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WHAT DOES PARTNERSHIP MEAN FOR CHURCH MEMBERS?

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Partnership among churches is not just a pastors' collective. Every member has a part to play and benefits from partnership.

Pay Attention to the Postscripts

Do you read and study the postscripts at the ends of the letters in the New Testament? You know, those last few verses that include the personal greetings, well wishes, and instructions from the author to the church(es) that were once practical but now seem quite irrelevant 2,000 years after.

I used to view them as nice but unnecessary. It was fun to read and try to pronounce their names, while imagining what they looked like. I pictured Rufus, a large, bearded man; Andronicus, a warrior disciple; Ampliatus, the one-armed evangelist. In my mind, the meat was in chapters 1-14 of Romans, and chapters 15-16 seemed like they were kept for posterity but were not quite as "living and active." How wrong I was!

Far from being outdated and irrelevant, along with all the personal references in the epistles, these postscripts give us a wonderful window into the interdependent life of the New Testament churches and their leaders. Through these Spirit-inspired "*add-ons*," we gain vital insights into what gospel partnership means, not just for pastors but for the entire church membership. They teach us, by example, so much about the duties, expectations, and benefits of interdependence across churches. They teach us that every member has a part to play and benefits from our partnerships.

In healthy New Testament churches, partnership across churches is not just for the pastors; it's for the whole church. And we have the same hope for Sovereign Grace Churches. We want to continue in our rich history of whole churches caring for other churches. We want to see the youngest members in our congregations embrace their own role in partnering with other churches. I want the members of my local church to sense their belonging and participate within our family of churches. This is a sign of health and maturity.

Mature Church Memberships

Mature church memberships are concerned for the welfare of other churches and their leaders. Immature church memberships are only concerned for themselves individually and at best their own church corporately. Why is this?

The New Testament church is a family, the "household of God" (Eph. 2:19, Gal. 6:10, 1 Tim. 3:15), within a broader, larger, universal church family, "your brotherhood throughout the world" (1 Pet. 5:9). Families care for one another, sacrifice for one another, protect one another, give gifts, share meals, welcome new additions, show deference and respect to uncles, aunts, and grandparents. They do this not only in the nuclear unit but also in the broader familial group for the good of the family name.

It's often been said that it's not "*Jesus and me*" but "*Jesus and we*," but it's even bigger than that. The "we" includes not only our local church but other local churches that we are called and blessed to be in partnership with as well. This is reflected in Paul's instructive greeting to the Corinthians: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). We are called to be saints together with other Christians. The most practical way for us to put that into practice is with our fellow Sovereign Grace churches locally, regionally, and globally.

This cuts against our natural individualism and our lionizing of corporate independence. Healthy New Testament churches are not *independent* but *interdependent*. And this is not just at the leadership level. Interdependence must make its way throughout the entire membership. Partnership is not just for pastors; it's for the entire congregation, with every member doing their part for the good of the whole.

The Mature and The Childish

The church in Philippi is heralded by Paul as a great example of a healthy and mature congregation that played their part in the furtherance of the gospel and the care for other churches beyond themselves. It took the whole congregation to make this happen. For example, multiple times the Philippians alone sacrificially partnered with Paul by sending him financial aid while he was shamefully bound in chains for the cause of the gospel (Phil. 1:3-7, 4:10-21). They sent out one of their best, Epaphroditus, to serve Paul and accompany him in his evangelistic mission and support for other churches (Phil. 2:25-30). They begged Paul for the opportunity to give financially to aid the Jerusalem church in her suffering, despite their own poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

The Macedonians are honored because of their maturity amidst adversity. They cared for their partners in the gospel, their broader church family, and wanted to play their part.

The Corinthians, on the other hand, were childish and constantly beset by tribalism and independence. They struggled constantly to accept the extra local leadership of Paul and instead welcomed in false apostles (2 Cor. 10-11). Though they pledged to give aid to the Jerusalem church, they had begun to waiver in their commitment and needed a special envoy to remedy this lack (2 Cor. 8-9). They accepted immorality, got drunk at communion, sued one another, and used their spiritual gifts as badges of their own importance.

In a word, they were immature. Despite their wealth, status, education, and gifting, they didn't seem to excel in partnership or play their part in accordance with the grace given to them.

Partnership in Practice at the Member Level

So, what can you do as a church member to participate maturely and meaningfully with other churches? Here are five practices for how each of the members of a local church, not just the leaders, can participate in the cause of the gospel.

Give

Though 2 Corinthians 8-9 is often used to spur us on for giving generously to our local church, the context is actually Paul encouraging the Corinthians to set aside money to send outside of their church to the Jerusalem church. He sees it as their duty to support the hand that fed them at first. From Jerusalem came the gospel which saved them. And it is a matter of “fairness” (2 Cor. 8:14) that they who are wealthy now should support their suffering and poorer extended church family.

In Sovereign Grace we have so many wonderful opportunities to play our part by giving to the global mission of God. We can give to the work of the Asia, Africa, Latin American, and European development funds. We can give to Sovereign Grace Central. We can join together as regions to raise funds for church planting in our region and beyond. We find ways to help the poor, persecuted, and under-resourced churches in our family. It takes the work not just of big donors but people like the poor Macedonians who,

“..in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, *begging us earnestly for the favor* of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” (2 Cor. 8:2-5)

Giving to Sovereign Grace is a wonderful way to support the work of other churches.

Receive

Whether it's Paul, Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, or countless others, local churches and their whole membership were called to humbly accept an extra-local leader coming in to serve and guide them. The church was to provide for their needs, receive the letters they brought, embrace them, and listen to their teachings, encouragements, and corrections.

When Paul sent Epaphroditus back to the Philippians he told them to “receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men” (Phil. 2:29). That is, the

whole church was called to welcome him back, take him in, and do it with a joyful heart, and even to go as far as to honor him. Paul also wrote to the Roman church to welcome Phoebe into their midst instructing them to, “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” (Rom. 16:2).

Let us do the same in Sovereign Grace Churches. When a visiting preacher or a serving team comes from another church, be invested and involved. Receive them, host them, care for them, honor them, and provide for them. Lean in to their leadership and wisdom. That’s partnership, and that’s maturity as a whole church.

Send

Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been in the church at Antioch? After hearing the gospel, turning to Christ, and gathering as a church, the great Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to check on the church. He stays for a while and then leaves to get his friend to help—the Apostle Paul! They both stay there for a year of fruitful ministry.

Then in a prayer meeting the Holy Spirit sets aside both Paul and Barnabas for the cause of world mission. They fast, lay their hands on them, and send them out. What a blow! What a loss! But, what a gain! By sending out Paul and Barnabas, the Antioch church was caught up in the global plan of God promised from the time of Abraham to see the nations of the earth blessed (Gen. 12:3). They got to be an instrumental part of fulfilling the great prophecy of Isaiah 49:6: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” And the rest is history. As they went out, they took the gospel to the Gentiles and from there sparked a sovereign chain reaction that reverberates into our lives today.

But what would have happened if the members of the Antioch church were only concerned for themselves? What if they wanted to keep their best pastors for themselves only? Imagine how great their sermons would have been! Imagine their Sunday morning classes! But also imagine their loss. There would have been no churches planted in Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, or even Corinth.

Healthy and mature churches send leaders and send workers to spread the gospel and aid other churches. For

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent” (Rom. 10:14-15)?

It takes courage and gospel sacrifice as a church to send out a church plant, to send out beloved members to join a team, to send a pastor on trips, to send out key leaders to aid other churches. And it takes a belief that the salvation of unbelievers and the health of other churches is our priority. Therefore, we must send!

Who is it in your church that needs to be raised up and sent out? When the call comes for a church plant, will you pray about whether God is calling you to join the team? Will you joyfully bear the costs of sending your leaders out regionally and globally to help the cause of Christ abroad? If you do, you will be involved in the great plan of redemption in a new and broader way.

Pray

Often what is most achievable can seem like the hardest thing to do, and that is to pray. It doesn't cost us money but it does require our time, energy, heart, and headspace. Yet, this is a vital means of healthy church partnership. Paul enjoins the Ephesians in the task of broad prayer, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).

And he calls them to join in praying for him and his gospel work: “and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19-20).

Are you praying for matters outside of your local church? Have you signed up for the monthly Sovereign Grace “Global Missions Newsletter” so that you can be informed and consistent in praying for the nations? Do you pray

for church plants, planters, and their teams? This takes time and effort but is a beautiful way of partnering with our churches across the world.

Love

Probably the least obeyed command in all the New Testament is, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (2 Cor. 13:12). This command, which may be confusing at first, was a Christian innovation, a beautiful expression of Christian love and “a token of deepest relationship and unity.”¹ This greeting broke down social, gender, and racial barriers, and enabled a visible and physical sign to express our solidarity in Christ. This unity is first to be expressed in our local churches but then radiates outward to “the brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet. 5:9). Although it isn’t necessary that we kiss physically, it is a reminder that our unity is to be affectionate, warm, genuine, and unprejudiced.

Sovereign Grace Churches is now a global family of churches. This is beautiful and it requires us to love people all around the world who are very different from us in almost every way. And so, we must do more than simply partner with our fellow Christians; we need to “love the brotherhood” (1 Pet. 2:17).

Do you love your brothers and sisters in your region, in your country, and across the world? Does your heart yearn for them? Do you hold them with affection?

Play Your Part and Feel a Part!

We have a duty and a privilege to be in partnership across our Sovereign Grace Churches. We *get* to play a part in God’s global mission, in big and small ways. And the benefit is, as we look outside ourselves, we also will *feel* a part of what God is doing. Paul told the Corinthians that their financial partnership “benefits you” (2 Cor. 8:10). This has been my experience: the more I participate, the more I feel a part, and the more joy I have.

Our church, Sovereign Grace Parramatta in Australia, was born out of sacrificial partnership from Sovereign Grace Church Sydney. Their church was

1. R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 234.

born out of generous partnership from churches in Wales and the U.S. And the cycle continues. Whole churches, like Inglesia Gracia Soberana in Juárez, Mexico, have the joy of hosting the significant Fieles Conference for 480 pastors. Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville in Kentucky adopts 10-15 future pastors and their families for 10 months and serves them, even though they know they'll all likely leave them and never return. The stories abound, and so does the joy!

Mature churches are concerned for the welfare of other churches and their leaders. They are in partnership as a whole church. They give, receive, send, pray, and love. And their Chief Shepherd, the One who gave it all to welcome us into his eternal family, watches with delight.