

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

DOCUMENT 2

We will look at the *power of partnership* under these headings:

- Reasons for partnership
- Our four pillars of partnership
- Brief reflections on different types of partnership
- Conclusions
- FAQ's about partnership

REASONS FOR PARTNERSHIP

Partnership Is Biblical

Partnership is an often overlooked, yet vitally important aspect of New Testament Christianity. Although the ministry of Paul and other prominent New Testament leaders was in some ways unique and, therefore, in some ways unrepeatably, the *pattern* of partnership is repeatable. God still provides suitably gifted people to facilitate such partnerships today. Paul used the word, "partnership," to describe both church leaders and churches working together:

- As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. (2 Cor. 8:23)
- I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...because of your partnership in the gospel. (Phil. 1:3-5)

In the past, partnership happened between individuals and churches, and churches and churches. They helped each other out in terms of *doctrine and practice* (Acts 8:14-25; Gal. 3), they *relocated leaders* to strengthen other situations (Acts 11:19-23, 25-26, 12:25, 16:1-3), they sent *individuals and teams* on short-term strengthening visits (Acts 11:27, 19:21-22; 1 Cor. 4:15-17; Phil. 2:19-29; 2 Tim. 1:18), they sent *money* to help each other and bless the wider society (Acts 11:28-30), and they helped advance the gospel together and *plant churches* (Rom. 15:24; 2 Cor. 10:15-16).

Partnership Is Necessary for Mission and Maturity

Our mission from Jesus is to take the gospel to both the neighborhoods and the nations, to both Jerusalem and the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). How could any local church do that alone? But if we organize ourselves properly, every church can contribute meaningfully to world mission. Every church can *consistently* pray and give financially to church plants; and every church can *periodically* contribute leaders to church plants. Together, our mission can be healthier, stronger, longer, and more sustainable.

In terms of *maturity*, no matter how experienced a team of local elders are, a local church will not reach full maturity without outside perspective and input. In fact, New Testament translocal ministry had a specific aim to help bring churches to maturity (Col. 1:28, 4:12).

Partnership Is an Expression of Humility and Honors the Body of Christ

Apart from the Biblical precedent of partnership, common sense tells us that no eldership team could maximize their potential without meaningful outside input. On this, Colin Hundermark writes,

In a corporate or not-for-profit context, it would not be frowned upon - more likely encouraged - to use an external source to contribute to the overall cause and direction of the enterprise. This is typically expressed in one of two ways. Firstly, the role of non-executive directors on a board is oftentimes filled by a subject matter expert or industry doyen, that is, someone that can contribute meaningfully to the overall direction and executive strategy of the business. Moreover, global corporate governance standards require that boards of directors have a minimum number of non-executive directors. Secondly, the use of external strategy and management consultants is commonplace, even for tasks considered the domain of internal teams such as understanding new product opportunities, new markets and new geographies. It would be curious to conclude that the use, or encouragement, of external input should be restricted to the corporate environment. Would it not be unwise for local elders to assume that they and their local church could somehow reach their redemptive potential without outside help?

Partnership Provides Synergy

Partnership helps *enhance a church's strengths* and helps shore up her weaknesses. Partnership helps *maximize a church's potential influence*, providing a network through which individuals and churches can influence more broadly than they otherwise could. Partnership *provides resources* to help a church plant more churches in her region than she could working alone, including prayer, people, finance, encouragement, and skills.

Partnership Provides Protection

Sometimes churches go through immensely challenging seasons. For example, if a church loses a leader to burn out, sickness, or death, it is much easier to support the church and find a suitable replacement leader if the church is part of a partnership.

FOUR PILLARS OF PARTNERSHIP

Agreeing that church-to-church partnerships are Biblical and necessary is the easy part. The challenge is working out how these partnerships worked in the Bible, and then faithfully imitating them. The clearest view that the Bible gives us of church-to-church partnership is the partnership that developed around Paul. This partnership was shaped around four main things, which we have also chosen to partner around:

1. Similar Doctrine and Values

The content of the epistles testifies to how much Paul wanted the churches that he worked with to believe correct doctrine and be “pillars of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Paul didn’t say, “Outside of believing that Jesus is Lord, it doesn’t really matter what you believe. It just matters that we plant more churches!” While planting more churches certainly mattered to Paul, so did having these churches believe the right doctrine and values. See *Document 5 Statement of Faith and Values* for an overview of our doctrine and values.

2. Shared Mission

In addition to partnering around truth, Pauline partnerships were *missionally* productive. Together, they planted churches, strengthened churches, and pooled finance for worthy causes, such as drought relief in Judea (1 Cor. 16; 2 Cor. 8:5). Advance partner churches consider themselves active “*fellow workers*” (1 Cor. 3:9) in our shared mission to *plant and strengthen* churches. Advance exists because we are on mission together. The deep sense of camaraderie and belonging that we enjoy is a derivative of our missional partnership, not the purpose of our partnership.

3. Genuine Relationship

The churches that Paul was involved with couldn’t think about God without thinking about *Father* or church, without thinking about *family* (Eph. 3:14-15). The bandwidth of relationships ranged from brotherly connection on one side through to seasoned fathers like Paul on the other (2 Tim. 1:2; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Cor. 4:15-16) - but never to a purely functional or corporate atmosphere. Paul encouraged church leaders to lead their churches in a family manner (1 Tim. 5:1-2), and sometimes referred to the churches he partnered with as his children. It was on that basis that he felt authority to encourage, comfort and urge them to live lives worthy of God (1 Thess. 2:6-8, 11-12). Paul even displayed concern for the church leader’s physical health (1 Tim. 5:23) and often ended his letters with lists of personal greetings and messages to people in the church that he had grown to know over years of involvement.

With the pressures of a busy world and an expanding movement, we need to be clear that the relational aspect of church partnership is a Biblical imperative, or else it is easy to opt for a less relational style. Theologically convinced of the importance of genuine relationships and a family feel, we cultivate relationships characterized by genuine affection, respect, honesty, trust, and fun.

4. Recognized, Suitably Gifted Leadership

Leadership is a gift from God, and necessary to help any group move together - including a movement of churches. Leaders of our movement, and within our movement, are recognized on the basis of sound character and suitable gifts; and they play an important role in helping us partner together. See *Document 6 Leadership and Regions* for more about how leadership works in Advance.

We believe that the New Testament teaches that local elders are the highest human authority in the local church. Therefore, we consider partner churches as autonomous, but interdependent.

BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON DIFFERENT TYPES OF PARTNERSHIP

To help clarify what we mean by the word, “partnership,” it is helpful to briefly reflect on different types of partnership. Successful partnerships seem to form around either *just one* of these four components (we could refer to these as “single issue partnerships”), or around *all four* components (we could refer to these as Pauline-type partnerships), but seldom around two or three components.

Single-Issue Partnerships

Partnerships such as the Gospel Coalition and the Simeon Trust deliberately choose to partner around one main thing: similar doctrine and values. They play an excellent role in helping their partner churches develop *similar doctrine and values*, but they do not try to mobilize their churches to *shared mission*, or to *genuine relationship*; and, therefore, *recognized leadership* is not a critical factor in the partnership.

Or, think of a Pastors Fraternal in a town consisting of pastors from many different denominations. This would usually be based simply on *genuine relationship* - a worthy goal. If it made *similar doctrine and values* a component of partnership, the fraternal would soon fracture. Or, if they tried to do *mission* together (outside of “neutral” endeavors, such as prayer, or social action projects), things would likely unravel. Or, if one pastor assumes too much in the way of *leadership*, the fraternal is probably on borrowed time.

Single-issue partnerships such as these can be very valuable, but we believe they should complement Pauline-type partnerships.

Pauline-Type Partnerships

Partnering around *all four elements* is a glorious, yet audacious endeavor. For such a partnership to be successful, equal attention needs to be given to all four components, because they are all interdependent. Often, churches don’t know why they are feeling dissatisfied in their partnership until they evaluate their partnership using this Biblical, four-part grid, asking themselves the following questions:

- Do we share similar *doctrine and values* with our partnership/denomination?
- Are we meaningfully involved in *mission* with our partnership/denomination?
- Do we enjoy *genuine relationship* within our partnership/denomination?
- Do we *recognize* the gifting of God on those who *lead* our partnership/denomination?

If one of the answers to these questions is “no,” the partnership will feel uncomfortable. If two or three answers are “no,” the partnership will be unsustainable. The New Testament model of partnership assumes all four aspects of partnership, resulting in a holistic, satisfying partnership.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that it is preferable for every local church to be involved in a holistic, Pauline-type partnership, as their primary partnership. They should also then enjoy some subsidiary, single-issue partnerships.

Because Advance aspires to be a holistic, Pauline-type partnership that “ticks all the main boxes” (at least the four main ones), Advance partner churches do not have the capacity, or inclination, for another, similarly comprehensive, partnership. However, Advance partner churches will hopefully enjoy beneficial relationships with other single-issue networks. That said, some Advance partner churches maintain their affiliation with their denomination in a nominal sense, so long as they are free to fully partner with Advance. We describe our partnership as *primary but not exclusive*. As a movement, we actively honor, learn from, and engage with churches and movements outside of our partnership.

FAQ'S ABOUT PARTNERSHIP

How will the congregation feel the benefits of partnership?

The congregation should feel the benefit of partnership with Advance by (a) *being exposed* to visiting ministers from Advance, (b) *being enlarged* by being kept informed about news and needs across the movement, (c) some congregants attending various Advance gatherings, and (d) benefiting from *better ministry from their leaders*, who will be blessed the most by Advance.

Elders are warmly encouraged to ensure that all their members receive Advance publications (the prayer mailer and online magazine), which are specifically designed to help each congregant stay current with regards to what is happening in Advance.

How can we help our church engage with church planting and Advance?

Firstly, help your church become convinced that church planting is the primary way that the gospel advances, *and* that your church needs to be involved in church planting. You could preach a series on the book of Acts, or a single sermon on church planting, or you could do a 5-10 minute mini-teaching on the theological basis for planting. Help answer the objections people have, including “Why do we need more churches, shouldn’t we rather boost existing churches?”

Secondly, make sure your congregation knows about the money you sow into church plants each month. Remember, if you are giving to Advance, the majority of that money is going directly to church plants.

Thirdly, profile different church plants. You could schedule one Sunday a month to take a few minutes to profile a plant, and then pray for it together. You can show the church plant video, or communicate with the leader via live video conference, or have the leader send you a video message that you can play.

Fourthly, make sure the *online magazine* and the *prayer mailer* reaches the inbox of every member of your church. These publications are loaded with news on church plants, and help everyone feel meaningfully

connected to church planting and to Advance.

Fifthly, consider encouraging, or even tasking, various Small Groups to adopt a church plant for a year. They could pray for it, give money to it, send encouragements to it, or even send a person/team to visit it.

Finally, and most importantly, try to be hands-on with a church plant in your region. There are Advance church plants happening in most places where there are Advance churches; and nothing beats joining in on the ground.

Does Advance function like a denominational grouping?

Denominations operate differently, so this is a hard question to answer. However, we find that adhering closely to *all four* aspects of New Testament partnership enables us to enjoy the best aspects of belonging to a denomination, while avoiding the worst.

How can partnership be meaningful if there are not yet other Advance churches in our local area?

Firstly, we hope that it will not be long before your church plants a church in your area; and we would like to help you with that.

Secondly, Jesus' commission to your local church is to be on mission not only in the neighborhoods but also in the nations. You are already on mission to some degree in your neighborhood; and partnership with Advance can help you be on mission much further afield.

Thirdly, in terms of fellowship and connection, there will need to be more travel (both ways) involved for a while, but that is not insurmountable.

Finally, modern technology provides us with many options in terms of staying connected.

What are the expectations of Advance partner churches?

See *Document 8 Expectations and Joining*

How can we become a partner church?

See *Document 8 Expectations and Joining*