

3 JOHN 5-8

CO-OPERATION IN THE CAUSE OF CHRIST

“Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.”¹

Churches are to be autonomous; no outside agency should dictate to a congregation in matters of faith and practise. This means that we should have no ecclesiastical hierarchy to dictate belief or practise. Biblical Christians have no headquarters to compel uniformity. It means there is no “church boss” to control the church. Because we are autonomous does not, however, mean that we do not seek to co-operate with other churches of like faith and practise in advancing the work of the Kingdom of God.

It is only because contemporary Christians are confused about the distinction between the church and the Kingdom that this issue even needs to be discussed. Together with all who have been born from above, we work to build God’s Kingdom. Building the Kingdom is a labour that will not be completed through our human efforts, but we are nevertheless responsible to live as citizens of the Kingdom—honouring Christ our King, fulfilling His call to evangelise and glorifying Him through holy lives reflecting His righteousness. This work is assigned to all who are called by the Name of the Son of God. Though we encourage Kingdom work, and though we labour together with all Christians in the Kingdom of God, we do not—indeed, we cannot—co-operate with every religious organisation in missionary advance. The reasons for this are several-fold, revolving around our understanding of ecclesiology. Baptists are a doctrinal people, and our doctrines define both who we are and how we carry out the work our Lord has assigned. Our work is never done in isolation, but rather we realise that we are engaged in a great work that unites churches throughout the world. The message this day is designed to explore briefly the co-operative work of Baptists.

OUR MISSION AS CHRISTIANS — Reviewing the text, you will notice an arresting phrase. John speaks of Christians as “fellow workers [*sunergoi*] for the truth” [VERSE EIGHT]. Clearly, the term, “fellow workers for the truth,” suggests the interrelated nature of our Christian life. Apparently, God wants Christians to co-operate at some level. This does not mean that distinctions between the several communions claiming to adhere to the Faith do not exist; but it does mean that Christians are obligated to seek unity in the Faith. This unity must, however, be based upon doctrine.

That co-operation must be centred on Christ is evident from an earlier missive. “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works” [2 JOHN 9-11].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Our mission is to exalt Christ, and when we co-operate in Christian missions, we fulfil this mandate. I have just introduced two similar terms that are vital to our understanding of the will of God for us as children of God—“mission” and “missions.” Every Christian, and consequently every church, is expected to be on mission with Christ. Before His ascension, Jesus issued a weighty charge to each Christian. That charge is iterated at least five times in the several Gospels and in the Book of Acts.

In the evangelist Matthew’s account of the Ascension, Jesus is recorded as saying, “Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:19, 20].

Mark records Jesus’ commission to disciples as, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” [MARK 16:15, 16].

Doctor Luke has the Master addressing His disciples with these powerful words, “It is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” [LUKE 24:45-49].

John, the Beloved Disciple, recorded a terse account of the charge Jesus issued. “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” [JOHN 20:21].

In his historical account of the early churches, Luke relates the words Jesus spoke before His ascension into the heavens. Jesus pointedly charged His disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” [ACTS 1:8].

These statements lead me to conclude that the mission assigned each individual who would believe in the Son of God was quite dear to the Saviour’s heart. Our mission is to glorify Christ through telling others of His sacrifice and inviting them to receive the life that He offers. We accomplish this goal through personal and corporate witness to the Good News of His salvation. Each Christian is responsible to tell others of Christ’s offer of life. Peter writes that we are to be always “prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks ... for a reason for the hope that is in us” [see 1 PETER 3:15].

This is the mission assigned each Christian. If we are not witnesses of Christ, we surely serve as witnesses to our own perfidy—we betray both the Master and the work that He entrusted to us. It is of little consequence whether we claim to be Baptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians or whether we piously present ourselves to be “just Christians,” if we are not witnessing to the grace of God we are disobedient to the charge we have received. We Christians are always on mission with God.

Also, our mission is to glorify Christ through adorning the doctrine of Christ [TITUS 2:10]. This is accomplished through endeavouring to be holy. Holiness is perhaps seen as an anachronism, a relic of a bygone age without relevance to modern life; however, holiness defines us as Christians. We are redeemed by Christ to be His people and we are set apart for His purposes. This is the essence of holiness—being set apart for Christ’s purposes. Being ethical and being moral are certainly part of being holy, but holiness is much more than merely being ethical or being moral in our conduct. Holiness is marked by a desire for unity surrounding the Person of Christ.

The call for unity is presented repeatedly throughout the New Testament. Christians are to seek the unity of the Spirit [EPHESIANS 4:3], the unity of the Faith [EPHESIANS 4:13] and unity of mind [1 PETER 3:8]. We are enjoined to live in harmony with one another [ROMANS 12:16] and we are to be of the same mind [PHILIPPIANS 2:2]. The harmony sought is clearly a doctrinal harmony leading to unity and not uniformity. The unity of the Faith is agreement concerning Christ and all that He has done for us.

Some Protestant Christians have imagined a strange entity that they identify as a universal church. This church is supposed to be invisible, in contradistinction to the Catholic concept of a visible, universal church. Let me state quite clearly that there is no “invisible” church, nor even a visible, universal church. The concept is a reaction against Catholic doctrine of the universality of the Catholic Church as the true church of Christ. Protestants trace their origins from Catholicism, and not surprisingly, they carry much of the baggage that they brought with them when they exited their mother church.

Baptists, however, never were Protestants. We had nothing to protest since we did not have our origins among the Catholics. We indeed share some tenets in common with both Catholics and Protestants. Nevertheless, there are great differences between our understanding of the Faith and that held by these broader groups within Christendom. Perhaps our greatest difference with Catholic friends is our understanding of justification. Perhaps our greatest difference with the churches identified with Protestantism is our view of ecclesiology and the doctrines that rightly belong to that particular discipline.

Nevertheless, there is unity in Christ. All who through faith are born from above and into the Family of God share a common salvation and serve a common Lord despite obvious distinctions in various areas of belief. This is Paul’s assertion in EPHESIANS 4:4-7. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

The Psalmist certainly set a godly standard for Christians when he wrote:

“I am a friend to all who fear You,
to those who keep Your precepts.”

[PSALM 119:63]²

So, we seek co-operation without compromise in our faith. The key to understanding this statement is the concept of “co-operation without compromise.” The unity we seek and the co-operation we enter into are defined by the teaching about Christ. The corollary is that when a church or a denomination no longer exalts Christ as Lord of life, or when that church or denomination begins to tolerate practises that are unholy, we must resist the temptation to ignore these differences. There can be no debate concerning our response to religious error concerning Christ and His presence among us. We must immediately cease walking with those who choose sin.

Co-operation in the cause of Christ to advance the Kingdom of God, to share in evangelistic efforts, are limited to co-operation with other Christians who are Trinitarian and orthodox in theology. This includes a proper understanding of Christology and soteriology—the teachings of Christ and of salvation.

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Agreement on broader doctrinal issues, including especially agreement on issues of ecclesiology, permit co-operation at the level identified as denominational labours. Through denominational union, we may co-operate in educational and missionary enterprise. Training institutes, schools and seminaries are facilitated as we work together in a common cause. Missionaries require support from groups that share a common focus for the expression of their faith. Mission boards and the various missionary causes generally enjoy support from churches that agree on general issues of doctrine.

When we agree substantially on all issues, including methods of worship, we unite into communities of faith identified as local churches. Here, we seek to co-operate on a broad range of issues. Especially, do we seek harmony as we labour together for the glory of God endeavouring to advance the Kingdom of God as a congregation.

I have already spoken at length about the mission assigned to us as Christians. Let's summarise what I've said to this point. Our mission as those who are twice born is to glorify God. We glorify God when we believe the message of life as we submit to the reign of Christ the Lord, through obedience to all that He commands, through living a holy life, and through maintaining the unity of the Spirit. If you understand this concept, you realise that you are always on mission with God in all that you do. As this ideal seizes your heart and mind, your life will be transformed and God will be glorified.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN MISSION AND MISSIONS — John was writing a man named Gaius. We know little of him, but it is likely that Gaius was a leader in his congregation. Whoever he was, he was commended for his co-operative spirit. Itinerating preachers, perhaps evangelists or perhaps missionaries, had come to his church and he had received them hospitably. Gaius exemplifies Christian hospitality expected of all believers.

Peter teaches us to “show hospitality to one another” [1 PETER 4:9]. Likewise, Paul enjoins us to “pursue hospitality” [ROMANS 12:13]. The writer of the Hebrew letter had an insightful commentary on hospitality. He wrote, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” [HEBREWS 13:2]. Elders, especially, are expected to demonstrate hospitality [1 TIMOTHY 3:2; TITUS 1:8]. Gaius, in extending hospitably to itinerating servants of Christ, fulfilled the teaching of the Word. His gracious action was commended as a “faithful thing,” or as one translation expresses it, he was “showing [his] faith.”³ His mission—honouring Christ—dictated his participation in missions. His mission ensured that he would be hospitable.

Hospitality toward those labouring in Christ's work and entering into their labours through providing support—both prayer support and financial support—is a mark of one's faith. The church that is stinting toward those who labour in their behalf—both missionaries and settled servants of Christ, reveals that it has scant faith. Certainly, the penurious church fails to honour Him who gives the labourers. The church that always looks at the bottom line instead of weighing the will of God is unfaithful.

Our mission will inevitably dictate co-operation in missionary endeavour. At the local level, we are taught to work at maintaining the harmony that comes from being united as members of Christ's Body. United in our desire to worship the Living Christ, we will reach beyond ourselves, daring great deeds in the power of the Spirit and always pushing the frontiers of the Faith beyond our own immediate Jerusalem. One way in which we will advance this cause of Christ is through missionary labours.

³ The Holman Christian Standard Bible

Missions and missionary causes are dear to my heart. I came to Canada as a missionary assigned the task of restarting a moribund congregation. Five people remained in that first church when I arrived in this, my adopted country; I was charged to reignite a fire in that church. God was gracious, and the congregation grew and prospered. Since that time, I have been privileged to plant two churches where there was need for a congregation and I have served six other churches, each of which had experienced crippling conflict and/or serious decline.

A dear friend who was greatly influenced through a ministry I conducted in the city of San Francisco planted over twenty-seven churches in the Philippine Islands before his tragic death last year. On several occasions, he urged me, not without sympathy on my part, to travel to barrios situated especially in the Filipino Province of Ilocos Sur to plant churches and to preach the Gospel where Christ is not known.

One of my daughters was committed to missionary service in her early teen years. She was only deterred from a lifetime of service after contracting cancer, though she continues to encourage the mission with which she initially laboured. My eldest daughter was involved in teen ministries for many years, seeking to honour the Master through that service. Missionary service is dear to my heart, and has been a part of our family life for years. However, “missions” is not my mission.

I served briefly in a church that boasted of its missionary programme. However, that same congregation was deeply offended when first generation Canadians in large numbers began attending services. They were the wrong colour and they were “different.” In fact, at one service, the Chairman of the Church (Yes, that is the official title he appropriated to himself) complained before the congregation during a service that I had brought in too many of “the wrong kind of people.”

“What’s wrong with these people,” I queried? “What is wrong with them?”

“They ain’t like us,” he blustered.

“No, thank God,” I stated. “They’ve been converted.”

The missionary programme of that church was rendered meaningless when people from the community were not welcomed in their services. That congregation had forgotten their mission. They were convinced that they glorified God when they sent money overseas, even though they proved ungodly in their attitude toward the strangers God delivered to their community. The New Testament church must always ensure that the mission God has assigned is central in the planning for every activity.

Do not imagine that I am anti-missionary; I am not anti-missionary. Frankly, my desire is that as a congregation we will see the greatest part of the moneys the people entrust to us invested in advancing the Kingdom of God. Certainly, part of that investment must be missionary causes. However, “missions” is simply one practical application of the “mission” we have received from the Risen Saviour.

The labours that I have invested in Canadian ministries have been performed with the generous support of multiplied Christians throughout these past decades. I have lived by faith, dependent upon the generosity—the hospitality—of God’s holy people as they faithfully supplied from their own wealth what was necessary for my family’s expenses. The ministry here in this congregation is not my ministry, but rather it is the expression of the united will of the people of God. The advance we experience is the advance of Christ working through His people as they “show their faith” through generous giving and through constant prayers and through personal witness.

One vital truth rules over us: **our mission is to know Christ and to make Him known.** Our mission is not “missions,” but our mission certainly does embrace missions. Central to the planning and in the execution of every endeavour of this congregation is the knowledge that we are exalting the Lord Jesus Christ. When we meet for a potluck, it is not simply a meal that we share; it is opportunity to invite others to witness the love we have for one another. When we participate in a business meeting we are not merely doing church business; we are entering into the labours of Christ to extend His Kingdom. When we meet for a Sunday service, it is not simply to “do our duty”; rather, we seek to know Christ and we pray that others will receive Him as Lord of life.

When we embrace the mission of Christ, those who share this ministry will testify to our love before the church. When we unite our hearts and minds to fulfil the will of Christ, the faithful will rejoice and the cause of Christ will prosper. Tragically, far too often the churches of our Master function as small-hearted fiefdoms that seek only to advance their own interests and not the interests of Christ.

At one point, I served a congregation situated in Jasper national park. On any given Sunday during the summer months, we would have as many as one hundred guests present. I proposed to the denomination that we institute a programme that would bring world-class speakers to minister during those summer months. Such a plan would serve to encourage our guests and it would surely glorify the Lord. The plan was not implemented because several board members of the denomination refused to approve the plan unless a similar plan to bring speakers to their own church was implemented.

What a rebuke to such attitudes Paul delivers in his instruction to the Philippians! “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” [PHILIPPIANS 2:1-8].

The problem of spiritual myopia is not a recent malady restricted to modern churches, but rather it has been a problem from the earliest days of the Faith. In the same Philippians letter Paul proposed to send Timothy to the church to minister in his stead. His commendation of the young minister is actually a censure of other ministers. “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. **They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ**” [PHILIPPIANS 2:19-21].

Our mission as Christians is to glorify Christ; we glorify Christ as Lord through participating in His Kingdom work. We glorify Christ as Master through living lives reflecting holiness and marked by godliness. We glorify Christ as King as we serve together in a spirit of unity and harmony. Our mission leads us to be authentic and not artificial. When our faith is reduced to mere religion—fulfillment of duties or observance of rules—we no longer honour Christ. Glorifying Christ as Lord requires that we understand our mission and enter into that mission with joy.

PRACTICAL EXPRESSIONS OF COMMON MISSION — Baptists are a co-operative people. Whilst fiercely independent, resisting all outside control, Baptists are nevertheless interdependent with other churches to advance the Kingdom of God. We recognise that we do not labour alone; rather, God has placed us in this place to work together with all who love Him and with all who honour Him, to make Him known.

At this point in the message, I want to think of practical expressions of the mission we have received from our Lord. In our text, Gaius is commended for supporting itinerating ministers in their labours. That support appears to have been primarily through extending hospitality. Certainly, we should welcome those who come to us with the message of Christ, and I have witnessed a beautiful generosity of spirit among God's people as they host missionaries and preachers of the Word.

Guests share any given service; many of those guests, travelling through our fair community, will never visit here again. But they will remember the courtesy and the goodness they witnessed among us after they have gone, and they will glorify God because of us. We are to send them on their way in "a manner worthy of God." Those who minister in the Name of Christ, we treat with generosity and kindness; those who worship with us in the Spirit of Christ we treat with courtesy and gentleness. In this way, we send them on their journey in "a manner worthy of God." Don't be content to merely speak with our guests; invite them to share a meal. This is treatment "worthy of God."

I cannot help but think of those who quietly worship week-by-week, conducting what I call "shadow ministries." They do not labour in the limelight, but rather they work quietly and without attracting notice to their service for Christ. Within our own congregation, some quietly clean the buildings. Their service is a quiet ministry that is easily taken for granted. However, they are not simply vacuuming floors or cleaning toilets, but they are making the building attractive for guests, and they perform their work to the glory of God. Likewise, those who mow the lawns, tend the flower beds, or clean snow from the walks during the winter months—each performs necessary ministries that make the buildings attractive and draw inquirers to listen to the message of Christ.

Within the congregation are a growing number who are involved in various media ministries. They are never seen on television, nor do their names appear on our web site, but they ensure that the work continues and grows. They quietly invest their labours to advance the Kingdom of God, thus doing a beautiful thing for Christ's glory. When we see matters rightly, all that is done to make the building presentable, all that is done to ensure that our fellowship is enjoyable, all that is done to prepare the television and radio programming and to post changes to the web site, serve to advance the Kingdom of God.

I will not be remiss to urge us as a church to invest more in missionary causes. However, I remind you that when we labour to saturate our immediate area with the message of life, the work is just as necessary as is supporting missionary labours in Indonesia or in Africa. Without a strong home base, labours far removed from this place will not prosper long. It is not an issue of either/or, but rather it is an issue of both/and.

I emphatically urge each member of the congregation to ensure enthusiastic support the mission of Christ. Do this through praying daily for the various ministries, and through asking the Master to open our eyes to see clearly where He works among us. Pray that God will bless us with growing opportunity to tell others of the life we have discovered in Christ and with the boldness to speak of Him and of His love.

I have no doubt that as we ask that He be glorified among us; He will perform a glorious work here. The Master has taught us to pray for Him to provide workers. You will no doubt remember the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples on several occasions. “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” [MATTHEW 9:37, 38]. When you pray for workers, ask that some of those workers would be here, among us. Ask that we would witness a great harvest of souls here in this place.

We reveal our understanding of the mission of Christ as we live righteous and holy lives. I am not speaking of artificial holiness; rather, I speak of practical holiness. I am not saying that we are to develop a set of rules and congratulate ourselves because we measure up to our own rules; rather, I am saying that we need to know Christ and that we need to know what pleases Him. This requires nothing less than knowledge of the Word and time spent in the presence of the Master. Undoubtedly, this was Paul’s intent when he prayed for the Colossian saints. “We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” [COLOSSIANS 1:9, 10].

Most of all, however, I stress that we fulfil the mission of Christ as we work together in unity. I urge the people of God to pray for one another, to serve one another in love, to encourage one another and to comfort one another in sorrow.

All this can be lost in a moment, jettisoned in a heartbeat, when we seek to promote our own interests or pursue our own dogged course ignoring the welfare of the congregation. If we fail to work together and if we fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we will have sacrificed the mission Christ assigned us. Because we are individuals, we may not always agree on methods, but we must agree on the message; and when we do disagree on the methods, we are nevertheless responsible to live in harmony with one another.

Would you join us in the mission of Christ? It begins when one receives the life Christ offers. Christ invites all who are willing to walk together with Him, enjoying the unity of the Spirit to receive the gift of life that He offers. The Word of God offers life, saying, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Our invitation to each one sharing the service—whether present with us today, or whether viewing this message via television, or whether listening on a radio broadcast—is to join us in this great mission. Those who have trusted Christ as Lord are called to obey Him as He commands us to identify with Him through baptism as believers. This church receives those who confess Him as Lord and who willingly follow Him in baptism. Those who have been baptised as believers are invited to come, join us in this great task of advancing the Kingdom of God. This task that demands our best, and this is a task that demands active and willing participation of each Christian. Come, join us in this glorious labour. Do it now, and do it for Christ’s sake. Amen.