

STRONGER TOGETHER



**WHY**

**PARTNERSHIP**

**MATTERS**

**TO US.**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Abstraction is the enemy of application. It is content to live in a listless world of vague, noble notions.”<sup>1</sup> Tell a man to “get fit” and he stares at you with a, “Yeah Captain Obvious, but how?” look. But tell him to walk 30 minutes each day, 30 minutes of circuit training and reduce calories by 20% and you’ve given him a clear path for fitness. An idea takes shape through specifics.

Grace Partnership desires to build a fellowship of churches that are gospel-focused, unified, diverse, global and maturing. But what does that look like specifically? Just as local churches thrive on clarity flowing from leadership to members, a partnership of churches needs clarity on what it is and how it works for prospective and current member churches.

Clarity is the aim of this summary article. If we cannot articulate clearly and simply why we exist than we won’t have a compelling model or example for churches. May this article reflect our desire to answer the question, “Why Grace Partnership?”

## HOW DO YOU DEFINE A PARTNERSHIP OF CHURCHES?

Two good questions to ask of a church partnership are:

1. How do you define ‘partnership’?
2. What does it mean for pastors/churches to participate in your network?

As we seek to define partnership, we are reminded that God’s first words spoken over his image bearers were: it’s not good for man to be alone<sup>2</sup>. We are relational because we have our origin in a relational Creator. We are made for community! In Scripture, as well as in creation, we see evidence of our need for relationship at every scale imaginable – individual, local, and beyond. It is not good for man, or churches to be alone.

*We are made for one another.*

Local churches really are no different. Just as people wither and perish in seclusion, so does the local church. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, thanks God for them, “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.”<sup>3</sup> This verse is our theme, our self-describing verse as a partnership for a reason! Though the church in Philippi had her own elders, deacons, and members, she was also vitally connected with other churches and leaders outside of their church. The Philippians were a strong, established church, but they were not an independent church. The result of this arrangement was not a hierarchy, but a relational partnership of joy (v. 3).

As we trace Paul’s ministry in the New Testament, we see a beautiful pattern emerge: Paul establishes a church in a new location, he moves on to plant another church in a new city or region, and then he returns to previously planted churches to further cultivate his relationship with them.<sup>4</sup> Paul’s ongoing partnership between churches strengthened relationships, encouraged their leaders, and advanced the gospel in tangible ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Harvey. We have been inspired in this paper by Dave’s investment, discipleship and example as he has served in leadership roles in various ministries, currently with Great Commission Collective. We are indebted to Dave for his investment in us and his imprint is all over this paper. May we be the same for others! This paper has been edited from his work and with his permission.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:18. While this passage is an endorsement for marriage, it is also the first in a long litany of scriptures that evidence our need for others at an individual, as well as at the group and corporate levels.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:3-4

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20:17-38 is a powerful picture of the impact of relationship that comes through partnership. Note especially Acts 20:36-38, “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.”

Equally important, it provides a pattern that should continue today.

Can local churches survive on their own? Probably, but history proves local churches are better together. Through partnership the Philippians gave generously to the poor together, contended for orthodoxy together, and served more churches throughout the Mediterranean together. Consider the distance that existed geographically between these churches. Yet, that was no hindrance to a shared mission through partnership.

Every church generation needs a vision for this kind of fruitful interdependence that reproduces this biblical pattern. Paul's ministry provides a pattern for the mission-minded interdependence reflected in some denominations and networks today.

We do not find radical autonomy celebrated or encouraged in the Scriptures – nor within the Trinity. The need for and biblical value of relational connectivity across diverse churches does not undermine the autonomy of local churches. However, churches that lead with absolute independence from other churches are missing God's pattern for the relational interdependence we see in Scripture.

Scripture does not demand only one way to reflect this interdependence and we must be careful not to overly spiritualize our own preferences or traditions<sup>5</sup>. A network or partnership of churches exists to bring harmony between God's local design for elder-led congregations and his global design for vitally connected churches. Professor of Missions, Paul Hiebert, puts it this way:

The future of missions is based in the formation of international networks rather than multinational organizations. Networks build up people, not programs [sic]; they stress partnership and servanthood, not hierarchy; they help to build up

the local church, not undermine it.<sup>6</sup> This is exactly what we are seeing in our early days of Grace Partnership, and how beautiful it is! Friends, co-laborers in the gospel of Jesus Christ across the United States, in Bolivia, Vietnam, Ukraine, Netherlands, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Haiti, and our hearts are open to more!

Grace Partnership is a voluntary association, not a hierarchical agreement. We are eager to see local churches strengthened and equipped for mission. Though we talk in terms of partner churches, the primary focus for our equipping, counseling, and care is the eldership/leaders of local churches.

So, what that means for Grace Partnership is:

*Grace Partnership is a partnership of local churches serving together in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same mission of the early church continues as churches partner together today. Our desire is to support one another in the mission of the gospel through:*

- *Partnering together in local and global **mission**.*
- *Pastoral and church relationships centered on mutual **care** and encouragement.*
- *Practical **equipping** contexts that strengthen one another.*

Shared mission, mutual care, equipping one another. This is Grace Partnership.

The second question, "What does it mean for pastors/churches to participate in your partnership?" is answered by demonstrating some of the ways to apply our definition. Specifically, we want to clarify how Grace Partnership joyfully partners with one another.

### **Pastors and Churches Joyfully Partner Around the Gospel**

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<sup>5</sup> Eckhard Schnabel's reminder is helpful: "Christians, missionaries and mission agencies should realize that they do not need to substantiate or defend every action, program or initiative with a biblical passage." *Early Christian Mission*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2004), 1572-1573.

<sup>6</sup> *Partners in the Gospel*, edited by James H. Kraakevik & Dotsey Welliver; a BGC Monograph, p. xiii.

The joy Paul describes in Philippians 1:3-8 is not based on a mutual love for a sports team or style of music, but a deep fellowship experienced between Paul and the church “because of (their) partnership in the gospel” (v. 3 – emphasis mine). The deep joy evoked in Paul springs from the unity they experience in the whole gospel – the life-transforming news of God’s kingdom breaking into this world through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this partnership flows from the biblical reality that we are not only forgiven individually by Jesus, but we are now adopted corporately into the family of God by grace. As the family of God, we are called to enter into the family-venture of sharing the love of Jesus Christ together.

Of course, we value the “Gospel.” What partnership of churches doesn’t? For our partnership to flourish, the gospel message must move from technical terminology to relational application. This means we must help fellow leaders and member churches move from gospel content to gospel living. This is what defined so much of Paul’s time in the churches.

As a partnership, we derive our joy in part from helping each other move from abstraction to clarity; from gospel content to gospel living. We want to embrace the gospel and develop partnerships at the depth of love and trust.

If Grace Partnership is to flourish, it will be because the gospel functions powerfully in our lives and we call each other to it through our partnership.

However, if a partnership fixes its vision solely on helping each other enjoy and apply the gospel, we will miss the mark. The churches may swell with life but the work will become sterile – unable to

reproduce. Partnering in the gospel also means partnering to spread the gospel. This includes using partners resources to identify church planters, fund church planting, and equip pastors all over the globe for the work of ministry.

### **Pastors and Churches Joyfully Partner Through Leaders**

Jesus will build his church, and, incredibly, he uses us to do it.<sup>7</sup> Jesus promised never to leave us and He gave us ‘Another’ who in turn gives gifts to enable us to serve his church.

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”.<sup>8</sup>

The gifts are not given to build personal platforms, but to strengthen and encourage churches to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”<sup>9</sup> One of the ways God does this is to uniquely gift some people with the gifts necessary for the helping churches partner together. Healthy partnerships recognize leaders whose gifts draw a wider influence and appear to serve the broader church, then find ways for those individuals to serve the network.

Furthermore, scripture clearly shows us that God gifts leaders for extra-local and missional purposes. The use of apostle in the New Testament indicated a person’s exercise of spiritual gifts upon, or in, being sent. They were emissaries of gospel truth, mission focus, and practical application. This particular gift found expression not only in local churches, but specifically between numerous churches. At the risk of oversimplifying, apostles were a type of traveling elders.<sup>10</sup> Each local church

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:11-13.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:15.

<sup>10</sup> In Scripture, the Twelve Apostles will always hold a unique place in the purposes of God (Revelation 21:14). But the New Testament concept of apostle has various applications, including the eleven disciples, Paul, and others whose primary function was the planting and establishing of churches. (See Acts 14:4; 1 Corinthians 4:6, 9:5-6; Galatians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6; Philippians 2:25). “In the NT, Apostolos can mean delegate, envoy, messenger (Philippians 2:25; 2 Corinthians 8:23). Perhaps even

did not need to have each office in its own locale; through partnership the variety of gifts were shared.

This is how we see that the ministry begun by Paul and his coworkers continues today. God gives equipping gifts that extend beyond the boundaries of a local congregation. However, this does not make one a modern-day Apostle in the fashion of The Twelve, it simply makes one a servant who may be of use to the broader church. These men<sup>11</sup> seek to be an effective tool for connecting local churches together in partnerships and training leaders for gospel mission.

Local churches deepen their participation in the mission of God by partnering with other leaders who serve with their gifts to bring benefit and advancement of a shared mission through partnership. A review of church history typically uncovers leaders emerging regionally and nationally, mobilizing partnerships for mission.

An extra-local role of uniting churches in a shared mission is why the New Testament does not encourage every elder to envision congregations to leave home and go to the nations. In the New Testament, it is the “apostles and prophets” that ‘go’. The local church remains local. Too often we honor those that go an extravagant length for mission (rightfully so!) but neglect to celebrate the determination it takes to serve a neighborhood or community for thirty faithful years.

God builds his church locally and globally through leaders who use their gifts to serve and unite churches that partner together. In doing so, the mission goes forward and the body of Christ enjoys access to a fuller range of Christ’s generous gifts to his people.

### **Partnership Pastors/Churches Joyfully Partner Through Relationships**

For Paul, partnership was more than mission. This New Testament Greek word is rich with warm relational tones. Just listen to Paul’s heart for the Philippians:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel. It is right for me to feel this way about you because I hold you in my heart; I yearn for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:5-8).

Paul is not merely addressing a group of ministry professionals mobilizing for breathless gospel expansion. Paul is speaking to those he knows and loves.

Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church, and the other churches he founded, was one of nourishment and strengthening. As Peter T. O’Brien rightly notes, “It is clear that the nurturing

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missionary. One especially commissioned. One who proclaimed the gospel.” (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 99. “Denotes (the) bearers of the NT message, first the twelve ... then the first Christian missionaries” W. Kohlhammer Verlag, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and abgd. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1996 reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Devon: Paternoster, 1985), 70. “Modern gifts...are analogous to but not identical with apostolic gifts and Messianic gifts.” (Vern S. Poythress, *Modern Spiritual Gifts as Analogous to Apostolic Gifts* (Glenside: Westminster Theological Seminary), 6. In our leadership averse days combined with the misuse of the term, the word ‘apostle’ has fallen on hard times, but it does not change the clear picture in Scripture of the servant role God intends in the office of apostle.

<sup>11</sup> While we believe network leadership rests in the hands of men, it certainly does not eliminate the need for gifted women. Schnael says, “The circle of Pauline coworkers included a considerable number of women. Andreas Kostenberger estimates that 18 percent of Paul’s fellow missionaries were women. In the list of greetings in his Epistle to the Romans Paul mentions the following female coworkers who are now residing in Rome: Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), Priscilla (Rom. 16:3), Mary (Rom. 16:6), Junia (Rom. 16:7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom. 16:12) and Persis (Rom. 16:12). Other women whom Paul’s description reveals to be coworkers are Apphia (Philem. 2) and Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3). Their participation in Paul’s missionary work is indicated by the prefix syn- (“with”): they have struggled “with” Paul for the gospel (Phil. 4:3). They evidently preached the gospel along with Paul”. Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 1428.

of the emerging church is understood by Paul to be an integral feature of his missionary task.”<sup>12</sup>

The Philippians, along with many New Testament churches, enjoyed relationship with Paul in unique and reciprocal ways. They were asked to pray for Paul’s extra-local mission<sup>13</sup>, they hospitably welcomed extra-local leaders<sup>14</sup>, and they developed and released coworkers<sup>15</sup>. They truly “one-anothered.”

Partnerships exist to come alongside local churches to cultivate rich relationships, well-directed missions, and meaningful care.

### **Partnership Pastors/Churches Joyfully Partner Through Distinctives**

By distinctives we do not mean something new, trendy or hip. In fact, the truer we are to the biblical pattern, the more similarity we can expect to see in various partnerships and networks. Instead of being trendy, we must seek to embed ourselves in historic church practices. From a deep rootedness in Scripture and church tradition we can be unapologetic over the unique inscription God molds upon our partnership because when the Spirit gifts leaders, unites people, and breathes on us, a specific picture emerges.

We have all heard that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Well, in the early church, Thessalonica was called to imitate the church in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> The Thessalonians in turn became a model for the Macedonian churches. Biologically, this comes naturally to us. Children learn from their

parents. Young churches look to more mature churches to learn how to grow healthier.

Models also define and distinguish. There is plenty of room within orthodoxy for those who disagree with certain particulars of Grace Partnership, but for those in our partnership we joyfully embrace our particulars. This is not because we think we have a superior partnership or we have arrived at the “right way”. Far from it! Instead, we want to maintain clear distinctives within our partnership because those distinctives represent how the Spirit is guiding us. To succeed as a partnership, we must humbly acknowledge each local church’s limitations and joyfully pursue an interdependence that invites the strength of connectedness.

Partnership involves uniting over a shared message, with gifted people who share a similar spiritual DNA, building humble, gospel-church models. This kind of partnership brings great joy!

### **Partnership Pastors/Churches Joyfully Partner Through Sharing Resources**

In his closing remarks to the Philippians, Paul thanks them for supporting his ministry financially. To Paul, this was another important feature to their partnership. He commended this church saying, “no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.”<sup>17</sup> Not only does this illustrate the precedent of churches partnering financially with outside entities (Paul, in this case), but it also holds up their giving as evidence of the kind of mission spending that pleases God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> P.T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*, quoting W.P. Bowers, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:2-4; Romans 15:30-32; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Colossians 4:7-9; Ephesians 6:21-22; Acts 14:27.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 11:22-26, 13:1-3, 15:40, 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:17-18; Romans 16:3-4; Philippians 2:25; Colossians 1:7, 4:12-13; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 13. For useful chapters on partnership in missions between local churches and an extra-local team, see: Chapter 16 (“The Relationships Continued”) in Hesselgrave’s **Planting Churches Cross-Culturally** (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Chapter 16 (“The Mission and the Churches”) in Robert Banks’ *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994); Chapter 6 (“The Church and Missions”) in Georg Peters’ *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1984); Chapter 1 (“In Pursuit of True Christian Partnership: A Biblical Basis from Philippians”) by Luis Bush in *Partners in the Gospel* (Kraakevik, J.H. and D. Welliver, ed., *Partners in the Gospel* [Wheaton: Emis/Billy Graham Center, 1992]).

<sup>16</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2, 4; 2 Corinthians 8.

<sup>17</sup> Philippians 4:15(b).

<sup>18</sup> Philippians 4:18.

In the New Testament, partnership support was not an abstraction or reactionary. It was concrete, with real money sacrificed for real mission.

The generosity of the Philippians had two apparent results – one direct and one indirect. First, their money allowed Paul to fulfill his role in fostering and feeding partnerships that reaped a harvest of gospel fruit. Their money led directly to planting new churches and to strengthen existing ones. As Schnabel observes, “Since Paul refers to Philippians 1:12 to the ‘progress of the gospel,’ the believers in Philippi contribute to (this) progress of the gospel through their financial support of apostolic ministry and through their own missionary activity in Philippi.”<sup>19</sup> Paul was clear on this point: The Philippians’ giving contributed to the progress of the gospel.

If gospel progress is the only result of giving, they (and we!) would have more than enough motivation for committing our resources to our doctrine. But there is another less direct benefit.

After saying their gifts were pleasing to God, Paul tells the Philippians that, “my God will supply every need of your according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”<sup>20</sup> Paul wanted the Philippians to know that their generosity came with a promise – God would supply their needs even as they supplied Paul’s. Generosity to a partnership grows God’s work elsewhere and fosters God’s work in us.

The truth is, few churches feel an abundance of resources. The biblical reality is that we experience the abundance of God’s grace by giving. The Philippians’ generosity to the partnership put them in a place where they could learn to trust God as they experienced his goodness.

As one of the more stable churches in the New Testament, the Philippians’ maturity was expressed in their joyful support of Paul. In contrast, the

church in Corinth was chastised for their immaturity because of hesitancy towards an extra-local partnership with Paul. When Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he commends the maturity and example of the church in Philippi, especially in their extra-local vision and generosity.<sup>21</sup>

In Grace Partnership, member churches aim to give 5% of their annual giving to the partnership. These resources are maximized for the care of leaders, training and equipping, caring for and supporting ministries in keeping with James 1:27, and the strengthening and planting of churches. Individually, we also expect the partnership to invest in us – the partner churches and leaders. It is a reciprocal relationship of generosity flowing in both directions.

## CONCLUSION

Partnerships exist because it is not good for a church to be alone. Perhaps we could go faster by ourselves. But we will go further, flourish better, and enjoy the gospel in greater measure if we remain determined to finish the same way we started – together, for His glory, our growth and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Would you like to know more? We’d love to get to know you! [www.gracepartnership.net](http://www.gracepartnership.net)

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<sup>19</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 1460.

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 4:19.

<sup>21</sup> The “churches of Macedonia” in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 has Philippi primarily in view.

