

What Does the Bible Say About Partnership?

19 Jan 2014 by Daniel Dow

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This is an attempt to do a biblical study of the word partnership and its derivatives ("partner," "partners," and "partnership") from four predominant English versions of the Bible, i.e., New International Version, New Living Translation, New American Standard Version, and the New King James Version. Complementary texts dealing with other biblical concepts related to partnership will also be considered. Finally, further input on this topic will come from the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) by Gerhard Kittel.

Since biblical partnership is a concept broader than the specific application of vocational ministry, e.g., mission partnerships, I will seek to allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves on a broader basis (admittedly through my own personal grid), and then attempt to draw some theological and missiological implications from these observations.

1. BIBLICAL PARTNERSHIP IS ROOTED IN AND MUST RESULT IN RELATIONSHIPS

The primary Greek word translated "partner/s/hip" in the New Testament is koinonia. This word appears 19 times in the New Testament. Perhaps the most common translation of koinonia is the English word "fellowship." But koinonia and some of its surrogates are also often rendered as "partner/s/hip" in the versions consulted. It can also be translated into other English words such as participation,sharing, and association.

Kittel reduces the meaning of koinonia to two bottom lines. First, koinonia is, "to share with someone in something" (TDNT 3:804-806). This first notion speaks of participation. We are called into fellowship (koinonia) with Christ by God (1 Cor. 1:9). This partnership with God is meant to lead us into meaningful partnerships as brothers and sisters in God's family (1 John 1:3). Furthermore, the participatory nature of partnership leads to both relational intimacy as well as to a fruitful advance of the Gospel (Phil. 1: 5ff).

The second concept presented by Kittel speaks of reciprocity, i.e., koinonia, is "to give someone a share in something" (3:807-808). In the work of the Gospel, the "plowman plows and the thresher threshes (doing so) in the hope of sharing in the harvest" (1 Cor. 9:10ff). In similar language, Paul states that the obedience of "sowers" (through the "sharing" of prayerful, generous gifts) will enlarge a harvest of righteousness in their lives and in the lives of those to whom they are related (2 Cor. 9:13ff; cf Rom. 15:27ff). In addition, koinonia, i.e., partnership, leads to a reciprocal relationship between those who receive a resource (in this case, instruction in the Word of God) and those who give it out.

Therefore, the biblical concept of partnership is rooted in and must eventuate in relationships. Because partnership in worldly terms is often related to or perhaps is even synonymous with business enterprises, it is tempting to replicate this business-based understanding in both church and mission. But it is important to remember that our Lord Jesus Christ says that love relationships/partnerships are of penultimate significance (Mark 12:28-34). While the task or, dare I say, the business of the Great Commission is of extreme importance, a business-based understanding of mission must never supplant and, in fact, must be the maidservant of relationships/partnerships as mandated by Jesus' Great Commandment. There is no greater work or greater understanding of partnership than the building of relationships in love (Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 12:31b-13:3, 13; Col. 3:14; 1 Tim. 1:5; cf John 13:34-35).

2. BIBLICAL PARTNERSHIP BEGINS WITH THE VERTICAL DIMENSION

The doctrine of the tri-unity of God reflects partnership within the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in and provide a perfect model of partnership. This doctrine spans the whole of Scripture from beginning to end, e.g., Gen. 1:26-27; Matt. 28:19; John 14:26; 15:26; 1 Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:4-5.

This is significant in that, also from the beginning of human history until the end of this age, the triune God calls and commands His children into a vertical partnership with Him, in general terms as well as with a view to the administration of Hs kingdom rule. Our partnership with God is life itself in fullest measure for all who know and trust Him (Gen. 2:7; John 1:4; 10:10; Acts 17:28; Gal. 2:20). But God also calls us into partnership with Him with a view to be personal extensions in order to fulfill His plans for world redemption. This was His design even before the fall, i.e., that we should be His vice-regents to rule over the earth (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8:3-8). After the fall, in Old Testament times, God ordained priests, prophets, and kings as His agents and partners. This is true in the New Testament era also, but not just through the apostles and prophets. All of us have become priests of the most high God with the purpose of declaring His praises among the nations (1 Pet. 2:9). This we shall do forever, as a restoration of our original, i.e., pre-fall, identity and calling (Rev. 5:9-10).

This notion is complemented by some interesting statements made in the New Testament referring to God's partnership with us and ours with Him in the work of the Great Commission. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me. Therefore (you) go and make disciple of all nations…and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). In reference to the sending of Barnabas and Saul from the church of Antioch, we see a partnership between the prophets and teachers of the church (and arguably, the entire Spirit-led church) and the Holy Spirit Himself: "So after they (the leaders and the Antiochian believers) fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them [Barnabas and Saul] and [they, i.e., the church] sent them off. The two of them, being sent on their way by the Holy Spirit…" (Acts 13:3-4). This partnership between God and is people is normative and not exceptional. In the Old Testament, David (and other leaders) administered God's rule through a dialogue-style relationship with the Lord (1 Sam. 23:2, 4; 30:8; 2 Sam. 2:1; 5:19, 23). In the same way, New Testament leaders viewed themselves as partners with God as they heard His voice and made crucial decisions regarding the fulfillment of the Great Commission. For example, consider Acts 15:28: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us…." Also reflect on Paul's dependence on the Holy Spirit's leadership/revelation regarding where to preach the Gospel, as in Acts 16:6-10. Finally, also consider other texts on partnership with God: 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Pet. 4:13; Rev. 1:9.

Much could also be said about another vertical partnership between heavenly beings and humans, that is, with Satan, demons, and evil. This can occur with both false and even sincere, albeit deceived followers of Jesus. (See Prov. 28:24; Matt. 16:23; 23:30; John 13:27; Acts 5:3-10; 1 Cor. 10:20; 2 Cor. 6:14-16; Eph. 4:25-26; 5:7; 2 John 11.)

3. BIBLICAL PARTNERSHIP ALSO CLEARLY HAS HORIZONTAL DIMENSIONS, AND THIS WITH VARYING LEVELS OF DEPTH, APPEARING IN VARYING FORMS

When the words partner/s/hip are mentioned, most will think of it in terms of horizontal relationships. The Bible has much to say about this human-to-human dimension of partnership. Peter, James, John, and their colleagues are called partners in the enterprise of fishing (Luke 5:7, 10). Also, in 1 Peter 3:7, husbands and wives are called “equal partners.” Thus, the Scriptures affirm partnership in both business and matrimonial realms. This illustrates that human partnerships are multifaceted. It also shows partnerships can be on an individual and corporate basis.

These varying levels and forms of partnership are also evident when considering what the Bible says about joint ventures in the work of the Gospel. For example, as it relates to differing levels of partnership, we see several levels of depth in Paul’s relationships with supporting churches as well as with members of his “missionary teams.” In order to illustrate this, consider the following chart :

THE APOSTLE PAUL’S CHURCH AND MISSION PARTNERSHIPS

	LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS	GROWING PARTNERSHIPS	DEEP PARTNERSHIPS
WITH CHURCHES	Corinth; Galatia; several churches from Paul’s first missionary journey	Colosse; Thessalonica; Jerusalem	Antioch; Philippi; Ephesus
WITH INDIVIDUALS	Syzygus and Clement (Phil. 4:3); Demas (Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10); Apollos	John Mark; Priscilla and Aquila; Silas; Onesimus; Peter; John	Timothy; Barnabas; Titus
WHAT WAS SHARED IN PARTNERSHIP	Varying amounts of encouragement, rebukes, and/or argumentation depending on the person’s/church’s heart; Money (or pleas for same); Paul did most of the praying; Stressful and limited communiqués; A limited advance of the kingdom emanated from their partnership due to the below limiting factors	Open to counsel and input from either/both sides; Mutual submission to common goals; Freedom to operate eitherindependently orjointly; Both sides prayed for each other; Open, regular communiqués; Significant missionary outreach occurred, albeit mostly in separate realms (e.g., Gal. 2:9)	Free/open interchange of resource personnel and their expertise; Transparency and risk-taking on both sides about motives, money, and potentially touchy, personal issues; Prayer was essential and fervent by all; Frequent, passionate communiqués; Intimate relationships led to a most fruitful mutual advance of the Gospel (e.g., Acts 19:8-10)

	LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS	GROWING PARTNERSHIPS	DEEP PARTNERSHIPS
REASONS FOR VARYING LEVELS OF DEPTH IN PARTNERSHIPS	Spiritual immaturity; victims of spiritual warfare; sin or disobedience; doctrinal error; lack of and/or limited time spent together	Mutual warmth and respect; common but not necessarily identical goals; ability to operate independently	Commonly held passions, aims, and goals; they suffered together and for one another; time spent together was repeated and substantial
SUMMARY VERSES	1 Cor. 3:2 "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it." Also Gal. 1:6; 3:1; 4:16; 5:7-9	Col. 2:5 "I delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is." Also 1 Thess. 1:4-10	Phil. 1:7 "It is right for me to feel this way about you, since I have you in my heart." Also Phil. 2:19-22
TYPE OF PARTNERSHIP	DEPENDENT, OR PERHAPS EVEN CODEPENDENT AT TIMES	INDEPENDENT	INTERDEPENDENT

This chart illustrates that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" model of partnership. Biblical partnership can be individual and/or corporate. It can be church-based, or mission-based, or both at the same time. It can be limited to single matters such as funding or it can be more full-bodied. It can happen on a one-time or occasional basis, or on an ongoing basis. It can have significant limitations, or it can be fewer, deeper, broader, and everything in between. However, it is clear that the most satisfying and fruitful partnerships went well beyond a mere business model, financial transactions, standards of accountability, and modest prayers. Rich partnerships in the Gospel arose out of deep relationships based on shared passion, mutual goals, and much time spent together. This should give us much to pray about and ponder.

4. BIBLICAL PARTNERSHIP, AS IS TRUE OF ALL RELATIONSHIPS WORTH PURSUING, IS OFTEN BOTH RISKY AND MESSY

One of the most blessed, but also most tragic partnerships in the Bible is that of Paul and Barnabas. No less than 27 times do their names appear together as mutually submissive co-workers in Acts, chapters 11-15. Yet the last words spoken of their partnership and friendship are these: "They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company" (15:39a). The grace of God allowed their split to be a greater means of advancing the Gospel as their work force was multiplied (15:39b-41; cf Col. 4:10 and 2 Tim. 4:11). But this occurred at a great cost and resulted in much pain.

This is but one biblical illustration of an ever-present, but often rarely spoken of reality: partnerships are risky and messy. Jesus trusted Judas Iscariot, and Judas in turn betrayed Him. Moses chose twelve partner leaders to spy out the Promised Land; ten of them succumbed to unbelief and caused deep grief and judgment (Num. 13:1-14:45). In the cases of both Jesus and Moses, even those who did follow and believe often got sidetracked and made things difficult at times (e.g., Peter, the sons of Zebedee, Philip, Thomas, Aaron, and Miriam).

Most of Paul's partnerships with congregations and individuals (his church and mission relationships) are marked by risk and conflict. Those who were wayward and/or immature were often subject to his rebukes. And those representing "agreeable" and "deep" partnerships with him were ones Paul took risks with, and they with/for him. In addition, numerous New Testament apostles clearly declare that an important, common denominator in their most meaningful Gospel partnerships was suffering (Peter–1 Pet. 4:13; John–Rev. 1:9; Paul–Phil. 1:29-30).

Such matters are and will be true of ministry partnerships until the Lord Jesus returns. In our vertical partnership with God, it is not infrequent that God doesn't work according to our expectations. And just as it was with Jesus and the twelve, God assumes a great risk by entrusting us, fallible as we are, with the stewardship of the kingdom. On the horizontal front, personalities and cultures clash. Unmet expectations lead to many disappointments on both sides. Misunderstandings and conflict are an inevitable, human norm and a spiritual/emotional reality. Callings may be different and lead to relational stress. And spiritual warfare vastly complicates and stresses partnerships. But we must not be surprised or derailed by the messiness and riskiness of our joint ventures! Rather, serving and persevering in love and discernment, God will prevail in and beyond our partnerships (Rom. 16:25-27; Eph. 3:20-21; Jude 24-25).

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One thought on "What Does the Bible Say About Partnership?"



Daniel
24 Jun 2013 at 11:50 am

What a challenge to partner as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit does!
I also like the story of Nehemiah (ch 3-4) rebuilding the walls – each one doing his part!

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