

A Legacy of Cooperation

Acts 10

Story: Bill Pinson

I have had some recent conversations, via phone and email, with Dr. Bill Pinson, one of the longest tenured executive directors of the BGCT.

I've always had great admiration and respect for him. He retired as executive director in 2000 and was named Executive Director Emeritus by vote of the executive board.

One of the reasons that prompted my phone call to him was the sudden accidental death of Doris Tinker, who was the executive assistant at the building for 27 years, and then his part-time assistant since retirement for a total of almost 48 years!

Dr. Pinson has served as Executive Director Emeritus for twenty-five years. I believe it would be appropriate to express our appreciation to him in a formal way for his faithful service in that role. He has written and disseminated Baptist distinctive materials for Baptists in Texas and around the world, as well as archive historical materials of the BGCT.

When I think of giants like Dr. Pinson and others who have come before us I am reminded of the great legacy that is ours. Our legacy is a legacy of cooperation.

On June 29 of this year, we will celebrate 140 years since the establishment of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Yes, this year is our 140th birthday as Texas Baptists! It is a 140-year legacy of cooperation...140 years of cooperation for missions.

We cannot look to the future without being grounded on our past. Our history informs our identity. Our past shapes our present and our future. We don't have to live in the past. We need to be future-thinking but neither should we ignore it.

In fact, if we go back to the history of the church in the first century we are reminded of how God works to unleash a gospel movement.

The book of Acts begins with Jesus' declaration to his disciples that they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

The movement begins the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes down and the gospel is proclaimed in every language. It continues with the powerful testimony of the church. And it is further propelled by persecution.

Those who were scattered because of the persecution preached the word wherever they went. And the movement grew. With a few exceptions, the gospel witness was shared primarily with Jews in the diaspora.

Although Acts 1 and 2 gave a blueprint for a global movement that included all nations, the church did not grasp that fully at first. So we come to an important turning point for the church and its leaders.

Acts 10:9-16 (NIV)

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." 14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." 15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." 16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

This vision of Peter about kosher and non-kosher food, had much further implications than dietary restrictions. God was revealing to Peter and the church in Acts how the gospel movement was meant to be unleashed.

1. A Renewed Vision for Cooperation (God wants to do something greater)

Peter had been brought up as a good Jew. He kept the Jewish dietary laws, the Jewish feasts, and other Jewish customs. He understood these to be the kind of holiness God expected from him. That is why he has such difficulty accepting to eat non-kosher food even when God is the one inviting him!

What is God doing here? Is he tempting Peter to disobey his own law? Is God indicating that the Jewish dietary laws expired upon the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus? Or is it something else?

God is here renewing Peter's vision! He is removing the mental limitations that would keep Peter and the church from fulfilling God's mission. He wants to expand his vision because God wants to do something greater than what Peter had imagined up until that point.

Anytime God advances his mission through his people, he enlarges their vision. Movements in history are preceded by new ways of thinking. Breakthroughs require new mental models and paradigm shifts.

When the BGCT was established in 1886, there were five different statewide bodies of Baptists in Texas. You think it's challenging to have two today? Imagine having five when there were very few churches and the population was much smaller!

While these five state "conventions" were limiting their cooperation with one another because of disagreements, controversies and differences, the founders of the BGCT had a renewed vision.

The vision was one of cooperation for the sake of God's mission. Together Baptists in Texas could undertake educational enterprises, benevolence ministries, evangelism and missions initiatives. While Baptist distinctives, including sound Christian doctrine, have always been important, the BGCT did not organize around doctrinal conformity.

It is interesting to note that even at the national level, the Southern Baptist Convention, which was established in 1845, did not adopt a statement of faith until 1925. For eighty years

Southern Baptists rallied around missions and theological education rather than around one uniform confession of faith!

Churches and associations had confessions of faith but they were not all the same. Even after adopting the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, churches struggled with having a confession at the convention level rather than at the associational level.

William W. Barnes, Baptist historian and church history professor at Southwestern Seminary, noted in the early 1930s the angst around this and spoke prophetically about what would happen in 100 years.

Graphic: Barnes quote

The reception that the [1925 Baptist Faith and Message] has received, or perhaps one should say, has not received, seems to suggest that Southern Baptists are not yet ready for doctrinal centralization, but the first step has been taken. It may be another century, but if and when the doctrinal question again arises, succeeding generations can point to 1925 and say that the Southern Baptist Convention, having adopted one creed, can do so again. Perhaps by then the centralizing forces will have been developed and the convention may have the means and the method of compelling congregations to take notice of the creed then adopted.”

William W. Barnes. *A Study of Ecclesiology. The Southern Baptist Convention* (1934)

Two weeks ago I attended the retreat of Baptist state convention executive directors in San Diego. The theme for the retreat was “The Future of Cooperation.” We discussed the history of cooperation among Southern Baptists, the biblical and theological bases for cooperation and heard reports about the trends in Cooperative Program giving.

One of the presenters talked about the history of cooperation in the SBC. Asking the question, “*how much doctrinal agreement is necessary for cooperation?*” He shared this graphic of the concentric circles of cooperation.

Graphic: concentric circles of cooperation



He stated that in the historic convention model confessional uniformity existed at the local association level. Confessional homogeneity was the historic convention level. Confessional amity refers to cooperation with Christians of other denominations. That's a legacy of cooperation not unlike the legacy of the BGCT!

Sadly that has changed! It was noted that the SBC has progressively adopted a superassociation model toward confessional uniformity!



Today we are surrounded by a culture of tribalism. People are emotionally invested in their tribe, be it around politics, religious beliefs, ethical issues, nationality and ethnicity, to name a few. The tendency is to see the other tribes as enemies, to demean them, dehumanize them and dismiss them completely.

The sad thing about this is that this has crept into our churches and into denomination. People in the pew, and even some pastors, want to rally around what makes them different from other Christians or Baptists. They stiffarm those who are a little different with a sense of superiority.

Peter had that attitude in regard to clean and unclean animals, and in regard to Jews and Gentiles. Today people in church make decisions around what *they label* liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, woke or racist, etc., etc.

God wants to remove the limitations we have set for ourselves. He desires to give us, like he did for Peter, an enlarged vision that takes us from tribalism to unity in diversity. We need to be different from the culture around us!

I believe God wants to do something greater today. I believe God is up to something in our state and around the world. If we are going to be a part of it, we need a renewed vision. We need to return to our commitment of cooperation, not at the expense of sound doctrine but in the practice of love for God and one another. That's our legacy of cooperation!

2. **A Reawakened People** (God wants to empower our work)

After the vision, God leads Peter to go to Cornelius's home. The vision allowed Peter to be open to the possibility of going to the home of a Gentile. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile but he was a Roman centurion! The Romans were the oppressors of the Jews. The "enemies of God's people!"

When Peter arrives you can see how his willingness to change his mind about what is clean and unclean is beginning to change his heart. What Peter says to this group of Gentiles gathered at Cornelius' home seems a bit comical.

Acts 10:28 (NIV)

He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

Can you imagine addressing a congregation like that? My religion doesn't allow me to hang out with people like you but God made me come.

Peter is somewhat conflicted by what he has been taught all his life and what God is doing in the present. What is evident is that the renewed vision is leading him to have a reawakened heart.

We need God to reawaken our hearts. We need a reawakening of our churches. We need a reawakening as the people of God today. God wants to reawaken our hearts for what He loves.

One common theme at the state executives retreat was the decreased giving through the Cooperative Program for both state and national conventions. At the national level, it is a 35-year downward trend. Every state convention and the national convention are figuring out what the future looks like.

In addition to decreased CP giving, the population in our state, in our country and in our world continues to grow at a fast rate. There are more people who don't know Christ today. The need for our gospel witness is greater than ever!

Many churches are on the decline. Our churches need resources. We also need to start more churches to reach more people. Many of our current churches don't have pastors. We need more pastors. And pastors need to be healthy.

In other words, while CP giving decreases, ministry needs have increased.

The other factor is inflation. If giving were to stay flat, we would still lose buying power. When you combine CP giving levels with inflation, it almost cuts our ability to do ministry in half.

While the trifecta of decreased giving, increasing needs and inflation can sound overwhelming, we realize that our response should be neither fear, nor a fixated focus on dollars, nor indifference, nor a lament that things are not the same as they were a generation ago.

Where we need to focus is (1) the biblical foundation for cooperation, (2) our legacy of cooperation as a Baptist people, (3) prayer for God to reawaken our churches, associations and conventions and (4) a commitment to collaborate for the sake of God's mission.

Notice what happens in our story about Peter and Cornelius.

Acts 10:44-45 (NIV)

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

Peter obeyed the leading of the Holy Spirit to go to Cornelius' home. Peter was a faithful witness of the gospel to them. But God sent his Holy Spirit on the listeners. The Holy Spirit empowered the witness and transformed those who believed the message.

Notice the new believers were not the only ones supernaturally changed that day. Peter and his companions were also transformed! They were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles! It had not occurred to them that such a thing would be possible. They would never have prayed for that! But God did it and they witnessed it!

God wants to empower our work with his Holy Spirit as well. Only God can provide the power. We need reawakened hearts! We need reawakened churches! We need reawakening as a people!

We need a great commandment, great commission reawakening. We need a reawakening to cooperative missions.

I have enlisted a Cooperative Program study group and a Prayer Network Task Force because I believe these two things have to go together.

Graphic: BLESS App <https://www.texasbaptists.org/bless>

We have introduced the Bless App as a tool for churches to lead their people to pray for their neighbors by name this year. Can you imagine if we prayed for every person in Texas by name during this year? God can change the hearts of those who are far from him. God can change the hearts of the people in our churches who are praying.

I hope you are already participating in this effort. I encourage you to share this with your church and people you come in contact with as well.

We will also have a concerted prayer effort from Easter to Pentecost Sunday joining Baptist churches around the world praying for a Great Commission awakening. More information about that is forthcoming. Be on the lookout so you can engage your church in it. After the prayer emphasis we are releasing a GC2 Strong Bible study curriculum in our Connect 360 series by GC2 Press.

You will see a brochure on your table tomorrow. I encourage you to consider using this with your Bible Study and Sunday School groups this summer.

We need a reawakened people with a reawakened heart. I believe that when we pray together and we study God's Word together, we will have the spiritual breakthrough to do what he has called us to do.

We have difficult work to do this year when it comes to the Cooperative Program. Giving needs to increase. We are also assessing how we need to be more efficient and finding ways to reduce expenses so we can be good stewards. But first and foremost we need God to empower everything we do!

3. A Realignment for the Mission (God wants us to capture his heart)

In our story a renewed vision and a reawakened heart led to a realigned mission. Once Peter understood God's intention more clearly. Once he witnessed the Holy Spirit at work, it changed the course of the mission. The rest of the church caught on to it.

When the rest of the apostles and the Jewish believers back in Judea heard about this they asked Peter why he had gone into the home of Gentiles and ate with them. Peter tells them about his vision and about his experience in the home of Cornelius and they respond favorably.

Acts 11:18 (NIV)

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Luke goes on to tell about the church in Antioch and how the gospel advanced beyond Jewish circles to include Gentiles. Peter's vision and his visit to Cornelius' home resulted in the unleashing of a gospel movement. It realigned the mission!

The mission didn't change. What changed was the posture of the church.

God's mission was not for the Jews only. God's mission was not geographical only (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, etc). God's mission was for every nation and every tongue.

Peter and the church in Acts needed to understand that. They needed to embrace it. They needed to realign their resources and strategy to reach every nation, every language, every tribe, every people group.

Almost two thousand years later, the mission has not changed. We are still called to love God with all our being, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to make disciples of all nations.

We need to realign our resources and our work in order to do this most effectively in the days ahead. This is our time. This is our generation.

GC2 Strong is a process which helps churches to strengthen their Great Commandment and Great Commission practice. We believe that when churches choose to do so, there will be

church multiplication, missions advance, kingdom expansion and disciples made among the nations.

GC2 Strong Process

The result is the GC2 Strong process. Our GC2 team has designed a 3-step process for churches that desire to consider and strengthen their GC2 practice...

1. **Learn and Pray**
2. **Assess and Reflect**
3. **Pathway and Pursuit**

In order to serve churches well as they strengthen their GC2 practice, our TXB staff organization will focus on three areas:

1. Strengthening Churches
2. Strengthening Pastors/Leaders
3. Strengthening Missions

Budget and work structure



Our budget this year has realigned around this strategy and focus. We have more work to do in regard to budget but we have taken the first step in that direction.

In regard to our staff, you have received notice of one of the first major realignments in the organization. The Center for Cultural Engagement has ceased to exist as such.

The Christian Life Commission, under the leadership of Dr. Katie Frugé stands on its own and it has in the past. They will continue to increase their focus on resourcing churches as they live out the Great Commandment in the area of advocacy, justice and mercy.

Affinity groups, namely Texas Baptists en Español, African American Ministries, Intercultural Ministries, and Western Heritage churches has moved to the office of Relational Development and GC2, where Sergio Ramos serves as senior director. This will facilitate the contextualization of GC2 Strong for our affinity groups. Carlos Francis is the supervisor of these affinity groups.

The office of chaplaincy relations has been moved temporarily under the supervision of Dr Christina, associate executive director, and will be reassigned to the most strategic place later this year.

I believe these organizational realignments will help us be more effective in serving our churches live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as we focus on strengthening churches, strengthening ministers, and strengthening missions partnerships.

These changes at the staff level would be well served by some changes in our governance structure, namely some of our committees and councils. These are changes that we have communicated to you and which our executive committee will propose for your approval tomorrow.

Our GC2 design team has conducted a thorough assessment of all the resources and services in our organization so that we can better align them to serve our churches.

We are launching a GC2 Strong pilot project later this spring with approximately 20 churches. We will enlist and train what we are calling “navigators” who will walk with these churches through this process. They will be co-creators as we develop a refined process to be implemented later this year.

I have also enlisted the three groups I had previously mentioned to you and convention messengers. You will find the lists on the executive board website.

1. The Cooperative Program Study Group: 12 members
2. The Constitution and Bylaws Task Force: 12 members
3. The Prayer Network Task Force: 20 members

All three groups include a broad representation of our Texas Baptists family. Additionally they include convention officers, executive board officers and directors, pastors, lay people, and TXB staff.

Although I have the freedom to appoint groups like these that have no governing or decision making authority, I would like to ask for your endorsement of the groups. They will bring back reports or recommendations to this board.

During my recent daily Bible reading, I came across a passage where God instructs his people how they are to camp around the tabernacle.

Numbers 2:2 (NIV)

“The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family.”

The beauty of the Israelite camp in the wilderness journey was their unity in diversity. Each tribe and family retained their particular identity and banner while they recognized they were one people around the worship and presence of covenant God.

The church today would honor God most and would be most effective when while every local congregation retains their identity and uniqueness it recognizes we are one body in Christ.

We don't have to agree on everything to be on mission together. We are not called to be tribal. We are called to unity in diversity for the sake of God's glory.

Sound doctrine is important. We must agree on orthodox Christian doctrine. We must hold on to Baptist distinctives. But we must give room for diversity in secondary and tertiary doctrines.

When it comes to salvation we have churches that believe that Christ died only for the elect and churches that believe Christ died for everyone. That's not a test of fellowship or a deterrent of cooperation.

There are churches that believe that God is the only one who decides who is saved and who is not. Others believe that individuals can respond freely to God's invitation. Baptists have had these differences for 500 years and have still cooperated together for God's mission.

Some of our churches believe in dispensational premillennialism. Others have an amillennial or covenantal view of the end times. We can disagree and still cooperate together.

Some of our churches practice closed communion (only for Baptists). Others practice open communion (all believers). Some of our churches believe women can serve as ministers or pastors. Others do not. We can still cooperate for the sake of God's mission.

I must pause here and address the matter of biblical authority. While interpretation of some of these things may differ among our churches, what is constant is our commitment to authority, inspiration, sufficiency, infallibility, and trustworthiness of the Scriptures.

I have travelled throughout this state visiting Texas Baptists churches and meeting with pastors with hundreds of pastors. I have not met one yet that does not believe this about the Bible.

Recently there has been some chatter regarding the word "inerrancy" which was the battle word of the SBC controversy thirty years ago or so. Those who are bringing it to the forefront in recent days are stating that what distinguishes their convention and their churches from the BGCT is their commitment to biblical inerrancy. The implication is that the BGCT has a low view of the authority, inspiration and trustworthiness of the Bible. Additionally they suggest that only those who are willing to subscribe to the BFM 2000 believe in inerrancy.

Allow me to share with you the articles on the Scriptures from the BFM 2000 & the BFM 1963.

“The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.” (BFM 2000)

“The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” (BFM 1963)

Both are very similar although not identical. Please note first that neither one uses the word “inerrant.” Those who suggest that conventions and churches who affirm the BFM 2000 demonstrate their commitment to inerrancy in contrast to those who affirm the BFM 1963 are either ignorant or dishonest.

Secondly, notice that both statements, contain the following sentence word for word, *“It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”* The word “inerrant” has been politically loaded in the SBC controversy. However, we are talking about believing that the Bible is inspired, authoritative, infallible and is truth without any mixture of error, both statements affirm the same.

Texas Baptists believe the Bible. We are a people of the book. Do not let anyone deceive you otherwise. In fact, I would argue that our commitment to the authority of the Scriptures is higher than others because we do not elevate confessions of faith to the same level.

If your conscience is going to submit to anything, let it be to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and not to a man-made confession of faith. That's where we stand!

The Israelite camp instructions are a beautiful illustration of what cooperation looks like for the people of God. Our legacy of cooperation as Texas Baptists is 140 years old but it also goes back to the book of Acts and even to the tabernacle in the wilderness.

Let us rise up and claim our legacy and identity as a Baptist people who cooperate together: 140 years of cooperation for God's mission! The Great Commandment and the Great Commission demand it. The glory of God is worthy of it.