

LOCAL CHURCHES IN UNITY AND COOPERATION

Matthew 9:35-38

Part 1

The experience of true Christian unity within a fellowship of individual churches produces a symphony of praise to God where each individual part blends with all of the other parts to the glory of God.

I. Creator of Unity and Cooperation among Local Churches: Jesus Christ

A. One Shepherd and One Flock

John 10:7 – *So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.”*

John 10:11 – *I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*

John 10:14-16 – *I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,¹⁵ even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.¹⁶ I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.*

- Word “church” used in the New Testament almost always used of particular congregation. A local visible body of believers – “the church at Antioch,” “churches of Galatia,” etc.
- We hold that every church is an independent, autonomous body with no authority but Christ and His word!
- However, we are “one” flock with one Shepherd = unity and cooperation.

B. Jesus’ Prayer for Unity

John 17:11 – *I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are.*

- Jesus knew His struggles were coming to an end but theirs were not. He asked the Father to keep them that they may be “one.”

John 17:21-23 – *That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.* ²² *The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one;* ²³ *I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*

- The unity among individual churches is not a formal, mechanical unity of an ecclesiastical machine BUT of the true and living unity of the “Spirit of God.”

V.21) *So that the world may believe that You sent Me*

V.23) *So that the world may know that You sent Me*

- The unity among individual churches is not based on the “equality” of churches, but on the “likeness” of churches.

“Churches cannot do without one another even though they are distinct from one another.” – James E. Carter

II. Essential Pillars of Local Churches in Unity & Cooperation: Doctrine, Spirit, Discipleship

Ephesians 4:1-7 – *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

A. Pillar #1: Grounded in True Doctrine

Ephesians 4:5 – *One Lord, one faith, one baptism,*

- The initial faith (justification) and a growing embrace of that body of doctrine that was once for all delivered to the saints for which we are to contend.
- One of the dangers of cooperation is that we tend to drift into a “lowest common denominator” concerning doctrine.
- “The work of missions should be the **OBJECT** of cooperation among churches. **DOCTRINAL TRUTH** must be its base.”

Part 1 ends

Part 2

(A Review, then a continuation of Grounded in True Doctrine)

New Testament Commands & Examples

- In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul rebukes them about being open to “another Jesus” and another “gospel.” His point: We must unite around true doctrine and remove the false (“false prophets,” “deceitful workers”).
- In Galatians 1, those preaching a “different gospel” are “distorting the gospel,” and they are “disturbing you.” Upsetting the unity! (“Accursed”)
- In Galatians 5, a little leaven of false doctrine will corrupt the whole loaf. The one doing this is to “bear His judgment” (**Galatians 5:10**). There can be no unity with false doctrine (**Galatians 5:7-12**).

Examples of How Embracing False Doctrine Destroys True Unity:

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 – *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.* ¹⁵ *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

Titus 1:10-11 – *For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision,* ¹¹ *who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.*

2 John 1:9-11 – *Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.* ¹⁰ *If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting;* ¹¹ *for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.*

B. Pillar #2: Empowered by the True Spirit

- Note how all three pillars are interconnected.
(True Doctrine, True Spirit, True Discipleship)
 1. The Spirit wrote the Bible which gives us the doctrine.
 2. The Spirit interprets the Bible to give understanding of sound doctrine.
 3. The Spirit empowers us to live out true discipleship.

Ephesians 4:3-4 – *Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* ⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling.*

- There is a “false spirit” that mimics these virtues, but it doesn’t pass the test of time.

1 John 4:1 – *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

Example of Jews & Gentiles

Ephesians 2:14-18 – *For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ¹⁷ AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; ¹⁸ for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.*

A Spirit-Empowered Unity

What glues your congregation together?

- Cold doctrine?
- Denominational loyalty?
- Fear of man? – Each powerbroker gets his way?
- Extra-biblical idolatries (legalism)?

- The hallmark characteristic of the Spirit's empowerment is genuine conversion. Genuine conversion leads to a genuine membership.
- For churches to have unity and cooperation, each individual church must be striving toward a Spirit-wrought membership and a Spirit-wrought unity and Spirit empowered ministry, which produces genuine conversion, a regenerate membership, etc.

Part 2 ends

Part 3

*(A Review, then a continuation of
Essential Pillars of Churches in Unity & Cooperation)*

C. Pillar #3: Walking in True Discipleship

- Not just their individual walk in discipleship, but the corporate discipleship of the local church.

Ephesians 4:5 – *One Lord, one faith, one baptism*

Ephesians 4:4 – *Called in one hope of your calling*

Ephesians 4:1 – *Calling with which you were called*

- We all alike have, by the same Spirit, placed our faith in the same Christ and begin our discipleship journey by the same ordinance of baptism.
- One thing is for certain, there can be no unity and cooperation in a local church if some are striving to true discipleship and the others are not!

Application for Local Churches in Unity and Cooperation

Romans 16:19 – *For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.*

- This was the obedience of one local church affecting the others.
- One church's striving toward obedience unifies it with the others striving to live out true discipleship.
- So, likewise, today only churches that are striving to walk in true discipleship will have proper unity and cooperation for mutual edification and the advancement of missions!

- Churches walking in true discipleship means that they are embracing and striving to develop and maintain biblical methods.

STRUCTURES OF GRACE

- 1. CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP** (preaching the word in the power of the Spirit)
- 2. EVERY MEMBER MINISTRY THROUGH SMALL GROUPS**
- 3. PERSONALIZED STRATEGIC WORLD MISSIONS**

- Out of these functions all the means of grace. (Examples: preaching, fellowship, prayer, Bible study, evangelism, genuine conversion, church discipline, meaningful membership, ordinances...)
- There must be substantial agreement on these structures of grace and a commitment to strive toward maturation in each.

III. Biblical Illustrations of Local Churches in Unity and Cooperation

A. Earliest Days of Acts

- As the empowered church went forth from Pentecost, it went forth in unity and cooperation. The believers were scattered after the martyrdom of Stephen. Phillip went to Samaria and preached, and many were converted.
- Then the Bible says,

Acts 8:14 – Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John.

- The local church in Jerusalem (mother church) sent Peter and John to Samaria to mentor and oversee the new church plant in Samaria! = Unity
- Also, in Acts 11, the local church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to the local church at Antioch.

Acts 11:20-26 – *But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.*

²¹ *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.* ²² *The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.* ²³ *Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;* ²⁴ *for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.* ²⁵ *And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;* ²⁶ *and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*

- Acts 11 also records that the local church in Antioch sends a love gift to the mother church in Jerusalem for famine relief.

Acts 11:29-30 – *And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.*

³⁰ *And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.*

- Acts 15 reveals some rogue, self-appointed men from the local church in Jerusalem came to the local church at Antioch and began adding circumcision to the gospel. Paul and Barnabas disputed them and the local church at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas, and some other brethren to the mother church at Jerusalem to resolve the doctrinal issue! Their resolution was also addressed to the local churches in Syria and Cilicia!
- While there is no specific scriptural command for any local church to seek the guidance of another local church, it seems wise and certainly was the practice in the early church that newer church plants voluntarily sought the oversight and leadership of more mature, established congregations.

B. Paul's Commissioning to Ministry

- Paul's ministry began under the oversight of coordinated local churches. Paul was sent out by a local church.
- The blessing of the local church at Antioch...

Acts 13:1-3 – *Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While*

they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”³ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

- Furthermore, Paul was also affirmed by the mother church in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:24-25 – *Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul.*

Galatians 2:9-10 – *And recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.¹⁰ They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.*

C. The Complete New Testament Record

- Paul’s entire ministry was marked by leading the local churches to unity and a cooperative spirit!
 1. Traveled
 2. Preached
 3. Souls were saved
 4. Established local churches
 5. Discipled them
 6. Leaders trained
 7. Led them to cooperate together for mutual edification, support, and church planting

Some Examples from Paul’s Ministry

- In Romans 15, he motivates the local church at Rome by holding up the example of the giving of the local churches in Macedonia and Achaia.

Romans 15:26 – *For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.*

Romans 16:16 – *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

➤ Here we have the local church at Rome mentioned, the local churches in Macedonia mentioned, the local churches in Achaia mentioned, along with the mother church in Jerusalem, and “all the churches.” This shows an ever-growing cooperative family of churches.

- In 1 Corinthians 16, we see the local churches of Galatia and Asia, and the local church at Aquila and Prisca’s house all in a united cooperative relationship.

1 Corinthians 16:1 – *Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.*

1 Corinthians 16:19-20 – *The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.²⁰ All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

- In 1 Thessalonians 1, he commends the church at Thessalonica for being a good example for the local churches in Achaia and Macedonia.

1 Thessalonians 1:7-8 – *So that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.*

- In Romans 16:19, he commends the obedience of the local church at Rome as a good example for all the local churches.

Romans 16:19 – *For the report of your obedience has reached to all...*

- In 1 Corinthians 14, he corrects the local church at Corinth for their abuse of spiritual gifts by using the example of other local churches.

1 Corinthians 14:33 – *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.*

- In effect, in 2 Corinthians 8, the local church at Corinth is exhorted to be a good example to other local churches! It was their duty to do so.

2 Corinthians 8:24 – *Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of*

your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

- The local churches selected a man to lead them in an effort to raise money for the mother church in Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 8:19-20 – *And not only this, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself, and to show our readiness,²⁰ taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift.*

- Here, Paul commends the local church at Philippi for financially supporting his work to plant still more churches.

Philippians 4:15-16 – *You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone;¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.*

- Paul expects the church at Rome to support his church planting work in Spain!

Romans 15:24, 28 – *Whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while...²⁸ Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain.*

3 John 1:5-8 – *Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers;⁶ and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.⁷ For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.⁸ Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.*

**GRACE LIFE CHURCH OF THE SHOALS
AS A MOTHER CHURCH (A LEADING CHURCH)
IN THIS COOPERATIVE MISSIONS EFFORT**

- ★ What is our role as a “mother church” in this cooperative missions effort called? (AIT Missions)

- ★ AIT Missions is THE embodiment of this mother church's role.
- ★ By God's grace, Grace Life Church of the Shoals has become a long-term model of true doctrine, true spiritual power, and true discipleship.

A Biblically, Spiritually Healthy Church

“Sound Theology and Proven Methodology”

Now, we come to the Final Structural Beam in the house of AIT Missions:

PASTORS TRAINING INSTITUTE

First: We have put together several courses that literally have been developed over 4 decades of reforming and revitalizing Grace Life Church of the Shoals.

For Example:

- “Master Plan” – “Encyclopedia of the Local Church”
- Expository Preaching I & II
- Every Member Ministry through Small Groups
- Personalized Strategic World Missions
- Biblical Church Discipline, Biblical Counseling, Biblical Conflict Resolution

Second: We've added those typical courses that are needful for the pastor/missionary/church planter:

- Biblical Theology
- Church History
- Intensive – 1 Peter
- Intensive – Biblical Pastoral Ministry – 1 & 2 Timothy

Third: A one-year Pastoral Mentoring Practicum

- Includes instruction on biblically sound church elders, church calendar, building a staff & staff relations, finances, planning special events, etc.

PROFESSORS WHO ARE POSSESSERS

- ★ **The professors in PTI are more than professors. They are also possessors!**
That is, they have lived the long and hard journey of planting or revitalizing a local church to biblical/spiritual health.

- ★ **A CONTINUING RELATIONSHIP...FOREVER!**

- ★ Like the example of the New Testament, we are NOT interested in men completing the course work and getting a degree or certificate and then going alone into ministry.

- ★ We are committed to a “continuing relationship” with our students. That is, that AIT Missions will aid the student in his efforts to plant a church or revitalize an existing church after he completes his course work.

THREE RELATIONSHIP TRACKS FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

#1 Students in AIT Partnership Churches

- When a pastor in one of the AIT partnership churches has a prospective student in their fellowship, then PTI will partner with that pastor/church to train the prospective student for ministry. At all times, PTI will recognize and support the authority of the home church of the the prospective student. He will only be on loan to us for a season of training. He will remain under the authority of his ordaining church as to his future ministry assignments.
- At such time as his home church sends Him out to the field, AIT Missions will come alongside his home church to support and mentor him, and AIT will continue this support indefinitely.

#2 Students who Belong to Biblically/Spiritually Unhealthy Churches

- They can be considered for acceptance to the PTI and membership in Grace Life Church of the Shoals through the application and interview process.
- Likewise, this would apply to men called to preach who are members of an AIT partnership church who obtain their pastor/elders' blessing to move to Muscle Shoals, join GLCS, and enroll in the PTI. After completion of the

training, they are sent out with the joint blessing of GLCS and their home church.

**#3 Students Taking Selective Courses
(for ministers already on the field of ministry)**

- Those who may or may not be members of an AIT partnership church, who desire to take selective courses to sharpen their ministry skills.
- We do accept credit for general courses successfully completed at reputable schools to apply toward their completed training.