



## Chapter 6 Cooperative

### Unity and Diversity in the Church 1 Corinthians 12:12-18

*12 Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. 13 We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. 14 Certainly the body isn't one part but many. 15 If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? 16 If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted.*

My earliest memories of cooperating are with my brothers, Nick and Jeff. We were born close in age and were, therefore, best friends. We did everything together—climbed trees, performed songs for my parents' friends, played superheroes, practiced ballet moves, and read books to each other. We really did everything together.

Once, when I was about ten, we were on a camping trip with all my extended family. My Uncle Lynn was getting married and he had invited everyone for a giant campout in the Black Hills of South Dakota. This trip was rife with opportunities for the three of us to cooperate. There were tons of trees to climb, hiking trails to explore, and a lake.

Our campsite was right on the edge of the water. We swam, we floated on pool floaties, and we rode in Uncle Lynn's boat. Then we got adventurous. Not too far out in the water was an island. It would be the perfect place to play—pirates or Disney's Pocahontas or as lost boys. We just had to get there.

The three of us were all game. We were on the swim team and fancied ourselves water babies. The pool floatie we were playing with had a rope tied to it, we decided that we could stick Jeff on the floatie, and Nick and I would alternate pulling and pushing the floatie. He took the first pulling shift, so I swam to the back and pretended the floatie was a kick board. We were in business.

Jeff sang us songs while Nick and I swam. Occasionally, we'd all hop onto the floatie and take a break. We'd look at the clouds and watch the boats go by, then we'd get back to work. It was lovely.

Until it wasn't anymore.

We couldn't figure out why it was taking us so long to get to the little island. We felt like we had been gone a long time. (Spoiler: we had been gone for a couple of hours and no one knew where we were.) We were all starting to get hungry. We were about halfway when the three of us had a decision to make—would we press on or turn around and go back to the campsite dreams unfulfilled? I really wanted to press on. Nick and Jeff really wanted

to get a sandwich and a s'more. Their rationale was reasonable; we had been gone a long time, and we still weren't close enough. If we turned around, we could get food and see if Uncle Lynn and Dad would use the boat to get us across. I didn't have a rationale, I just wanted to go.

So, we turned around.

Getting back was easier. We hadn't realized it, but we had been fighting the current the whole time we were attempting to get to our little island. When we finally made it back, we were bone cold, hungry, and sad. My mom was angry with us. We weren't allowed to eat a s'more that night, and we were told we wouldn't get to explore the little island because we took off without letting anyone know.

The determination of child Brittany, child Nick, and child Jeff is inspiring to adult Brittany. But I think what is even more important, especially for our extremely divided world, is to look at the deep cooperative act that happened in this little story.

Here are three children with one common goal—get to the little island. I was 10, so Nick was 8 and Jeff was 7. We were all good swimmers, but Jeff was the youngest so we knew he shouldn't be one of the main kickers. He was given a different job—entertaining Nick and I while we swam. Had he not sung us songs or told us stories, we would have given up a lot sooner out of boredom. When Nick and I were getting tired, Jeff moved over and let us share the floatie. And when Nick was tired of pulling the floatie, I became the puller and he became the pusher.

We were very cooperative in this memory. There were times when we were so not cooperative, and a parent or teacher had to get involved to settle an argument. Those stories are the ones I think adults remember most—the times when things didn't go right and they had to step in. But what about this memory? Where was the validation of the collaboration and cooperative teamwork we used to pursue our shared goal?

## The Wesleys

Sibling relationships and friendships are rife with opportunities for cooperation. The Methodist movement began with cooperation between two brothers: John and Charles Wesley. Together, they worked to spread a holiness revival through the Church of England. Their father, Samuel Wesley, was an Anglican rector and their mother, Susanna Wesley, was a fervent follower of Christ. John and Charles watched their parents lead the parish through sacramental rites (Samuel), and everyday Bible study and devotions (Susanna).

When the brothers went to Oxford University, they began a small group with their friends called the “Holy Club” where they studied the Bible, prayed together, and covenanted to grow in God’s sanctifying grace. The Holy Club was quite methodical in its practice, and other students at Oxford nicknamed the members the Methodists as a joke!

After their ordination in the Anglican Church, John and Charles left England and came to Savannah, Georgia, to do mission work in the colonies and with the native peoples. It didn’t go great for the brothers, though. The mission field in Georgia wasn’t what they expected, and they returned to England. But the small spark of revival the brothers began was soon to rage into an all-out wildfire.

Today, there are 13,143,746 lay members<sup>1</sup> and 47,403 clergy members<sup>2</sup> in the United Methodist Church (and there are other denominations that came out of John and Charles’ revival!). John and Charles disagreed about many things, but they also worked together for a common goal—to “spread Scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>3</sup>

If the two hadn’t cooperated, I truly wonder who I would be. Their shared faith and their fervent piety led them to cling to their convictions and to each other. John preached over 40,000 sermons and Charles was a prolific hymn writer and poet. Had they not cooperated and used their individual gifts to help each

1 <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance>

2 <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance>

3 <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe/basics-of-our-faith/our-wesleyan-heritage>

other and the movement, the world would be missing out on so much! Their cooperation, their closeness, their willingness to disagree and be genuine, led to a massive movement that still impacts how we do spiritual formation across the age-levels today.

## Positive Reinforcement and Paul

I am not advocating that all families have multiple children to teach them cooperation skills. What I am advocating for is noticing when our children work together whether with siblings, friends, or us (their pastors and parents). We focus a lot of our energy in guiding them to right action and belief, but the journey of working together to explore it/learn it/grow it gives our children opportunities to cooperate.

Cooperation shows up in every arena of our lives. We need it to work together at the church, at the office or school, and in our homes. Caregivers need to make conscious efforts to affirm when we see the children in our care working together well. There is a lot of research on training methodologies and psychologists have proven that positive reinforcement (celebrating and acknowledging when our children engage in behavior we want repeated) works better than negative punishment.

In my childhood story, if my parents had positively reinforced what my brothers and I had done, they would have praised us for the things we did well (i.e., cooperating) and ignored what they didn't like (i.e., attempting to swim across a lake without telling anyone about it). Granted, I will also be scared and upset if Rowan hatches a plan to swim across a lake on his own. But I hope I will also acknowledge the ways he worked with others to reach a shared goal.

Positive reinforcement is great for all kinds of things, but I don't see a lot of it for cooperation. I remember being in group projects at school, but someone always ended up with the bulk of the work and managing everyone else's tasks (me). The grade at the end always felt so disconnected from the actions of cooperating, and there wasn't a recognition of what each person's gifts were that could benefit the team.

In Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, we hear his response to questions the church community in Corinth. I imagine in 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, the community has asked, "Which talents are most important? Who is the most valued?" Paul's response is a metaphor. The community works together like a human body. Each organ inside the human body has a special job. Each person has a special gift/talent/calling. The human body couldn't work without each part—you can't just be eyeballs! The community relies on different people's passions and giftings—the whole community can't be comprised of pianists! Each part of the human body works together for a common goal. Each person in a church community must work together for the common good.

Paul knew that the early church couldn't last if the believers stopped cooperating and started comparing to figure out who was most valued. The early church was small and persecuted. The community was doing something radical: sharing everything in commonality and ensuring that every person in the community had everything they needed. It was (and still is) countercultural. If the community at Corinth started focusing on hierarchy, they were no longer sharing everything in commonality and mutuality. They were no longer cooperating to spread the love of God if they were focused on who was best.

Cooperation is hard work! Especially when we live in a capitalist system built for comparing and competing. But as followers of Jesus, we are called to notice those around us and to work together to make sure everyone has what they need to live abundantly. This is what Paul is reminding the people (and us) in his letter. We have a calling as the church, as the Body of Christ, to recognize the gifts we each bring to the table. Once we have a recognition of what each person brings, we are called to cooperate for the betterment of our world through the love and grace of God.

## Cooperation in Practical Ministry

Between writing chapters five and six, I uprooted my family. I took a new position at a local church, and we moved from Nashville, Tennessee, to Santa Clara, California—exactly 2,285 across the country. Anyone who has ever moved knows how difficult a move is. It's physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing. I have always thought my worst self is most visible in a move. The to-do list is long. My control needs are high. I'm always hungry because of stress and that makes me prickly.

This move was different though. Maybe it's because Rowan was present for it. Maybe it's because Michael and I were a little healthier mentally this time. All I know is we worked extremely well together to make it all happen as smoothly as we could with a toddler (Rowan is 14 months old as I write this chapter) and two very old dogs.

As we were unpacking boxes in our rental house, I realized we have transformed into a solid unit as Rowan's parents. We are individuals, but we are also co-operating in a new way under this shared title—Rowan's parents. We have a good groove! It feels pretty radical to me the way we cooperate as a team. So many television shows, or books, or real-life stories prepared me to think that couples aren't really teammates. They are romantic, and codependent, but don't operate in a way that values all parties' skills and attributes and distributes the workload of life across each party equitably.

I feel like Michael and I operate in a very equitable way most of the time.

That means my child, and the kids I work with, will see an example of what cooperation looks like. It looks like the two of us knowing ourselves and appreciating each other, and recognizing our shared goal—having a happy, loving marriage.

When I take this into a ministry context, I think of human resourcing and team management. As a leader in ministry, you have the responsibility of knowing your gifts and skills, and seeing what your teammates bring to the table. Every time

you ask someone to be one your team, you need to match the job to the person. Don't ask someone who is uncomfortable with preschoolers to teach preschool Sunday school. That isn't cooperation, and it isn't kind to the children in your care nor the person you asked to be in ministry with them.

Volunteer recruitment comes up a lot at children's ministry conferences. It is an area that feels lacking and exhausting to probably every ministry leader on the planet. I think a huge part of that is our constant attempt to fill holes instead of accessing ministry gifting. Cooperation principles, and Paul, reminds us that our job as the church is to create ministry based on the people is our congregations—their needs, their gifts, and their bandwidth. When we don't, we end up with volunteers who are burned out, or who feel like failures because they were tasked with a job they aren't gifted for.

Our kids see this and experience this, too. We teach them that their spiritual needs aren't important when we put people in ministry roles to fill gaps instead of callings. We teach them that cooperation is just something we tell them to do as kids.

If we want our kids to grow to be good people, we need to value cooperation in our homes and churches. By recognizing and positively reinforcing the times our children cooperate, and by practicing true cooperation in our homes and churches, we give our children the opportunity to grow into the leaders we long for them to be—leaders who value their teammates, value their partners, and see their place in our family of faith. Cooperation is the key to the longevity of Christ's body.

<https://www.umc.org/en/content/susanna-wesley-mother-of-methodism>

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<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/john-and-charles-converted>