

PARTNERS IN CHRIST AND FOR HIS GOSPEL: THE SHARED VALUE OF UNITED IN FELLOWSHIP, MISSION, AND GOVERNANCE

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We believe that the unity for which Jesus prayed among His people should find concrete expression among believers and churches. Indeed, the New Testament testifies to a vibrant interdependence among churches in the first century.

The Koinonia of the Early Church

Koinonia. Partnership. Giving and Receiving. Planting and Building. Sowing together and harvesting together. Co-laborers in Christ. Fellow workers in the gospel.

The New Testament is packed with references to church partnership. Just to trace one partnership line through the New Testament, take the starting point of Philippians 1:3—a familiar and well-loved verse in Sovereign Grace:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership (*koinonia*) in the gospel from the first day until now (Phil. 1:3-5).

In thanking the Philippians for their faithful financial support of his church planting apostolic ministry, Paul uses the rich word *koinonia*. They had committed themselves to support him as he sought to plant churches and provide for him as he labored in prison in Rome. They had determined to use their resources to help the gospel mission by supporting Paul, even sending a dear leader and friend, Epaphroditus. We might say their view of partnership was looking forward to new areas and new church plants. They were giving themselves to build and care for other churches besides their own.

Going backward from this point in time, it is not hard to see the seeds of a heritage that had produced this *koinonia* legacy in Philippi. The church at Philippi was planted because Paul had been sent out from Antioch.

Acts 13:1-3 describes the faith and sacrifice of the Antioch church in sending their treasured leaders Paul and Barnabas to the “work to which [God] had called them” (Acts 13:1-2). We can sympathize with the hole left behind by their departure!

But, Antioch had its own history of receiving prior to this moment of sending. When persecuted Christians came to Antioch and proclaimed the gospel, new converts were created, yet the fledgling group needed a seasoned leader. Jerusalem had sacrificed to send Barnabas, “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). No doubt the Jerusalem church was pained to see him go, though honored by the opportunity, given the result that “a great many people were added to the Lord.”

The strands of *koinonia* stretch forward and backward through the early church. Local churches send and receive, sow and harvest in partnership with one another through gifted leaders called to guard the gospel and build local churches.

Beyond this Philippian strand, we can expand our study of church *koinonia* to include Paul’s hope for his visit to Rome, where he desires that they and he would be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. We can read

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Paul's extensive list of personal greetings and encouragements, revealing a relational connection between churches as the gospel spreads around the Mediterranean. We can survey Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians that they would follow through on their financial commitments to help the saints in Jerusalem. (This passage is legitimately applied in many sermons to local giving, but extra-local giving is its immediate focus.)

We can consider Paul recruiting a young Timothy for on-the-road discipleship and then sending Timothy to check on the well-being of the Thessalonian church. We can look at Paul's warning to the Galatian churches about legalism and note the crucial decision from the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. We can see Paul's sacrifice in sending Onesimus, his "very heart," back to Philemon to ensure the reconciliation of the two men, now Christian brothers. In all of these examples, a *koinonia*, a partnership, existed, not just in the churches but also *among the first-century churches*. It was a gospel partnership of giving and receiving. The early church leaders saw churches as having a responsibility to give to and receive from others. Those that only focused on themselves were warned or exhorted. Those that received and gave outside of themselves were commended. We must ask ourselves, what does their church *koinonia* mean for us?

***Koinonia* without Apostolic Authority**

First, it is crucial to note that this pattern is relevant to us even though we do not have anyone with the authority of Paul or the twelve apostles. Their role and authority in the church were unique and unrepeatable. They were authoritative eyewitnesses to the risen Christ and commissioned by him. They were entrusted to guard and pass on the gospel tradition as foundation-laying apostles of the church. No one else, either then or now, has their normative authority in the church.

With that caveat firmly in place, much of their function in the church, and especially their role in facilitating and nurturing church-to-church partnership, can and should continue in the church today. To clarify, here are a few examples of how the function of NT partnership could be perpetuated without claiming any modern-day apostolic authority.

- Churches should still sacrifice to plant new churches. This function of *koinonia* doesn't require an apostle with authority. It

simply requires local pastors and churches who are committed to sowing friends and leaders for the sake of the mission. Unless we are ready to say that church planting was a unique and unrepeatable calling in the first century, mature churches should still sacrifice for the support of new church plants.

- Churches should prayerfully and practically look to support existing churches. Though we have no one with the authority of Paul to insist on a specific financial gift (i.e., the Jerusalem offering), surely churches can still fulfill this pattern of recognizing ways that our abundance can meet those with a current need.
- Churches should partner with each other in guarding the gospel and guarding their witness to the gospel through biblical accountability, encouragement, and evaluation. Because we do not have the Twelve or Paul, this kind of partnership for accountability should be voluntary and not presumptuous, based on doctrinal unity and agreed-upon principles and not arbitrary perspectives. Yet surely, churches have not outgrown the risk of doctrinal blind spots or pastoral missteps. Surely no pastor would say his church or his pastoral team is incapable of repeating any of the NT errors. Humbly receiving the wisdom of trusted friends in ministry does not require an apostle with normative authority so much as an agreement between trusted pastors and churches to guard each other in gospel truth and witness.
- Churches and pastors should recognize, receive, and send those leaders among them with proven wisdom, leadership, and faith. This motivates our partnership toward our church planting mission and helps guard us against doctrinal dangers along the way. God has provided some men with particular leadership, mission, and wisdom gifts to be a blessing to churches beyond their

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own, even though there is no modern-day Paul. The absence of normative authority residing in individuals does not mean that there is an absence of any gifts related to what might be called “apostolic function” in the church today. It is worth noting that Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, and others were a great blessing in leadership and help to multiple churches in laboring together in the gospel. Yet, they did not possess Pauline authority. Throughout church history, God has raised up men who motivated and served the broader church in mission through a unique blend of doctrinal vigilance and missional passion. May the Lord continue to raise up such men among us.

- Churches should cultivate affection, gratefulness, and encouragement for other churches and missional leaders in ways that fulfill our broader unity in Christ. Paul’s affection for the churches, their affection for him, and their unity with each other were not dependent on his authority, but on the affectionate unity, we are all meant to have in Christ. Though we all long for the day when every true Christian will experience our full unity in Christ (John 17), we should certainly seek to enjoy the first fruits of that loving unity in partnership right now.

In Sovereign Grace, we joyfully agree that church *koinonia* is God’s good purpose for the church in every generation, provided in the NT as a pattern to be fulfilled from one church to another until the Lord returns. We do not believe that this pattern is restricted merely to the age of the apostles. We do believe that these patterns are not just optional ideas for the church that is looking for something to do with extra resources but rather an essential part of church maturity. Let me say that again: church *koinonia*—partnership with other churches in ways patterned after the NT—is an essential part of church maturity. In light of this calling, let us consider how we fulfill this partnership in Sovereign Grace, going again to Philippians 1:3-8.

Church Partnership in Sovereign Grace

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I

am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:3-8).

Paul's greeting to the Philippian church forms a helpful summary of the New Testament calling to church partnership. It also serves as an important outline for applying church partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches.

- Gratefulness, Joy, and Affection

Clearly, Paul does not relate to the Philippians with a "just business" perspective. He is filled with gratefulness for their labors for the gospel, joy in the effect the gospel has had in their lives and through them in the mission and affection for them as his dear brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why we seek to create contexts where pastors and members can know, serve, and encourage each other. To put it bluntly, we do not want only a business association but a loving relationship. We want not only a formal structure but an affectionate family of churches. This is why our Pastors Conferences and our Regional Assemblies of Elders regularly include time for informal relationship building and formal equipping and planning. This is why our pastoral prayers seek to highlight specific church plants and missional initiatives in a demeanor of grateful prayer and joy. This is why Sovereign Grace regions plan events where church members can come to know each other, can share each other's burdens and can build together with other Sovereign Grace churches in a kind of "family reunion" expectation. We do this not merely because it's more fun to partner within a relational atmosphere (though it is!) but because we want to fulfill the pattern of relational, affectionate, grateful, joyful partnership modeled by Paul and the mature NT churches.

- Unity in Gospel Doctrine

The partnership of Paul with the Philippians was full of gratefulness, affection, and joy precisely because it was in the gospel. Paul knew the Philippians (and they knew him) to be in Christ through the confession of the true gospel and gospel-centered doctrine. This same gospel unity is part of Paul's greeting to the Romans (though he did not plant their

church!), and it forms a primary reason for his rebuke of the Galatians. The doctrine of Christ is and will be the cornerstone of our partnership in Sovereign Grace. Practically, guarding this doctrine is the reason we created and steward our *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*. Guarding this doctrine is the passion behind our Pastors College, the goal of our ordination standards, and the motive for our adjudication and discipline processes for any pastors or churches who stray. Apart from unity in Christ and the doctrines that flow from the gospel, there can be no authentic or enduring unity. Yet, in Christ, there can be abundant joy and relationship among this global family of churches even as we enjoy distinctions in culture and tertiary doctrines. We are partnered, now and into the future, in Christ.

- Sharing the Burden of Gospel Mission with Faith

Paul had a partnership with the Philippians, not merely a mutual appreciation. This partnership, this *koinonia*, is a sharing together the burden of mission. It is investing oneself into the calling that the gospel places on the shoulders of every Christian, church, and pastor, allowing the momentum of the gospel to lead us to self-sacrifice for the cause of Christ. In Sovereign Grace, we embrace this call by giving financially to our common mission of planting and building healthy churches. We support the cost of caring for pastors through regional leaders, training pastors at the Pastors College, and providing extra-local leadership for pastors and churches through a Sovereign Grace leadership team. We also embrace this call by sending pastors to support regional functions such as ordination, church planting, and adjudication. We joyfully promote church plants in our own churches, knowing that some of our own dear members may be sown for the harvest. We faithfully send delegates to our Council of Elders, stewarding our *Book of Church Order* and our *Statement of Faith* through grateful, earnest participation in the formal structures of Sovereign Grace. We share the responsibility not only to give but also to receive in this gospel mission, rejecting independence and self-sufficiency and welcoming the loving encouragement and even exhortation from our fellow churches and pastors as a normal part of gospel guardianship.

We are determined that the gospel mission of Sovereign Grace should be sealed with our own labors of love. We are not content unless our own church may share the honor of the gospel mission in our Sovereign Grace

family. And we do this with faith, knowing that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus because of his grace and for his glory.

It is important to note that we also gladly celebrate other gospel churches around the world who are seeking these same goals among other church denominations and affiliations. May all those who preach the name of Christ in faithful gospel *koinonia* be blessed of the Lord! For our part, we are humbled and honored that God has placed us here, in this family of churches, to practice New Testament *koinonia* for the sake of his mission with these dear churches and these dear saints.

Our Partnership Prayer

Our prayer is that this value of church partnership will flourish with greater zeal and affection as Sovereign Grace churches are planted and adopted worldwide. We pray we will be faithful to the biblical pattern laid down for us. We pray that we will be stronger in Christ together. We pray we will show the love of Christ toward one another. And we pray that Sovereign Grace churches, now and in the future, will be known for our *koinonia*—our gospel partnership—for generations to come.

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