

STRENGTHENING CHURCHES TOGETHER

DOCUMENT 4

We will look at how we *strengthen churches together* under these headings:

- The importance of strength
- Strengthening elders
- Strengthening doctrine
- Strengthening values
- FAQ's about church strengthening

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRENGTH

Alongside planting, the other main feature of the New Testament ministry was the ongoing commitment to strengthen churches. For example:

- Peter and John strengthened the new believers in Samaria (Acts 8:14-25).
- Peter built up churches in various regions (Acts 9:31-32).
- Barnabas relocated to Antioch to strengthen the work there (Acts 11:19-23).
- Barnabas recruited Paul to help him strengthen Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).
- Prophets from Jerusalem strengthened the Antioch church (Acts 11:27).
- Antioch sent an offering for famine relief to Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30). Macedonia and Achaia also contributed (Rom. 15:25-26), as did Galatia and Corinth (1 Cor. 16:1-3).
- Jerusalem released John Mark to help Barnabas and Paul (Acts 12:25).
- Lystra released Timothy to help Paul (Acts 16:1-3).
- Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples (Acts 14:21-23), and strengthened the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:36-41). "The churches were strengthened in the faith" (Acts 16:4-5) and encouraged (Acts 20:1-2).
- Paul sent delegates to help strengthen churches (Acts 19:21-22; 1 Cor. 4:15-17; Phil. 2:19-29; 2 Tim. 1:18).

Planting *and* strengthening

Paul's dual commitment to planting and strengthening is reflected in his longing to preach Christ where he had not been preached (Rom. 15:20), *and* his longing for Christ to be fully "formed" in believers (Gal. 4:19). Paul implies that local church *strength* is a prerequisite for churches to be *planted* in regions beyond (2 Cor. 10:15-16). Paul knew that if churches were not *well-founded*, they couldn't easily send the gospel *further*. For example:

- Paul *planted* churches in Iconium, Derbe and Lystra, *and* returned twice to *strengthen* them (Acts 14:1,21; 16:1).
- Paul urged the church in Rome to help him *plant* churches in "regions beyond" (Rom. 15:20-24), but he did so on the back of fifteen chapters about *strengthening*.

The fact that the churches on Crete were weak bothered Paul. This caused him to send Titus, one of his leading men, to strengthen these churches. He could have directed Titus' energy, and the funds that paid for what must have been a costly trip, into *planting* new churches, which would have looked a whole lot better on the website, but he didn't. Rather, he spent "movement resources" on strengthening these precious churches on Crete.

Application for Advance: Aware that they are interdependent, we are as committed to *strengthening* churches as we are to *planting* them. This means spending time, money and energy on both *planting* and *strengthening*.

Paul seemed to pour most of his local church strengthening energies into three areas:

- Elders
- Doctrine (believing the right things)
- Values (correctly applying doctrinal truth to a specific context)

We will now look at how we try to strengthen partner churches in these areas.

STRENGTHENING ELDERS

John Stott rightly says, "The main way to regulate and consolidate the life of a church is to secure for it gifted and conscientious pastoral oversight."¹ The most strategic way to strengthen a church is to strengthen its elders, who are the existing "people foundation" of a local church. We help strengthen elders by:

- *Helping to appoint the first elders of a church plant:* In a new church, the first aspect of strengthening elders is to help prepare and appoint the first team of elders. Before elders are appointed, the leadership authority of the new church would commonly rest jointly with the pioneer leader and another outside party. This would be either the eldership team of a local church most closely connected to

¹ J. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, IVP, 1996, p. 173.

the church plant, or with a translocal minister who is helping facilitate the church plant. Either way, these parties would work together with the new congregation to identify, develop and appoint the first team of elders.

- *Helping the elders with future eldership appointments:* Once the first team of elders is appointed, the primary responsibility for identifying, developing and appointing more elders lies with those local elders. However, there is benefit in drawing on outside perspective and affirmation regarding the weighty task of appointing elders.
- *Targeted strengthening of their areas of need:* Each local church and eldership team will have specific areas that need strengthening. For example, a church may feel weak in the area of mission, or in being Spirit-empowered, or in a specific doctrine. Once this need is identified, people who are strong in that area can be deployed to help. If an eldership is in some kind of crisis, we would also provide a trusted individual (or two) to help the elders work through things.
- *General strengthening:* Most strengthening happens simply through a local church participating in normal “movement life.” Our rhythm of gatherings and our matrix of relationships are designed to provide ongoing support, encouragement, fellowship, and equipping for eldership teams.
- *Leadership training:* Partnership allows us to develop resources and train leaders better than if we remained in our own isolated local church silos. While a local eldership team should never abdicate their primary responsibility to develop leaders and elders in their ranks, pooling our energies can provide a welcome boost to local elders.

STRENGTHENING DOCTRINE

The content of Paul's epistles affirms how much Paul wanted his churches to believe correct doctrine and be “pillars of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). He wanted churches to believe the right things about who God is and how he interacts with mankind. He wanted churches to grasp the full benefits of the New Covenant and the primacy of the church in the heart and plan of God. He wanted churches to correctly understand this present age and the hope we have in the future age. He also called for church leaders and believers to hold fast to truth, to defend truth, and to proclaim truth. The doctrinal foundations of a local church should certainly be no less or more than the original and unchanging foundation of Scripture. As such, laying doctrinal foundations in a local church today essentially involves helping the church to know and believe the original, universal foundation of Biblical truth.

We help partner churches become doctrinally strong through:

- *Relational connection* with the church’s eldership team – great friends talk about great doctrines.
- *Advance gatherings* that promote doctrinal clarity and courage for those attending.
- *Recommending various courses and resources.*
- Our *Statement of Faith* outlines what we consider to be the primary, non-negotiable Biblical doctrines. Partner churches could adopt this Statement of Faith as their own, but it is better for them to use it as a plumb line of truth against which to develop their own, more detailed, Statement of Faith.

STRENGTHENING VALUES

Closely connected to, and yet distinct from, doctrine are *values*. Look at how Paul's concern for churches went beyond sound doctrine into this area of values, "That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my *ways in Christ*, as I teach them everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17, emphasis mine).

As much as Paul wanted churches to believe sound doctrine, he also wanted them to imitate his *ways in Christ*. "Ways," refer to the *way* doctrine is worked out in life. For example, it is possible for a church to correctly believe in *God's sovereignty*, but for the atmosphere in the church to remain mean, miserable and driven. That church needs no help with the *doctrine* of God's sovereignty, as much as with correctly *applying* God's sovereignty to life. Similarly, some churches pride themselves on proclaiming the one and only true gospel of *God's grace*, yet there are never too many smiles during their times of corporate worship. They don't need help in the *doctrine* of grace, as much as with the way in which they are *applying* grace to life. Proper application should promote praise of God and joy in their lives.

Consider the *Holy Spirit*: Paul wasn't content for a church to have just head knowledge of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because he wrote multiple chapters about the *way* we should eagerly and intelligently facilitate the work of the Spirit in church life.

Consider *leadership*: To believe that elders should lead the church is one thing. However, creating healthy leadership values where elders are humble, yet confident, and servant-hearted, yet fearless, takes modelling and impartation, not just a one-dimensional instruction in truth.

In summary, Paul felt a fatherly responsibility to help churches with both *doctrine* and *ways*, which we call *values*. We feel a similar responsibility to help churches develop a compelling set of New Testament *values*. However, the exact way that those values are expressed will differ from church to church, according to the unique personality and context of a local church, and according to the conscience and convictions of the local eldership team.

We help partner churches develop strong values through:

- *Relational connections* with the church's eldership team – values are often caught, as much as taught.
- *Advance gatherings* that model and impart healthy New Testament values.
- *Recommending value-rich courses and resources*.
- *Document 5 Statement of Faith and Values* provides an overview of the main Biblical values that all partner churches willingly embrace; although the expression of these values may differ from church to church and context to context.

FAQ'S ABOUT CHURCH STRENGTHENING

Do some churches need more strengthening than others?

Yes. New churches, churches without elders, and churches in crisis or transition, need more help than more mature and stable churches. However, even mature churches need the provocation and encouragement of the wider body.