

Partnership

in the **Gospel**

A thematic study of Philippians to help churches improve their engagement in mission



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God's Word to God's World

Partnership in the Gospel
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How To Use This Study Guide

Aim

The aim of this interactive study is to help churches think through and improve their engagement in mission by exploring the Biblical concept of ***gospel partnership*** and applying it to their own context.

It also outlines the right and proper role of a 'mission agency', namely to serve and support local churches in their engagement in mission, rather than 'do' mission instead of or on their behalf.

Format

This guide has two elements:

1. A thematic study of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, looking at the model of gospel partnership;
2. A set of related questions to prompt discussion and, if appropriate, decision-making to help churches re-focus their mission engagement.

You will probably need at least two 90 minute sessions to work through the material. All Bible quotes use the NIV translation.

Suggestions for Group or Individual Study

This resource is designed primarily for a group (e.g. a PCC, Mission Committee, Home Group leaders, Small Groups) to work through. Individuals, including a church's existing or potential 'mission partners', should also find it helpful.

Group leaders should work through the study themselves, to become familiar with the material and determine the areas where the group will find discussion most profitable.

Prior to the study, all group members should prepare by reading through the book of Philippians. You may wish to point out the six instances when the Greek word for partnership appears in one form or another (see *Leaders' Notes*, p.14).

Mission and Gospel Partnership

Nearly 2,000 years ago, as recorded at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the command of the risen Lord Jesus was to 'go and make disciples of all nations'. Ever since, this command has been the Church's mandate for engaging in God's mission to 'bring salvation to the ends of the earth'.

This task is the immense privilege and responsibility that comes with belonging to the body of Christ, and central to it is the idea of **gospel partnership**.

In our Bibles, the word *partnership* is the closest English word we have when we translate the Greek word '*koinōnia*' (pronounced *coin-oh-nee-ah*). This is a very rich and dynamic New Testament word, and describes an active pursuit towards a common purpose, participation in a shared activity.

For example, in Luke 5:10 we see *koinōnia* being used in a commercial setting, to describe the business relationship between fishermen.

It is also used throughout the New Testament to describe the relationship between Christians because of their shared faith in, and *koinōnia* with, God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (e.g. 1 John 1:3).

This study considers the example in Philippians, where the Apostle Paul uses *koinōnia* to describe the relationship he has with the Philippian Christians. Through this study we will see how the concept of partnership has many implications for how a church views, describes and organises its mission engagement.

It is worth noting that different contexts lead to various different English words being chosen to translate the word *koinōnia* (or a variant from the root of that word).

We will see this in Philippians, but here are some other examples which begin to show the 'roots and fruits' of gospel partnership:

Titus 1:4 *"To Titus, my true son in our **common** faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour."*

Jude 3 *"...I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we **share**..."*


Acts 2:42 *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."*

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

Paul describes his relationship with the Philippian Christians as a *partnership*.

Investigate

2. What was the common/shared basis for their partnership?

 1:1, 1:5, 1:7, 2:1

How does it link with his priority (Question 1) that he reminds them of?

Apply

- *To what extent do you/your church members recognise that you share this unique, privileged status?*


- *What could be done to improve your/your church's understanding?*


Investigate


3. The partnership between Paul and the Philippian Church was like a rope comprising many strands. Look up the following references from Philippians and identify the different strands of their partnership.

Once you have looked up the references, try also to find a verb to sum up each of the four collection of verses, and hence each main 'strand':


a) Partnership in _____

 1:14, 2:16

 1:27, 2:2, 4:3

 1:29-30, 3:10, 4:14

b) Partnership in _____

 1:4, 1:9-11, 4:6-7


 1:19

c) Partnership in _____

 2:19

 2:25

d) Partnership in _____

 2:25, 4:10, 4:15-16, 4:18

 1:5


Apply


- Which of these main 'strands' do you find easiest? Why?

- Which of these 'strands' do you find most challenging? Why?

Investigate

4. Whilst *koinōnia* can be used to describe a business relationship (e.g. Luke 5:10), here it clearly involves much more than that. How did Paul feel about this partnership?

 1:3-4, 4:10

 1:7, 1:8, 4:1

Apply

- How does Paul's heart-felt language compare to the way you feel and talk about your mission links (individuals or organisations)?

Summing Up

Paul would have us embrace the following:

- All Christians are by definition in '*koinōnia*' because together we are 'in Christ' (Phil 1:1), sharing in God's grace (Phil 1:7) and having the Holy Spirit (Phil 2:1).
- All Christians have the privilege and responsibility of being a worldwide family of fellow-workers (Phil 2:25, 4:3) in the task of advancing the gospel by preaching Christ (Phil 1:18) to the ends of the earth.
- Therefore, we must act upon this status, privilege and responsibility we share by encouraging each other in our gospel toil, wherever we are, understanding 'fellowship' in this active (rather than passive) sense – *participating*, not simply *sharing*, in Christ. Indeed this participation is a result of our sharing in Christ.
- This 'partnership in the gospel' will include mutual support, prayer, learning, sharing and benefit, and will require ongoing commitment. To cut any one strand is to seriously weaken the bond; to work at having all in place will be a rich and rewarding experience.
- Finally, when we consider how we can extend our influence beyond our local reach, we are to engage in '*koinōnia*' partnerships with others 'there' just as we engage in '*koinōnia*' locally with each other 'here'. It is the same pattern of relating with each other, but requires careful thought, effort and communication because of the geographical separation.

Action Planning

We have developed an understanding of what gospel partnerships can look like. The whole congregation needs to be informed and involved if gospel partnerships are to work effectively and thrive.

Whilst all strands should be in place (mutual prayer, support etc.), the Bible does not tell us exactly how we should organise, maintain or review them; we have the freedom to determine what is most appropriate to our particular situation.

Work through the following self-assessment questions and develop an action plan for making gospel partnerships a vibrant reality for your church.

1. To what extent does your church think consciously in terms of gospel partnerships with specific gospel workers ('mission partners'), rather than merely 'support' of individuals or mission agencies?

- **Action Planning:** *How can you foster a congregation-wide understanding of, and involvement in, mission and gospel partnerships?*

3. Gospel partnerships require commitment and resources. How many mission partners can you realistically and meaningfully engage with?

- **Action Planning:** *If you are currently over-stretched, based on the previous question, which partnerships must take priority?*

- **Action Planning:** *How will you raise and allocate our giving?
(If you tithe, is this the most helpful approach for your mission partners?)*

4. To what extent is the whole congregation aware of what partnerships the church has, and how easily can they get actively involved in them?

- **Action Planning:** *How will you organise/'allocate' your partnerships to encourage whole-congregation ownership and active involvement?*

The Proper Role for Mission Agencies

Often churches think in terms of 'supporting mission agencies' rather than the Philippian model of 'being in active partnership with Christians'. Sometimes mission agencies have unhelpfully encouraged this 'support' model. It may seem easier for both churches and mission agencies for churches to send funds to the mission agency to allocate as they see fit, and for the agency to send general information and news to supporting churches in return.

Yet this falls short of the picture we see in Philippians and indeed often results in church members having a rather limited sense of ownership and engagement. This is because there is no personal relationship and so whatever is being supported feels distant and somewhat intangible.

Mission agencies are not found in the Bible so, whilst that does not make them wrong, it certainly means that they should operate in a way that *supports* rather than *distorts* the Bible's model for mission.

As the Bible's model for mission is gospel partnerships, the role of the mission agency must be to support and facilitate these rather than 'do' mission on behalf of or instead of the churches themselves. This means that as a church you will want to consider which mission agencies encourage churches to form gospel partnerships rather than the 'support us' model.

In the 21st Century, there are many ways in which mission agencies can add value and contribute to making gospel partnerships a reality for churches, for example by offering:

- Accumulated knowledge, experience and expertise in mission.
- Worldwide networks to facilitate placements.
- Selection, orientation, training, accountability, debriefing.
- Help in finding additional churches to partner with Mission Partners.
- A legal and financial framework for sending individuals – contracts, pension, tax, insurance, visas and work permits etc..
- Experienced pastoral support in times of stress or crisis.
- A range of services and teaching resources for churches on mission.

Leaders' Notes

Key Verse References

Listed below are the verses where some form of *koinōnia* is used in Philippians:

- 1:5 *“because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now,”*
- 1:7 *“It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you **share** in God's grace with me.”*
- 2:1 *“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any **fellowship** with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,”*
- 3:10 *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the **fellowship of sharing** in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,”*
- 4:14 *“Yet it was good of you to **share** in my troubles.”*
- 4:15 *“Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church **shared** with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;”*

Gospel Partnership in Philippians - Answers

The Thematic Study is summed up on page 8; further suggestions are given below:

1. Paul is concerned that the gospel of Christ is advanced and preached, i.e. that the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is proclaimed far and wide, that people might respond in repentance and faith.
2. All Christians are united by the gospel; by definition we share in God's grace and all have God's Holy Spirit. Rather than accept this passively, Paul is acknowledging how the Philippians have proactively ensured that this common bond is expressed practically through partnership in advancing, defending and proclaiming the gospel.

3. We have only 'bundled' the various strands of 'koinōnia' for the purposes of helping us understand the concept; use our subdivisions and wording only as a guide. The four approximate 'bundles' we identified are:

a)...Partnership in DOING

- *Proclaiming and contending for the (same) gospel yourselves*
- *Suffering for the gospel*
- *Living in a Christ-like way*
- *At home and elsewhere*

b)...Partnership in PRAYING

- *Paul prays for the Philippians – with thanks and joy; that they may constantly progress in their Christian faith and also rejoice in God and turn to him with all their needs with thankfulness.*
- *The Philippians also pray for Paul – it is two-way, mutual intercession.*

c)...Partnership in COMMUNICATING

- *An eagerness to share news to inform and encourage*
- *The possibility of visiting each other where possible/practical*

d)...Partnership in GIVING

- *Material support*
- *Long-term commitment*
- *Essential, generous and effective*

4. Paul rejoices greatly and is thankful to God for the relationship he has with the Philippians. Paul speaks of loving and longing for the Philippians and having them in his heart. As we compare our own engagement in mission to Paul's, can we speak with this sort of personal language?

Action Planning - Suggestions

It may be useful to have a list or table of your current links or partnerships for group members to use as they consider each one in turn to see how close it is to the model in Philippians and what changes may be necessary.

You may wish to agree an **aim statement** such as:

<Our church> will engage in mission beyond <our local area> by forming and nurturing a realistic number of committed gospel partnerships."

You may also wish to agree to adopt the four principles under question 2 as criteria to inform your periodic review of your gospel partnerships.

Further Resources

This guide has considered how to apply the concept of gospel partnerships to engaging in mission beyond your local area. If you are keen to look further at this, as well as how you can be more effective in mission and gospel partnership *with each other* in your *immediate* local area, consider working through the following, all available from the Good Book Company (www.thegoodbook.co.uk; 0845 225 0880):

"God's Mission and Ours", Ed. Peter O'Brien, ISBN 0-947316-04-3

"Proclaiming the Risen Lord: 6 Interactive Bible Studies in Luke 24 – Acts 2", Good Book Company, ISBN 1-876326-98-0

"Mission Minded: A tool for planning your ministry around Christ's Mission", Peter Bolt, ISBN 1-875245-19-7

This material has been developed from resources we use as part of the Crosslinks Mission Consultation, a service we offer to churches to help them take a fresh look at their involvement in mission.


If you would like to know more about this service, or any others that Crosslinks offers to help churches engage in mission, please contact the Crosslinks Church Partnerships Team using the details below.

We welcome any feedback to help us improve the resources we offer to churches; please send us any comments.


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