

Partnership

in the **Gospel**

A thematic study of Philippians to help
churches engage in mission



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 and applying the biblical concept of ***gospel partnership***.

It also outlines the right and proper role of a 'mission society', namely to serve and support local churches in their engagement in mission, rather than 'do' mission 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 further discussion and, where appropriate, decision-making to help churches re-focus their mission engagement.

You will probably need at least two 60-90 minute sessions to work through all the material.

Suggestions for Group or Individual Study

This resource is designed primarily for a group to work through. Individuals, including a church's existing or potential 'mission partners', should also find it useful.

If those using the guide are 'mission-policy' decision makers (e.g. a PCC or Mission Committee), they can work through all sections of the guide.

Groups who are seeking to engage in mission but are not primarily decision makers (e.g. Home Groups) can either leave out the 'Planning for Action' section, or work through the section but ignore the 'Planning for Action' prompts.

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. You should consult the Leaders' Notes (p.19), and you may wish to point out the six instances when the Greek word for partnership appears in one form or another. It may also be useful to have a list of current 'mission links' available.

Prior to the study, all group members will profit by reading through Philippians.

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 therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19). Ever since, this command has been the Church's mandate for engaging in God's mission to bring salvation 'to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

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, and 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 Church. Through this study we will see how the concept of partnership has 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 (the *koinōnia* word is in **bold type**):

- Titus 1:4 "*To Titus, my true child in a **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 our **common** salvation"...
- Acts 2:42 "*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*"
- 1 Cor 10:16 "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** in the body of Christ? "*

Investigate

3. The partnership between Paul and the Philippian Church was like a many-stranded rope. Look up the following references, try to identify the different strands and suggest an umbrella title for each one:

a) Partnership in _____

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

b) Partnership in _____

 1:6-8, 1:12-14, 1:24-25, 2:25-30, 3:1, 4:10

c) Partnership in _____

 4:11-18, 4:14, 4:15

d) Partnership in _____

 1:1, 1:27-28, 2:14-16

e) Partnership in _____

 1:29-30, 2:1-7, 3:10, 4:2-3

Think through

- *Thinking about any mission links you have with individuals or organisations around the world, which of these main partnership '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 merely a business relationship (e.g. Luke 5:10), here it clearly involves much more than that. What value did Paul place on their relationship?



1:3, 1:7, 1:8, 4:1



4:10, 4:16-17

Apply

- *Compare Paul's way of speaking to the way you feel and talk about your mission links. If there is a discrepancy, why might this be so? What can be done about it?*

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), partakers of God's grace (Phil 1:7) and participants in the 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 proclaiming 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 of the rope 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.

Think through

- *What practical steps can you take as an individual, home group and/or church to improve your involvement with your mission links and to help build authentic gospel partnerships?*

Planning for Action

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, as appropriate, develop an action plan for making gospel partnerships a vibrant reality for your church.

1. To what extent do your church members think consciously in terms of gospel partnerships with specific gospel workers ('mission partners'), rather than merely 'support' of individuals or mission societies?
 - **Planning for Action:** *How can you foster a congregation-wide understanding of, and involvement in, mission through gospel partnerships?*

2. List those with whom your church has a mission-related link. Which are most like the gospel partnership model—and why? Which are less so—and why?

○ **Planning for Action:** The following questions may be useful to ask - perhaps draw up a table to help you compare your mission links, existing and potential:

(i) To what extent are they involved in 'proclaiming Christ'?

(ii) Do they share the same understanding and expectations as you regarding gospel partnership?

(iii) If they are linked with a mission society, does it operate by encouraging and supporting gospel partnership?

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

- **Planning for Action:** *Given your thoughts from Questions 2 and 3, what changes may be required in terms of mission partners, mission societies and any other organisations you support? Do you think you are currently over-stretched—or perhaps you have too few links?*

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

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

The Proper Role for Mission Societies

Often churches think in terms of 'supporting mission societies' rather than the Philippian model of 'being in active partnership'. Sometimes mission societies have unhelpfully encouraged this 'support' model. It may seem easier to all parties for churches to send funds to the mission society to allocate as they see fit, and for the society 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 societies 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 society 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 societies encourage churches to form gospel partnerships rather than the 'support us' model.

In the 21st Century, there are many ways that mission societies can add value and contribute to making gospel partnerships a reality for churches, such as offering:

- Accumulated knowledge, experience and expertise in mission deployment.
- 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.

...and so it is also necessary to fund the mission society and its essential central operations. This can be achieved by annual church donations to Crosslinks' central funds, individual Membership/Friends, or setting up a legacy.

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 you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all **partakers** with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel."*
- 2:1 *"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any **participation** in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy..."*
- 3:10 *"...that I may know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may **share** his sufferings, becoming like him in his death..."*
- 4:14 *"Yet it was kind of you to **share** my trouble."*
- 4:15 *"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;"*

Gospel Partnership in Philippians - Answers

The study is summed up on page 11; further important points are:-

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, in order 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 five approximate 'bundles' we identified are:
- a) **Partnership in PRAYER...**
 - *For one another according to gospel priorities*
 - *Out of personal concern*
 - b) **Partnership in CARE...**
 - *Developing a real relationship*
 - *Sharing news to inform and encourage*
 - *Visiting each other where possible*
 - c) **Partnership in MONEY...**
 - *Material support*
 - *Long-term commitment*
 - *Essential, generous, effective*
 - d) **Partnership in MINISTRY...**
 - *Proclaiming and contending for the same gospel*
 - e) **Partnership in DISCIPLESHIP...**
 - *Following the same Lord*
 - *Suffering for the same cause*
4. Paul rejoices greatly in the relationship he has with the Philippians, and is thankful to God for them. Paul speaks of loving and longing for the Philippians and having them in his heart. His attitude of service towards them, patterned on Christ's example, is demonstrated in a greater concern for their well-being than for his own. This model is a challenge to churches and Mission Partners alike.

Planning for Action - 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 assess how it compares to the model in Philippians and consider what changes may be necessary.

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

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

You may also wish to agree to adopt the three principles under Question 2 (page 13) as criteria to inform your periodic review of your gospel partnerships.

Further Resources

This guide has focussed on 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:

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

Available from Christian Focus Publications (www.christianfocus.com; 01862 871011):

"Partnership / Philippians", William Taylor, ISBN 1-84550-231-0

Available from Inter-Varsity Press (www.ivpbooks.com; 0115 978 1054):

"Salvation to the Ends of the Earth", Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, ISBN 978-0-85111-519-1

"Basics for Believers", D. A. Carson, ISBN 1-844740-30-7

"Paul the Missionary", Eckhard J. Schnabel, ISBN 978-1-84474-349-0

This material has been developed from 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 or other services that Crosslinks offers to help churches engage in mission, please contact the Crosslinks Church and Members 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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