

# Baptist Voluntary Cooperation: Challenges and Benefits



**A rope of sand with strength of steel...** that is the way James Sullivan, long-time distinguished Baptist leader, described Baptist voluntary cooperation. Although fragile, it is highly effective. The benefits of voluntary cooperation have kept a multitude of Baptists devoted to preserving and strengthening it in the face of obstacles and challenges.

## Obstacles to Voluntary Cooperation

Why did it take Baptists decades to develop extensive voluntary cooperation among churches and other Baptist organizations? The answer is rooted both in Baptist beliefs and in Baptist history.

Baptists believe that the Bible is the authority for the doctrines and practices of churches. Some Baptists have insisted that the Bible does not provide for any organization of believers other than the local congregation. This conviction prevents these Baptists from developing and supporting Baptist organizations beyond the local church.

Other Baptists have insisted that **the Bible sets forth both the principle and the example of voluntary cooperation among churches (Acts 15; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 1:2; 2:1-10; Revelation 1-3)**. These Baptists are willing to develop associations, societies and conventions for missions, education and benevolence.

**Another obstacle to voluntary cooperation among Baptists has been a staunch commitment to the autonomy of the local church.** Many Baptists feared that organizations formed by Baptists outside of churches would attempt to exercise authority over churches. Therefore, they emphasized autonomy rather than cooperation.

**The autonomy obstacle was cleared by stressing that a church's relationship to any organization beyond the local church would be purely voluntary.** With this guarantee, numerous Baptist individuals and churches were willing to establish organizations for various causes.

**Another obstacle was the diversity among Baptist churches as well as competition between churches.** These factors still keep some churches from cooperating with each other. However, many churches are willing to cooperate voluntarily, as long as basic convictions are not compromised, for the advancement of evangelism, missions, education and benevolence.

## The Benefits of Voluntary Cooperation

**Once they had cleared the obstacles to voluntary cooperation, Baptists began to establish entities, such as associations and conventions, to provide means for churches to cooperate.** From the start, these organizations were not established for the churches to serve them. They were established to serve the churches.

**"Remember, on the great articles of our faith and practice, we do not differ as Baptists. Should our little Churches therefore be tenacious about these non-essentials, they will remain disjoined, and thus broken in fragments they will perish away."**

**Circular Letter of 1840 to Baptists in Texas written by R.E.B. Baylor as requested by Union Baptist Association**

The denominational organizations originally were formed to serve the churches by providing a means for them to work together to advance the cause of Christ. **Voluntary cooperation** enables churches to do far more for the cause of Christ together than they could do alone.

Later, associations and conventions developed ways to assist the churches in carrying out their own local ministries. Furthermore, voluntary cooperation can help churches that are experiencing difficulties, such as internal conflict and financial crises. A church in this situation can request help from an association or convention without losing any of its autonomy.

**"For we are laborers together with God..."**  
**1 Corinthians 3:9**

Individuals, such as pastors and church staff members, benefit from voluntary cooperation. The denomination provides insurance and certain forms of aid in some cases for those who have been dismissed from their position without any other employment; this is always voluntary and not something the denomination is required to do.

Baptist institutions also benefit from voluntary cooperation. A voluntary relationship with an association or convention provides a wide base of support that enables them to have more stability and strength than they would have as totally independent organizations.

The Baptist denomination benefits from utilizing the strengths of various congregations and institutions. This broad base of involvement enables Baptists to minister far more effectively than they could otherwise. **Thus, a large number of persons both inside and outside of the Baptist denomination benefit from Baptist voluntary cooperation.**

## Challenges to Voluntary Cooperation

Although the benefits of voluntary cooperation among Baptists are huge, obstacles and challenges continue to exist. Here are some often cited by observers of Baptist life:

- **The belief held by some that denominations are a relic of the past.** These persons regard Baptist conventions as outdated and cumbersome and often regard Baptist distinctives as irrelevant. Thus, they see little reason to cooperate with conventions, although some cooperate through affinity groups, such as those formed around worship styles or cultural distinctives.
- **The development of numerous so-called para-church organizations.** These organizations, many of which operate effectively, are generally made up of persons from different denominations. They provide churches with ways both to get help for the ministry of the church and to collaborate with other Christians in mission and ministry endeavors apart from the denomination.
- **The rise of mega-churches.** These churches can do on their own many of the things that associations and conventions were created to do. In addition, they do not need most of the helps and services provided by associations and conventions. Thus, a number of these churches are little involved in Baptist voluntary cooperation.
- **The continuing denominational conflict among Baptists.** Some churches indicate that they do not want to be drawn into the conflict between various conventions and

denominational groups and therefore withdraw from denominational cooperation.

- **Pressure on churches and other entities by denominational bodies to conform in order to be considered cooperative.** Whether it is pressure to use certain literature, to follow a particular pattern of financial support or to subscribe to some doctrinal statement, the voluntary nature of cooperation is undermined.
- **The increased financial independence of various denominational organizations.** As institutions that were once heavily dependent on cooperative support become more able to do without this support, they may pull away from the denomination.
- **The concept that the association or convention is responsible for furnishing a church assistance in carrying out its local ministry.** The "What have you done for us lately?" attitude can lead to less participation in Baptist voluntary cooperation when the church's expectations are not met.

## Responses to Challenges to Voluntary Cooperation

The challenges to voluntary cooperation are daunting. Rather than abandoning it, a better approach would be to respond to objections and explain its benefits.

**Constructively respond to the objections that some churches have to denominational cooperation. Here are some possible ways to do this:**

- By participating in the voluntary cooperative efforts of Baptists, churches can be part of a vibrant movement to make and mature disciples for Christ and to minister to persons in his name.
- By remaining cooperative, larger churches help provide a means for smaller churches to enjoy the benefits of cooperation.
- By participating in Baptist voluntary cooperation, churches provide a constructive response to conflict.
- By being part of Baptist voluntary cooperation, churches demonstrate that voluntary cooperation is not only about what a church receives but also about what it is able to contribute to evangelism, missions and benevolence.

**Enthusiastically praise the benefits of voluntary cooperation.**

Baptist missionary, educational and benevolent ministries help millions of persons each year in the name of Christ. Churches are involved in missions and ministries far beyond what they individually could do.

## Conclusion

Voluntary cooperation is indeed **a rope of sand with strength of steel**, a rope that has been wonderfully effective. Through voluntary cooperation, Baptist churches have been able to maintain their autonomy while becoming highly effective in ministering to the world in Christ's name.

For further information on voluntary cooperation, see [www.baptistdistinctives.org](http://www.baptistdistinctives.org).