

Every one members one of another.

by Enrique Montenegro

Romans 12:3-5 says, "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one *members one of another.*"

The first part of this passage is an individual exhortation. The second one is an answer to the first one as a collective explanation to the whole church. The church is being compared to a body. The Word exhorts us that first, regardless of the place we occupy in it, none of us should think of oneself as qualifying as a "relevant member".

The second thing the Word teaches us (even when we theologically accept it, it seems to be the contrary in practice) is to remind us of four great truths that, most of the time, make it almost impossible for us to work together in cooperation in order to achieve the completion of the Great Commission. Let's take a look at it.

The first truth is the Church is a "unity in diversity". The Church is a whole Body and there is an immense diversity of different members that enrich and give sense of identity, form and mobility. This directly affects both the appearance and the action of the Body. With this principle we obtain the first practical lesson: independently from the diversity of existing

missionary expressions, the unity principle should always be first, due to our identity. We must be aware that all we do, for the good or for the bad, will affect the rest of the Body. This should demand from us a higher grade of responsibility in that which we do or do not do.

The second truth that makes us act in a different way in the life of the Church (and particularly in mission actions) is that only some very few members have the same function. On the other hand, most of the members have differentiated functions, each one in particular. It is extremely important to understand and assume that it is in the sum of all the members that the Body is able to mobilize and act cooperatively in order to reach the objective for which it moves. Practically, this truth shows us that we must assume that not all will accomplish missions in the way that we understand it, but we can sum up and capitalize all the existing missionary expressions and resources.

The third teaching this passage offers us is that we are many members, but only one Body. The multiplicity, variety, diversity and even the individuality of each member of the Body should never offer opposition to its unity. The individualism of the worker or the agency in the work, without a sense of identification with the Body, which is The Church, is not contemplated in this biblical principle.

The text also teaches us one last lesson about individualism with a pertaining character and relationship with the rest of the members. We are members of one another. Even when we don't like the way "other members" of the work do things, we must cooperate, due to the fact that we belong one another, and this is not an agency, denomination or local church decision, but of The One that created and designed The Body: our Lord Jesus Christ.

Based on these premises, I want to describe one of the members of this body called COMIBAM (Latin-American Cooperation Mission) and its function within the Latin-American church scenario.

The first word that describes COMIBAM is "Cooperation". As an Latin-American missionary movement, from its begin-

The Ethné06 plenary presentation of Enrique Montenegro, vice-president of COMIBAM International, the Latin America missions movement.



ning, the awareness of the need to master how to learn and cooperate has thrust our work in the movement. When deeply evaluating our resources and limitations, we have recognized that, unless we learned to work together, the Church in Latin America would never be a missionary force.

The second word that defines our way of work is "Church". From the beginnings of the Latin-American Missionary Movement, COMIBAM has defined itself as a process centered in the local church. Our existing reason is not to substitute the Church or to do better what it has not done. We exist to help equip the church with the firm purpose that it should become a people capable of taking Gospel of Jesus Christ to the uttermost parts of the Earth.

The third word that describes us is "Interaction". Although we recognize that, biblically, the Church has the mandate, the resources and the responsibility of accomplishing the task of preaching the Gospel to the world, we also recognize that the Church needs the existence of two other structures that will help it make this process effectively and completely. These two structures are missionary-sending agencies or structures and equipping centers, which provide both biblical-theological teaching as well as cross-cultural missionary training.

The fourth word that we find in our identification is "Innovation". We recognize that the Latin-American Missionary Movement is a new wine that needs new skins. We need to innovate the forms. Our task in COMIBAM has been to think and think it over creatively each of the processes of the Church and the missions in order to find those that can respond, since our world vision, to the needs of our world today, using the existing resources, the most efficient way possible.

Speaking about new patterns in the cooperation in Latin America seems to be an easy task at this point of the process. But it has been a continuous learning process to know the main and secondary authors of this history that the Spirit is writing in Latin America. Therefore, we recognize we are a privileged generation God has called to live and experiment in this part of the world in such a meaningful move of God.

One of the distinctive elements of the Latin-American missionary movement, and maybe a meaningful difference with its predecessors, is the place that the Word takes in the missionary process. COMIBAM, as a Latin-American missionary movement, considers the Bible as THE behavior rule, firm and absolute.

We use methods, but we understand that they are relative and can surely be improved. A proof of this is that, when we find ourselves in the middle of a crisis situation or difficulty in going ahead with the development of the missionary process, our first question is focused on checking whether we have applied Biblical principles; if we have been faithful to the calling and mandate and the way it is presented in the Word. The revision of the methods that we use is left in second place.

During the process of the development of the Latin-American Missionary Movement we have learned some valuable lessons that we would like to share with you.

We have recognized that the world has changed so much as much as its administration style; that the values that shape this new administration style are different. As an example, let's consider the power and authority that has been given to information and to the capacity of influence, which has made networks less rigid and more human and adaptable; specialization has opened a way to the capability of developing connections. This has brought about a sense of community in the networks and has motivated them to learn and cooperate. Responsibility has opened a way to the unity in the vision. This has given the networks the opportunity to walk in a better direction and with a sense of discerning the end of its work from its beginning. And, finally, bosses have given way to facilitators: people or groups that have made it possible to develop a bigger and stronger sense of property with the idea, the entity and the results among all the participants. With these elements in our hands, we have developed a cooperation network which, in its multiple forms, reaches twenty-six countries and manifests itself in three primary sub-networks:

The first and most important one is the network of pastors and churches. This connects through its pastors all those churches that are involved in any way in the development of missions. The purpose of the connection is to share information regarding the way in which missions are developing in each one of the churches. This network provides mutual learning to pastors and leaders of the churches. It is an exchange process that helps us learn lessons from other groups and enables us to translate these experiences into effectiveness in the development of the work. The network of churches and pastors gathers around the common purpose that the church in Latin America should become a missionary force.

The second exchange network is comprised by schools and training centers. This network works in Latin America in order to gather schools, bible schools, theology seminars and cross-cultural and training centers. These elements develop interaction that allows us all to identify capabilities of serving the church and organizing ourselves in order to supply additional training to missionaries that leave from these churches and can be duly prepared for the work. In each country, this network is responsible for developing the missionary's profile and a national training program that allows developing synergy, in order to better prepare the missionaries.

The third network in importance is the one composed by missionary agencies and structures dedicated to sending workers, including both ecclesiastic and para-ecclesiastical groups, national or international, which are busy in the process of sending, canalizing and giving attention to workers in the field. These structures gather around the common objective of

servicing the church, providing the necessary assistance, so that its workers can reach out, and be effectively attended in, the field. This network operates in search of the way of developing friendly processes that help identification on the part of the churches, which is the sending structure, and what is needed to accomplish the task.

Since its foundation, the Latin-American Missionary Movement has grown from 1,635 workers in 1987 to over 8,000 in the year 2005. This result has only been accomplished due to the work COMIBAM International does, generating interaction and fostering each of these three networks, until it can take advantage of their full potential. One significant development of the Latin-American Missionary Movement has been the facilitation concept. Producing one person or entity that is capable of generating confidence among participants; creating a cooperative environment amongst them, which is capable of potentiating the capacities of each one; and letting natural leaders emerge, without taking the direction or authority over the network. This has been the differential element that has maintained the Latin-American Missionary Movement functioning and going in a good direction.

Another one of the results has been the great quantity of new leadership that has emerged as a result of COMIBAM. The majority of national and regional leaders are a fruit of the facilitation effort of the movement itself and an impulse for maintaining constant development of leadership.

Thinking of the Latin American idiosyncrasy, another significant feature in the cooperation pattern has been the fact that this movement is inclusive, and that it is not perceived as a competitor. Rather, it is viewed as a potential inside the other existing networks in Latin America. COMIBAM has contributed to the development and perfecting of many of the existing networks in Latin America, through shaping, mentoring and providing the development of a new leadership style.

In 2 Corinthians 8:5-11 we find five principles of cooperation. This text provides us with a series of recommendations that we have adopted as our guideline. We promote its application in the whole Movement in Latin America.

1. "Give first to the Lord, then to others" (2 Co. 8:5)

The reason for cooperation is, in the first place, to understand: What is that which pleases God? Then we must give ourselves up to others as an "act of obedience". This is what the Word commands us to do. This is the spirit that is shaped in Philippians 2:5-11, where the Lord Himself shows the premises of the cooperation; He stripped Himself of what He is, of what He has, of the voluntary use of His attributes of Majesty, and then He decides to submit to God's plans and directs His entire life to doing so. His act of giving Himself up to us and for our sake was the result of understanding that this is God's will. When we think about this and revise what has been writ-

ten about cooperation, we find a concept that has seemed revolutionary to us. It was proposed a long time ago, but I think we have never had the courage to practice it. This concept redefines cooperation reaching, truly coming down to its essence: being partners in obedience. The term was first coined in 1947 in the missionary council in Whitby, Canada. This concept proposes that we should associate first with the will of God, so that no one gets lost, and then we make it a common cause together with those who are doing the same thing.

2. "Not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love." (2 Co. 8:8):

The cooperation does not have the purpose of enlarging the influence circle of an organization, be it geographically or denominationally, before other organizations. Neither is it an opportunity to strengthen what we are and what we do; nor even a way of reaching my own objectives or those of my sending structure. It is time now to come to a new description that better responds to this "spirit of cooperation" of the Word.

One element implied in this point is that we cooperate in order to join in God's plan, not because we have resources in excess or a better plan to share. We cooperate stripping ourselves of resources and plans, as a premise to avoid these elements from being the ones that command the way of cooperating, and therefore distorts our interaction or our cooperation. The failures that we have faced in the cooperation, are very often due to the fact that in the field of practice, internal politics, missionary tradition of the agency or pressure to demonstrate something, kill the spirit of cooperation. This makes us feel that some come from the outside "as the one who commands", "as someone who knows everything" and "as one who knows how to make fingers sound, can obtain the resources that he needs to do what we want". We believe that the time for change is now!

Cooperation is cooperation in obedience. It is an invitation in which those dead models are imposed by institutionalize and sometimes the colonialist mentality of the past give way to new ones and also to new institutions that recognize the values of each cooperator. Patterns that are focused on searching for ways of serving the brothers, without serving themselves, even at the cost of themselves, not based on feelings, but on obedience. Cooperation and love are a two-way street.

3. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." (2 Co. 8:9)

The example is unquestionable and it challenges us to get closer to each other in this process of establishing a cooperation under the same principle. We understand cooperation not as someone who exposes multiple riches, nor using them as a

pressure factor in order to maintain the cooperation in their favor. Very often do we make the mistake of believing that the only things we can add to cooperation are material resources, including people, money or operating systems. If we pay close attention, all of us have riches to contribute with in a cooperation. We are not going with empty hands. And what is more: let us not go with empty hands, because this will tempt us to put them like that for begging! Let us recover, together, what Stephen Neill identified as “a reemphasized stress on world evangelism”, the status of equality and dignity.

4. “Now therefore perform the doing of it...” (2 Co. 8:11)

Cooperation must be based on specific actions that offer benefit to those with whom we associate. There is a Latin saying: “a lot of greg-greg to say Gregory”. Popular wisdom shows us things are achieved with specific actions and not with “blah, blah, blah.” In Latin America we say strategic alliances don’t start with the signature of an agreement, but rather when we begin working together. Many times we spend so much time talking and talking in order to get to an agreement and we never reach the final agreement to start working.

In this regard, there are certain things that are immovable in present-day missions: a) this goes on being the purpose of the Church (Matthew 28:18-20); b) sending is the only hope of the lost regarding their salvation (Romans 10:13-15); c) size and resources do not define those that God can use for the evangelism of the world (Ephesians 3:8); d) it is necessary to finish the work before time is up (Matthew 24:32-34).

The important question is: what are we waiting for? Let’s start working together, even when we don’t have an agreement, remembering the previous points. Let’s find ways of proving our true attitude towards cooperating, and let’s cooperate.

5. The result of cooperation is mutual benefit.

“...That now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14).

The Holy Spirit categorically affirms that as a result of cooperation we reach a concept of equality and dignity in which each one has something to give in order to complete someone else’s knowledge. Definitely we believe that neither of them is superior, because they have the material resources, nor is the other inferior because they contribute with their passion, experience in suffering, renewed vision, intercession, faithfulness in the work, perseverance in adversity, etc. In order to reaffirm the concept of equity and equality, we must sincerely answer the question: Which has more value in the Kingdom: material things or spiritual ones? All of us have been chosen by God to cooperate in order to accomplish the task of world evangelism and also to show God’s love to others when we give them what the other one lacks, in order for them to be complete.

Summing up:

We declare that, without any doubt, we have a lot to learn. But, at the same time, this has been another differentiating element: we are a teachable movement.

We recognize that the advancement experimented by the Latin American Missionary Movement to this moment has been by The Lord’s mercy and as a result of being in the middle of a significant move of God’s Spirit at this moment of the history of Latin America.

We recognize that this move is towards evangelism and from Latin America.

We humbly believe COMIBAM movement has known how to identify, interpret and connect with this move of God.

We recognize that this move of God has the firm purpose of preparing a committed people, to the uttermost consequences, that is able to carry Jesus’ Gospel to the ends of the Earth in order to reach every and each ethnic group.

Based on all that was said I firmly believe that the success in the accomplishment of the task cannot and should not be measured by the quantity of members that we accumulate in our churches. If success in the Great Commission depended on numbers, our quick conclusion would be that Peter was more successful than Jesus, for The Master had thousands that followed Him but only 120 remained. While in Peter’s case, with only two messages, eight thousand, one hundred and twenty people were added.

The model the Scriptures propose is based on faithfulness to what has been commanded, without letting ourselves be impressed by conditions imposed by results. Jeremiah said he preached for 23 years with not even one result (25:3). Workers such as these would certainly lose their support of a missionary agency of our days almost immediately. However this is the pattern of sending we have before us; one which is based on the premise of faithfulness to one’s calling; the one that is based on the responsibility of sowing more than on reaping.

We declare that we are ready and willing to work in cooperation with each and every one of those who, wherever they are, have the primary objective of the entire earth being full of the knowledge of The Lord, so that all ethnic groups, each individual, can have the opportunity to take their own decision when hearing at least once, in an understandable way, the message of salvation about our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the challenge we have before us. We are willing to walk the along way together with those who want to accomplish the Great Commission, recognizing the multiform expressions of the Body, under the principle of cooperation based on unity in diversity.

The great task of reaching all ethnic groups in our generation is necessary, it is possible and it is urgent! Together, we can accomplish it!

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