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Topic: Addition or Multiplication? Cooperation or Collaboration?

Cooperation or Co-laboring Collaboration?

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John Maxwell, in his book on Team Building, delineates that there is a difference between a team member who cooperates with a team and a team member who collaborates with a team. Frankly, I had never given a thought about there being a difference between a cooperator and a collaborator. Have you heard that there is a difference?

It seems like a subtle distinction, but it results in the difference between the team's effects being negligent, or transformative. A team member can choose to give passive assent to the team agenda, or choose to give whole hearted engagement to implement the agenda.

As I think of this, my mind turns to Gonzaga's College Basketball team. Mark Few is one of the most successful coaches in the NCAA, and Gonzaga always has a good team. The reason I am a Gonzaga fan is because their team is usually made up of undersized players attending a small parochial college, playing against teams that get first choice of the best players in the country. Yet when you watch Gonzaga's games with any regularity, you realize that Gonzaga embodies what the sport of basketball is really all about. They play as a team, they play to help the team and teammates to win, not to bolster personal results. They are at their best when they display genuine team mindset and functioning. The scoring is not all done by one player. They pass the ball amazingly, and play really good defense. When the opposing team "beats" a Gonzaga defender, other players quickly intervene to guard the threat.

Gonzaga is great because their coach models team play and team values. Gonzaga is great because their players are collaborators, not just cooperators. By playing together, instead of competing among themselves for "the glory," they often defeat the giant big-name schools they play against. Go Zags!

Cooperating is good and requires a decision, but that decision can be made without putting any skin in the game. The strength of our brand of Baptists is that we cooperate together, pool our resources and skills, so that even little churches or individual believers play a vital part of fulfilling big projects for God. It is a great plan and system, where everyone has a part in doing together what they could never do alone as an individual church member or a small rural church. However, that plan can be even more effective if the people investing in the ministries being done via donations (cooperate), then also give of their skills, their abilities, their energy and passions (collaborate) to accomplish those plans.

To cooperate is to go along with a proposal, or at least not deter the things being proposed and implemented. When we cooperate, we add ourselves to the support base, but not necessarily to the labor force. Churches, and communities, are full of people who voice verbal assent and cooperation to a plan or activity. But often they then disengage and let the people who are passionate about actively trying to effect the impact and results (the co-laborers) carry out the plan.

Co-laborers, or collaborators, give their time, energy, resources, thus their talents and gifts to help the team. They encourage others to use their abilities in positions matching their gifts. They are about actually participating to help the team accomplishing its goals, rather than just being an agreeable bystander.

So cooperators add consent and support, while a collaborator multiplies the effectiveness of the project by adding their full abilities as well. Thus each collaborator produces more, and the whole team accomplishes more together. It is one thing to say, "That's a good idea; you go do that." But it's another thing to say, "That's a good idea; let me help."

As Christians in churches, we are to be co-laboring together with each other and serving one another under God's direction and power. Granted, we can't all get involved in every single endeavor, but we all need to be involved on the team that makes a concrete impact for God. Paul taught that we are to be co-laborers together with Christ in 1 Corinthians 3:5-6, 9. (CSB): "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth ... For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building."

Are you a non-cooperator, a cooperator, or a co-laboring collaborator in God's services? In your family life? In your workplace? Don't just be a by-stander!

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