A THEOLOGY OF PARTNERSHIP:
IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION BY A LOCAL CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Christian faith and practice are to be grounded in sound theological foundation and "Christian partnership" is no exception. The purpose of this study is to define and describe "a theology of partnership" that will serve to guide a local church to illustrate such a theology in action.

DEFINING "PARTNERSHIP"

In surveying the literature on ministry and missions partnerships, we discovered a plethora of books and articles on the subject of partnership. Much of the literature trends toward pragmatism, identifying the qualities that make a partnership work. However, despite all of the ongoing discussion of partnerships, it is quite difficult to identify a comprehensive, coherent definition of partnership as it applies to ministry and missions. Before proceeding to develop a working theology of partnership, we must first identify an acceptable definition of "partnership."

A General Definition

Dictionary.com provides a very general definition of partnership, which it defines as, "the state or condition of being a partner; participation; association; joint interest."[1] Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary focuses more upon the legal aspects of the term, and defines "partnership" as "a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities."[2] The Encarta online encyclopedia more specifically addresses the cooperative nature of partnership, which it defines as, "cooperation between people or groups working together," and, "an organization formed by two or more people or groups who work together for some purpose."[3]

Though all of these definitions are helpful, especially with regard to the aspects of cooperation and responsibilities, they fall short of a complete understanding of the nature of partnerships between Christian churches and organizations.

A Ministry-Oriented Definition

A primary issue with regard to partnerships in ministry and missions is the element of purpose. Why does a partnership exist? What is the partnership's fundamental purpose? By addressing the issue of purpose, Warren provided a foundational ministry-focused definition of partnership, which he describes as, "sharing with another or with

[1] "Dictionary.com: Partnership," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/partnership>, accessed June 11, 2009.

[2] "Merriam Webster Online Dictionary: Partnership," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/partnership>, accessed June 11, 2009.

[3] "MSN Encarta Dictionary: Partnership," <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryResults.aspx?refid=1861723992>, accessed June 11, 2009.

others in action."[4] He further identifies three critical elements which constitute action-oriented partnerships. These elements are:[5]

- Genuine involvement – demonstrated by a commitment of trust.

- The acceptance of responsibility – demonstrated by a readiness to serve the purpose of the focus of the partnership.

- The acceptance of all liabilities – demonstrated by a readiness to pay the price of partnership.

Warren's simple definition is profound in that it is, indeed, oriented toward action and purpose. Missional partnerships do not exist merely for the rights or identity of those involved. Instead, they exist for the accomplishment of common actions and goals. Warren's insights are most valuable to the people and leadership of Crossroads Fellowship because international missions partnerships are, indeed, action-focused and goal-centered.

Williams augmented against the action focus of Warren by applying purpose and action to his mission-specific definition of what he termed the partnership team concept. Williams asserted that, "… missionaries represent the sister sending church. The national church and the sending church become a team that God uses to build his universal church of believers."[6] Morris furthermore identified three elements which are keys to the partnership team concept. These key elements are biblical love, good communication, and a clear definition of roles.[7] These elements of Williams' partnership team concept are

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[4] Max Warren, *Partnership: The Study of an Idea* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1956), 12.
[5] Ibid., 12-13.
[6] Morris O. Williams, *Partnership in Mission: A Study of Theology and Method in Mission* (Springfield, Missouri: Morris Williams, 1979), 161.
[7] Ibid., 161-175.

most helpful for a local church or entity that is in the process of fleshing out a theology of missions partnership.

Bush and Lotz provided a comprehensive and focused definition of partnerships in missions. They described such partnerships as, "… an association of two or more autonomous bodies who have formed a trusting relationship and fulfill agreed-upon expectations by sharing complementary strengths and resources, to reach their mutual goal."[8] This definition includes the necessary elements of trust, expectations, sharing responsibilities, and purpose.

A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR PARTNERSHIP

In May 2009 Geoff Baggett wrote an article[9] for the Southern Baptist web site, *sbc IMPACT*.[10] In that article Baggett described how a group of pastors of Panao Quechua churches in Peru had joined together to form a leader's training school called the *Andean Interdenominational School of Missiology*, and that Baggett was honored to have been invited to serve as a visiting professor in the school.

One pseudonymous Southern Baptist pastor and respondent to the article commented in response:

> That's good. I'm glad that you're giving them sound, Bible teaching. But, the interdenominational thing is an oxymoron. There's no such bird this side of Heaven. We could have complete unity here in the states as well. But alas, you have some people who want to sprinkle for convenience sake, instead of baptizing in the Bible way. And, you have some people who want to preach that a Christian can lose his salvation, instead of believing the Bible that salvation is an eternal work of grace in the heart of man. We have people who want to preach and teach

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[8] Luis Bush and Larry Lutz, *Partnering in Ministry: The Direction of World Evangelism* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 46.

[9] Geoff Baggett, "Theological Training-Andean Style," <http://www.sbcimpact.net/2009/05/19/theological-training-andean-style/>, accessed June 6, 2009.

[10] <http://www.scbimpact.net>

that salvation is by grace thru faith, but then you have to work like the dickens to keep saved. And, you have some people who want to embrace feminism, and they believe that women can pastor a Church, in direct violation of the Word of God. And, the list of theological errors goes on and on that some people want to cling to, instead of accepting the truth of God. How can we possibly join together with people who want to hold to such errors, and even heresies in some instances? I don't see it.[11]

The sentiments of this commenter are quite common in Southern Baptist life. The mindset might be expressed thusly, "Unity would be nice, but we cannot have unity at the expense of doctrinal orthodoxy. Therefore, we must work in isolation to insure doctrinal purity. There can be no true interdenominational unity this side of heaven."

It is the conviction of authors of this study that, while we must work to teach sound doctrine and insure doctrinal orthodoxy, we must also pursue the possibility of working in unity with other Christians, even those who come from diverse denominational backgrounds.

Unity – The Prayer of Jesus for Future Believers

John 17:20-23 contains perhaps the most compelling passage of scripture that addresses both subjects of unity and mission. The entire seventeenth chapter of John is a prayer. During this extended prayer Jesus prays for himself, his disciples, and for future believers. These verses are found within the prayer for the future believers. Jesus prays:

> [20]"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; [21]that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. [22]"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; [23]I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. (NASB)[12]

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[11] Baggett, "Theological Training."

[12] Unless indicated otherwise, all passages quoted in this paper are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Jesus prayed for unity among the believers of the future. The unity that He prayed for was modeled after the interrelationship, or community, within the Godhead. The unity that he prayed for was not a state of unity for unity's sake. On the contrary, this unity would have a purpose. It would be, "…viewed as a kerygmatic vehicle in the context of a divided world."[13] It seems that unity was intended to provide a convincing testimony, a believable platform upon which the gospel might be preached, so that the world would believe that the Father sent the Son. Therefore, where there is an absence of unity or the presence of conflict among believers, a convincing foundation for Gospel mission must, consequently, be lacking or absent.

The application of this passage to missions today is difficult to deny. Interdev Ministries, in outlining its biblical basis for partnership in missions, comments on this passage, "Except for the Great Commission itself in Matthew 28, this is one of the strongest comments Jesus made on missions. He hinged the credibility of our message on our oneness in Him."[14] To refuse all efforts at Christian unity is a direct rejection of the prayer of our Lord.

Interestingly, Tenney maintained that the unity described in this prayer is not an institutional form of unity. Instead, it is a personal unity, as evidenced by the Son's personal reference to unity with the Father.[15] This prayer did not address a vast ecumenical denominational unity. Instead, it was a prayer for the unity of individual believers and, through community, unity among local congregations.

[13] Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, in vol 25b of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 206.

[14] "The Biblical Basis for Partnership," <http://www.interdev.org/ZWPC4.htm>, accessed June 5, 2009.

[15] Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, in vol 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 167.

Therefore, it seems reasonable that followers of Jesus Christ and local churches, as they move out among the people groups of the world to fulfill the Great Commission, will seek to formulate unifying efforts of partnership with like-minded believers already on the field in order to fulfill that mission.

A Unified Body – A Defining Characteristic of Christians

The fourth chapter of Ephesians is the principal transition of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church.[16] It is a turning point. Throughout the first three chapters of the epistle, Paul emphasizes the theology and truth of what it means to be a child of God. Beginning in this chapter, he begins to teach the Ephesian believers how to act like children of God.[17] The starting point for this lifestyle of Christ-centered action is unity. Thus, he begins Ephesians 4:

> [1]Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, [2]with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, [3]being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [4]There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; [5]one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6]one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

The New Testament church that Paul addressed in Ephesus was a church of enormous diversity. Jews and Gentiles had been united by God in Christ Jesus. Since people from such radically diverse cultural and religious backgrounds can be united in Christ within local congregations, we have within this early church a potential model for unity and partnership in our current missions context.

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[16] A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians*, in vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 54.

[17] Max Anders, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians & Colossians*, in vol. 8 of the *Holman New Testament Commentary*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 147.

Paul stressed that there was only one body, and only one Spirit. There is only one Lord, faith, and baptism. There is only one Father God. Therefore, an outright rejection of brothers and sisters in Christ as potential ministry partners because of denominational labels or what we perceive as uncomfortable secondary and tertiary doctrinal differences demonstrates a poor emulation of the early church model. Indeed, how can we reject those who serve the same Lord, adore the same Father, and are inhabited by the same Holy Spirit, all on the basis of manufactured labels, man-made boundaries or perceived theological errors?

Paul, in the second verse, emphasizes four qualities that are foundational for Christian unity. These are humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance. I perceive that the issue of humility may be the greatest barrier in forming solid, unified partnerships for missions outside the boundaries of denomination. Yohannan speaks to this attitude when he states:

> There is a disturbing trend within many missions-conscious churches today. Although they still desire to fulfill the Great Commission, the focus has shifted inward. Rather than answer the question, "How will the lost be reached?" they now ask themselves, "How can *we* reach them?" It is a small but alarming change, for suddenly the emphasis is on "what works best for *us*" rather than "what will most effectively reach *them*."[18]

This is, we believe, the attitude that was so clearly expressed by the previously quoted respondent to Baggett's article on cross-denominational theological training, when he said, "… the list of theological errors goes on and on that some people want to cling to, instead of accepting the truth of God. How can we possibly join together with people who want to hold to such errors, and even heresies in some instances? I don't see

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[18] K.P. Yohannan, *Come, Let's Reach the World: Partnership in Church Planting Among the Most Unreached* (Carrolton, Texas: Gospel for Asia Books, 1991, 2004), 14.

it."[19] The concern demonstrated in statements such as this one is not a concern for the state of the lost people of the world. Instead, this indicates a discomfort in dealing with differences in doctrine, and a greater desire to protect self and doctrinal integrity at the expense of souls.

Paul, however, teaches in this same chapter in Ephesians that the church, on mission, exercising spiritual giftedness in partnership as the body of Christ, is the very remedy for false doctrine and teaching. He proclaims:

> [11]And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [12]for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; [13]until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. [14]As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; [15]but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, [16]from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Insulating ourselves from those who hold to different doctrines or practices is not a biblical response. Indeed, if we are convinced that our brothers in Christ in other cultures are holding to doctrine that is not sound, then a primary focus of our efforts at unity and partnership must be the teaching and mentoring of sound doctrine. Such instruction becomes our responsibility.

David Sills, a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and director of the Doctor of Missiology program at that seminary, is a participant in southern Peru with the REAP South team through his home church in

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[19] Baggett, "Theological Training."

Louisville, Kentucky. He made an observation on partnership in cross-cultural and interdenominational theological education as follows,

> I have been doing similar work – primarily in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, (and) Venezuela – for years, and I share your excitement for such vital work. I have also felt the tensions that the brothers mentioned in their comments above. However, I came to see that anything we teach these brothers about the Truth and sound doctrine will be more than they had before we got there. Of course, it would be great if we could just teach them with solid SBC men and not let them go until they are profoundly saturated with all the truth from God's Word, but that is not possible for a host of reasons.[20]

We agree with his statement. It is unthinkable that we should abandon believers to languish in false doctrines, or even heresies. Part of our responsibility within a missions partnership is, through our one body relationship, to teach and train in sound doctrine. We cannot allow irrational fears of self-contamination to outweigh our responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission.

Clearly, Paul's focus in Ephesians 4 is upon the concept of Christian unity. Interdev Ministries likens unity to a ligament.[21] The function of the ligament is to hold various body parts together. Therefore, when unity is lacking or absent, the church is neither healthy nor whole.

Partnership has risks. It is often times a difficult process. However, the apostle Paul has taught us that there must be unity through the body of Christ. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. We must cast off the yokes of fear, arrogance, and pride and seek to partner with, empower, and instruct our co-laborers in the mission who presently live on the mission field.

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[20] Baggett, "Theological Training."
[21] "The Biblical Basis for Partnership."

The Body of Christ – A Whole Made Up of Many Parts

Paul makes frequent use of the metaphor of the body in his description of the church. Referring to the body illustrations in Paul's epistles, Duncan maintains that the church is built upon partnership through body ministry.[22]

One such passage is Romans 12:3-6a, where Paul describes in brief the church as a body, and includes an application of spiritual giftedness:

> [3]For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. [4]For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, [5]so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. [6]Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.

The use of imagery of the human body was widespread in the ancient world.[23] Paul was not the first to use this imagery to describe a group of people.[24] However, Paul was very descriptive in using the imagery to communicate the interconnectedness of believers in the church. In this passage he reminds believers that they are, indeed, members of a single body and that they must use their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the entire body.

Mounce maintained that the theme of this passage is unity in diversity, and that the Christian faith is a corporate experience.[25] Although each believer comes into the church by an individual and separate act of faith, each is joined with other believers in community through Jesus Christ. The true Christian life is a life designed for community.

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[22] Malcolm Duncan, "Faith into Action: Working in Partnership," <http://faithworks.info/Standard.asp?id=5482>, accessed June 5, 2009.

[23] Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 402.

[24] Ibid., 404.

[25] Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, in vol. 27 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 234.

Paul goes into even greater detail in his description of the Christian body in his first letter to the church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 is an expansion of the Romans 12 passage. Of particular interest is the section that deals with the potential rejection of some parts of the body, 1 Corinthians 12:21-26:

> [21]And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." [22]On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; [23]and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, [24]whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, [25]so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. [26]And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Paul suggests that it is inconceivable, almost to the point of absurdity, for one part of the body to reject another part. Clearly, no part of the body of Christ has the right to reject another part. The body is an interconnected whole. When an individual part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers. When one part is missing, the entire body is incomplete.

The question becomes whether or not the body principle was intended for the local church only or is it also applicable to the universal church? The immediate context of each of Paul's letters seems to be the local church. Each letter was written to address specific issues in church life. However, if context is taken to its extreme, one might assume that the instructions in these letters applied only to the local churches to which they were addressed.

Moo maintained that these body principles are applicable to the universal church. Indeed, each individual Christian is a member of the universal church. Furthermore, Paul's letters forbid us from separating the local and universal church.[26]

We agree with Moo's assessment. The local church is an expression of the universal church. Just as Christians within a local church are designed to live and serve in community, so also are local churches designed to live and serve together in community through partnerships. An obvious expression of this cross-congregational community is found on the mission field.

Again, this issue reverts back to the issues of pride and self, for only selfishness and prideful arrogance could lead one portion of the universal church to dismiss another portion of the church as being unnecessary or unworthy of cooperative ministry. One verse found in our original focal passage in this section, Romans 12:3, speaks most vividly to the problem of arrogance, as it reminds us, " … I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think …"

We Christians in North America must be careful to avoid our tendency toward pride and arrogance, and we must humbly approach our indigenous brothers and sisters on the mission field as potential partners in God's mission.

Koinonia – The Biblical Expression of Partnership

The Greek noun, *koinonia*, is most often translated and understood to mean, "fellowship." For Paul this was the most appropriate term used to describe the unity and bond between Christians.[27] It is a Greek word that has found a common usage even in

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[26] Moo, *Romans.*

[27] Bradley Chance, "Fellowship," in the *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman, 1991), 483.

English-speaking churches in the West. Fellowship is a common principle, even recognized by many today as one of the fundamental purposes of the church.[28]

Interestingly, this noun which is commonly translated as, "fellowship," may also be translated as, "participation," or "partnership." It is translated as such in Philippians 1:3-5 in the NASB: "[3]I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4]always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, [5]in view of your *participation* in the gospel from the first day until now."

In the New International Version (NIV), the same passage is translated: "[3]I thank my God every time I remember you. [4]In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy [5]because of your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now."

It seems that *koinonia* is the New Testament word that is nearest in meaning to the English word, "partnership."[29] Warren concurs with this translation, stating that *koinonia* indicates both partnership and intimate fellowship. The term expresses a two-sided connection, and it assumes that a brotherly relationship exists among believers. This connection includes purpose and results, such as giving, sharing property, and breaking bread.[30] Cueva suggested that biblical partnership includes, in addition to sharing in common projects and sharing of gifts and resources, the sharing in suffering.[31] This is an interesting insight, and one that is much needed in the North American church.

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[28] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Drive Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 105.
[29] Samuel Cueva, "A Missionary Paradigm of Partnerships Between the North and the South," <http://www.globalconnections.co.uk/OneStopCMS/Core/CrawlerResourceServer.aspx?resource=6c63f1e62f7c4285b3a5e8b878e37157&mode=link&guid=34731240b9f94baca2c71bb0060bbca5>, accessed June 17, 2009.
[30] Max Warren, 48.
[31] Cueva, "Missionary Paradigm."

Though some interpret this passage as a specific reference to a financial gift from the Philippian church, it is much more likely that Paul had a broader intent.[32] Again, this is a passage from a letter directed to a single local church, but with principles applicable to the universal church.

Interestingly, there seems to be a functional disconnect between fellowship and partnership among some Christians in the church in North America, as evidenced by another comment by the same pseudonymous respondent to my previously mentioned article on cross-denominational theological training. This commenter elaborated on his sentiments by saying:

> I could not start a seminary with a Catholic, nor with a Methodist. That's why I could not start Churches with a Pentecostal, nor with a Presbyterian. I wish that they would see the light and believe sound, Bible doctrine. But alas, they wont. They are sold out to tongue speaking, and baptizing babies, and sprinkling, and worshipping Mary and the Saints, and Arminian theology, etc. That's why I cannot start Churches with them, nor would I want CP (Cooperative Program) dollars, nor my church's money, going towards starting a seminary with them. Fellowship with them. Yes. Of course. Treat them good. Yes. Of course. Pray for the nation or the town with them. Yes. Of course. Start a food and clothes pantry ministry with them. Yes. Of course. But, when it comes to making sure that the true Gospel is being preached, and Pastors are being trained to teach their people, and churches are being started that will influence people and areas with the truth of God's Word; then no.[33]

This commenter seems to believe that he can choose to reject partnership with certain believers, but at the same time he can have fellowship with them. I submit that, from the linguistic and contextual evidence, the two concepts are not separable. If we share the same Lord, claim the same faith, and are indwelled by the same Holy Spirit, then we must be open both to partnership as well as fellowship. They are two sides of the same coin. This is the very heart of biblical *koinonia*.

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[32] Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Philippians*, in vol 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 105.
[33] Baggett, "Theological Training."

Finally, the fact that this passage refers to a fellowship and partnership across a great distance cannot be denied. Paul wrote this letter during his imprisonment in Rome. Paul's partnership began when he was physically among the Philippian believers. It continued as he traveled, even until he was incarcerated in Rome. Clearly, this notion of fellowship and partnership is not limited to the environment of a single local church.

The principle of *koinonia* is an important element of our missions efforts and strategies. As such, we cannot ignore the biblical mandate to serve in partnership with other believers, even across great geographic and cultural distances, within the mission of God.

Teamwork – Partnership in Action

The church at Corinth suffered from disunity. Paul was a missionary pioneer in the city. He introduced the gospel to the Corinthians and planted a church there. He was followed later by a Christian leader and preacher named Apollos. Tragically, the people of the church became divided into factions, each pledging their loyalty to the different leaders.[34]

This situation was unacceptable to Paul. He used a practical example from everyday agricultural life near Corinth to teach the church an eternal truth. Corinth had been famous for centuries for its grapes. Using the imagery of the vineyards and fields on the plain below the city,[35] he responded to their division and disunity with these words in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9:

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[34] *Life Application Study Bible*, New International Version (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991), 2065.
[35] W. Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 206.

[5]What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. [6]I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. [7]So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. [8]Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. [9]For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Paul's point was simple. He and Apollos were not competitors. They were fellow workers serving in God's field at Corinth. They were allies in the mission, co-laborers on God's farm.[36] Paul planted the seeds of the gospel. Apollos watered them through his ministry. However, workers such as Paul and Apollos were merely servants. They, themselves could not produce any spiritual results. Only God can produce growth, yet believers are privileged to work in cooperation with God in his mission.

These words of Paul reinforce a fundamental and necessary principle of teamwork on God's mission field. Various laborers in the work each bring their respective gifts and talents to the work. God uses those gifts and the service of believers to bring about results. All workers must work in relationship with one another and in relationship with God.

Wan expanded upon this teamwork/relationship principle in a paradigm that he called "relational realism." This paradigm stresses the importance of relationship, both the vertical relationship between God and the created order and the horizontal relationships within the created order.[37] It emphasizes the relational aspects of the Trinity and the community aspect of Christian life. Indeed, Wan maintained that relational realism is particularly relevant in cross-cultural environments.[38]

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[36] Raymond Bryan Brown, *1 Corinthians*, in vol. 10 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 310.

[37] Enoch Wan, "The Paradigm of 'Relational Realism,'" in vol. 19, no. 2 of *Occasional Bulletin*, ed. Bob Lenz (Wheaton, Illinois: Evangelical Missiological Society, Spring 2006), 1.

[38] Wan, "Relational Realism," 2.

In another study, Wan developed his paradigm to communicate a coherent system of relational theologizing and missiology.[39] Wan proposed that relationship is the source of human understanding, the basis of human knowledge, and the key to Christian doctrine. Sound theology must be grounded in biblical truth, but the context for making use of that sound doctrine is within a network of relationships.[40] He stated,

> Christian faith and practice are presented within a relational framework: especially in cross-cultural context. Traditional Western, categorical, definitional theologies prove difficult in non-Western contexts to live out within intensely relational societies. In a post-Christian and post-modernist era of the 21st century, a relational comprehension and implementation are essential.[41]

> We believe that it complements the admonition of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3.

Teamwork, partnership, and relationship are keys to success on God's mission field. Every servant is necessary. Every gift is important. No single individual, nor any single church or denomination, is capable of completing the mission task on its own.

Partnership and Unity – God's Blessing

The Bible teaches us that blessing is the result of our unity. David described the joy of unity among God's people in Psalm 133:

> [1]Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
>   For brothers to dwell together in unity!
> [2]It is like the precious oil upon the head,
>   Coming down upon the beard,
>   Even Aaron's beard,
>   Coming down upon the edge of his robes.
> [3]It is like the dew of Hermon
>   Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;
>   For there the LORD commanded the blessing--life forever.

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[39] Enoch Wan, "Relational Theology and Relational Missiology," in vol. 21 no. 1 of *Occasional Bulletin*, ed. Frank Lenz (Wheaton, Illinois: Evangelical Missiological Society, Winter 2008), 1.

[40] Ibid., 2.

[41] Ibid., 2,4.

Existing and working in unity does not mean that Christians will agree on everything. However, believers should agree upon purpose and mission. When the universal church works in unity it draws the world toward Jesus. When that same church displays open conflict and disunity, it repels people from the gospel. Genuine Christian unity alleviates the tensions that so often distract from the mission of God. Perhaps the greatest reward for believers today is that partnership and unity in mission provide a foretaste of the perfect unity that we will experience in heaven. The work, the accomplishments, and the blessings of unified partnership are well worth the investment of time and effort required.

DOCTRINE – THE PARAMETERS OF PARTNERSHIP

Unity is a biblical and noble foundation for missions partnerships. However, doctrinal issues must be considered when identifying missions partners. Missions entities or local churches would be unwise to enter intimate missions partnerships without first considering the doctrinal positions of potential partners, especially when dealing with such missions endeavors as church planting or theological education.

Doctrinal Policies within the IMB

The leadership of the IMB has an established structure of doctrinal policies and standards governing its appointment of missionaries. The trustees of the IMB adopted and added two rather controversial policies during their November, 2005, meeting. These policies related to the selection of candidates for appointment to mission service through the IMB. These policies related to two specific issues. The first was glossolalia and the

practice of a private prayer language. Candidates for appointment who claimed to practice either were disqualified from service.

The second policy related to the practice of Baptism. Specifically, this policy declared that baptism was a church ordinance. A candidate for service in the IMB must be baptized in a church that practices baptism by immersion alone and does not view baptism as sacramental or regenerative. In addition, the baptizing church must embrace the doctrine of the security of the believer. If a candidate does not meet these guidelines, he (or she) must be baptized within a Southern Baptist church as a testimony of identifying with the beliefs held by Southern Baptists.[42]

The adoption of these policies resulted in a firestorm of debate within the SBC, especially among bloggers. The policies caused much bitterness and division. However, the debate over these policies served to bring the issue of doctrinal orthodoxy to the forefront in the practice of missions within the SBC. Clearly, doctrinal guidelines must be in place to govern missions partnerships at the various level of cooperation. Since the fundamental missions partnership within the SBC is between its churches and its missionaries, guidelines are necessary to ensure doctrinal integrity and compatibility.

While the IMB guidelines are worthy of consideration, their contribution to the process for determining parameters for partnership at a local church level is limited. Local congregations typically have a well-established system of doctrinal parameters and tend to send out short-term missionaries from within their own membership. Since Southern Baptist churches are autonomous in their governmental structure, with no

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[42] "Explanation of BP news story, text of personnel selection measures given," <http://www.imb.org/main/news/details.asp?LanguageID=1709&StoryID=3667>, accessed June 29, 2009.

system of top-down authority, local churches must establish their own parameters for missional partnerships and cooperation.

Doctrinal Triage – Applications for the Local Church

R. Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, proposed a system of doctrinal triage for Christians to use to determine issues of doctrinal unity or parameters of partnership. Within his system, Mohler differentiates among primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrines. Primary doctrines include those doctrines that are central to the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, justification by faith, and the authority of the Bible. The denial of any of these doctrines would be, essentially, a denial of the Christian faith.

Secondary doctrines allow for disagreement among believers, though such disagreement would establish significant boundaries for identification and cooperation. Mohler identifies mode and meaning of baptism, as well as the service of women as pastors, as potential second-tier doctrinal issues.

Finally, third-tier or tertiary doctrines are those doctrines about which believers may disagree and remain in close fellowship, even within the same congregation. Mohler suggests that debates over eschatology fit into this category.[43]

Mohler's system of triage is very helpful and applicable at the local church level. Indeed, his system compliments the previously-established doctrinal parameters published within the membership documents of Crossroads Fellowship, a congregation within the network of the IMB and is a case in point for this study.[44] This congregation

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[43] R. Albert Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," <http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-07-12>, accessed June 29, 2009.
[44] *Discovering Crossroads Membership* (Cadiz, Kentucky: Crossroads Fellowship, Inc., 2002), 23.

has established a two-tier differentiation of doctrine and practice. The congregation has determined a set of eight essential beliefs which require unity within the congregation. Members of Crossroads Fellowship must agree to be in complete agreement on these doctrines. These essential beliefs address the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity and work of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, man, salvation, eternal security, and eternity (heaven and hell).[45]

Other beliefs or practices beyond these eight essential beliefs are considered as non-essential within the church's triage system. The people of Crossroads Fellowship are taught and encouraged to grant liberty in these non-essential areas. Ultimately, members of Crossroads Fellowship are encouraged to demonstrate charity and kindness in dealing with all areas of doctrinal difference.

In considering the doctrinal standards for potential missions partners, the people of Crossroads Fellowship need to look no further than their own membership documents. They simply need to identify partners on the mission field who share similar beliefs on the eight previously-established essentials, then allow liberty with regard to all other non-essentials.

FROM THEOLOGY TO STRATEGY

It seems clear that the Bible places a high value upon unity in the church. One natural outcome of true biblical unity is partnership and collaboration in missions. A good theology of mission requires a relational theology of partnership. In my opinion, there is no escaping this biblical truth.

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[45] *Discovering Crossroads Membership*, 23-25.

The difficulty comes, however, in the fleshing out of one's theology. How does one incorporate the biblical admonitions within a denominational structure like the SBC, which seemingly leans in the direction of isolationism and restriction on a missions partnership spectrum? Specifically, how might Crossroads Fellowship conform to the clear teachings of the Bible and form relational partnerships on the mission field, and at the same time function within the leadership and supervision of the IMB? Our first step has been to recognize that in fulfilling our role as a SC church among the Panao Quechua people, we are actually engaged in two partnerships instead of one. The first is a partnership of mobilization with the REAP North team of the IMB. The second is an actual partnership of engagement with an unreached people group.

Partnership of Mobilization – The IMB

Our first partnership is with the REAP North Team of the IMB in Peru. It is a partnership of mobilization. This team serves as our resourcing unit for our short-term teams on the field. We work through the IMB's structure of team formation, application, and documentation. We rely upon them for provision of counsel, logistical support, strategy recommendations, and training. In return, the REAP North team counts on our church to provide good records of goals and accomplishments on each of our deployed teams.

We understand that the REAP teams rely upon anecdotal accounts and statistical information for justification of personnel and budgeting needs from year to year. We assist REAP North team members by providing after-action reports and evaluations after our time on the field, as well as end-of-year summaries for their reports to their superiors. We want to do everything possible to assist them in securing adequate funding and

personnel for year to year. We have committed to function as thoughtful partners with this IMB team, and adhere to all of their prescribed standards and regulations for partnership mobilization. However, as an autonomous local church, we can and must exercise our autonomous freedom to form partnerships with other evangelical believers on the mission field, as we deem necessary, in order to achieve our strategic goals.

CONCLUSION

In this brief study, a definition and description of "a theology of partnership" has been offered to be a guide to Christian cooperation and collaboration. The case study of a local church working in partnership with the IMB has been used to illustrate "a theology of partnership" in action.

Harmony, unity, and partnership are important biblical principles. Just as God designed individual believers to exist in community with one another, it seems that God intends for churches and groups of believers to co-exist and co-labor in community, as well. Working in partnership is especially critical on the international, cross-cultural mission field. Mission partnerships cannot be engaged in a thoughtless or haphazard manner. Kingdom work demands careful and thoughtful theological foundation, resource-sharing stewardship and God-honoring practical implementation in terms of cooperation and collaboration.

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