**The Great Strength of the Cooperative Program**

*By Bob Shelton*

When the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) formed in 1845, one of the distinctive elements was the desire to find a more effective way to do mission work beyond the local church.

In his history of the SBC, Jesse Fletcher writes: “Thus, in contrast to the Triennial structure with separate, autonomous and independent societies for each benevolence, the Southern Baptist Convention provided for one body that would promote all benevolences that commended themselves to it, with an emphasis on denominational unity rather than any single benevolence.”

One of the biggest hurdles the new convention would face was supporting this cooperative form of work with a societal form of giving. The new convention quickly formed the Foreign Mission Board under J. B. Jeter and the Home Mission Board under Basil Manley. At the end of the annual session in 1846, offerings were taken to support these new agencies. In the years following, a variety of means of support were used, but primary was personal fundraising.

In One Sacred Effort, by Chad Brand and David E. Hankins, we find the boards of managers for the Foreign Mission Board and Home Mission Board—“appointed agents ‘who would spend varying amounts of time in designated areas, promoting foreign missions and soliciting funds for the work.’ Some assumed these posts as employees of the agencies, while others acted as volunteers in collecting funds. The financing of foreign (and home) missions during these years was ‘largely dependent upon agents for both publicizing the work of the board and raising the financial support necessary for sustaining its work.’ Though it seems foreign to modern Southern Baptists, the work of these agents was the lifeblood of the mission boards. Yet there were many problems with the process. Agents were allowed to keep about 20 percent of what they collected, and after expenses that amounted to about 25 percent. It was a costly approach to raising money.” For example “in 1876 the Board collected over $19,000, but 44 percent of that was spent on administration, the largest amount of which went to pay agents.”

In One Sacred Effort, Brand and Hankins go on to write: “Further, there were problems with the frequency of visits by agents. Many smaller churches would receive a visit from a representative of one of the agencies only once or twice a year. In other situations, especially with larger or urban churches, the problem was too many visits by agents.”

In 1851, the general agent of the Association of Baptists in Kentucky noted: “Wherever I went, I found that other Agents of other Societies had preceded me, and done what could be done; and that the Pastors and churches were complaining of the number and expense of agents, while many of the ablest churches either had, or were talking of, adopting some plan by which they might keep agents out.”

Out of these early funding struggles and efforts to find a more effective methodology came the “Seventy-five Million Campaign.” Every church was canvassed, and on victory week, it was announced that more than $92.5 million had been pledged. Unfortunately by the end of the campaign in May of 1925 only $58.5 million had been collected. Significant financial problems arose because agencies had borrowed for capital improvement based on large pledges and early returns in giving, and did not have the funding to pay their debt.

Because of this some would call the “Seventy-five Million Campaign” a failure, but as noted in One Sacred Effort, “In some ways the Seventy-five Million Campaign was a remarkable success. Southern Baptists had raised nearly sixty million dollars for extending the larger work. This was more than the total of all gifts to the denomination in the previous seventy-four years combined. Additionally, one-thousand churches that contributed to the campaign had never given to denominational causes before. The campaign also introduced the churches to ‘a prototype for the Cooperative Program, the unified church budget, and the Every Member Canvass for contributions, a trio that revolutionized Southern Baptist life.’”

From this came the birth of the CP in 1925. It is modeled after the Biblical pattern of tithes and offerings. The CP is analogous to the unified budget of the local church. It is the foundational funding mechanism (i.e. unified budget) for our Southern Baptist work at state, national and international levels.

Then, just as members of a local church give offerings for special purposes above and beyond the tithe; i.e., missions, special projects, building fund and so forth, so then Baptists give to special offerings above and beyond their church’s CP contributions; i.e., Lottie Moon, Annie Armstrong, State Missions Offering, Disaster Relief and World Hunger.

A key distinctive to note is that our Southern Baptist model calls for churches (not individuals) to give to the CP and for individuals to give to the designated or special offerings. It could be said like this, “The Cooperative Program is the church’s channel of giving, and the special offerings are the individual’s channel of blessings.”

Some of the greatest successes of the CP are that it provided a solution for the weaknesses and costs of the societal method of paying agents to do fundraising, and provides more resources and more predictable funding.

The great strength of the CP is that the local church replaced the ‘agent’ as the fund raiser, thus eliminating this cost and freeing an additional 20-25 percent of the money to go to the state, national and international work of Southern Baptists.

More effective cooperation in mission work beyond the local church was a significant part of the formation of the SBC in 1845. Eighty years later in 1925, we multiplied our effectiveness with a cooperative form of giving. The question for the future is will we continue to support cooperative funding, or will we allow an erosion back to the societal method of giving that takes 20-25 percent of our mission gifts to pay fundraising costs?

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