

Axioms of a Cooperating Conservative
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INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to address the subject of connectionalism versus cooperation within the context of the Southern Baptist Convention. The subject concerns whether and how individual congregations of Baptists can work jointly on Christian projects (missions, benevolences, moral issues, and education) with fellow Baptists without compromising local church autonomy. Through the years, this has been a major question for Southern Baptists.

DEFINING CONNECTIONALISM

Connectionalism is a term used to describe the relationship between local churches and other ecclesiastical bodies (e.g., other churches, associations of churches, and conventions). I should note that not everyone interprets the term uniformly.

The founders of the Southern Baptist Convention used the idea of connectionalism approvingly. For example, William B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention and the primary author of its first constitution employed the term positively. He was interested in finding a “bond of union ... for the promotion of righteousness” (Constitution of the First Baptist Convention, South Carolina, 1821) (Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Source Book: With Particular Reference to Southern Baptists*, Nashville, Tennessee, Broadman Press, 1966, p. 75). By Johnson’s definition, connectionalism can be understood as merely an affiliation among churches for cooperative ventures without exercising authority or control.

However, for many Southern Baptists the term is negative. Connectionalism is defined as one body having authority over another (i.e., local churches under the authority of another ecclesiastical body such as a synod, bishopric, or association of churches, or one ecclesiastical body under the authority of a higher ecclesiastical body). This definition seems to be the primary understanding for contemporary Southern Baptists. Therefore, connectionalism as a theory of church polity is rightly rejected because it provides that one ecclesiastical body may have rule over another, especially local churches.

Let me note one recent interpretation of the concept of connectionalism in contemporary Southern Baptist Convention matters. Dr. Charles Kelley, the president of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, recently proposed a novel idea that connectionalism should be construed as bearing on the relationship between the Baptist conventions and their institutions. He comes to this conclusion because he insists that these SBC institutions are modeled after the autonomy of the local church. Obviously, the autonomy of the local church is a scriptural principle that is very dear to Southern Baptists. In fact, not only is the church autonomous, the state convention is autonomous, and the SBC is autonomous. However, an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention is not autonomous. A SBC entity is owned by the Convention. Dr. Kelley’s proposed polity, including his view of connectionalism has no basis or precedent in Baptist history or polity. Institutions, entities, and other subsidiary legal corporations of Baptist conventions are not properly “ecclesiastical Baptist bodies” for which the topic of

connectionalism is germane. I mention this here not only because it is a current event but also because Dr. Kelley's whole proposed polity issues from a misunderstanding of connectionalism and autonomy in Southern Baptist relationships. Should his thinking prevail, (which I trust it will not), we could revert to a denominational methodology that emphasizes independence to the detriment of cooperation. Dr. Kelley's paper may be found on Baptist2Baptist.net under the category of "sole membership." Also, you will find Dr. David Hankins' response to Dr. Kelley's paper in the same category. I invite you to read both papers.

What shall we conclude about connectionalism and Southern Baptists? Because connectionalism is widely understood as a violation of local church autonomy, it must be rejected as an acceptable polity for Southern Baptists. It is also probably wise not to attempt to rehabilitate the term to William Johnson's definition of non-controlling cooperation. To do so would lead to more confusion. However, this does not mean that Southern Baptists do not value ecclesiastical bodies beyond the local church or official relationships between churches. On the contrary, maintaining these relationships is a *core value* of Southern Baptists. It is called cooperation, the other word mentioned in my assigned topic.

DEFINING COOPERATION

As Southern Baptists, how should we feel about cooperation? Cooperation between congregations in the form of associations and conventions should be more highly prized and protected than ever as a necessary component of being Southern Baptist. From the beginning of our Convention, cooperation has been critical to our growth. Where there is no trust, there is no cooperation. Our Convention may be doctrinally pure, but without cooperation, without trusting each other, our Convention shall cease to have the dynamic missions enterprise that reaches to the far corners of the earth. In order to build upon the shoulders of our forefathers, our goal must be unwavering trust among ourselves. If trust is not possible, neither is cooperation. The consequence will be a diminishing witness around the world and a much smaller Convention. While this goal seems readily obtainable, it cannot be forgotten that trust is a trait to be earned, it is not a birthright. To earn trust, one must learn to trust.

As far back as the Philadelphia Association in 1707, Baptists began to form associations of churches. There were, of course, some Baptists who opposed the creation of *any* organized structures for missions. For some, the opposition stemmed from anti-missions theology (e.g., Daniel Parker who began a predestinarian movement among Baptists and Alexander Campbell who fomented the Campbellite split from Baptists). For others, it was because they believed the local church was the only legitimate organization permitted by the New Testament (e.g., John Taylor in the early 1800s, and T. P. Crawford of the Gospel Missions Movement of the late 1800s) (McBeth, H. Leon, *The Baptist Heritage*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 373). Crawford expressed this sentiment when he wrote:

Centralization and ring-government may suit the policy of other denominations. They do not suit ours, but are deadly hostile to it. Yet, strange to say, this dangerous element was first introduced among us with the first session of the Old Triennial Convention in 1814; and, stranger still, the Northern Baptist Union and the Southern Baptist Convention have continued it down to the present day. Their Boards are self-perpetuating, irresponsible central bodies with unlimited permission to grow in power by absorbing the prerogatives and resources of our churches, as the old Roman hierarchy grew by absorbing those in the early ages of Christianity (Baker, p. 280).

Most Baptists, however, did believe these organizations were permissible and beneficial and

affirmed cooperative Christian missions beyond the local church. They were always extremely careful to insist authority resided in the local church and not in these ecclesiastical bodies. Baptists simultaneously employed two different approaches to the cooperative missionary work of the churches: 1) the societal model and 2) the associational model. The societal method reflected the views of those who believed cooperation by Baptists beyond the local church was permissible but that it could not be carried out as an extension of the churches. Therefore, societies for particular benevolences (missions, education, etc.) were organized and directed by interested individuals, not churches. The most prominent example of societal methodology in American Baptist history was the Triennial Convention organized in 1814 of which Baptists in the South were a part until the forming of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.

The other approach to corporate missions work by Baptists in America is the association or convention model. Historian Robert Baker notes, the associational method usually involved a denominational structure fostering many benevolences, and had an interdependent and connectional relationship in all the benevolent work through the association (Baker, pp. 99-101). The most remarkable example of the association model is the Southern Baptist Convention (although it was not the first, the South Carolina Baptist Convention was organized on this model in 1821).

At the organizing meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, William Johnson explained how the Southern Baptist Convention would work:

In its successful operation, the whole Denomination will be united in one body for the purpose of well-doing, with perfect liberty secured to each contributor of specifying the object or objects, to which his amount shall be applied, as he pleases, while he or his Delegation may share in the deliberations and control all the objects, promoted by the Convention (Baker, p. 165).

Therefore, Southern Baptists purposefully formed a Convention built on the cooperation of the churches. Robert Baker writes: “Disdaining the possibility of overwhelming the authority of local congregations, Johnson was suggesting a more centralized body that would have control over all the benevolent objects projected by Southern Baptists” (Baker, p. 165).

How important is the concept of cooperation to Southern Baptist identity? It is foundational. The “Rope of Sand” is James L. Sullivan’s description of our cooperative polity. Since the rope has been in existence, it has proven in many ways to be as strong as steel. Conversely, the material used to weave the rope obviously is fragile, and remains strong only as long as it remains tightly woven, even strengthening under stress. When Southern Baptists are not bound tightly together, there can be only one anticipated result, a dismantling of the rope. At first, a few grains of sand may drop from the rope without much notice, but once the sand begins to move, one grain against another, the entire rope will disintegrate at warp speed. This does not mean the bricks and mortar will fall as did the walls of Jericho. Like the cathedrals of Europe, some semblance of structure may stand for generations, but they no longer will house a mighty force of God’s people who came together with stouthearted biblical convictions, determined obedience to the Great Commission, a passionate love for the lost, and a compassionate heart for the hurting.

Is the issue of cooperation a contemporary concern for Southern Baptist identity? Very much so. In the current climate, there are practices and attitudes among vast numbers of Southern Baptists that have the potential for greatly reducing, if not destroying, the effectiveness of our churches and Convention’s ministries. I have identified three different emphases that might be termed church world-views. All of them, in their own way, are detrimental to the health of our

common work because all of them *undermine cooperation*.

I. Undermining Cooperation by Decay

The first is perfunctory performance. This approach to church life is marked by Spirit-less apathy, a form of godliness but denying the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5). This is not new to the people of God. It was a common sin of the Old Testament. In fact, while idolatry was the most common sin of the Israelites from the Judges to the Exile, from the Exile to the time of Christ, their most common sin was perfunctory religion--just going through the motions, rulekeeping without regard for heart-change. Hundreds of our contemporary churches have fallen into this pattern. They value their human traditions over the movement of God. They spend their time and energy fighting for control of the congregation. Their motto is come weal or woe, our status is quo. These congregations are in need of spiritual renewal, of revival. The Empowering Kingdom Growth (EKG) initiative was birthed with these congregations in mind. The mission statement of EKG states, "*Empowering Kingdom Growth (EKG) is an initiative designed to call individual Southern Baptists to renew their passion for the Lord Jesus and the reign of His kingdom in their hearts, families, and churches from which God can forge a spiritual movement marked by holy living, sacrificial service, and global witness*".

II. Undermining Cooperation by Default

The second type of church world view I will call Pragmatism. These are the churches whose primary question for church life is, "Does it work?" The emphasis on quantifiable success (nickels and noses) can relegate such weighty matters as sound doctrine, spiritual heritage, and sacrificial service to the hinterlands of congregational life. I am concerned we have a generation of Southern Baptist pastors who know not Joseph and who have uncritically embraced the trappings of non-denominationalism. Their congregations are not taught the great principles and the great people on which our denomination was founded and which caused it to flourish.

The churches are left to adopt secondary, less effective, even dangerous, practices and methodologies by default. They simply are not being taught the value of Baptist heritage. These congregations could be helped by conferences such as this. They could be helped by becoming better informed biblically, theologically, and historically. They could be helped by studying research like Thom Rainer's *Surprising Insights of the Unchurched* before they discarded Baptist identity and purpose.

III. Undermining Cooperation by Design

The third trend I will identify is simply Politics. This church world-view is of particular moment to contemporary Southern Baptist life. While politics (the art of working with people) is always present in social structures, including ecclesiastical ones, politics has played an unusually large and influential role in Southern Baptist denominational life for the last quarter of a century. In fact, at this upcoming Southern Baptist Convention, those of us who participated in leadership roles in what has been called the SBC Conservative Resurgence will gather for a Silver Anniversary celebration. And it is something to celebrate. Our beloved Southern Baptist Convention was saved from the theological and numerical decimation known to most other mainline American denominations in the last half of the 20th century because of the Conservative Resurgence. Thoughtful, aggressive, prayerful politics was an integral ingredient to its success. However, one of the challenges we now face, in my opinion, is how to move beyond aggressive partisan politics to a model of denominational decision-making that is more normative for Southern Baptists and more beneficial. While vigilance against heresy is always a task of faithful Christians, it appears to me, that some Southern Baptists want to make every decision, even those

not affecting doctrine and practice, based upon loyalty to friends, parties, or agendas. If this evaluation is true, and a politics for politics sake practice prevails, the SBC will be the poorer for it. It will result in narrower participation in denominational life, a shallower pool of wisdom and giftedness in our enterprises, and a shrinking impact upon the world. Those who may be in this aggressive political mode or party approach can be helped by understanding the vast potential for expanding God's kingdom that lies in the time-honored principles of cooperation that have marked our Convention's work.

So, in summary, it can be seen from these contemporary church world-views, the deterioration may be caused by deliberately brushing away a few grains of sand here and there (to use Sullivan's analogy); not enough for anyone to notice, but enough to begin the weakening process in the spirit of cooperation. In most instances the deterioration may be the unintended consequences of a pastor who has failed, for whatever the reason, to grasp the reality that cooperation is the lifeline, albeit a rope of sand, of this Convention, or if so, what difference does it make? These unintended consequences may stem (1) from a personal preference for an independent polity, (2) from having mentors who never grasped the potential of cooperative missions, choosing to give little or nothing through the Cooperative Program, (3) from perceiving, rightly or wrongly, that the Convention has become a non-essential in the health and growth of the church, (4) from adopting the world's mantra for giving, if I give I want to know precisely how it is spent, (5) from a strong sense of personal motivation, believing cooperation, like a church committee, is far too slow a process for doing missions, (6) from a tendency to launch satellite congregations loyal to the mother church rather than plant cooperating churches loyal to the Convention, or (7) from viewing the Convention as a bureaucracy that is too big, too costly, and too uninformed to understand what the church is facing, and believing that even if the Convention understood, its response time would be too slow to be effective. Regardless of the reason, the unraveling of the rope of sand would be a tragedy in a convention whose churches have networked their way to building enormous mission enterprises for God's glory and the salvation of the unsaved.

SEEKING A SOLUTION

How can we correct these trends and practices that threaten our cooperative identity? At the 1980 Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis, at the invitation of the Committee on Order of Business, I gave the Response to the Welcome. The time allotted was 10 minutes. In an effort to be a good steward, I decided I should seize upon at least nine of those minutes to define what I believed was Southern Baptist Tradition. The discussion of inerrancy had erupted during the preceding year and I felt it was my responsibility to state my convictions, hopefully lay down a roadmap for the future. I asked the messengers the question, What is Southern Baptist tradition? Then I defined it as conservative theology and cooperative methodology. In the first one-third of the response I spoke of our conservative theology saying, "Our conservative heritage is based upon the belief that the Bible is the authoritative, inspired, infallible Word of God, inerrant in the original autographs. When men have stood unequivocally upon this truth, their teaching has been enriched and their preaching empowered because God is a God of Truth. Historically, when a denomination has failed to stand upon this truth, it begins, sooner or later, to fall for anything. We also know deep in our hearts that our enthusiasm for evangelism and missions will not exceed our convictions about biblical authority." For the next two-thirds of the response I spoke about cooperative methodology, saying, "Just as we are a people of the Book, we are also a people who are one in the bond of love. This tie that binds our hearts in Christian love has given birth to the cooperative program, cooperative missions, cooperative education, cooperative literature, and above all, a cooperative spirit. In our Convention there are some who tend to be conservative, but not cooperative, and there are others who tend to be

cooperative, but not conservative. However, the rank and file of Southern Baptists is both conservative and cooperative. The world just waits for controversy to erupt among us, but what the world needs to see is the love of God explode within us. For without love, what we do and what we say will be as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. We may have the faith to remove mountains, but without love, God says, it is nothing. We are on the threshold of the mightiest movement in evangelism and missions in our history and with the love of God in our hearts, we can take this nation for Christ.” I reminded the messengers that the only living thing on which the curse of Jesus fell was a fig tree that bore no fruit. Then I quoted J. W. Storer of Oklahoma who was president of the Convention in 1954 when it met in the same city, St. Louis. He read Ephesians 4:16, “From Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supportive ligament, grows, and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (NIV). Then he said, All joints (ligaments) are not alike, which illustrates our diversity, that voluntary principle which Baptists so correctly prize. To be sure, there are Baptists who seem dedicated to separatism, who refuse to play on the team, who prefer to return their own punts, call their own signals, do their own blocking, run their own interferences, and set off for a goal line diagonal with the field. They refuse, however, to recover their own fumbles. I concluded by saying, “The genius of Southern Baptist tradition is that we have been able to speak our minds without losing our heads. Our forefathers intended we are to be a denomination of convictions, not convenience. They determined we are to be a denomination of cooperation, not coalitions” (*Southern Baptist Tradition: What Is It?* Morris H. Chapman, Response to the Welcome at the Southern Baptist Convention, St. Louis, MO 1980).

Allow me to expand on my remarks of 25 years ago and suggest some principles I will call Axioms of Cooperating Conservatives. There are six of them. The first three axioms speak to the conservative qualities of cooperating conservatives. The last three speak to the cooperating qualities of cooperating conservatives. These two sides must be held in tension.

1. Confession: The Theological Axiom

To confess is to confess the truth. We are a confessional people. Unity does not take precedence over truth. Consider the following: If you must make a choice between heresy and schism, always choose heresy. This recent quote by Peter James Lee, the Episcopal bishop of Virginia who voted last summer to approve the appointment of openly homosexual bishop V. Gene Robinson is diametrically opposite of what cooperating conservatives practice. If we must choose between heresy and schism, we always, always, choose schism. Even when it is painful for us to separate from some beloved colleague, cooperating conservatives always choose truth before unity. Early Southern Baptist leaders experienced this in the late 19th century when Crawford Toy was dismissed from the faculty of our oldest seminary because of his acceptance of European liberalism. We face the same sad reality now with the BWA. Our brothers in the Venezuelan Baptist Convention concluded in a resolution sent recently to the SBC that There cannot be a bigger problem in the midst of God’s people than that of the lack of unity. Cooperating conservatives respectfully disagree. Failing to affirm the truth is a bigger problem than the lack of unity.

It should be noted that the Executive Committee has voted to recommend to the Southern Baptist Convention in June that the Convention withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance. As chairman of the SBC/BWA Study Committee, I was aware that this was an issue about which good Southern Baptists will disagree. After all, the Southern Baptist Convention was a founding member of the organization and has been a member for the 99 years of its existence. In 1997, the chairman of the Executive Committee, James

Merritt, at the request of SBC President Tom Elliff, appointed a BWA Study Committee. Increasingly, questions were being raised about the direction of the BWA and the feelings of many of its member bodies toward the Southern Baptist Convention. These concerns were especially acute because the Convention was contributing \$420,000 annually to the budget of the Baptist World Alliance, a large proportion of the BWA annual operating budget. The deliberations among the committee members led us to ask, "Is the Southern Baptist Convention better represented in the world through the Baptist World Alliance or would the Convention better represent itself to like-minded Christians throughout the world?" We came to the conclusion the latter of the two was true, partially because of our decreasing confidence in how we were being represented to other Baptists with regard to theological, ecclesiological, and missiological issues. While the committee is aware that the members will be criticized for making a decision that on the surface appears to be driven by isolationist views, nothing could be further from the truth. If the Convention withdraws its membership, we fully intend to begin immediately planning for ways to maintain friendships with our Baptist brethren from around the world and building bridges to all conservative Christians. Our committee is meeting in Nashville on April 13, 2004, with BWA officials. At the least we hope to find a mutual interest in accomplishing the transition with as little fanfare as possible.

In the early years of the recent Conservative Resurgence to which I alluded earlier, Dr. Jimmy Draper, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, set out what he termed irreducible minimums of Southern Baptist doctrine (*Authority: The Critical Issue for Southern Baptists*, Fleming H. Revell, 1984, pp. 105-6). Dr. Draper rightly concluded that, without these common beliefs, Southern Baptists could not remain vital nor should we remain unified. The *Baptist Faith & Message*, through its various editions, is the effort of Southern Baptists to define our commonly held beliefs. As cooperating conservatives, Southern Baptists have insisted our unity is dependent on our common belief and cannot be sustained apart from it.

2. Courage: The Societal Axiom

God honors the man who has not only convictions, but also the courage of his convictions. What good is our faith if we hide it under a bushel? It is not enough to believe the right things. We must give testimony to the right things. John Revell and Ken Conner have a new book soon to be published, entitled *Sinful Silence: When Christians Neglect Their Civic Duty*. Christians must engage the culture regardless of personal sacrifice and rejection.

Jude wrote, "Beloved it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort [you] that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). I will give several quotes in these axioms from Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Dr. Henry, who died a few months ago, in my opinion, embodied the axioms I am describing. His main thesis was that Fundamentalism had neglected its responsibility to engage the world's ills: Christianity opposes any and every evil, personal and social, and must never be represented as in any way tolerant of such evil; it rejects the charge that the Fundamentalist ideology logically involves an indifference to social evils; an assault on global evils is not only consistent with, but rather is demanded by, its proper world-life view (Henry, p. 45). Cooperating conservatives attempt to please God rather than pleasing men. Peter and John told the Sanhedrin they would continue to speak what they had seen and heard (Acts 4:20) because they chose to obey God rather than men. On the other hand, John tells of certain

secret disciples of Jesus (John 12:43) who would not confess their faith publicly because they loved praise from men more than praise from God. (NIV). It is not our goal to unnecessarily alienate society. But if there is a choice on an issue between what God says and what men say, we choose to follow God.

3. Character: The Ethics Axiom

This axiom speaks to how we conduct our daily lives. Consistent character is a necessary component of the Christian life. No admonition is more useful to those of us who highly value sound doctrine than practice what you preach. For cooperating conservatives, believing must be accompanied by ethical living; orthodoxy (right doctrine) must lead to orthopraxy (right practice). Simply holding the right doctrinal beliefs doesn't mean you are right about everything or that your behavior or relationships are righteous. Christianity should be known not only by its biblical convictions, but also by the life and testimony these convictions inspire. A mistake of some fundamentalist movements in the past has been the belief of the adherents that to be right with doctrine is to be right with the Lord. True righteousness was too easily discarded in favor of a type of dogmatism that was stifling and demoralizing to other Christians. In other words, right doctrine was equated to righteous living. They are not one and the same. A zeal for the Bible should result in a zeal for living for Christ, i.e., treating others with dignity, telling the truth, and insisting upon one's own integrity.

4. Collaboration: The Ecclesiastical Axiom

Our understanding of New Testament ecclesiology affirms the slogan we can do more together than separately. We, as Great Commission Christians, elevate cooperation of Christians as a core value. We could call this good connectionalism; a combining of resources for ministry and missions. It's associationalism, the *modus operandi* of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Cooperating conservatives reject the hyper-high church view of some that say *only* a local church may accomplish the Kingdom's work. In fact, cooperating conservatives would insist that such an independent view is counter-productive to the work of the gospel. It is clear from the New Testament that the congregations in various regions understood they had an obligation to the ministry outside their own locale. The council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) in 50 AD indicates doctrinal concerns were to be considered by the larger Christian family. Another example of multi-congregational cooperation was the commissioning of missionaries. The famine in Jerusalem evoked the collection of a freewill offering from among the gentile churches. Both John's epistles and the Book of Hebrews insisted that hospitality for other Christians was a congregational duty. To reiterate, this axiom of collaboration (we can do more together than separately and God expects no less) is what makes Southern Baptists fundamentally different from independents or separatists.

5. Charity: The Attitudinal Axiom

Charity is the spirit of collegiality, generosity in spirit, no slander or malice, grace and Mercy, no arguing or defaming over disputable matters or non-essentials, avoidance of Legalism, not majoring on the minors. Again, I quote Carl Henry. He said, "Fundamentalists are quicker to oppose than to propose." He further stated, "What distressed the growing evangelical mainstream about the fundamentalist far right were its

personal legalisms, suspicion of advanced education, disdain for biblical criticism per se, polemical orientation of theological discussion, judgmental attitudes toward those in ecumenically related denominations, and an uncritical political conservatism often defined as Christian anticommunism and Christian capitalism that, while politicizing the Gospel on the right, deplored politicizing it on the left. Cooperating conservatives believe it is entirely possible, in fact necessary, to maintain an irenic spirit without bending one iota on basic doctrine. It is a matter of developing an attitude built on the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5) and the mind of Christ (Phil. 2). Charity includes compassion and civility, being kind always. Timothy George commenting on Carl Henry said, His commitment to the orthodox Christian faith was solid as a rock, but I never heard him speak in a bitter or disparaging way about anybody, not even those with whom he disagreed” (*Christianity Today*, p. 51).

6. Co-belligerency: The Political Axiom

Cooperating conservatives cooperate where it is possible. Carl F. H. Henry wrote,

The time has come now for Fundamentalism to speak with an ecumenical outlook and voice; if it speaks in terms of the historic Biblical tradition, rather than in the name of secondary accretions or of eschatological biases on which evangelicals divide, it can refashion the modern mind. But a double-minded Fundamentalism, one that veers between essential and inessentials, will receive little of the Lord, and not much of a hearing from the perishing multitudes (Henry’s Book, p. 63).

Henry promoted the ideals of unity, education, evangelism, and social ethics while maintaining the absolute truth claims of historic Christian orthodoxy (*Christianity Today*, p. 49). The principle is we can join together with folks whose theology we do not share in order to accomplish good works, as long as we do not compromise our theology. Simply working with them is not a compromise in itself.

CONCLUSION

The Southern Baptist Convention needs fine-tuning. In fact, the Convention may require an overhaul, not in its polity, but in its programming and processes by which it functions daily. A major overhaul by the national Convention and the state conventions appears to be an absolute necessity, letting the facts speak for themselves lest the conventions discover too late they were blind and deaf to a delivery system that better serves the churches. Questions waiting to be asked and answered are stacking up by the month. There are pressures to establish more special offerings for Southern Baptists. This could unleash a horde of denominational entity fundraisers fanning out across the nation to make their appeals directly to the churches, re-establishing the failed practices of the societal system of denominational work from a bygone era. Furthermore, although Cooperative Program (CP) receipts continue for the 10th of the last eleven years to exceed the CP receipts of the prior year, the trend in the percentage of the total undesignated gifts given by the local church through the Cooperation Program has slipped from 10.5% for a fiveyear period in the mid-1980s to 7.39% in 2001-2002. The slippage is trending toward becoming an erosion of the entire Convention landscape. If the erosion continues, it will erupt into a landslide forcing an evaluation of our delivery system (how we relate and minister to the churches) and needed changes. The tragedy may be that by the time we are forced to evaluate, it may be too late to recover the ground we have lost.

The Southern Baptist Convention is a network of churches volunteering to work with other likeminded Baptist churches. Should this network fall apart, there is no Convention. You need only to look at the Southern Baptist landscape today to understand we are in an era of enormous flux.

The fluidity of the Convention is amazing. In some states we have two organized state conventions. In a few more, we have two state conventions, one organized, the other unorganized. We have churches exercising their freedom to leave a geographical association and join an association that is more doctrinally compatible. We have a number of state Baptist colleges and universities that have broken free from ownership by the Convention. We have seminaries and colleges that have become Southern Baptist because they have chosen to do so as contrasted to institutions of higher learning that exist because a convention has chosen to establish, partially fund, elect trustees, and otherwise secure the existence of the school. Inclusive of Jackson, Tennessee, the vision for a newly configured association has been announced, called the Mid-South Baptist Association of Churches. The vision is to include parts or all of seven states: Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, and Kentucky. Not until this mega-association becomes more reality than vision will we be able to measure its affect upon the traditional configurations of state conventions and associations now in existence. Convention leaders must not fail to take into account that we are not driving the changes. Pastors and their churches are driving the changes from the perspective of field generals. We have the responsibility of offering our observations and our collective assistance to the churches. If our conventions are not careful to take into account a shift in the landscape, we shall find ourselves inessential after all. The conventions exist to serve the churches, not to insist that the churches fit into the convention, a voluntary choice that is already their option. On the other hand, the churches must communicate to the conventions their needs. When they do, we are compelled to listen and as is possible take action to meet the needs brought to the attention of the conventions.

As has been mentioned already, the importance of cooperation within the Southern Baptist environment cannot be overstated. Cooperation is enormously vital to the existence of the Southern Baptist Convention and its cooperating state conventions. Enough words cannot be strung together to state adequately the danger that lurks in the shadows waiting to break down communication and cooperation among us. Where it is intentional, individuals must reassess their own attitudinal axiom. Where it is unintentional, churches and conventions must reassess why the cooperative nature of our Convention is breaking down.

If the churches lose the vision and the understanding of the Cooperative Program, missions suffer. If missions suffer, the conventions suffer. If the conventions suffer, reorganization and reallocation of funding shall no longer be a choice. Now is the time for leaders of all conventions to concentrate upon priorities of their organization's very existence and determine that more shall be done for less. To fail to do so will bring the disadvantages of smaller budgets and reduced ministries. Now is the time to maximize our resources by creating leaner organizations and eliminating wasteful expenditures for failing and static ministries and programs. To put our money behind ministries that genuinely assist the churches who gave us a portion of their undesignated and designated offerings is a formula for fulfilling our Lord's command to go ye therefore. Anything less must become unacceptable. It is incumbent upon chief executives and trustees to assure the very best use of resources by giving laser-like focus to those pursuits that most honor our Lord Jesus Christ and expand His Kingdom on earth.

It is my prayer that The Axioms of Cooperating Conservatives can become a catalyst for discussing the basis of our denominational work and that this current generation of Baptists can learn to revalue our corporate ministries. May God allow us to embody the principles of our

Convention founders--to maintain the proper balance between conservatism and cooperation--and, thus remain useful to the Lord Jesus until the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God. (I Cor. 15:24).

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