

# FIRST-PERSON: Recovering the biblical doctrine of cooperation

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We might call what happened with the boys in the boat “synergy.” The word synergy points to a phenomenon that occurs when two things come together resulting in greater power and results than the sum of the individual parts. The word synergy comes from the Greek word *sunergos*.

The apostle Paul uses that word to describe those who were working together with him in the ministry of the Gospel. He uses the verb form of that word to describe the mission God has given us to do together. As Tony Wolfe reminds us in his recent Southern Seminary dissertation, “Confessionalism and Cooperation in the Baptist Movement, 1609-1925,” these words form the biblical basis of cooperation in the work God has called us to do.

Paul uses the word, *sunergoi* in 1 Corinthians 3:9 to describe himself and Apollos as “co-workers” with God. That statement was not meant to elevate their status. He had just described the two of them as “servants” who planted and watered but pointed to God as the One who gave the growth. He then makes the connection that we are working together with God. Our cooperation with one another begins with a proper understanding of ourselves as servants who are completely dependent on God for any results.

Paul names dozens of individuals as *sunergoi*, “co-workers,” in his letters. The list includes men, women, Jews, and Gentiles. Among them are:

- Priscilla and Aquilla (Romans 16:3)
- Urbanus (Romans 16:9)
- Timothy (Romans 16:21)
- Titus (2 Corinthians 2:23)
- Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25)
- Clement (Philippians 4:3)
- Philemon (Philemon 1)
- Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Philemon 24)

Paul was no lone ranger. He worked together with others. He may have learned that from Barnabas who recruited Paul to come help him teach new believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Paul followed suit by appointing elders in places where a church was established (Acts 14:23). Paul was sending a message that working together with others in the work of the Gospel is not just more effective, it is absolutely necessary.

Further, Paul uses the verb form, *sunergeo*, in 2 Corinthians 6:1 to underscore how he was working together with God in appealing to the church in Corinth. He had just described how he had been given the ministry of reconciliation to deliver the message of reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ. The ultimate expression of that message is found in the closing words of 2 Corinthians 5, “[God] made the one who did not sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (CSB). Now, we have been commissioned to work together with God to take that message to the world as well.

In his address last fall to the SBC Executive Committee, “A Force For Good,” Dr. Jeff Iorg asserts that the Bible is replete with examples of this type of cooperation.

He states, "From encouragement in group decision-making – 'victory comes with many counselors' (Proverbs 24:6); to the examples of partnership among believers – 'I give thanks to God ... for your partnership in the Gospel ... I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me. ...' (Philippians 1:3-7); to churches meeting each other's financial needs in the face of natural disaster – 'Each of the (Antioch) disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea' (Acts 11:29); to the Pauline example of almost always working with a missionary partner or team; cooperation is both a biblical pattern and mandate."

The doctrine of cooperation is well established in Scripture. It seems inherent to the nature of God Himself and the work of salvation.

In his book "The Bruised Reed," written in 1630, Puritan Richard Sibbes says, "Look here, for our comfort, at the beautiful agreement between all three persons of the Trinity: the Father gave a mission to Christ, the Spirit equipped and sanctified Him for it, and Christ himself carried out the role of the Mediator. Our redemption is based on the joint agreement of all three persons of the Trinity".

When we cooperate, we look more like the God who saves us. We demonstrate His grace and glory as we share the saving message of the Gospel with a lost world.

As we approach the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cooperative Program, we can rest assured that the idea of cooperation did not originate with Baptists. It came from the heart of God who works together with us and loves to see us working together with one another in the most important work in the universe – the work of the Gospel!