the presence of God who is the final judge.

The Bible is the source for this training in righteousness. Jesus reminds us of this truth in His prayer for His disciples in John 17. In verse 17 Jesus prays for His disciples to be sanctified by the truth and then He says the word of God is the truth.¹⁰ Through His word of truth, the Holy Spirit washes us and purifies us for daily living that is pleasing to God and furnishes us for every good work. A soul can only be declared righteous by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. However, by His Word and through His Spirit He creates in us an actual righteousness.

Paul concludes his thought in this text by telling Timothy the Scriptures can make him completely fit for the ministry that is before him. In fact, the text allows the church to make that connection for every “man of God.” If Christians will make

⁹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003), s. v. “didactic.”

¹⁰ John 17:17.

themselves familiar with the Bible, God will use his Word to make them fit for every good work that he has prepared in advance for them to do. The equipment for the Great Commission is the Holy Word of God and the power for the mission is the Holy Spirit of God as seen in Acts 1:8.

The Power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8)

Speaking to his disciples before he ascends into heaven, Jesus is recorded in Acts 1:8 as saying, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit is come on you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The power Jesus gives is his Holy Spirit and his power. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

As seen throughout the book of Acts, the power from the Holy Spirit gives the disciples boldness to proclaim the Word of God. The Holy Spirit gives them the words that they ought to speak. Even when the disciples of Jesus stand before their accusers and before judges they are given from the Holy Spirit the words they ought to speak.

At the end of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:20, after Jesus tells his followers to make disciples of all nations, he then says, “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus is always with his church through his Holy Spirit, who lives in them because they are the temple of his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). The Spirit resides in his people and gives them the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work of the Great Commission.

In John 16:7–8, Jesus tells his disciples he sends the Holy Spirit “to convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of coming judgment.” The Holy Spirit takes the Holy Word and uses that to bring conviction; conviction of sin, conviction of God’s righteousness, and conviction of the coming judgment. All people have sinned, but God

is holy and without sin. Because of God's holiness, humanity's sinfulness demands judgment.

God has given his people the power of Holy Spirit to get the work done. That Spirit gives God's people power to speak boldly as they ought. The Holy Spirit gives God's people the words they ought to say when they witness to other people in obedience to Jesus's command. The Holy Spirit takes the truth of God's Word and brings conviction that leads to repentance and faith.

The church may be tempted to trust in something other than the power of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Word of God to save people's souls from the penalty of their sin. Sometimes the church trusts in its own power or wisdom to convince people of the need for salvation. Perhaps the church trusts in a great new witnessing tool or evangelism program for leading people to faith in Jesus. The church may put their trust in a new book for effective discipleship. None of these resources are bad or evil, but they can never take the place of the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The church does not have all the answers, but the Word of God does. The Holy Spirit of God does have the answers. In faith, the people of God trust the Holy Spirit of God for conviction in witnessing. Rather than trusting in human effort and all human wisdom, God's people should trust in God's power and promises. The church should trust in the Holy Spirit as they go out and witness as Jesus commands them to do.

God gives the equipment to fulfill the Great Commission, and the Word of God equips his people completely or thoroughly so that the church is capable for every good work, including the work of the Great Commission. Then Jesus gives his people the power to do the work of the Great Commission, and that power is his Holy Spirit. The church should trust God's Holy Spirit to fulfill the Great Commission through them rather than trusting in their own strength or prowess.

A Plan Is the Cooperative Program

The Cooperative Program is not the only plan to fulfill the Great Commission, but it is *a* plan among many. The Cooperative Program is an effective, efficient, biblically based plan to accomplish the Great Commission and Southern Baptist churches are blessed to have such a great tool for carrying out the Great Commission.

God has given the church equipment. He has given the church power, and through the SBC Cooperative Program God has given a blessed plan for fulfilling the Great Commission. Acts 2:44 gives biblical insight to understand how the Cooperative Program works. In Acts 2:44 Luke writes about the early church: “All the believers were together, and they held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all as any had need.” This is not an early form of communism, but it is a display of Christians understanding they are stewards of all that God has given to them. When there was a need, others contributed voluntarily to meet the need, even to the point of selling their own possessions to meet the needs of other people. This is the kind of principle at work in the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program. The SBC pools all the resources voluntarily contributed by Southern Baptist churches and then distributes them to fulfill the Great Commission mandate. This is how the Cooperative Program works and it begins with members in the local church. Each member of each church voluntarily contributes financially on a regular basis to their church. Those offerings are collected and distributed as each church has voted to distribute those funds.

Every year local churches discuss and vote on their operating budgets. Part of that budget is how much money is designated to be sent to the state convention, such as the Colorado Baptist General Convention. Members of local churches vote on church budgets and on how much is forwarded to the Cooperative Program through their state conventions. Every Southern Baptist church, because of its autonomy, gets to vote on its own budget and what percentage of its budget goes on to the state office. Local church

members are the authority on how much gets sent to the state convention. Cooperative financial support begins with the local church members. Members contribute to their local church and vote on a budget for the local church, and then the local church sends money on to the state convention. Each state convention has an annual meeting where they present a budget and messengers, who are representatives of the local churches, vote on how much of the state budget gets sent on to the national level. Then, the SBC has an annual convention where a similar process is followed. Messengers at the annual Southern Baptist Convention vote on how the Cooperative Program dollars will be distributed. A church that reflects the concern and generosity of the churches in Acts will give more generously than the church that looks only inwardly. We need to ask, “What kind of church are we?”

A diagram from the SBC website graphically shows how Cooperative Program dollars were distributed for the 2022–2023 fiscal year.¹¹ The diagram uses the shape of a heart as a pie diagram to depict the percentage distribution of Cooperative Program dollars. The bottom banner on the diagram reminds readers that the Cooperative Program is “The heart of Southern Baptist missions and ministries.”¹²

According to the diagram, over 73 percent of the money given to the SBC by local churches is dispersed for world missions effort. IMB and NAMB get 73 percent of the budgeted Cooperative Program pie. Over half of the 73 percent goes to international missions and then the remainder is for North America missions. The world mission portion is the biggest part of the Cooperative Program budget every year, which is directly aligned with the purpose of the SBC. The SBC constitution states,

¹¹ This diagram was printed and handed to each person in the Sunday worship service at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church on the day of the sermon.

¹² “2022–2023 Cooperative Program Allocation Budget,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://sbcnet.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022-2023-SBC-CP-Heart-Chart.pdf>.

It is the purpose of the Convention to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States and its territories for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad and any other objects such as Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God.¹³

It may surprise some people to learn that SBC mission boards receive the lion's share of Cooperative Program dollars every year. That is because when the SBC formed together as a convention of churches the original constitution identified the propagation of the gospel as the sacred effort that unites Southern Baptist churches.¹⁴ The sacred effort of fulfilling the Great Commission is why more than 73 percent of the Cooperative Program dollars are directed to fulfilling and supporting the SBC worldwide mission effort. The next largest portion of Cooperative Program budget is theological education, which receives just over 22 percent of the Cooperative Program funds.¹⁵ Theological education is connected to the Great Commission goal by preparing those who will minister for the gospel in North America and around the world.

After theological education, the last two, relatively small portions, are the Executive Committee receiving just under 3 percent and the Christian Ethics and Religious Liberty Ministries receiving a little more than 1.5 percent of the Cooperative Program budget.¹⁶ These percentages of the Cooperative Program budget are voted on by messengers from local SBC churches who vote as representatives for their churches at the annual meeting of the SBC.

This is how local churches through the Cooperative Program S are helping to fulfill the Great Commission. The SBC is sending missionaries out and fully funding the

¹³ "Constitution," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/>.

¹⁴ "Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention," Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, accessed May 13, 2024, http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1845.pdf.

¹⁵ "2022–2023 Cooperative Program Allocation Budget."

¹⁶ "2022–2023 Cooperative Program Allocation Budget."

missionary unit. SBC missionaries actually get a salary and benefits. Missionaries from other churches, when they come back to the United States or wherever their home is, have to come to their supporting churches and ask for money so that they can stay on the mission field. However, because of the way SBC churches cooperate to fulfill the Great Commission with other churches in the SBC, they can pay SBC missionaries a salary and provide benefits. When missionaries return home, they report on what they have seen God do and how local SBC congregations may pray for them as they continue to serve as vocational missionaries.

Local Southern Baptist churches help to fulfill the Great Commission by sending out missionaries through SBC mission boards and funding the mission effort. Local SBC churches also help fulfill the Great Commission through the theological education of ministers of the gospel. The last verse in the Great Commission is a command to teach disciples to obey what Jesus has commanded (Matt 28:20). Christians are commanded not only make disciples but to also teach them. Through theological education ministries, local churches reduce the expense to educate SBC pastors and ministers. Local SBC churches also train SBC missionaries before they are sent out to wherever God has called them to serve. Local SBC churches are part of that Great Commission work by cooperating for training through SBC seminaries. Local SBC churches contributing to the Cooperative Program keeps the expenses down for every SBC church member who goes to an SBC seminary or college. Students who are members of other denominations may still attend SBC seminaries, but they pay a higher tuition. This is not unlike in-state versus out-of-state tuition. Non-Southern Baptist students pay out of state tuition and everybody who is a member of a Southern Baptist church pays the in-state tuition rate.

This cooperative funding allows even a small church to be part of something much, much bigger than itself. Every time an SBC church member puts money in the offering plate, part of that money, as approved by the local church vote, gets passed on to

the Cooperative Program, which helps fulfill the worldwide gospel mission. Even small local SBC congregations are a part of doing God's big work. They are part of the worldwide mission every time a church member puts money in an SBC offering plate. Giving financially to a local SBC church is not only about the local church but it is also about what God can do through the church in the local community, and it is also about what he is doing all over the world, through the local church because each SBC church is a part of the Cooperative Program. Local SBC churches help support over 3000 international missionaries and 2000 North American missionaries all over the globe who are taking the gospel to those who have never heard. SBC missionaries are starting new churches and baptizing new believers in the name of Jesus. Every local SBC that contributes to the Cooperative Program is part of these Great Commission efforts. God is asking individuals to be part of this plan called the Cooperative Program in three main ways.

First is giving. Every time SBC church members put money in the offering plate they are part of fulfilling the Great Commission through the Cooperative Program. Second is prayer. Second, prayer should not need to be limited to prayer meetings once a week in the church building. Church members should pray for missionaries and pastors throughout the week, every week. Third, local congregations should invite missionaries to come speak at their church so members may know and pray for them by name. Fourth is going. Members of local SBC churches can be a part of the regular going on mission. Week after week, day after day, in their local community, church members can go out intentionally on mission. Pastors can help equip their members with witnessing tools, Bible verses, and evangelism training. Local SBC church members can go on short term trips with SBC mission boards in North America and around the world. They can go as career missionaries with IMB or NAMB. Each member of every church is a part of fulfilling the Great Commission.

God has given the equipment in the Holy Word of God. God has given the

power of the Holy Spirit of God to do the work, and he has given a plan to SBC churches called the Cooperative Program. As mentioned previously, other plans are out there, but the Cooperative Program of the SBC is a very effective and efficient plan for fulfilling God's Great Commission by cooperating with other Southern Baptist churches across the nation so that God's name is glorified all over the earth. Local SBC churches should continue to be a part of this cooperative work. Each local congregation should assess if God is asking them to be a bigger participant in the future. Each person and each church should give willingly and cheerfully as the Spirit leads (2 Cor 9:7). As each person gives, they may give knowing they are giving to God's mission for God's glory.

Sermon 5: "Tools in the Toolbox" (Part 2)

This is the last sermon in the Cooperative Program series. It begins with some review to help recall what has been learned to this point.

The Cooperative Program was developed as a plan for helping SBC churches fulfill the Great Commission. At the beginning of that commission, Jesus says all authority in heaven and earth have been given to him. Jesus sends out his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, to baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and to teach them to obey everything he had taught his disciples. Then Jesus reminds his disciples he is with them to the end of the age. Jesus sends his disciples out with all authority. He sends his disciples out with his presence, and the Lord says go make disciples everywhere, teaching them to obey what I have taught you. This Great Commission is the mission of every local church regardless of size or budget.

To begin, this sermon will review the equipment, the power, and a plan for fulfilling the Great Commission. After review, this sermon will look at the history of the SBC and the Cooperative Program. To conclude, this sermon will discuss future thoughts and concerns about the Cooperative Program.

The Equipment Is the Holy Word

The equipment that has been given to the church is the Holy Word of God. Second Timothy 3:16–17 is often used to talk about the inspiration of the Word of God; that Scripture is breathed-out by God. Indeed, this is an important truth to note from these Bible verses. However, verse 17 also encourages Christians by reminding them they may be equipped for every good work through Scripture. Scripture is given to thoroughly equip the church for every good work. God gives the church his Word to equip members for his work. If the church ignores God’s Word, the church will not be equipped for the work.

Romans 1:16 is a related verse: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.” The gospel as it is recorded in the Bible, is equipment the church needs if the church is going to point others to salvation by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. The Word of God is the multi-function tool that completely equips Christians for every good work.

Hebrews 4:12 represents the Bible as living and effective and sharper than a two-edged sword. The Bible is not a dull instrument that makes work more difficult for the church, but it is razor sharp and cuts to the core of the human spirit to bring conviction, salvation, and sanctification. God gives the equipment of his living and effective Word to equip the church for fulfilling the work of the Great Commission. God gives the equipment and he also gives the empowerment.

The Power Is the Holy Spirit

Every tool in the toolbox needs power of some kind. Even hammers, wrenches, and screwdrivers use the power that comes from human hands and arms to make them work. Most tools have been updated in some way. Now nail guns are used instead of using hammers and attachments on drills have replaced screwdrivers and wrenches. Still, all tools require some external power source. Every tool has some kind of power behind it to make it work.

The power for the church to fulfill the Great Commission comes from the Holy Spirit of God. The end of Luke's Gospel reads, "And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high" (24:49). Jesus says to the disciples to wait until they receive the *power* that he will send, and when they receive that *power*, they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). As the early disciples were timid and afraid until the coming of the Holy Spirit, the church today is also without power and boldness for witness without the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent.

The two verses mentioned previously, Romans 1:16 and Hebrews 4:12, also make a reference to power. First, Romans 1:16 says the gospel is the *power* of God for salvation. The word that is used for "power" here is *dunamis* in the original language.¹⁷ This root is where the English language gets the word for dynamo, which is a power source. Next, in Hebrews 4:12, the Word of God is alive and effective. The word that is translated "effective" comes from the original word *energes* where the English words energy and energetic come from.¹⁸ These two words help portray that the Word of God is not simply existing, but is working in people's lives, and it is the Holy Spirit of God that gives life and power to the written word of God.

God has given the church the equipment to do the work of the Great Commission, he has given the church the power and the authority to get that work done, and then God has given the church a plan called the Cooperative Program.

A Plan Is the Cooperative Program

The Cooperative Program is specific to the SBC, and it is a plan whereby local SBC churches work together to fulfill the Great Commission. Local churches pool

¹⁷ Kurt Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Society, 1983), 530.

¹⁸ Aland et al., *Greek New Testament*, 754.

resources of finances and personnel, and we send them out to fulfill the Great Commission.

In Acts 2:44, the disciples were bringing their money in and laying it at the apostles' feet. The apostles would then distribute resources to meet needs. The Cooperative Program works on a similar principle. Local church members give money to their churches, the churches give money to their state's Baptist Convention, and the state convention gives money to the national convention to fund Southern Baptist missionaries, mission boards, and seminaries to get the work of the Great Commission done. The Cooperative Program effort begins with local church members doing as the Bible exhorts, and each one giving as they have decided in their own hearts so that they may give cheerfully and not reluctantly (2 Cor 9:7). Then local SBC churches give to the state office and the state gives to the national level.

The percentages of Cooperative Program financial distribution were discussed in the previous sermon: more than 70 percent of the Cooperative Program receipts are directed to IMB and NAMB. However, the previous sermon did not touch on the two annual special emphasis offerings taken. The money collected from the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering and the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering goes directly to the mission field. One hundred percent of the money goes to the missionaries and these offerings supplement the money received through the Cooperative Program by the mission boards.

Now the sermon will look at the history of the Cooperative Program and the future of the Cooperative Program. The reason we talk about the Cooperative Program is not for the sake of the program—the program is a tool to fulfill the Great Commission, which is a command from Jesus, and the mission of every church in the world. The Cooperative Program is a plan to get that work done until Jesus returns. Other denominations and organizations have other methods, but I believe the Cooperative Program is the best plan.

*A History of the SBC and
Cooperative Program*

As noticed through the previous sermons in this series, the Cooperative Program is a biblically-based plan for reaching all nations with the gospel. The biblical vision for reaching all nations starts back in the first book of the Bible, Genesis 12:1–3. God makes a covenant with Abram, and in 12:1–2 the Lord says, “Go out through your land, your relatives, your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” God is making a promise to Abram, he says here is what I am going to do for you. I am going to make you a nation, I am going to give you blessing, and I am going to make your name great. Then in verse 3, God says, “I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God says he intends to bless “all the peoples on earth”—from the first book of the Bible all the way to the last book, the book of Revelation, God’s plan includes all nations, all peoples. The last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation, begins to describe a worship scene going on in heaven. The Lamb is on the throne and people from every tribe and tongue and nation are around the throne (7:9). The Great Commission has always been about all the nations, not just one nation.

Another reference for the international intention of the Great Commission is Ezekiel 36, starting in verse 22. God says Israel has profaned his holy name and he (God) is going to act for the sake of his holy name. God is pronouncing judgment on Israel. Then in verse 23 God says he’s going to glorify his name through that judgment because *the nations* will see and know that he is LORD.

The SBC’s desire for reaching all the nations is founded upon this biblical basis. It was noted at the beginning of this series that the SBC was formed to carry out what the Convention called, “One sacred effort.” That sacred effort was clarified as getting

the gospel out to all the world as efficiently as possible.¹⁹ The churches that first formed the SBC figured more resources of manpower and more resources of finances were available when churches worked together to fulfill the Great Commission. The problem came when individuals began to reach out to churches and pastors asking for time and finances. Rather than showing a cooperative effort of reaching all the world with the gospel, these missionaries seemed to be competing for local church time and money.

This is an illustration of what it could look like: a church member says they have been called by God to take the gospel to the city of Denver. The church affirms the call, and they prayerfully send the church member out, but the church is not able to fully financially support this missional effort. The new missionary begins contacting and visiting Southern Baptist churches all over the nation to raise more support. He calls pastors and asks for time in the pulpit. Because the pastor is convicted the whole world needs the gospel, he graciously agrees to allow this new missionary to speak to the church on a Sunday morning. The new missionary continues to make regular calls to many churches every week so that he can raise funding for the mission.

Then, there is a family in another church and God is calling them to go to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Their church affirms the call and sends them out, but the church cannot fully fund the mission effort. They begin to call other churches and ask the pastors for time to speak in the pulpit to share their passion for the lost souls of Cheyenne. Many of the churches they contact are the same churches contacted by the missionary called to Denver. The pastors of local congregations want to show their support of Great Commission work, and many of the same pastors surrender pulpit time to this missionary family as well as the missionary called to Denver.

Now, multiply that scenario by one hundred, and one begins to understand how pastors in the early years of the SBC were feeling overwhelmed by requests. One can

¹⁹ “Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention.”

understand how the missionaries would seem to be competing for the time and finances of the same churches. And when one takes into consideration that computer teleconferencing and free nationwide long-distance calling were not yet feasible, one can understand how these early missionaries or their agents spent much of their money for travel and correspondence. Instead of working together to fulfill the Great Commission this illustration communicates more competition than cooperation. Missionaries were competing for time behind the pulpit, competing for specific days, and competing for finances.

By 1925, the SBC leaders recognized this was not an efficient way to fulfill the Great Commission. The desire was good and biblical, but the method was not an effective and efficient model. Then, at the 1925 convention in Memphis, an efficient model for funding the one sacred effort was proposed that they called the Cooperative Program. Through this program, SBC churches would pool finances for fulfilling the Great Commission. As discussed with Acts 2:44, the Cooperative Program was built on this biblical principle of bringing all the money together and trusting it to mission boards, who distribute resources where there is need.

That is a brief history of the beginning of the SBC and the beginning of the Cooperative Program. The Cooperative Program has been an efficient and effective program. Southern Baptist leaders throughout the history of the SBC have said if somebody can show a more efficient and effective way to fulfill the Great Commission, they are open to that idea but so far no one has been able to produce a better model.²⁰

Having reviewed the history of the Cooperative Program and the biblical principles upon which it is built, the next topic of consideration is the future of the Cooperative Program.

²⁰ Frank Page, "The Cooperative Program and the Future of Collaborative Ministry," in *The SBC and the 21st Century*, ed. Jason K. Allen (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 20.

The Future of the Cooperative Program

The Cooperative Program exists to bring glory to God by efficiently managing God's resources to fulfill the Great Commission. One way Christians glorify God is by obeying his commands, and the last command Jesus gave before he ascended into heaven was the Great Commission. Therefore, working together to fulfill the Great Commission brings glory to our Lord.

Article II of the SBC constitution says, "It is the purpose of the Convention to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States and its territories for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad and any other objects such as Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God."²¹ The purpose of the SBC is to bring glory to God by promoting Christian missions and anything else that would advance the kingdom of God. The Cooperative Program affords Southern Baptists a great way to promote and fund Christian missions. However, church leaders must not misunderstand "promoting" to only mean advertising. Churches and church leaders need to not only advertise but also mobilize for Christian missions. The Great Commission calls all Christians to make disciples, as we go, everywhere we go, wherever we go. All Christians and all churches bringing glory God by pointing other people to him.

If the Cooperative Program is going to continue long into the future, it will be because Southern Baptists prioritize glorifying God rather than glorifying a program, rather than glorifying the Convention, and rather than glorifying any of the SBC churches or personalities. Southern Baptists must promote God as supreme, recognizing that he is the Almighty, and that he owns all things. As the owner of all things, all the human resources and all the financial resources belong to God, and Christians are stewards, or managers of God's resources. Using God's resources wisely is another way local

²¹ "Constitution."

churches can glorify God. The local church, the SBC, and the Cooperative Program are all means by which God's resources may be managed for his glory, but Christians cannot and should not put their hope in any of those entities as the answer to lostness. They should trust God and use the tools he provides to get the Great Commission done but seek his kingdom and glory first.

Second, and very closely related, is a high view of Scripture. When seeking the kingdom of God, the Bible is the only roadmap for reliable navigation. The SBC must hold fast in the continuing battle for biblical inerrancy and authority. As already seen, the Cooperative Program was built on a biblical foundation. If the Cooperative Program is going to continue for many years in the future, that solid foundation must not change.

Third, churches and church leaders need to continually remind members of the wisdom and efficiency of the Cooperative Program. Many good options for fulfilling the Great Commission are now available and easily visible on the internet and mobile phones. Financial contributions can also be made using the internet and mobile phones, so the Cooperative Program blessings and benefits need to be regularly kept before SBC congregations. As an example, some church members may not realize that IMB and NAMB missionaries are funded solely from the giving of SBC churches. Every other mission organization asks everyone they know for funding. SBC churches and church leaders must inform church members of the unique structure of the Cooperative Program.

Worshipping regularly is another important factor for the future of the Cooperative Program. Worshiping God goes back to being equipped to do the work of God through the Bible, which is the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16–17). All worship of God should be founded on and saturated with the written Word of God. The Bible is God's revelation of himself to us and we must allow that Word to direct our worship. God then uses his living and active Word to sanctify us and make us completely equipped for every good work. Every good work certainly includes the work of being on mission to fulfill the

Great Commission for the glory of God. The Cooperative Program is a great plan for helping Southern Baptist churches in this effort.

All Christians should be spending time worshiping God privately and together with other believers so that all can be equipped, empowered, and encouraged to do the work of God, and fulfilling the Great Commission *is* the work of God. One added dimension of collective worship is the opportunity to encourage and be encouraged by other believers. Individual Christians do not get this opportunity in private worship, but it is something the Bible commands all Christians to do.

The writer of Hebrews 10:24–25 writes, “Let us watch out from one another to provoke toward love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” Local church members should not stop meeting together. Church members not attending church became more of a concern for pastors all over America and all over the world since the corona virus pandemic. Because people were so afraid of contracting the virus, they would stay at home rather than attend church in person. Some chose to watch church services online and some chose to not go back to services in the church building. People can now watch online, and churches are grateful for that opportunity to minister to people online, but watching worship online at home is not the same as gathering together in the church building with God’s people. Church members need each other to spur on toward love and good deeds. This happens best and most often when the church meets together. When watching on the internet or television at home, brothers and sisters in Christ are not gathered together to provoke one another toward love and good deeds. Christians should not stop worshipping the Lord together but should regularly meet to worship together and encourage one another to be on mission for the glory of God.

Statistics from the Southern Baptist Convention in the year 2021 give reason for concern that too many Southern Baptists are not meeting together on a regular basis.

The total membership in the SBC network of churches is more than 13.68 million members. On average, only 3.6 million of those members are in church attendance each week,²² which means when there is an opportunity to be exhorted by God’s Holy Word to be on mission to fulfill the Great Commission, almost 75 percent of the people will not be in attendance to hear the exhortation. When there is an opportunity to educate people about how God uses the Cooperative Program to fulfill the Great Commission through Southern Baptist churches, 75 percent of the people will not even hear it. Simply by being together to worship the Lord by being in attendance at a church allows Christians to be educated, equipped, empowered, and exhorted to fulfill that Great Commission, so Christians must not stop meeting together.

The church glorifies God by worshipping together regularly, and the church also glorifies God by giving cheerfully. In 2 Corinthians 9:6–7, the apostle Paul records the importance of cheerful giving: “The point is this. The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. And the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver.” The root word for “cheerful” in the original language is where we get our English word for hilarious (*Ilaros*).²³ God wants his people to be so delighted when giving to his church that it is not a burden, but a delight. Would it not be great if people would celebrate when they put money in the offering plate?

The church is full of people who are sinful by nature. Sinful people can struggle to give even 10 percent of their income to the Lord who supplies all needs according to his riches in glory (Phil 4:19). Sinful people often find it difficult to give a tithe to the

²² Lifeway Research, “2021 Southern Baptist Convention Statistical Summary,” accessed January 24, 2022, https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ACP_Summary_2021.pdf.

²³ Aland et al., *Greek New Testament*, 638.

Lord who gave his life to purchase their salvation. According to a church giving research group, people were giving less to the church in 2019 than church members gave during the Great Depression.²⁴ May God help current and future generations of Christians be generous and joyful givers for the glory of God by advancing his kingdom.

God's people also glorify God by praying zealously or fervently. In Luke 18:1, Jesus begins teaching the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. Jesus taught this parable so the disciples would always pray and not grow faint nor give up (Luke 18:1–8). Christians need to pray in such a way for nations all over the world. Churches need to pray in such a persevering way for God to save souls in their own immediate communities. Local congregations need to pray fervently for God to give them opportunities to witness their communities and pray zealously for the Holy Spirit to send out missionaries to reach the unreached of the world. Southern Baptists should pray that IMB and NAMB missionaries would have opportunities to share the gospel and that they would be bold as they ought to be. Southern Baptists should pray that the Holy Spirit will give missionaries the words they need to speak when sharing Jesus with lost souls. Christians are exhorted to be fervent and really wrestle in prayer. Christians should not grow weary of begging God to deliver lost souls from eternal punishment according to his great grace.

The future of the Cooperative Program depends on how Southern Baptists glorify God, by worshipping him regularly, giving cheerfully or hilariously, praying zealously or fervently, and going obediently. And going obediently does not mean only going to another nation. When Jesus gives the Great Commission in Matthew 28 he tells all who are listening to go and make disciples. As followers of Jesus go wherever they are going, everywhere they are going, while they are going, they are to be making disciples. Every day is an opportunity to take advantage of and to share Jesus with someone. Every

²⁴ “The State of Church Giving through 2019,” Empty Tomb, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://emptytomb.org/publication/the-state-of-church-giving-through-2019/>.

day is a day to be on mission right where they are.

Believers should look for opportunities daily, and as they pray to start their day, pray that God would give them eyes to see the opportunities given, words to speak during those opportunities to share Jesus right where they are, to raise up and send out church planters and missionaries into other parts of the world as well. Christians are all called to obey this Great Commission. Every church member is called to make disciples and develop worshippers of God, inviting them to church and most importantly inviting them into a living and dynamic relationship with Jesus. The future of the Cooperative Program depends on how Southern Baptists glorify God by worshipping him regularly, giving cheerfully, praying zealously, going obediently as he has commanded believers to do, and laboring efficiently and cooperatively.

The SBC was formed for the purpose of spreading the gospel. The Cooperative Program is a good and efficient plan for that mission and purpose. There are other means for fulfilling the Great Commission, but none I am aware of manage God's resources so well for fulfilling the Great Commission. How is God asking members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church to be on mission to fulfill the Great Commission for the glory of God?

Conclusion

This sermon series has shown how the foundation of cooperation within the local church fosters cooperation among churches. The spirit of cooperation among churches is essential for working together through the Cooperative Program to fulfill the Great Commission.

Doctrinal unity is another key element for Cooperative Program progress. When churches are doctrinally aligned it makes it easier for them to walk together and work together for the advance of the gospel. Amos asks the question, "Can two walk

together without agreeing to meet?”²⁵ When churches agree to meet on doctrine it allows them to walk together in Great Commission ministry.

The Lord has distributed resources to each local church for fulfilling the Great Commission. The Cooperative Program is an effective and faithful means to steward those resources for making disciples of all nations.

²⁵ Amos 3:3.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter lays forth an evaluation of project efficacy beginning with a look at how the project fulfilled its purpose. As evaluated, the project accomplished the stated purpose and completed all four listed goals successfully including assessing the beginning level of Cooperative Program understanding, creating and proclaiming a five-week sermon series on the Cooperative Program, increasing understanding of the Cooperative Program through the sermon series, and developing a ministry plan to further increase awareness and engagement with the Cooperative Program. Strengths and weaknesses of the project will also be evaluated to improve the presentation to other audiences in the future. I will also offer theological and personal reflections from the project before concluding.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to increase Cooperative Program understanding among members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado. The purpose does not aim at simply keeping a program alive, but helping members who have come from a variety of denominational backgrounds grasp the beauty and efficiency of the Cooperative Program. However, this is not a goal of pragmatism but an issue of stewarding well the resources God entrusts to each one. A good understanding of how the Cooperative Program works helped convince members that it is the best way to invest God's money in God's kingdom. By the grace of God, statistical evidence from the *t*-test suggests that the members of the church improved in their knowledge of the Cooperative Program.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Four goals were established toward the successful completion of this project to include an initial assessment of members initial Cooperative Program knowledge base, a five-week sermon series on the missional effort of the Cooperative Program, increased understanding of Cooperative Program among members of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church, and develop a ministry plan for further increasing Cooperative Program understanding.

Goal 1: Assess

The first goal was to assess the current level of Cooperative Program understanding among the members of GHVBC. The assessment was conducted at the beginning of a Sunday morning worship.¹ All who were in attendance were invited to participate in the assessment and pens were placed in the pews for all to use to complete the assessment. This goal was considered successfully met with fifteen members completing the assessment. This success was impressive considering the small mountain church was averaging fifteen to twenty in attendance at the time. A total of nineteen pre-test assessments were completed. Some in attendance were visitors but were still willing to participate in the assessment.

The initial assessment gave a baseline of Cooperative Program understanding. Participants were given a choice to use their name or a personal identification number (PIN) on the assessments. Demographically, six participants in the initial survey were male, eight were female, four people in the initial assessment chose to use a PIN and therefore could not be identified as male or female. One participant put no identifier on the survey.

The initial survey was divided into two parts. Part 1, questions 1–7, contained questions for understanding how long members had been part of an SBC church and if

¹ See appendix 1.

they had ever participated in any kind of missions education through an SBC church. I was curious to see if early Southern Baptist mission education made a difference in the initial assessment scores.

The second part, items 8–15 of the survey, was developed around a six-point Likert scale and established the baseline for Cooperative Program understanding. The optimal score for each question on part 2 was a score of 6, or a total of 48, for all questions 8–15.

The results of the first survey demonstrated a good overall understanding of the Cooperative Program. The combined median score was 35 for the second part of the assessment with a score of 33.8 as the combined average for the first assessment. Prior SBC mission education seemed to make some difference in the beginning knowledge of the Cooperative Program, but not a significant difference. For those who had no prior SBC missions education the median score was 35 with an average score of 31.6. For participants with prior SBC missions education, the median was still 35 but the average was 36.7.

Goal 1 was counted successful because the goal of fifteen participants was met. Because the average attendance at the time was fifteen to twenty people, the fifteen-person goal was fairly ambitious.

Goal 2: Develop Preaching Series

The second goal was to develop a five-week preaching series on the missional effort of the Cooperative Program. This goal was measured by three seasoned practitioners of preaching who have all served in Cooperative Program-rich environments. One man was on staff in the Colorado Baptist General Convention ministering in pastor and church relations. He pastored for several years prior to serving on the Colorado Baptist General Convention staff. The second practitioner served as a missionary in the local Southern Baptist association. He also pastored before serving as a missionary to the local

association. The third man is a retired pastor who also served as an IMB missionary in Southeast Asia. These practitioners measured goal 2 using a curriculum rubric.² The goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The reviews were very gracious, with the most helpful part being the comments they gave as a part of the evaluation. I was greatly encouraged to know these seasoned veterans of ministry felt my messages were theologically sound and clearly communicated the main points as evidenced by their “exemplary” ratings in the rubric. I was also blessed to know that, in the opinion of the panel, the application to GHVBC was clear. The mission statement of the church, which is repeated nearly every Sunday from the pulpit, says, “We are on mission to fulfill the Great Commission for the glory of God.” I wanted church members to see how the Cooperative Program helps us fulfill our mission. According to the scores and comments from this panel, this part of the goal was accomplished. One comment said, “A clear, concise, helpful history of the Cooperative Program, as well as how the Great Commission can be accomplished via the effective use of the tool of the Cooperative Program.” The goal was considered successfully met with a score of 100 percent from the three seasoned preaching practitioners. I believe these men were being gracious in their evaluations but I am grateful the main content was effectively communicated.

Goal 3: Increased Cooperative Program Understanding

Goal 3 was to increase Cooperative Program understanding among members of GHVBC. After the last sermon in the sermon series was preached, the assessment for Cooperative Program understanding was completed a second time. Nine persons who took the first assessment also took the second assessment. A *t*-test was used to measure

² See appendix 2.

the change in scores for those nine participants. The goal was considered successfully met if the resulting data of the *t*-test was statistically significant.

The second survey was the same format as the first survey with the first thirteen questions being identical. Three more questions were added at the end of the second survey to inquire how many sermons they listened to, what was most helpful, and what they would like to learn more about.

Participants were given the option of using their names on the assessment or using a personal identification number (PIN). Of those nine participants, two were male, five were female, and two chose to use a PIN. Only three participants listened to all five sermons.

Items 8–15 were scored on a six-point Likert scale with 48 being a perfect score. Most scores from the second assessment were in the 30s with only two outlying scores in the 20s. The highest improvement was 14 points, the lowest was a decrease by 1, the median increase was 3, and the mean increase was 4.2 points. Only one score dropped in value after the sermon series. It appears the person simply failed to answer one question. When I compared the individual scores of each question on his pre-and post-tests, his scores all stayed the same or increased. One question on his post-test had no answer, so it was counted as a zero. However, if that response simply remained the same score as his pre-test response, his total score would have increased by a value of 3 points.

Three indicators of statistical significance were generated by the *t*-test. First is the increase in the average, or mean, score. According to *t*-test results the mean score increased from 31.44 to 35.67 out of a total score of 48. The overall average score increased by more than 4 points. What makes the increased mean score more impressive is the low number of people who heard all five sermons. Only three people, one-third of the statistical analysis group, were in attendance for all five sermons in the series.

Second, the absolute value of the test statistic, or *t*-stat, number (2.910) is also

larger than the t critical one tail score (1.86), indicating an accomplished goal of increased understanding of the Cooperative Program through the preaching series.

Finally, the p value (0.0098) was also less than the alpha value of 0.05, which indicates at least a 95 percent confidence level for the accuracy of the test results.

Therefore, the results of the t -test suggest that the sermon series was effective in increasing Cooperative Program understanding among the members of GHVBC. However, the sample size was so small that the results may not be as reliable as the t -test results indicate.

Goal 4: A Plan for the Future

Goal 4 was to develop a ministry plan to further increase awareness and engagement with the Cooperative Program at GHVBC. The plan was emailed to three men in leadership at GHVBC on February 23, 2024. I did not receive any feedback from the leadership of the church about the suggested ministry plan. However, I did receive feedback the plan was received, but only after sending a later email to ask if it had been received. I have no information to indicate GHVBC will put the plan into practice now that I am no longer pastor at GHVBC.

The goal was considered accomplished when the plan was delivered to the leadership of GHVBC. The plan is included in appendix 4.

Strengths of the Project

Project evaluation is important for improving effectiveness in ministry in the future. In this section the strengths of the project will be noted as part of the evaluation. The first project strength was the opportunity to prepare and proclaim expository sermons while at the same time increasing understanding about the Cooperative Program of the SBC. Preaching expositional messages through the book of Acts while making natural connections with the Cooperative Program for points of application was a true joy. Church members were able to connect the way the Cooperative Program works with the biblical bases on which the Cooperative Program was built. Understanding that the

Cooperative Program is built on a biblical foundation should increase all kinds of participation in the Cooperative Program by bolstering church members' confidence in the program.

A second project strength was the post-test, or second assessment. The post-test allowed participants to reply to a question about what was most helpful to them from the sermon series. Many who responded said the sermon series helped them understand how the weekly offering money is used to support Great Commission efforts and how the money is distributed. People appreciate the transparency of knowing how money is used. Increased understanding of how regular tithes and offerings are being used to fund the Cooperative Program may encourage church members to be more generous in their financial giving to support the Cooperative Program.

A third strength of the project was the adaptability of the sermon series. The sermons can be preached at other churches and unique application can be made, which is fitting for the context in which it is delivered. Also, the series could be taught in a small group setting, such as a new member orientation class. The series could be taught at associational meetings as well, but the presenter would have to spend more time on review each lesson because of the lapse of time between lessons. The lessons could even be presented in a one or two-day seminar with breaks between lessons. The format in which this series was presented does not limit its future uses.

The fourth strength of the project was the sermon series. This is difficult for me to say because I do not like to boast in myself, and I always see room for improvement. The high scores on the assessment taken before the sermon series made it more difficult to see improvement because there was little room for improvement in the scores on the second assessment after the sermon series. The increased values on the assessment after the sermon series suggests some degree of success through the sermon series.

Only three persons attended all five sermons in the series, and yet all nine who

took both the assessment before the sermon series as well as the assessment after the sermon series demonstrated increased scores on the second assessment. Increased scores on the second assessment suggest an increased understanding of the Cooperative Program and how it works.

Weaknesses of the Project

While this project had many strengths, some weaknesses should also be noted. While it may be true the sermons accomplished the purpose of the project, I would say it was only because God was gracious to bless the teaching. I recognize that I am one of the great weaknesses of the project, simply a cheap earthen vessel endeavoring to honor the Master through my service. One sermon I preached while I was sick with a virus and chronic cough. I preached the sermon armed with the Holy Spirit, a pocket full of cough drops, and great prayer support from my precious wife.

A second weakness was poor planning on the timing of the sermons. An entire month lapsed between the preaching of the first sermon and the preaching of the second sermon. I also should have known that the holiday season would affect who is in attendance in the month of December.

Finally, I would say the small sample size is a weakness of this project. However, GHVBC was only averaging fifteen people in attendance at the time. To have nine people complete both tests is a good percentage (60 percent), even though it is a low number.

What I Would Do Differently

The next opportunity I am afforded to present this series of sermons I would plan the timing more carefully. I would avoid preaching through a holiday season and try to plan on a time of year when attendance is typically more consistent. As mentioned, the timing of my original presentation caused a great stretch of time between the first and second sermon in the series. An optimal time for the sermon series may be the end of

April and early May just before school was out for the summer. Most people tend to be out of town less at that time of year and the weather tends to be less treacherous for our elderly congregation.

Second, while this project was developed around a preaching model, teaching the series may be more helpful. Teaching allows for interaction with an audience. People would have the freedom to ask questions during the teaching time or at a planned question and answer time at the end of the lesson.

Another change I would make would be to include fill-in-the-blank note pages. Note pages would work well for a preaching series or a teaching series. Reviewing all the blanks at the end of the sermon or lesson would allow for participants to review the material to help with retention.

Theological Reflections

The Word of God is living and active. I am blessed when I am able to see how God is using his Word in the lives of his people and his church. However, I am humbly reminded that God does not need people to accomplish his work. He does not need me to preach his Word. He does not need me to tell other people about him and his gospel. God does not need the SBC nor the Cooperative Program to advance his kingdom. If we remain silent the rocks would cry out (Luke 19:40). But God has ordained his followers to be his mouthpiece to the world. Jesus calls believers and commands them to go. While they go, wherever they are go, everywhere they go, they are to be making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey. God also raises up and calls out preachers and missionaries and sends them to proclaim His message. What a divine privilege to be part of the King's work! Humans are sinful, fallen, imperfect earthen vessels, but the glory of God is in his gospel not in the vessels who carry the gospel.

God has used the Cooperative Program of the SBC to bring the gospel to many people and many people groups. In recent years, the SBC has seen some discord, which

threatens the health of the SBC and the future of the Cooperative Program. I believe the reason for this turmoil is a timeless theological issue of doctrine rather than a contemporary contextual issue of diversity. The root issue is truly living and believing the inerrant Word of God.

Early Christians in the book of Acts were in a similar situation. Differing ideas about the doctrine of salvation threatened to cause a divide in the early church. In Acts 15 the church came together to work toward unity, but it was not unity at any cost. Rather, the unity achieved through the Jerusalem council was built on doctrinal truth from the Bible. If churches are going to be able to cooperate with one another for the sacred effort of advancing the kingdom of God, it will be because they have come together in doctrinal agreement about the inerrancy and sufficiency of God's Word. The great concern of the council in Acts 15 was not a question of whether a particular group of people might be offended but if God might be offended by their decision and practice. This must be what concerns the church, today, as well. The cooperative spirit of the Cooperative Program will be destroyed if Southern Baptists do not come together in agreement about the sufficiency and inerrancy of the Bible. The SBC should not compromise God's truth for the sake of larger numbers but stand firm on the Scriptures to be completely equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Personal Reflections

My concern about a lack of awareness of and involvement in the Cooperative Program gave rise to this project. I noticed the folks at GHVBC were mission minded and mission active but were using avenues other than the Cooperative Program to fulfill the Great Commission. I saw a similar thing with my daughters while they were in college. Their friends from the college Baptist ministry would want to go on a mission trip but would not go through Cooperative Program sponsored trips. Of course, my daughters were also invited to go on these trips, and I would be the one asking, "Why are you not

going with Southern Baptists on a trip? Isn't this the Baptist college ministry you are going with?"

Southern Baptists are not the only group doing missions, but why are Southern Baptists not more regularly putting the blessing of the Cooperative Program before church members? Pastors and other Southern Baptist leaders need to help families and churches see the genius of the gift God has given to the SBC in the Cooperative Program. The Cooperative Program allows Southern Baptists to be on mission together to fulfill the Great Commission for the glory of God. The Cooperative Program allows Southern Baptist churches to steward well the resources God has given for fulfilling the Great Commission by funding theological education for future ministries, funding missionaries and paying them a salary plus benefits, and funding disaster relief.

I am humbled by how God has used this project in sanctifying me. The Holy Spirit has encouraged me to be more vocal about the Cooperative Program among believers, and they are willing to hear about an efficient way to steward God's resources in the best way possible for God's glory. Not all the attendees of the church where I presented this project had come from Southern Baptist backgrounds, but they were all happy to learn about this blessed way of supporting Great Commission work.

I am also humbled by the way God uses my feeble efforts to proclaim his Word. I listened to recordings of the sermons I proclaimed and I was pained by the many uses of filler words throughout the sermons. I am so thankful that God can be glorified through my weaknesses, for I know mine are many. I plan on listening to my own sermons on a regular basis so I can polish my delivery.

I confess that I am concerned the Cooperative Program may cease to exist if the SBC does not rally around doctrinal truth. But God is bigger. He is bigger than my concerns and he can turn all the events in the SBC toward good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. God is bigger than the Cooperative Program and if he allows the Cooperative Program to end then God's people will one day be able to

see how it was ultimately for God’s glory. God will still mobilize his people to proclaim his gospel. Even if God’s people should stop proclaiming the gospel, he is able to cause the rocks to cry out. God is bigger than the SBC. If the SBC ceases to be faithful to God and his Word, God will not cease to be faithful to his people for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:12–13). He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Joel 2:13).

I am blessed by new happenings in the SBC to encourage more cooperation for the “one sacred effort” of fulfilling the Great Commission. A *Baptist Press* article posted April 23, 2024, reports on a CP summit to encourage more cooperation and partnership across the SBC. Charles Grant, Associate Vice President of Convention Relations said attendees of the summit were reminded they are better together and, “together we lift the value of giving to the Cooperative Program for the Kingdom of God and His work.”³ Efforts such as this will certainly be beneficial in helping Southern Baptists value the Cooperative Program as the gift that it is.

Conclusion

The Cooperative Program is a great gift God has given to the SBC to fulfill the Great Commission. Too many people in SBC churches are unaware of how this program so efficiently enables Southern Baptists for Great Commission work. Local pastors must do better to inform and educate their people about this program and how it works. Local pastors must be intentional in their efforts to inform and educate church members on the Cooperative Program. Southern Baptist pastors need to do better at promoting short-term mission trips and mobilizing members to be on mission, and they would be blessed to have committed church members to help in this effort. Local Southern Baptist pastors

³ Brandon Porter, “CP Summit helps leaders pursue partnership, joy,” *Baptist Press*, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/cp-summit-helps-leaders-pursue-partnership-joy/>.

should labor in these ways not for the glory of the SBC nor for the glory of the Cooperative Program, but for the glory of God through these entities.

I pray that our faithful God will be gracious and merciful to help us be faithful to him: faithful individuals, faithful churches, and a faithful Convention faithfully on mission to fulfill the Great Commission for the glory of God.

APPENDIX 1

COOPERATIVE PROGRAM UNDERSTANDING SURVEY

The survey included in this appendix was completed by the members and regular attenders of Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church before and after the preaching series on the Cooperative Program.

COOPERATIVE PROGRAM UNDERSTANDING SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding of how Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church is involved in mission work. This research is being conducted by Jeff Moats for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project, and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

Part 1

1. Are you a member of this church?
 A. Yes
 B. No
2. Are you a member of another Southern Baptist church?
 A. Yes
 B. No
3. Have you ever taken a mission trip with Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church?
 A. Yes
 B. No
4. Have you ever taken a mission trip with a church or organization that is not Southern Baptist?
 A. Yes
 B. Yes
5. How long have you been a member of a Southern Baptist church?
 A. 0 years
 B. 1 year
 C. 2 years
 D. 3 years
 E. 4 years
 F. 5 or more years
6. Were you ever part of Royal Ambassadors or Girls in Action?
 A. Yes
 B. No
7. Were you ever part of Mission Friends?
 A. Yes
 B. No

Part 2

Directions: Answer the following questions: (1) Place a check by the multiple-choice questions. (2) Some questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat, AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

8. Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church gives money to missions *only* during times of special emphasis.
SD D DS AS A SA
9. Each Southern Baptist church independently supports their own missionaries.
SD D DS AS A SA
10. Churches are able to accomplish more work for the kingdom of God when they work together.
SD D DS AS A SA
11. Part of the money collected each week as tithes and offerings helps to support Southern Baptist missions.
SD D DS AS A SA
12. As long as the goal is to spread the gospel, it really does not matter which mission group/agency a person serves with.
SD D DS AS A SA
13. North American missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention are funded *solely* through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering.
SD D DS AS A SA
14. International missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention are funded solely through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering.
SD D DS AS A SA
15. I would like to learn more about how Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church supports missionaries and Great Commission work.
SD D DS AS

Personal Identification Number _____

APPENDIX 2
CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The evaluation rubric is a tool for feedback from a panel of “experts.” The people providing the feedback are considered “experts” because they have all served in ministry that is connected with and/or funded by the Cooperative Program. One expert is a retired pastor and served as an International Mission Board missionary for approximately eight years. A second expert served as a missionary with the Royal Gorge Baptist Association of which Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church is a part. A third expert served on staff in the Colorado Baptist General Convention.

All these men have regularly preached the Word of God and all these men are very familiar with the workings of the SBC and the Cooperative Program. For those reasons I asked them to use the rubric to evaluate the clarity of the main points, the relevance of the subject matter for Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church, and the theological soundness of the sermons.

APPENDIX 3

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

| Spiritual Leadership Curriculum Evaluation Tool | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|----------|
| Lesson Evaluation | | | | | |
| 1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary | | | | | |
| Criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Comments |
| The main points of the lesson were clearly communicated | | | | | |
| The lesson is clearly relevant to the mission of GVBC and the SBC | | | | | |
| The lesson is theologically sound. | | | | | |

APPENDIX 4
T-TEST RESULTS

| T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-Test Total</i> | <i>Post-Test Total</i> |
| Mean | 31.44444444 | 35.66666667 |
| Variance | 15.02777778 | 15.25 |
| Observations | 9 | 9 |
| Pearson Correlation | 0.374322009 | |
| Hypothesized Mean Difference | 0 | |
| df | 8 | |
| t stat | -2.910190408 | |
| P(T<=t) one-tail | 0.009791694 | |
| t Critical one-tail | 1.859548038 | |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.019583387 | |
| t Critical two-tail | 2.306004135 | |

APPENDIX 5

A LONG-TERM COOPERATIVE PROGRAM PLAN

The following is a long-term plan for continued improvement in Cooperative Program (CP) understanding. Regular reminders of how CP works will help with long-term understanding. Regular involvement in mission work supported by CP will also help with retention of CP understanding in the long run.

A Plan for Greenhorn Vally Baptist Church to Further Increase Awareness and Engagement with the Cooperative Program

1) Have a CP moment from the pulpit every week. Use the calendar from the SBC webpage (<https://www.sbc.net/calendar/>) for different focus touch points. One example would be to use the July emphasis of Christian liberty to spend time praying for SBC military chaplains who are not only commissioned officers in the military but are also commissioned Southern Baptist missionaries through the NAMB. NAMB also produces a prayer calendar that is mailed to churches each year. The calendars are full of pictures of NAMB missionaries and prayer requests that will be helpful for the CP moments each week.

2) Adopt mission families to pray for on a regular basis. Focus on one mission family each month. Share their prayer requests so that different requests are prayed for each week during the worship. It would be best if there is at least one missionary from NAMB, one from IMB and one in our state. The church already knows some SBC missionaries by name, and they could be adopted. Keep their photos on the bulletin board for people to see on a regular basis. If the family is in a high-risk area, DO NOT PUT THEIR PHOTO ON THE SCREEN DURING THE VIDEO RECORDING! However, if the family is not in a high-risk area, put a family photo on the video screen for all to see. OR, if they are not serving in a high-risk area, schedule a video call with the mission family on the Lord's Day. Audio calls may still be made if the family is serving in a high-risk area but be careful not to compromise their security by talking about their location if

the call is later placed on the streamed sermon. The church already has three SBC mission families that have been to the church who would be great families to adopt (Jones family, Robinson family, and Godinez family).

3) Have designated persons in the church serve as a point of contact (POC) for each mission family that is adopted. That person will be responsible for receiving email updates from the family and sharing prayer requests with the entire church. Each adopted family should have a different person serving as their POC. The POC could learn the birthdays for each member of the mission family and have members of the church sign a card that will be sent for their birthdays and other holidays and special occasions in their lives such as baptism. Include a photo of POC or Sunday School class in the cards to help the families recognize you when they visit.

4) POC will keep the pastor informed of the Stateside assignment dates for their mission family. POC will also make certain the church is aware of any needs for the family while they are on Stateside assignment (lodging, vehicle and child car seats are examples).

5) Continue with the backpack ministry sponsored by Send Relief which is a collaboration between NAMB and the International Mission Board. Remind the church how CP dollars are used to purchase the backpacks and how we put gospel tracts in those backpacks to sow gospel seed.

6) Mobilize people to go to Pueblo at least once a year and help our church planters on a project in Pueblo. People are normally more eager to help people they already know. Mobilize a team for a trip to help a NAMB missionary once each year. It would also be great if the church could send a team to help their IMB adopted families at least once every two years. In the spirit of cooperation, invite other churches to send members on these trips with Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church. The pastor should go on at least one of these trips every year to lead by example.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A PLAN TO INCREASE UNDERSTANDING OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM AT GREENHORN VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH IN RYE, COLORADO

Jeffrey William Moats, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. George H. Martin

The purpose of this project was to increase Cooperative Program understanding among members at Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church in Rye, Colorado. Chapter 1 of this project explains the ministry context and rationale as well as steps to be taken toward accomplishing the project goal.

Chapter 2 provides study of three primary passages from the book of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 11:19–30; Acts 12:24–13:3; Acts 15:1–35) along with a two-part message from a compilation of selected verses (2 Tim 3:16–17; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:44) and supporting verses. These passages expose a foundation of a cooperating spirit in the early church upon which the Cooperative Program is built.

Chapter 3 looks at the history of the SBC and the Cooperative Program and then considers the future of the Cooperative Program.

Chapter 4 explains the implementation of the project and includes the projects sermon series.

Chapter 5 examines the effectiveness of the project and its stated goals.

VITA

Jeffrey William Moats

EDUCATION

BS, The Ohio State University, 1990

MDiv, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Pastor, Livonia Baptist Church, Livonia, Indiana, 1996–1997

International Missionary, International Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia
1998–2005

Pastor, Logan Elm Baptist Church, Circleville, Ohio, 2005–2011

Pastor, Denman Avenue Baptist Church, Lufkin, Texas, 2012–2016

Pastor, Greenhorn Valley Baptist Church, Rye, Colorado, 2019–2023