



# The REFLECTOR

SEPTEMBER 1981

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## Genuine Congregational Co-Operation

By Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

-A congregation sends money to another church to help it relieve its needy members. That's co-operation.

-Two congregations send money to a gospel preacher. That's co-operation.

-A congregation sends a letter of recommendation to another concerning a member (maybe a preacher). That's cooperation.

-A congregation warns another about a factious person that has left it and gone to another congregation. That's co-operation.

-A congregation calls another about a member that has come from the first congregation, seeking to place membership in the second congregation. That's co-operation.

-A congregation announces the meeting of another congregation and urges its members to attend. That's co-operation.

**Congregational co-operation** is an old and recurring subject among those striving to follow the New Testament order of things. In **Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell**, a book of short articles taken from the **Gospel Advocate** in the late 1800's, one can read such titles as "Co-operate, How churches", "Co-operation, Church", and "Co-operation, a Plan of, Church". (pp. 142-148). Active Christians of the past 25 years know that the subject has been at the center of a controversy that has played a great role in shaping the nature of the church in these

years.

Co-operation between churches of the Lord is needful, helpful and desirable -- both in spirit and practice. This is especially true in an area like ours, where there are many churches that can be considered sound in the faith. Congregations often need to "act or work together with another or others for a common purpose" ("Co-operate" from **Webster's New World Dictionary of the American**

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## GOSPEL MEETING

NOVEMBER 29 - DECEMBER 4

7:30 P.M.

**H. E. PHILLIPS**

**Fultondale  
Church Of Christ**

**Language).** They did in New Testament days and they should today. Attitudes and practices among neighboring congregations are generally somewhere between the extremes of outright meddling in the affairs of another and that of total indifference toward other congregations. Between these extremes is co-operation that is both scriptural and helpful.

To help us understand this matter better, we want to consider a few contrasts:

### **GENUINE CO-OPERATION VS. CONGREGATIONAL COMBINATIONS**

There are two basic kinds of co-operation--two or more acting jointly or two or more acting concurrently in a common work. As a boy, I was around logging quite a bit. Men would take their animals (mules, horses or oxen) and "snake" logs from the woods to the road so that they could be loaded on trucks to be carried to the sawmills. Each man with his animal would pull a log to the same pile to be loaded. They were co-operating, yet each acting independently of the other. This was concurrent co-operation. Each man controlled his own animal, selected his log size, picked the best route through the woods, etc. Occasionally there was a log too big for one mule. Two of the men would hook their mules to the same log. But, when this happened they could no longer act independently nor concurrently. This was joint action. One or the other had to yield the oversight of his mule to the other or else they had to jointly oversee the operation. In either case, it was no longer a matter of the two being independent and self-governing. They were now co-operating jointly.

In the New Testament, churches co-operated in concurrent action, but never jointly. (cf. Acts 11:27-30; I Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8 & 9; 2 Cor. 11:8,9). Each acted independently of the other without forming a common treasury or common oversight. Each planned and executed its own work under apostolic instructions even though they were working in a common endeavor. Concurrent co-operation leaves churches independent,

while joint action of churches establishes an organization over and beyond that of a local congregation. This is the kind of "co-operation" that leads to world-wide oversight as exemplified in Catholicism. Churches must co-operate without forming congregational combinations.

### **GENUINE CO-OPERATION VS. CONGREGATIONAL ISOLATION**

To keep local churches independent, we do not have to withdraw into a posture of complete isolation, with no interest in the affairs of other congregations.

Congregations do need to mind their own business and respect the right other congregations have to do the same. There are too many attempts made by one congregation to manage the day to day affairs of other congregations. One eldership may try to step in and tell another congregation what kind, size, or shape building it can build. One church may try to select a preacher, teacher or other personnel for another, either overtly or covertly. A congregation may try to discipline a member of another congregation. None of these things ought to be. A congregation subjected to such pressure should tell the other group to mind its own business in terms that can be understood.

Yet, we do not want to choose total isolation in order to have non-interference. One congregation should be concerned about the welfare of another. Congregations can be concerned about each other, express that concern, assist each other without either combining the congregations under a common oversight or attempting to manage the affairs of each other. (cf. Acts 15:1-4, 22-30; Col. 4:15, 16; Acts 11:27-30).

### **GENUINE CO-OPERATION VS. CONGREGATIONAL COMPETITION**

Faithful churches have a common faith and a common purpose. They are not in competition with one another, yet they often act as if they were. This is an acute problem in areas where there are many congregations that are quite close together geographically. A Christian has several choices of congregations that are easily within convenient range of his

home. He can about as easily participate in the activities and meetings of one as the other. Under these conditions it is quite easily to slip into a spirit of competition for members. It is easy for the chronic disgrunts to slide from one congregation to another almost unnoticed. The competitive spirit among congregations is real and leads to two evils that may be more prominent than we would like to admit:

### **1. No-Questions-Asked-Fellowship.**

When Paul tried to join the brethren at Jerusalem they were concerned about his discipleship. They would not accept him until they were assured that he was indeed a disciple (Acts. 9:26,27). They insisted on more than just his word for it too! Too often today one can go from one congregation to another and place membership (or else slip right into the activities) with no questions asked. It concerns me that over the years that I have been preaching that a number of people have left congregations where I worship and gone to other congregations (most were good brethren, going for good reasons), yet very few of the congregations where they have gone have so much as contacted the congregation that was left about the faithfulness of these people. For all they know, those who left could have run off with the treasury! Such ought not to be!

**2. Old-fashioned Sheep Stealing.** I am not talking about one choosing to change from one congregation to another for whatever good reason he deems wise. I am talking about concerted efforts made by congregations (and their leadership) to persuade members to leave one faithful church and come with them in order to build up the attendance and/or contribution. This is done more than we might like to admit. Tactics are often used that would be frowned upon by men of high ethics in other fields of endeavor. There are those who seem to think that all is fair in love, war and attendance/contribution building! This kind of sheep stealing violates common fairness, common courtesy and the "golden rule". If a representative of one hospital were to

walk the halls of another trying to lure patients to change hospitals in order to boost the business of the second hospital, it would be considered the lowest of ethics. If a doctor or lawyer were to go into the waiting room of another to lure patients or clients, or if he were to mount a telephone campaign calling the ones on another's list, trying to get them to change doctors or lawyers -- it would be considered very unethical. Of course, if one on his own decided to change doctors no one would think anything of it. Nor would one blame a doctor or lawyer for trying to lure patients away from a quack or shyster. Neither are we critical of brethren who try to lure members away from churches that are unfaithful to the Lord. Really, brethren, should not God's people have ethics at least as high as people of the world? Should we not at least show as much courtesy and consideration in our treatment of other faithful congregations as high-principled professionals and human institutions would show to each other?

Good churches have common interests. Let them practice **genuine** co-operation between congregations.

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## **WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?**

It seems that whenever those who are making an effort to follow God become discouraged with the way things are going in the world around them, they begin to wonder concerning the prosperity among the wicked. They ponder this question privately in their own minds and sometimes express it aloud to others. Since this is a question that is often brought up, let us examine what God's word has to say about it.

First of all, I don't believe that it can be denied that the wicked upon this earth do prosper physically. One can easily confirm this by looking about and observing others. The inspired writers of old were also able to observe this fact. (Job 21:7-15; Psalm 73:3-12) They observed that the wicked lived long lives, became powerful, lived in peace and safety,

became wealthy, and had everything they could possibly want. It appears that this is also true today.

I am afraid that many people who seek a reason for the prosperity of the wicked, are plagued by a misconception of how God deals with man in this physical world. They would like to think that God rewards the righteous physically in this life and punishes the wicked in a similar manner. If one holds to such an idea, I can certainly see where he would be confused when observing the physical condition of the wicked. The fact that one prospers physically, however, does not indicate whether he is approved or disapproved of by God. We are told that "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust". (Matt. 5:45)

One who holds to the idea that God should physically punish the evil doer is also in danger of accusing God of injustice when the wicked are not so punished. This is what happened in the days of Malachi. They accused God of showing favoritism toward the wicked and neglecting righteous judgement. (Mal. 2:17) They also claimed it was of no use to serve God, because the wicked fared much better. (Mal. 3:14,15) They were disappointed with God's system of judgement.

A fact that we must face up to is that God does not punish the wicked while they are still on this earth. It is certainly true that the wicked sometimes have to suffer consequences for their actions, but that is not divine punishment. God, however, has chosen to allow the wicked to prosper on the earth and render judgement upon them later. The fact that the wicked prosper in this world, does not mean that they will prosper in the next world. God's justice will eventually prevail.

The Bible assures us that the prosperity of the wicked benefits them only in this life. The writers of old, although recognizing that the wicked prospered, also recognized that the wicked would eventually be punished. (Job 21:16-34; Psalm 37:1-17; Psalm 73:17-19) They inform us that the wicked are reserved for

destruction, their prosperity is momentary, and they are to be eternally cut off. The wicked may indeed prosper. But they prosper only in this life, not eternally. (cf. Luke 12:16-21)

There is another reason that one may raise a question about the prosperity of the wicked. It may be that one is unhappy with his own lack of prosperity, even though he is trying to serve God. I would remind this person that the righteous are content regardless of their physical condition. (Phil. 4:11-13) If we truly trust in God and His righteousness, we will not have to worry. God does not promise to make the righteous rich, but he has promised to take care of their needs. (Matt. 6:25-34) David said that he had not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging food. (Psalm 37:25)

The wicked may prosper, but that should not concern us. Instead, we need to take the gospel to the wicked so that they might prosper eternally, because we realize what the end of the wicked is.

-Edward O. Bragwell, Jr.

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