

Koinonia: the DNA of “gospel partnership”

Dr. Joel Christenson

The phrase “partnership in mission” has gained a good deal of currency in mission circles in recent years. But let’s be honest with each other. Partnership between Christian groups and organizations—even evangelical groups and organizations that have a shared commitment to the authority of Scripture and the priority of evangelism, church planting, and world mission—is not easy. It does not come naturally. It demands a lot of time and effort. It requires us to commit limited funds and limited personnel to activities that are not entirely under our own control. It can feel very inefficient at times. It can create a sense of inequality—of being taken advantage of—if one party feels that it is gaining less from the partnership than the other party, or if one party feels that all of the decision-making power rests with the other party. It can lead to misunderstandings and a sense of broken trust. It can foster jealousy, competition, division, and even slander. It can leave us wounded, disillusioned, and distrustful of entering into similar partnering relationships in the future. Because of these types of experiences, one international director of a large mission organization commented to me recently that organizations such as his don’t see much value in cross-organizational partnerships anymore. The implication of his remark was clear: it is better for each Christian organization to just get on with its own focused calling and mission, and to leave other Christian organizations to do the same thing.

But is partnership in mission, as agonizingly difficult as it can be, something that we are simply free to embrace or to reject according to our own personal whim or organizational fancy? When push comes to shove, is it merely a matter of personal preference as to whether we enter into partnership in mission with other believers or not?

In considering these questions, I have been struck by the remarkable similarity between the nature of *cross-organizational* Christian partnership and *cross-cultural* Christian mission itself. Both types of activity are very difficult to do. Both require a lot of time and energy, including the commitment of limited resources to activities not entirely under our control. Both can lead to frequent misunderstandings and a sense of inequality between the various parties involved. Both can leave us feeling wounded, disillusioned—ready to give up and go back to the safety, the security, and the comfort of our own people, our own place, and our own way of doing things. And yet, which one of us would be willing to say that we do not see much value in cross-cultural Christian mission any more because it is too difficult to do? Can we fully embrace the tremendous cost and inefficiency (from a worldly point of view) of *cross-cultural* Christian mission in one breath, and then disavow all interest in and commitment to *cross-organizational* Christian partnership in the next? I would like to caution us to be very careful not to dismiss cross-organizational Christian partnership merely because it is difficult, costly, and seemingly inefficient. To do so would be to call into question the necessity and validity of the Great Commission itself.

So then, if God’s Word is clear and unequivocal in its mandate for us to cross social, ethnic, political, linguistic, religious, and economic barriers in order to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), can we find similar encouragement in the Scriptures for us to do the equally hard work of partnering together across our organizational lines in the fulfillment of the world mission mandate?

Let’s take a look and see.

I have been involved in cross-cultural ministry among the Chinese for nearly three decades now—first in Taiwan in a Hakka church-planting ministry, then in North America on the pastoral staff of a Chinese church, then in Henan as a university lecturer in English and American literature, and now as the director of an NGO that places and supports foreign Christian professionals in Mainland China. Throughout these years of cross-cultural ministry, two verses from the opening paragraph of Paul’s letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi” have been very meaningful to me:

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (Phil 1: 4-5).¹

That one phrase in particular—“partnership in the gospel”—seemed to express much of what I and my co-workers, my prayer and financial supporters, and my Christian employers were engaged in together: gospel partnership. I often found myself quoting all or a portion of those two verses when writing a prayer letter or a thank-you note to supporters or friends. I even chose those verses for the back of

¹ Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations in this paper are from the NIV.

our prayer card that we mailed out to our supporters when my wife and I first relocated to Asia long-term in 1998. After all, those 200+ prayer supporters of ours were “partners in the gospel” with us, and we (like Paul in his letter) were grateful to God for the partnership we had with them.

So when I accepted the invitation to lead an organization consisting of co-workers from more than a dozen different sending organizations and twenty different countries, and when I began to realize just how complicated and difficult it was to partner together with all of that complexity and diversity, I naturally turned to Paul’s passage in Philippians about “partnership in the gospel” for insight and encouragement.

What I discovered instead, on closer inspection of the Greek text behind the English translation, was that I had actually been misreading Paul’s passage on “partnership in the gospel”!—and in the same way that countless other English readers have probably been misreading that passage as well. Paul was actually speaking, I was astonished to learn, of a much more enduring, foundational, and abundant “partnership in the gospel”—a “partnership” between God and humans that is entered into by all of us the moment we receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the English word “partnership” that we find in the New International Version is far too weak to describe the depth and intimacy of the relationship that God invites us to enter into with himself through faith in Jesus. In essence, Paul is joyful because the believers in Philippi have been drawn into life-giving fellowship with God himself from the day they first came to faith in Jesus. Other translations have

struggled to capture that richer, fuller sense of partnership with God himself that is alluded to here:

I thank my God...[for] your *fellowship* in the gospel (Phil 1:3,5 KJV).²

I thank my God...in view of your *participation* in the gospel (Phil 1:3,5 NASB).

I thank my God...because of your *sharing* in the gospel (Phil 1:3,5 NRSV).

The underlying Greek word that these translations are attempting to render into English is *koinonia*.³ It is a term that is found frequently in Paul's writings, and it appears in several other New Testament writers as well.⁴ As might be inferred from the various ways in which Philippians 1:5 has been translated, *koinonia* and its grammatical variants can in different contexts refer to "partnership," "sharing," "fellowship," "participation," "communion," or "close union."⁵ In this one epistle alone, Paul actually makes use of *koinonia* in almost all of these slightly different semantic senses at different points in the letter. For instance, a few verses later in his opening paragraph, Paul defends the warmth of his feelings for the recipients of his letter by adding,

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, ... for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you *share* [*synkoinonous*] in God's grace with me (1:7).

Similarly, in Chapter 2 we find the *koinonia* that exists between God and his sons and daughters in Christ described as "*fellowship* with the Spirit" (2:1), and again

² italics in this and subsequent biblical quotations are added to highlight English translations of the underlying *κοινων* word group.

³ *κοινωνία*

⁴ see Acts 2:42, Heb 13:16, and I John 1:3,6,7 for non-Pauline uses of *koinonia*.

⁵ TDNT, Vol 3, 804-806.

(famously) in Chapter 3 as “the *fellowship of sharing* in [Christ’s] sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (3:10).

It is not until the very end of Paul’s letter, in fact, that Paul finally uses two verbal variants of the noun *koinonia* to talk about “partnership” in the sense that we usually think of partnership today—and in the way that I had always been thinking of “partnership in the gospel” in my own innocent yet culturally biased misreading of Paul’s letter. In Chapter 4, Paul specifically thanks the Philippians for some monetary gifts that they had sent to him through his co-worker Epaphroditus:

Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only (4:14-15, ESV).

This is highly instructive to me. The logical order or sequence in which Paul develops the concept of *koinonia* in his brief letter to the Philippians is by no means random or accidental. In the first two-thirds of his letter, Paul goes out of his way to emphasize the close fellowship and intimacy that we experience with God himself by means of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, that is essentially what the miraculously “good news” of the gospel is all about: bringing sinful human beings back into close fellowship—into genuine *koinonia*—with a righteous and holy God. “Partnership in the gospel” is always first and foremost about us sharing in and partaking of the goodness of God himself. It is about God welcoming us “in Christ” into that joyful, trusting circle of fellowship and oneness that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always known and experienced within their Trinitarian nature. And only

after the Philippians have been repeatedly reminded by Paul of the *koinonia* that exists between them and God does Paul make mention of the *koinonia* that exists between fellow believers in Christ—a *koinonia* that is characterized by such actions as the act of “partnership...in giving and receiving” that Paul mentions at the end of his letter.

If any doubts remain as to the centrality of the term *koinonia* in Paul’s conception of our fundamental faith relationship with God in Christ, they are put to rest by Paul’s double use of the term in I Corinthians 10 when talking about the Lord’s Supper. For Paul, the intimate communion that exists between God and the believer is made possible only by means of our actual participation (or fellowship or sharing or partaking) by faith in the physical death of Christ:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks *a participation* [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break *a participation* [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? (I Cor 10:16)

These are rhetorical questions to which the obvious response is, “Yes, indeed!” Our joyful union with God in Christ is based firmly upon our participation by faith in Jesus’ spilt blood and broken body on our behalf. That is always the heart and soul of our *koinonia* with God. It is only through Christ’s offering of himself as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that a restored intimacy with God is possible. And this spiritual *koinonia* with God through Christ’s death on our behalf serves as the unshakable foundation upon which all *koinonia* among and between believers within the faith community is eternally based.

The connection between these two types of *koinonia* would have been obvious to the original recipients' of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which was written in *koine* Greek: we partner together freely in God's family, generously giving to one another and receiving from one another, because God in Christ Jesus has already drawn us into abundant, life-giving partnership with himself. To put it another way, the grace that is ours by means of our vertical "partnership in the gospel" with God is continuously overflowing into horizontal "partnerships in the gospel" in all of our relationships on earth—including and especially our relationships with fellow Christians, regardless of where they live, what languages they speak, what local gathering of believers they belong to, and so on. It is only by the power of the gospel itself that meaningful, fruitful fellowship and partnership can exist between brothers and sisters in Christ—and, by extension, between and among Christian congregations and organizations.

What is particularly crucial for us to realize here is that "gospel partnership" in this extended sense is not just limited to partnership in so-called "full-time Christian ministry." Our *koinonia* with God actually extends into and transforms *all* of our human relationships and institutions, of which Paul and the rest of the New Testament writers are always eager to remind us. We are, by means of the intimate participation that we experience with God in Christ, both called upon and empowered to bring "good news" into our marriages, into our homes, into our economic structures as masters and slaves (i.e. as employers and employees), into our educational institutions, our governance structures, and the communities in which we live and worship. We are invited, by means of our gospel partnership in

and with the living God, to allow his goodness, his grace, and his life-giving abundance to flow into all of our human relationships and structures, witnessing him transform those relationships and structures along the way.

What did this look like in practice in the first-century church as it began to spread outward from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean world? In Jerusalem, it meant that the believers

were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . All those who had believed were together and had all things in common . . . selling their property and possessions and...sharing them with all, as anyone might have need (Acts 2:42-45, NASB).

In Antioch, it meant that “the disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea . . . sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:29-30). It also meant that, when specifically called upon by the Holy Spirit to release Barnabas and Saul (40% of their church leadership team!) from local pastoral responsibilities in Antioch so that they could be involved in cross-cultural church-planting work among the Gentiles in other parts of the Roman world, they willingly and eagerly prayed for them, placed their hands on them, and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3).

In Ephesus, it meant that husbands were to love their wives “as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25, ESV), that fathers were to bring their children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4), and that both masters and slaves were to “do good” to one another “as if ... serving the

Lord, not men” (Eph 6:7-8). In Macedonia, it meant that even in the midst of severe trials, a “grace of God” was given to all the churches in the region so that

their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty . . . overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. . . . They gave according to their means . . . and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints [in Judea]—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 8:5-8, ESV).

There are dozens and dozens of additional accounts like these scattered throughout the New Testament record, all pointing to and illustrating the gracious, generous, humble, open-handed nature of our transformed lives and relationships as the *koinonia*—the gospel partnership—that all believers have and know in Christ begins to work its way into and through and around all of our other relationships. All those who are in Christ enter into redemptive horizontal gospel partnerships—both personal and corporate—because that is what *koinonia* with God always yearns towards and makes possible.

What does this mean for those of us engaged in cross-cultural mission today? At the very least, it means that “partnership in mission” is never just a matter of personal preference or organizational expediency. We do not do the hard work of entering into creative, generous, cross-organizational gospel partnership because it is easy or cost-effective or convenient (which it most certainly is not). Is it easy for husbands and wives to submit to one another and to love one another as Christ loved the church? Is it easy for masters and slaves to genuinely seek one another’s

good and to treat one another with Christ-like compassion and dignity? Is it easy for impoverished Gentile believers in Macedonia to give generously so that impoverished Jewish believers in Judea (whom they have never met) can provide for their own families in a time of severe famine? None of these humble, generous “partnerships in the gospel” make any sense at all apart from the rich, inexhaustible *koinonia* that those of us who are in Christ know and experience on a daily basis from the moment we first place our trust in him. No, we do the hard work of finding what “gospel partnership” means for us as stewards and gate-keepers of God’s resources entrusted to us because that is what believers in “fellowship with the Spirit” have always done, and are always being prodded by the Spirit to do more and more of (Phil 2:1). It is who we are. It is our birthright as God’s children. It is our truest spiritual nature and our highest spiritual calling on this earth.

I find it remarkable that the concept of *koinonia* with God is largely missing from the Old Testament narratives. We find many examples of fellowship, partnership, sharing, and participation in various human relationships in the Old Testament, but there is no equivalent expression of the intimate fellowship *with* God that is abundantly on display in the New Testament accounts. The primary understanding of *koinonia* in the Old Testament (as reflected in the Greek Septuagint) is one of associations between human beings, and in particular of associations of a legal or semi-legal nature.⁶ Even the associations between God and his own people are primarily delineated in the language of covenant and law. While God can be known by his chosen people in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is always a

⁶ TDNT, Vol 3, 801-803.

sense of respectful distance and formality in that relationship. And the horizontal *koinonia* that is on display between the twelve tribes is often hopelessly strained and fractured as well, characterized by tribalism, strife, competition, and internecine warfare. It is clear that they are still awaiting a Messiah to unite them once again and to call them back into abundant community.

As I reflect upon the competition, mistrust, and lack of open-handed cooperation that too often inhibits and blunts cross-organizational partnerships among God's people today in the cause of world mission, I wonder if we might still be operating under a tribalistic, Old Testament understanding of partnership. We joyfully enter into the intimacy of fellowship with God in Christ and invite that transformational grace to flow into our *interpersonal* relationships, including those with other brothers and sisters in Christ in our local places of worship. But it is often difficult for us to grasp either the privilege or the blessing of also allowing that transformational grace to flow freely from our grouping of God's people towards another grouping of God's people—whether those groupings are in a local church setting or in a Christian business/NGO setting. We essentially remain law-bound in our understanding of Christian partnership, and the whole body of Christ—indeed, the whole world—misses out on the fuller abundance and deeper blessing of grace-based *koinonia* as a result.

This is the very thing that Jesus earnestly talked to the Father about when praying for all of us at the conclusion of his highly priestly prayer on the night before he was crucified:

My prayer is not for them [the eleven disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

Three times here within the span of a few brief sentences, Jesus prays specifically for our unity—for our oneness—as believers. Moreover, Jesus makes a strong link here between the *completeness* of our unity with one another and the *completeness* of the world's knowledge of himself as the Messiah sent by God. As we are brought into complete unity with one another in Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ is literally thrust outward and fans across the globe. Nothing can stand in its way. Jesus had already said essentially the same thing to his disciples earlier that evening: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

I am confident that both the Son and the Spirit are still interceding on our behalf before the Father in the same way today, asking that we might be one, just as they are one, *so that the whole world may know Jesus through our united efforts*. After all, the three persons of the Trinity have been engaged in "partnership in mission" far longer than any of us has. And now that the Father, Son and Spirit have graciously chosen to invite us by faith fully into that privileged place of *koinonia*,

how can we presume to do anything less in our dealings with one another as we live out this grace-based *koinonia* in our personal, corporate, and organizational relationships?

Let us all, then, as spiritual brothers and sisters in the community of God's people and as stewards of the spiritual and material resources that he has entrusted to us and to our faith-based organizations, hear the challenge that Paul gives to another gathering of God's people nearly two thousand years ago:

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. . . . [For] to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:1,7,12-13).

We are indeed a graced people, with vital gifts to offer one another as individuals, congregations, denominations, and mission communities for the mutual benefit of the entire body of Christ. May we enter fully and unreservedly into the grace-based, *koinonia*-infused "partnerships in mission" that God himself has prepared beforehand for us to walk in. To this we have been called and for this we have been chosen.