

COMPETITION OR COOPERATION?

E3, the theme of this annual session, was proposed by some of our younger church leaders and it is based on scripture text from Jeremiah 29:7. Through this text we are inviting you to encounter God, engage the culture and experience the peace that only God can give. I invite you to ask God to speak to your heart as I share some things I believe God wants us to consider.

Acts 1:8 speaks of our responsibility in fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord. He instructed us to begin in our Jerusalem, expand to Judea, then onto Samaria and ultimately to the uttermost parts of the world. Every area is important. None is to be neglected. It is imperative that we communicate the gospel to the 1.5 billion people in our world who still have no witness of Jesus as well as the 250 million lost in North America. It is equally important that North Carolina Baptists do our part in reaching the 4.5 million people around us in North Carolina who do not know Christ. If we lose North America, we will not have the financial resources to fund international missions.

If we are to be effective as an Acts 1:8 convention of Baptist people, we must recognize that the culture around us and the world is much different than it was in the 1950s and 1960s when Southern Baptists were seeing some exponential days of success. The socio-cultural context across this nation and even here in North Carolina is greatly different than it was 50 years ago.

In a recent entry on the “Between the Times” blog, Drs. Danny Akin and Bruce Ashford of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary addressed the results of this trend by stating, “Many of our churches no longer have the luxury of communicating the gospel within a city that has basically one culture.” These men go on to say that many of the people we are called by God to reach in fulfillment of the Great Commission “do not even have a basic understanding of a Christian worldview or the vocabulary we use in our Christian culture.” They mention another related challenge we are facing as Southern Baptists here in America: “while the population of our nation increases, the population of our churches has not kept pace. While the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the Southern Baptist Convention remains a mostly middle-class, mostly white, network of mostly-declining churches. This is a painful truth, and to ignore this fact is the worst form of denial.¹” And what has been our response to the increased diversity of the community by the churches that comprise the SBC? Akin and Ashford respond by stating, “Many of the tribes, tongues, and peoples of Revelation 5 are right here on our doorstep. Further, there is a dizzying variety of sub-cultures within the broader American culture, each with their own distinctive beliefs and ways of life. Southern Baptists missionaries and pastors in North

¹Danny Akin and Bruce Ashford, “Between the Times blog - Mission focused on this nation (confront the brutal facts) November 5, 2009

America must take their own cultural contexts as seriously as Southern Baptist missionaries take their international contexts.”

In his book “The Way We’ll Be” John Zogzby writes the following regarding transition and change:

Seismic shifts can be slow, but they are seldom gentle. The underlying plates grind together, or they pull apart. Mountains are thrown up. Rifts open, whether they are literal chasms of geological shifts or the metaphorical ones of social change.

Zogsby says that’s where America is today. “Old paradigms are toppling and new ones are rising out of their rubble as the future begins to take shape and form.”

Please do not misunderstand. I am not talking about erosion in regards to doctrine or theology. To the contrary; that which has distracted us from the seismic changes taking place in our denomination has been the great attention that we have given to doctrine and theology. As long as the powers of darkness are in business, we will always have battles over the validity of the absolute truth of the Bible, but we must always stand firm in affirmation of God’s holy, inspired, infallible and inerrant Word.

I am seeing that our sin in recent years has not been in establishing a high view of scripture or a holy expectation for biblically accurate doctrine. Our sin has been in giving attention only to these efforts while we are failing to teach, minister, and find relevant ways to express the truths which we hold so dear. As God’s people, we must be about ministry that transforms lives with the same degree of passion with which we have addressed the authority of Holy Scripture. Simply stated, we have approached these two very critical issues with an “either/or” rather than a “both/and” commitment. Therefore, we as Southern Baptists now find ourselves in the throes of transition and change for which we are not fully prepared. However, lest you believe that I am a prophet of doom, I wish to declare to you that I am filled with hope for our churches, associations, this convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

It is time for North Carolina Baptists and all Southern Baptists to move from an “either/or” to a “both/and” approach to missions and ministry. It is time for us to declare that we also agree on the basis for missions and ministry. That is the command and commission given by our Lord as revealed in Holy Scripture. We are to move forward and onward with efforts to fulfill both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as we work cooperatively in our Lord’s service. Can we recognize that just as the individual units of the early church needed the prayers, support and cooperation of sister churches, we need each other today? I hope you are praying with me and more than 5,000 others for the Great Commission Resurgence Task Force.

If you have been paying attention to significant changes in leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention in recent days, you will realize that we stand upon the precipice of opportunities, the likes of which we have not known in many years. Any time new leadership is established, great new opportunities for improved effectiveness and increased efficiency abound. The Southern Baptist Convention has three key opportunities to shape direction for our two mission boards and

the executive committee of the SBC with the vacancies that have, or will take place, in the coming months. Now, the naysayers will declare that the Southern Baptist Convention as we have known it will fade away and become a shell of its former influence and impact for the Kingdom of God because this is what we have observed among other Christian denominations. Oh, it could if we allow that to happen or if we refuse to cooperate as we did during our best years, but it is my conviction that our current condition gives us the very best opportunity for our Lord to prove His faithfulness to the people of the Book.”

I believe that we have the opportunity, possibly the opportunity of a lifetime, to demonstrate the reason why our Southern Baptist Convention has been so greatly blessed by our Lord since it was established in 1845. We have the opportunity to pray together and serve together as we ask God to reveal His will to the Great Commission Task Force and guide the search committees that will bring new leadership to these Southern Baptist Convention agencies. Am I fearful? No, for the Scriptures remind me that, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” My challenge is that each of us gathered here this night will commit ourselves to pray for and to cooperate with one another as this generation has never done. I believe that North Carolina Baptists are well positioned to lead Southern Baptists in these ways, and in so doing North Carolina Baptists will be a blessing not only to each other, to our other Southern Baptists brothers and sisters, but most importantly to the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Maybe you are wondering why I would begin this address with such an emphasis on items that seemingly are related more to the Southern Baptist Convention as opposed to our own needs and concerns here in North Carolina. My reasoning is very simple. While the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina is an autonomous convention, independent in every right, we cannot accomplish the mandate of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment alone. This state convention will do well to pray for and cooperate with the Southern Baptist Convention. I will go one step further. I am Southern Baptist because I believe Southern Baptist doctrine and I greatly value our means of supporting our missionaries, but that does not prohibit me from working with other evangelical churches that share our burden for missions.

A CHALLENGE TO PRAY

Have you ever noticed that we pray for those with whom we are concerned and we cooperate with those whom we love? We are moved with compassion regarding those whose situations are near and dear to our own. Again, the idea that we should be concerned either for the Southern Baptist Convention or the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina must be discarded because our efforts of prayer for and cooperation with must grow beyond the “either/or” and become “both/and.”

We are not presently facing the same kind of changes in leadership in North Carolina that are being experienced on the Southern Baptist Convention level, but I am referring to the transition and change that we have been, and continue to undergo, related to the opportunities that stand before us. For you see, the transition and change before the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina has been underway for a few years, but we are only now seeing the effect and impact of

these changes. The source of our current transition and change is the same as the source for the changes before the SBC - changes in leadership. Again, please do not misunderstand me for the changes in leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist State Convention are not in the positions that you might think. No, the true leadership of both the SBC and the BSCNC is found in the churches of the convention. Individuals who serve in roles like mine are servants of the true leaders of the convention. While the people who fill roles like mine for the SBC and the state conventions indeed impact convention missions and ministries, the true leaders in both regards are found within the local churches. What is the source of transition and change that has been so subtly taking place in the churches of this convention? The source may indeed surprise you: it is the success of our churches. Now you might be wondering, "How can the success of our churches be the source of transition and change when so many are declining?" More importantly, you may be wondering, "How can the success of our churches be problematic?"

Students of Baptist history know full and well that our beginnings in colonial America were difficult at best. By the early 1800s, Baptist were becoming more established in the rural and impoverished southern colonies. In 1758 Sandy Creek Association was formed as the first association of Baptist churches in North Carolina. Shubal Stearns, who pastored Sandy Creek Baptist Church, led others to recognize the importance of cooperating together through the formation of associations in order that God's Kingdom work could advance. Later, when the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina was established in Greenville, N.C., in 1830, three primary emphases were established. The original BSCNC constitution stated:

- The primary objects of this Convention shall be the education of young men called of God to the ministry, and approved of by the churches to which they respectively belong;
- the employment of missionaries within the limits of this state, and
- a co-operation with the Baptist General Convention of the United States in the promotion of missions in general. (Article 2)

Did you hear the three emphases? First, the education of ministers followed by the support of missionaries and completed with an admonition for cooperation. I remind you, cooperation was part of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina long before the Southern Baptist Convention was established!

THOMAS MEREDITH AND THE BIBLICAL RECORDER

Thomas Meredith, who served as one of our earliest Baptist statesmen in this state, expressed the earliest purposes of the convention in this manner. He said, "You will also learn from the subjoined constitution, that the primary objects of this Convention are, the enlargement and intellectual improvement of the ministry, and the supplying of destitute churches and sections of country within the limits of the State." Notice the addition that Meredith makes to the convention's purpose as outlined in the constitution - church health.

It was Thomas Meredith's conviction that healthy churches were served by well taught ministers and filled with well informed members. Meredith believed that Baptists needed not only to seek information, but to also find information from a reputable and credible source. Therefore, Meredith put his conviction to work as he established a Baptist newspaper in North Carolina.

Known in its infancy as the *Biblical Interpreter*, when established in 1832, the paper changed its name in 1835 to the *Biblical Recorder*.² While the *Recorder* was privately owned, first by Meredith and later by other individuals, the *Recorder* was purchased by the Baptist State Convention in 1938 and established as an agency of this convention in 1939. This year happens to be an anniversary year for our Baptist state paper.

As an agency, the *Recorder* is managed by an editor that is accountable to a Board of Directors elected by this convention. The current board of directors for the Biblical Recorder has expressed to me both their desire and commitment to see the *Recorder* once again fulfill those aims and purposes that its founder held dear. Just in case you are wondering about my opinion, I am glad you asked. I am thankful that we have a Baptist State paper and I believe there is still a need for us to tell the story of what North Carolina Baptist churches and people are doing through the *Biblical Recorder*.

I call your attention to these matters of historical significance because we are once again faced with very similar circumstances as North Carolina Baptists. From its beginnings in 1830, North Carolina Baptists have stressed cooperation for the purpose of training ministers, supporting missionaries, and the establishment and continuance of healthy churches. Since those early days the churches of this convention have experienced many trials but they have accomplished far more together than they ever could alone.

COOPERATION IN THE EARLY NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

In I Corinthians 12 the Corinthian church was instructed to cooperate and thrive as a community of faith which viewed others better than themselves. The first century Christian churches were not in competition with each other, but rather they loved each other in Christ and they wanted to see the Kingdom of God succeed and advance. They cooperated together under the admonition of scripture found in Philippians 1:27b "...stand fast in one spirit with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." If their sister churches succeeded, it helped advance the cause of Christ and fulfill the Great Commission and they rejoiced.

A basis of cooperation among early New Testament churches is what led to the spread of Christianity to Europe and eventually to North America. That is how you and I were able to hear the gospel and come into a personal relationship with Jesus as our Savior. This very idea of cooperation or partnership appears all through Scripture. Just as it is important for Christians in a local body of believers to cooperate and work together, there is great value in individual churches working together to fulfill the Great Commission of our Lord.

²M. A. Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists 1727-1932*, (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1967), 114.

DOES INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS ELICIT NATURAL COOPERATION WITH OTHERS?

Again, it is my opinion that one change that has resulted in a measure of transition in our convention has been the success of our churches. Those individuals who labored and toiled to establish the ministries that have been the hallmarks of our convention never envisioned churches that have grown as large, enjoy the resources, or employ the staff that so many of our churches now possess. I do not believe that the forefathers of our convention realized that our churches would succeed on such a level as to no longer need to pray for each other and cooperate with one another.

Sadly, this is the transition and change that has taken place in many churches today. The growth and success of particular churches came over a period of time and some became an island unto themselves. The cessation of cooperation with one another and fervent prayer for each other quickly followed suit. An attitude representative of “if it does not benefit my church, then why should we invest the time, effort and expense to be involved” can emerge if we are not careful.

I am afraid that we find ourselves as a convention of churches, having been established on the need for cooperative support of each other and our collective efforts for missionary service, but now functioning so independently of each other that we no longer pray for, much less cooperate with each other. It becomes so easy to forget that this was why our local Baptist associations and this beloved convention were established.

Am I satisfied with the current reality – no I am not. Do I believe that ministry effectiveness once enjoyed by our convention is no more – no I do not. Are the transitions and changes that have occurred over a period of time become so firmly engrained that there is no hope for reversal – no they are not. For you see, I believe that Baptists in North Carolina are ready to examine not only their convention, but most importantly their local churches, in an effort to honestly answer the question, “Are our ministry and missionary efforts, locally, statewide, and abroad, accomplishing all that our Lord expects and requires?” If we are honest, we all must answer a resounding, “No.” However, it is that realization that should then drive us to begin praying for one another and cooperating together in order to reconcile our ministry efforts with the passion of our Lord and Savior.

THE VALUE OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Are my statements disturbing and do you wonder if perhaps I am mistaken in what I am saying? I ask you, “When is the last time that you prayed for the ministerial effectiveness and success of another pastor in your community?” If we are honest, can we admit that our petitions before the Father are far too personal, too inwardly focused, and maybe even too selfish.

As Henry Blackaby has been telling us for years, I am convinced that the power of the local church, and as a result the power of this convention, is found in the prayer closet. Yet, I am afraid that in our modern successful churches, we do not have time to pray as we should, much less see the need for prayer.

I am calling this convention to a season of prayer. But not like we usually pray... not a season of prayer for the church you serve, but for churches that are in your communities. I challenge you to pray for the very churches that some of you think are in competition with your congregation to reach the lost and un-churched of your town.

Pastors, I challenge you to pray God's blessings upon the pastors in your communities to whom you are compared and to whom your detractors say, "If you would preach like Brother 'so and so' this church would be like that one." I challenge you to pray not just for the churches that are struggling, for they are many, but to also pray for those that are succeeding. Such a challenge is not new to some of you, and this is already the practice of a few, but sadly this concept is much too foreign to the greatest number of us.

I am convinced that as we pray for one another, we will develop a godly compassion and concern for other pastors and the churches they serve. It is when we see the needs of others that we will be constrained by the Holy Spirit to "assist them in their divinely appointed mission." Incidentally, if that phrase I just used about assisting churches in their divinely appointed mission is unfamiliar to you, I want you to know that it encapsulates the purpose of our convention as stated in our articles of incorporation.

Can you see the progression of the process I am challenging you to follow? Prayer for one another will lead to cooperation with one another. Cooperation with one another will lead to a unified ministry effort to fulfill the convention's purposes of educating ministers, supporting missionaries, planting new congregations and assisting established congregations to become healthy reproducing, disciple-making, lighthouses in this dark world.

Shall this cooperation among churches be in name only? May it never be, for that which expresses our cooperation is our mutual support and participation of missions and ministry endeavors. Yes, our churches should be giving consistently to the Cooperative Program because we need to give more to support international missions, but our churches should also be participating in cooperative missions. The investment of resources is incomplete if the churches send token financial gifts and fail to motivate their members to give of their efforts and energies to missionary service in their communities, across our great state and nation, and ultimately around the world.

Are you aware of what North Carolina Baptist churches are accomplishing as a result of cooperating together? When some people have limited knowledge of all that is being accomplished and achieved through the work of our churches cooperating together, they are tempted to question the validity and relevance of this state convention and that is to be expected. Far too few North Carolina Baptists have a grasp of all that the churches of this convention are doing through our cooperative efforts.

Never before in the history of this convention have individuals enjoyed the instantaneous access to information, the ability to seek and find data, and the opportunity to share their thoughts and testimonies for a wide audience through the World Wide Web. Your convention staff utilizes a website, social networking technology like Facebook and Twitter, e-mail and a host of visual resources to communicate what the churches are accomplishing for the glory of Christ's

Kingdom. And yet, the message is still not being heard! How can this be? The answer is quite simple, this convention is but one of many voices that is calling out to serve the churches. There was a time that we were the only voice, then we became one of a few voices, but the expansion of avenues of communication in our modern world brings to the local church voices from around the state, across the nation, and from the uttermost reaches of the earth.

I would like to mention some recent significant achievements that God has enabled us to achieve. Do you realize that this convention has increased its support of church planting by 71% since 2007 while the overall budgets have decreased? The churches of this convention are strongly moving in the right direction regarding the support of church planting so that together we may reach the burgeoning masses of people moving to this state. Are you aware that working together, we planted 108 new churches in and added a total of 133 churches to our state convention rolls in 2008?

Do you realize that while the total Cooperative Program giving from the churches has decreased by 2.5% in the last five years that the monies forwarded to the SBC have increased by 8.5% during the same time period? The churches of this convention are strongly moving in the right direction regarding the support of the SBC and the myriad of ministries made possible through the Cooperative Program in North America and internationally. Are you aware that the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina led all state conventions in the support of the Lottie Moon Offering for International Missions and the Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions these past two years?

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina is a testimony to God's grace for over 178 years we have worked together to advance the gospel.

- Let us not forget that when Hurricane Katrina hit Gulfport, Mississippi, North Carolina Baptists rebuilt 716 homes in Gulfport in three years and we saw 428 people accept Christ as Savior.
- We care for over 1,500 children through the six Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina.
- Last year, we trained over 200 future ministers and missionaries at Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute and David Horton, our new president at Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute, has plans to expand this ministry with satellite campuses so we can train more pastors.
- In the last two years, well over 800 young people accepted Christ during our youth camps at Caswell and we assisted over 450 more who stated that God was calling them to fulltime ministry and missionary service.
- Baptist churches in North Carolina helped over 23,000 follow Christ in believer's baptism and we are working to increase that number thru Find it Here, our new evangelism emphasis.
- Wonderful things are now happening in evangelism through our Baptist Campus Ministries on some North Carolina college campuses.

These are accomplishments only God could do and He has chosen to bring these blessings through the lives and ministries of churches and associations working together because North Carolina Baptists are praying and have chosen to pool our resources through support of the Cooperative Program and special mission offerings and we work together.

We can accomplish much more working together than we could as individual churches operating as if they were an island unto themselves. We must cooperate together. A single church might boast of supporting two to three independent missionaries in another country, but as Southern Baptists, when you give to the Cooperative Program, your church has a part in helping support 10,000 missionaries in North America and in 174 countries, plus Southern Baptist seminaries and other successful Baptists ministries. I must remind us that obedience to God and cooperating together is the key to all of this.

REVIEWING THE VITAL SIGNS OF MISSION SUPPORT

That was some good news. Now let me challenge you about a need and a wonderful opportunity, but I must share something that is not pleasant. I call this information our “vital signs” in relation to mission support.

Are you aware that since 1995 the undesignated receipts of this convention’s churches have increased from \$494 million to \$892 million. This is a 75% increase. However, according to what churches reported in that same time period total missions expenditures increased from \$98 million to only \$105 million. That is a 7% increase. Do you see a problem with these numbers? The congregation has seen exponential increases, but missions’ giving has only seen a nominal increase.

Where has the money gone during these years of plenty? While I cannot speak for every church, John Butler, our Executive Leader for Business Services has described the situation in this fashion: we sometimes hear that churches are bypassing the Cooperative Program with their missions dollars because they want to have more direct control of how their missions dollars are used.

But the facts say differently. Since 1995, the percentage of undesignated receipts of our churches going to Cooperative Program has decreased from 5.8% to 4%. But at the same time, the percentage of undesignated receipts of our churches being spent on missions, including Cooperative Program and all other missions causes, has decreased from 19.8% to 12.2%. To put it in simple terms, if North Carolina Baptist churches were spending even the same percentage of their budgets on missions today that they were spending in 1995, there would be over \$66 million more going to missions than there was last year! If North Carolina Baptist churches were giving the same percentage to Cooperative Program as they did in 1995, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina would receive \$15 million more than we are projected to receive this year.

If North Carolina Baptist churches will commit to the support of missions beyond what they are doing in their own ministries in the comparison to what they have invested in missions in past years, we will be able to send much larger amounts to the Southern Baptist Convention to

support International and North American missions. We have to give more. Do you remember the title of this address - Competition or Cooperation? I ask you, which is it going to be?

I would like to move this address toward closure with another quote from Thomas Meredith, and I ask that you listen carefully to this statement from the 1830s.

And we would now solemnly ask you, is it not time that something were done? Is it not time that some organized and well sustained system was on foot to enlighten and enforce our ministry...; and to elevate the Baptists of North Carolina at least to a level with those of sister states? To whom, then, can we go, to whom can we appeal, from whom can aid be asked or expected, but from you, Baptists of North Carolina, who have been made to differ from other residents in the State and whose eyes begin to be opened to your duties and necessities?

I remember well the days after 9/11 when rescue workers were called to the scene of the world trade center towers in New York. One man heard the sounds of a survivor. He could not pull him free with his own strength, but as others joined with him soon a chain of men combined their strength and pulled the victim free. If we will join hearts and hands together for the cause of Christ we will be able to accomplish much more for the Kingdom of God.

Competition or Cooperation? Which is it going to be for you and your church? For me, I choose to cooperate. I believe this is what our God wants us to do. I do not always have to have my own way. I do not make agreement or lack thereof a test of fellowship. There are things far more important than having our own way. Our love for Jesus and our obedience to Him is of greater importance. We live in a world where people are dying and plummeting into hell while we argue about worship styles, our preferences in music, or who is right and who is wrong about reformed theology. May God help us to see things from His perspective.

I choose to cooperate as much as people will allow me to do so. I ask you to join together in cooperation with our brothers and sisters for the glory of God, for the good of His Kingdom, for the redemption of those who need a Savior.