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Churches Partnering Together : Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion

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Churches Partnering Together : Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion

Description

Most churches in the United States have fewer than 75 members. Many of these congregations barely have enough money to pay their pastor's salary, let alone launch a movement or host a conference. How can they hope to make an impact beyond their own walls?

In *Churches Partnering Together*, Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks show how all churches—big and small—can do more together than they can do apart. Looking to the New Testament for guidance, this practical book will help pastors, church leaders, and laypeople alike think creatively about gospel-driven church partnerships in their own communities and around the world.

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CHRIS BRUNO & MATT DIRKS

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON



**CHURCHES
PARTNERING
TOGETHER**

Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion

“One of the most important lessons from the New Testament is that gospel churches naturally cooperate in gospel ministries. That’s why I welcome this new book by Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks. The rising generation of young evangelicals needs to embrace once again a fully biblical understanding of cooperation so churches united in faith can cooperate together to share the gospel with the world.”

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“God’s mission is too big for any one church to accomplish. We know that. Yet we often act as if our church must do it all—alone. How freeing to discover what can happen when churches join forces. Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks are scholars with pastors’ hearts, and they tackle the topic with theological depth and practical wisdom. Their strategies for kingdom partnerships will leave readers inspired to seek out partner congregations and well equipped to make the partnerships flourish. For church leaders more excited about building God’s kingdom than their own, this is the book to read.”

Drew Dyck, Managing Editor, *Leadership Journal*; author, *Yawning at Tigers: You Can’t Tame God, So Stop Trying*

“The world has become too complex and challenging, and gospel opportunities too numerous, for Christ’s followers to work in isolation from one another, much less compete with each other. The twenty-first century must be a century of partnerships; as long as the Lord tarries, we need to work together to advance the gospel. That’s why I’m delighted to commend this thoroughly biblical and eminently practical book.”

Todd A. Wilson, Senior Pastor, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois

“God can and does work miracles through local churches linked together by the gospel for the sake of loving their communities by introducing them to Jesus. I love the vision Chris and Matt live out and lay out in this book. May their tribe increase!”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists*

“Unfortunately, smaller churches are too often deemed to be less faithful or significant. Bruno and Dirks cast a biblical vision for how such churches can partner together, providing a biblical foundation and practical strategies for such endeavors. The book makes a fresh and important contribution, and should be read widely.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“When gospel renewal grips our communities, it will be the fruit of churches collaborating in kingdom partnerships. *Churches Partnering Together* provides the requisite instruction and inspiration to make this vision a reality.”

Chris Castaldo, Director, Ministry of Gospel Renewal, Billy Graham Center; author, *Talking to Catholics About Faith*

“Gospel partnership, rightly understood, always extends beyond individuals to churches. This book is an outstanding resource. It lays out, compellingly, the biblical rationale for churches partnering together with the aim of gospel advance. It is full of useful examples and practical advice about partnership in action. I recommend it wholeheartedly.”

William Taylor, Rector, St. Helen’s Church, Bishopgate; author, *Understanding the Times and Partnership*

“Having recently begun to benefit from this very kind of relationship with four other local churches, I find myself very excited about *Churches Partnering Together*. I trust God will use this book to expose many more to the beauty and strength of these partnerships of mutual encouragement, shared resources, and shared labor. The work that Jesus has called his church to do will be greatly empowered as more of us follow the course that Chris and Matt lay out here. They give us not just a compelling vision but also the practicalities of pursuing these partnerships, with due attention to important things such as a solid relational foundation and prayer.”

Mike Bullmore, Senior Pastor, Crossway Community Church, Bristol, Wisconsin

“Can even small congregations play a large part in the Great Commission? This book answers the question with a resounding yes—as they develop kingdom partnerships where they don’t own anything, control anything, or count anything as their own. If you want to make a difference in the expansion of the gospel, read this book! It provides simple advice that can yield profound results.”

William J. Hamel, President, Evangelical Free Church of America

“Partnerships make the most important things in life happen. What none of us can do alone can often be done in collaboration with others. Many pastors and church planters will benefit enormously from the wisdom, biblical insight, and practical experience that Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks provide for us here. May God be pleased to spread the vision, and share the work, for the growth of kingdom churches that advance the gospel of Christ.”

Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Chris and Matt illustrate the power and multiplication factor of partnerships to see the kingdom of God expand. Out of their own experiences, they provide a road map for congregations of any size to partner together with others for powerful results. They write with kingdom hearts and gospel-centered focus. I highly recommend this book to any who are involved in the Great Commission.”

T. J. Addington, Senior Vice President, Evangelical Free Church of America; Leader, ReachGlobal; author, *High-Impact Church Boards* and *Leading from the Sandbox*

“Ever since the apostle Paul thanked the church at Philippi for their partnership in the gospel, churches with a vision bigger than themselves have joined together to establish kingdom partnerships. Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks help us to see how local fellowships willing to walk humbly and depend together on the power of God can become catalysts for gospel-centered outreach to their communities and to the nations. How might we multiply the seed God has entrusted to us and extend the reign of Christ with one another to the glory of God? You will be both challenged and encouraged as you read this strong exhortation to kingdom building through church partnerships.”

Bill Mills, Founder, Leadership Resources International

CHURCHES PARTNERING TOGETHER

**Biblical Strategies for Fellowship,
Evangelism, and Compassion**

**CHRIS BRUNO
AND MATT DIRKS**

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion

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To our Lord,
our wives,
and our kids

They have all given us
much more grace
than we deserve

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Foreword

If you are part of a big church, this book probably won't interest you.

But countless tens of thousands of us belong to small churches. Many of these churches are very small—so small it is difficult for one of them to imagine, at the moment, planting another church, fully supporting an overseas missionary, or several other things that need resources beyond the capacity of one small church.

Sometimes the challenge is reasonably well met within the framework of denominational structures: small churches with a common heritage and vision working together. Sometimes, however (let us be frank), churches within our own denominations do not share our understanding of and passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. We may then find deeper gospel-based links across denominational lines. That, too, is happening.

In England, these movements are called gospel partnerships—Free Churches and Church of England congregations, often fairly small, are working together to train workers and plant churches, remaining not too concerned about the denominational outcome provided the gospel is joyously and faithfully upheld. Likewise, in the United States, some churches that align themselves with the Gospel Coalition are developing similar patterns in certain

regions. The book you are holding tells of the outworking of one such partnership in one such region—Hawaii.

One does not have to agree with every pastoral decision adopted by Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks to realize that these brothers have important things to say, an important vision to cast, and important experiences to share with those of us who are members of small churches.

D. A. Carson
Research Professor of New Testament
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

1

Catching the Vision

Understanding Kingdom Partnership

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3–5

There are a hundred reasons why you shouldn't work together with other churches.

You have limited time, resources, and people in your church. Isn't it possible to overcommit these God-given gifts by deploying them in ways God doesn't intend? Your church has a unique theological and philosophical identity. What if you wake up and find yourself unequally yoked to another church that believes and behaves differently? You have a deep desire to reach people and

influence them to see God the way you see him. Won't there be people who are reached by your partnership ministry who decide to go to other churches or denominations? After all, you're only half-joking when you call other churches "the competition."

So why do it? What would drive churches, already stretched thin by their own ministry needs and financial pressures, to engage in kingdom partnership? What would make them work together selflessly, even when their own congregations might not benefit at all?

To answer those questions, we need to dig deeper into the Jerusalem collection partnership. We need to look at what drove Paul and the Gentile churches to join together for the benefit of a faraway group of foreign people many of them had never met. On the face of things, the Jerusalem collection just made no sense.

Why was Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, so zealous about blessing the Jews in Jerusalem? Why did he spend so much time and energy ministering to a group that clearly mistrusted him, probably hated him, and might even have killed him in appreciation for the gift he collected for them?¹ Why did he set aside his burning desire to bring the gospel to Spain, the last unevangelized region of the Mediterranean, in order to take a two thousand-mile detour to visit Jerusalem and deliver the gift himself? Why did he risk his already-fragile relationships with Gentile churches in places such as Corinth and Galatia by pushing them to unite in a partnership that would bless the same people who often shunned them as less than Christian?

Let's start from the beginning.

¹When Paul wrote about the collection to the Romans, he asked them to pray "that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints" (Rom. 15:31).

The Story of the Jerusalem Collection

At the birth of the church (Acts 2), the first believers were Jewish pilgrims from across the Roman empire who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Many of them were staying with relatives in Judea, but after they were converted and started following the teachings of the incendiary cult leader (as many saw him) named Jesus, their families disowned them and put them out on the streets. In order to survive, these new believers were forced to depend on the generosity of people they barely knew.

Their new brothers and sisters in Christ responded! As they grasped God's generosity toward them, the early believers showed incredible generosity toward one another. Acts 4:34–35 says “there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

But this happy community did not last for long. Only a few years later, a great persecution broke out, which scattered most of the believers in Judea back across the Roman empire. A small group was left in Jerusalem, but they had almost nothing. As despised Christians, it was impossible for them to get jobs and support their families. Added to this struggle was a great famine that occurred in AD 46. Luke described it:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27–30)

This was most likely the same mission Paul described in Galatians 2:2, when he said he and Barnabas “went up because

of a revelation.”² During this trip, they forged a strategic partnership with the apostles in Jerusalem:

When James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal. 2:9–10)

This is the point where Paul’s mission crystallized. While the Jerusalem apostles focused on reaching Jews, Paul and Barnabas would go across the Roman empire, planting churches among the Gentiles. And a major goal of their mission would be to “remember the poor” of Jerusalem by connecting the new churches together to support the struggling saints back there.³

After Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they were commissioned by the Holy Spirit for this new mission and then sent out by the church. Over the next decade, Paul planted churches in four major regions: Galatia (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe; Acts 13–14), Macedonia (Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica; Acts 16–17), Achaia (Corinth; Acts 18), and Asia (Ephesus; Acts 19).

Once Paul had evangelized a city, established a Christian community, strengthened the saints in the church, and raised up leaders to guide the church, he called the church toward part-

² While some scholars argue that Galatians 2 is actually Paul’s description of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, it is more likely that Paul was referring to his “famine relief visit,” recounted in Acts 11:30. Otherwise, Paul’s chronology in Galatians (which refers to only two post-conversion visits to Jerusalem) and Luke’s chronology in Acts (in which the Jerusalem Council is Paul’s third post-conversion visit) disagree. Apart from the chronological issues, the dispute between Paul and Peter, described in Galatians 2, seems more likely to have been one of the causes of the Jerusalem Council rather than the result of it.

³ The “poor” Paul was referring to here were almost certainly the poor saints in Jerusalem. In Romans 15:26, Paul referred to “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 126.

nership in God's greater kingdom.⁴ And there was one major task he recruited each of the churches he planted to carry out: collecting money for the poor in Jerusalem.

After spending ten years planting churches, strengthening churches, connecting churches, and collecting from churches, Paul decided it was finally time to deliver the big gift. This obviously wasn't an impulsive effort. He traveled one thousand miles to take the collection to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17–20; 24:17), bringing with him representatives from at least three of the four regions where he had planted churches.⁵ The saints in Jerusalem received the gift with great joy and gratitude, but as Paul expected, he was arrested by unbelieving Jews soon after the gift was delivered. Paul was soon on trial for his very life.

The Purpose for Partnership

So what sent Paul on this kind of suicide mission? One thing's for sure—it wasn't to impress the apostles in Jerusalem: “Those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me” (Gal. 2:6). Neither was the collection some kind of tax imposed by the Jerusalem mother church on Paul and the churches he had established: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under

⁴ As David Downs observes, “Embedded in Paul's epistles are numerous passages that highlight regional connections within Pauline Christianity, including greetings from members of one community to members of another (Rom 16:3–16, 21–23; 1 Cor 16:19–20; Phil 4:21–22; Phlm 23; cf. Col 4:10–17), letters of recommendation (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 16:10–12; cf. Col 4:7–10), references to travel delegates (1 Cor 1:11, 2 Cor 7:2–16; 8:16–24; 9:3–5; Phil 2:25–30; 1 Thess 3:6), and requests for hospitality (Rom 15:24; Phlm 22; cf. Col 4:19)” (*The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* [WUNT 2/248; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 18).

⁵ Acts 20:4 lists them. From the region of Macedonia: Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea and Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica; from the region of Galatia: Gaius from Derbe and Timothy from Lystra; from the region of Asia: Tychicus and Trophimus.

compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7). So what drove him to strive and strain toward a partnership of wildly different churches? What motivated him to risk his life delivering their gift?

There are at least three key motivations that propelled the first kingdom partnership, and these still inspire most partnerships today:

Fellowship and Unity. When Paul described the Jerusalem collection, he used many words. *Service. Gift. Privilege.* But one of the most powerful is the Greek word *koinonia* (Rom. 15:26). Literally meaning “sharing,” this word is often translated as “fellowship.” Paul saw the collection as a unique way to draw churches together and display the unity of the Spirit.

This wasn’t natural, especially in the racially charged church of the first century. Paul continually challenged churches to pursue gospel unity among all Christians, both Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3; Ephesians 2), but the Jerusalem collection partnership was a powerfully tangible demonstration of how the gospel transcends race, culture, and tradition.⁶ Paul made this purpose clear: “For if the Gentiles have come to share in [the Jews’] spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings” (Rom. 15:27).

⁶The Old Testament prophecies of a “pilgrimage of the nations” and the eschatological unity that it would produce were crucial in shaping Paul’s vision of how and why the Gentile Christians should bring a material offering to Jerusalem. This common Old Testament theme refers to the future ingathering of the nations to God’s covenant people. Of course, the expectation of blessing for the nations can be traced all the way back to the Abrahamic promises, such as “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) and “I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (17:5). Paul was well aware of these promises and referred to them often (see Gal. 3:7; Rom. 4:17). However, the later promises of the Gentile ingathering in the Prophetic Books added another important layer to Paul’s expectations. In Isaiah 66, the prophet speaks of the time when the Lord will “gather all nations and tongues” (v. 18). When that day comes, the nations will bring “an offering to the LORD . . . to my holy mountain Jerusalem” (v. 20). While scholars have spilled a lot of ink discussing the precise role of prophecies such as this in the collection and in Paul’s eschatology in general, it is hard to deny that Paul had the eschatological pilgrimage theme in mind in Romans 15 as he described his travel plans and referred to the “offering of the Gentiles” (v. 16).

And not only did the collection unite Gentiles and Jews, but it also bonded Gentile churches *to one another*. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the collection, he told the story of the churches in Macedonia: “For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord” (2 Cor. 8:2–3). This “reminded the members of these congregations that they were partners in the gospel with one another, no less than with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”⁷ When churches work side by side with one another, they are reminded of their union with one another in Christ.

Evangelism. When Paul delivered the Jerusalem collection, there’s a strong possibility that he was blessing not only needy Christians but also needy unbelievers. After he was arrested in Jerusalem, he testified before the Roman governor, Felix, and said: “I came to bring alms *to my nation* and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult” (Acts 24:17–18). Paul may have given most of the collection to the church in Jerusalem, but he probably gave a portion of it to the temple for distribution to needy unbelieving Jews. Why did he do this? One reason: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for [the Jews] is that they may be saved” (Rom. 10:1).⁸

Paul knew he couldn’t accomplish this goal by himself, so he established the Jerusalem collection partnership to get some help. Evangelism is hard enough even when you’re simply displaying and proclaiming the gospel to the family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers God has already put in your life. When you’re trying to take the gospel to highly resistant groups and

⁷Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles*, 19.

⁸David Garland makes a similar argument in *2 Corinthians*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 389–90.

highly dangerous places, it's just too much for one person, or even one church, to handle.

That's why a group of churches in Hawaii partnered together when they sensed God leading them to reach victims of the sex-trafficking industry in Waikiki. Most tourists don't stay up late enough to see the evil that emerges after dark, but every Friday night, believers from different local churches gather in Waikiki to pray for two or three hours. Then they walk the streets of Waikiki from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m., looking for prostitutes to engage in conversation. They offer to pray with the young women, many of them runaway girls as young as fourteen or fifteen who are enslaved by coercive pimps. These brave saints offer any assistance they can provide. Sometimes they have a chance to share the gospel, but they usually only have a few minutes to talk before a pimp swoops in to drive them away.

Over the last few years, this partnership has rescued almost a dozen women from slavery in the sex industry. The churches work together to provide safe housing and basic necessities for the young women and their children, connect them with loving Christian sisters and brothers who often become surrogate families, and disciple them toward maturity in Christ.

Compassion. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, possibly with the goal of recruiting them into the partnership, he said, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Compassion toward the poor and suffering is natural for people who have experienced *God's* compassion. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "[God] comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:4).

In 2010, this kind of compassion drove two churches to establish a partnership to bring aid to Haiti following the horrific earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands of people and left more than a million homeless. James MacDonald from Harvest

Bible Chapel in Chicago and Mark Driscoll from Mars Hill Church in Seattle wanted to respond, but they quickly realized that not even their two megachurches could do much to meet the incredible needs in Haiti by themselves.

So MacDonald and Driscoll spent the next few days putting together a church partnership for disaster relief called Churches Helping Churches. Donations began pouring in from around the world, and less than a week later the churches had a team on the ground in Haiti assessing the damage, praying with the people, and helping Haitian churches begin the long process of recovery. Churches Helping Churches has given millions of dollars and countless resources to churches in Haiti and, after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, Japan.

In thousands of cities across the globe, churches large and small haven't considered the amazing things God could do through them in partnership with others. He used kingdom churches to turn the first-century world upside down (Acts 17:6). What will he do in the twenty-first?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are some ways you've already seen God expand his kingdom through you and your church? How could partnerships enhance what God is already doing?
2. What aversions do you have to partnering with other churches? Do you have a fear of overcommitting limited time, resources, or people; a desire to maintain theological purity; or feelings of jealousy or competition toward other churches?
3. What motivations are driving you toward cooperative ministry with other churches? Fellowship and unity? Evangelism? Compassion? Something else?

2

Laying the Foundation

Building on the Gospel

I went up because of a revelation and set before them . . . the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

GALATIANS 2:2

When you visit a church in America, you can usually tell within a few minutes what really drives the congregation.

The activity-driven church has a list of all its upcoming events in the bulletin, and you need a microscope to read it, because there are ten to twenty activities every day of the week. The experience-driven church sings every song eight or ten times, and when you talk to people during greeting time, they start every other sentence with “God told me . . .” The social/political-action-driven church has a table in the lobby with,

depending on its political persuasion, either (1) family-values voter information guides or (2) fair-trade coffee that was hand-roasted by widows in a remote village in South America. The counseling-driven church has a rack on the wall advertising recovery groups for caffeine addiction and every other dependency under the sun. The family-driven church has entire rows taken up by families with five or six kids since there are no children's programs that might split families apart. The Bible-driven church hands you a bulletin as thick as your thumb, containing the pastor's seven-page sermon outline (plus fourteen pages of footnotes).

How many of those characteristics mark your own church? We can see three or four in our own! Few of these things are necessarily wrong, and many of them are attractive to us because they emphasize an implication of the gospel. God calls us to study his Word, to experience him through worship and prayer, to shepherd our families, and to influence our culture. The problem comes when you reduce the gospel to any of these things. Then your church becomes the family worship church down the street from the social justice church, rather than simply being a gospel church.

This kind of reductionism is a particularly strong temptation for churches that work together in kingdom ministry, because kingdom partnerships are usually focused on one specific gospel implication: assisting the poor locally or overseas; influencing one area of culture, such as the arts; or teaching biblical interpretation to rising church leaders. Gospel implications may be the focus of a partnership, but they cannot be the foundation. When a single implication of the gospel is all that's holding us together, rather than the gospel itself, the ministry will fall apart as soon as the money runs out or differences arise, as they always do.

Kingdom partnerships must be built on the gospel alone. This means that there should be a direct line between the aims of the partnership and Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. As

the implications of what Jesus has done are worked out in our churches, we will be compelled to partner with other churches to make the gospel and its implications clear across our cities and around the world.

The Gospel and the Jerusalem Collection

When Paul traveled to Jerusalem to deliver the Antioch church's gift to the suffering saints, the gospel was his first concern: "I went up because of a revelation and set before them . . . the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (Gal. 2:2).¹ Every Christian leader talks about the gospel, but Paul wanted to make sure they were all talking about the same thing.

The gospel is the good news of God's victory over sin through the perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrected reign of Jesus Christ. The gospel was proclaimed to the Serpent in the garden: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). It was foreshadowed by the sacrifices of Moses: "He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Lev. 1:4). The gospel was experienced by Isaiah in the temple (after he had already delivered five chapters of Spirit-inspired sermons): "He touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for'" (Isa. 6:7). It was preached by Paul above all else: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day

¹ While many scholars argue that Galatians 2 describes Paul's later visit to Jerusalem recounted in Acts 15, this view contradicts his claim that this was his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. Paul claims to have come to Jerusalem on the basis of a "revelation" (ἀποκάλυψις), and this description fits the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11:28 much better than the dispute that initiated the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The gospel will be fulfilled by Jesus at the end of the age when he comes to reign: “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).²

As Bryan Chapell summarizes the epic story of the gospel, “God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, restore creation’s glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice.”³ This means the gospel isn’t just a visa stamp on your passport to show the immigration officer when you get to heaven. It should shape every facet of life and ministry *now*: “The gospel . . . has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is *bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you*, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (Col. 1:5b–6).

Unfortunately, the gospel just isn’t enough for many people. We’re always trying to add something to God’s grace. Soon, the issues that drive our churches (such as strengthening families, pursuing social justice, or even studying the Bible) can start to take on gospel-level importance in our minds. Don Carson reminds us, “If the gospel is merely assumed, while relatively peripheral issues ignite our passion, we will train a new generation to downplay the gospel and focus zeal on the periphery.”⁴ Before we know it, the periphery can lead us to create entirely new belief systems, such as the prosperity gospel, the full gospel, the social gospel, and many more “gospels” that seek to complete what some believe is lacking in Christianity.

In Paul’s day, the Judaizing gospel sought to complete what some Jewish believers thought was lacking in the Gentiles’ faith:

²If you have never spent much time considering the storyline of the Bible, pick up an overview such as Vaughn Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) or Chris’s book *The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses* (Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming).

³Bryan Chapell, “What Is the Gospel?” in *The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices*, ed. D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 115–16.

⁴D. A. Carson, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1–19),” *Spurgeon Fellowship Journal* (Spring 2008): 1.

obedience to ritual requirements of the Law, such as circumcision. Paul was afraid that this false gospel had infected the Jerusalem church, but when he arrived, he was relieved to find out that the apostles proclaimed the same good news he did: salvation by grace through faith alone. This was confirmed when they did not require Titus, Paul's Greek teammate, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3), showing that secondary issues and practices were not going to be the basis of their relationship.

This budding partnership would not be the club of the circumcised, it would be the fellowship of those redeemed by the gospel of God's grace. So Paul celebrated the new relationship this grace brought about: "When James and Cephas and John . . . perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me" (Gal. 2:9).

The gospel unites leaders and churches in a way that no philosophy, tradition, task, or mission ever could. People who understand their need and their desperate dependence on God's grace are naturally drawn to one another, like beggars who huddle together in an alley where a five-star chef slips his best dishes out the back door every night. And that kind of gospel fellowship is where every great partnership starts.

Gospel Fellowship

Take Surge Network in Phoenix. It's a partnership of more than twenty churches that work together to train rising church leaders. They also host monthly pastors' seminars involving up to fifty churches and 150 leaders. But it all started with four pastors who simply decided to have lunch together once a month and talk about how the gospel influenced their lives and ministries.

The pastor who launched the partnership, Justin Anderson, says this step was crucial. Partnership projects can be a pain, he says. We don't need one more thing taking our time and our money. So you might not be completely stoked about an idea that one of your partners has, but if you're stoked about the guy who's

proposing it, it's a lot easier to support the idea. Partnerships strain trust, Anderson says, so trust needs to be established in relationship before leaders can start to work together.⁵

Andy Krause, who has helped launch missions partnerships around the world, firmly agrees. He says it takes time to build mutual trust, especially in other cultures: "A memorandum of understanding means nothing if the relationship isn't there."⁶

I've seen firsthand how gospel fellowship can lead naturally to kingdom partnership. A few years ago, I was meeting regularly with a group of pastors in our denomination, the Evangelical Free Church. We enjoyed one another's company, but we weren't doing much together outside our regularly scheduled meetings. One day, the topic of missions came up. As we talked, we realized that all our churches were spreading money, energy, and prayer for overseas ministry haphazardly across the globe, with little strategic thought. Praying together, we sensed God calling us to focus our efforts and partner together in missions somewhere. As we compared notes, we realized that we were all engaged in ministry to one degree or another in Southeast Asia.

But there was a problem: We were working with all kinds of missionaries from all kinds of organizations with all kinds of ministry goals. How could we unite? There was only one way to find out: get boots on the ground. A few months later, four of us jumped on a plane and went on a whirlwind trip through Southeast Asia. Our goal was to meet as many of our ministry contacts as possible and look for ways our churches could partner in ministry there.

As we drank gallons of tea and coffee with dozens of missionaries and local church leaders in three countries, our fellowship expanded. We gained many new friends across the region, all with different goals, target groups, and strategies, but all united by the gospel.

⁵Notes from personal conversation.

⁶Notes from personal conversation.

Once we got back home, we continued building relationships over e-mails and video chats. Other leaders in the East and West heard about what we were doing and joined the conversation. Out of this gospel fellowship, a church-planting partnership was born, with the goal of multiplying healthy churches across Southeast Asia. We called it the Kairos Project to signify how God brought us all together at his appointed time. While philosophical differences, financial struggles, relational conflict, and outside persecution have all worked to split us apart, our gospel fellowship has held us together.

Redeemed for Partnership

God designed us and then redeemed us in Christ to relate together and work together. Pete Cavanagh, who is part of the Acts 29 church-planting partnership in Australia, sees the thread of partnership woven throughout the Bible.⁷ In fact, he says the idea of partnership is fundamental to God's Trinitarian nature and our very identity as his creation. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been in perfect partnership with one another for eternity. When God created Adam in "our" image, he also made him coruler of creation.⁸ Then God gave Eve to Adam as a partner "fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). We were created for partnership, both with God and with others.

But Adam and Eve failed in their role as God's image bearers—his partners. Their job was to be God's representatives in the garden, acting on his behalf under his gracious rule. But they did not trust God as their partner, believing that he was not holding up his end of the deal. They decided to partner with Satan instead, hoping to gain what they thought God was depriving

⁷ Our discussion in the following paragraphs is indebted to Cavanagh's presentation, "Partnership," at the September 2012 Acts 29 regional conference in Waragul, Australia.

⁸ One of the best overviews of this concept can be found in Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 56–62.

them of. When confronted by God, they turned on each other. Their partnership with God was dead.

As you read through the rest of the Old Testament, you can see this pattern time and again. God entered into partnership with his people, making covenants with Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel, and David, and all these partners failed in their part of the relationship. But this did not end God's commitment to partnership. Since all the human partners in history failed to keep their end of the covenants, God intervened to keep the covenants for *both* parties.

When the Word became flesh, Jesus did what Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David could never do. He kept his side of the partnership perfectly. He went to the cross to bear the consequences of our failed relationships, and he was cast out of fellowship with the Father along with us. But he rose from the dead to reestablish the eternal partnership of the Trinity and, incredibly, to call *us* into their eternal fellowship as well.

In Jesus's famous prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, he asked "that they may all be one, just 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 have sent me" (John 17:21). We are brought into fellowship with the Trinity and with one another *so that the world may believe* and join us too! As Cavanagh says, "We look for those who are also co-laborers in the gospel, so our partnership with each other for the gospel now draws others into partnership with us and God in a continual cycle until Christ returns."⁹

Active Relationships

The whole scope of redemptive history highlights one thing about God-ordained partnership: it's *active*! Adam's partnership with God included the work of categorizing the animals and manag-

⁹Pete Cavanagh, unpublished manuscript.

ing the garden. Eve partnered with Adam as “one who helps” with the mission God gave. Jesus took on human flesh, lived in poverty for thirty years, tirelessly ministered for three more, then joyfully endured the horrors of the cross in order to restore the partnership between God and man. The Holy Spirit now empowers us to be co-workers in the gospel with others who are partnered with God in the same way.

When God calls his people into partnership, it’s not just to rub shoulders. Good relationships form the foundation and fuel for great partnerships, but too often fellowship is where it ends. It’s important to understand that a network is not the same as a partnership:

- *A network is passive; a partnership is active.* At the end of a networking meeting, you’ll come away with a doggie bag from lunch and a few new ideas to pitch to your church leadership team. At the end of a (good) partnership meeting, you’ll leave with an action plan for, say, caring for foster families in your city.
- *A network is about sharing information, expertise, and inspiration; a partnership is about sharing responsibility.* Networks are usually loose associations of like-minded leaders, with a revolving door of people who come and go all the time. Partnerships work collaboratively, demanding commitment from leaders and churches, and holding them accountable to follow through with their responsibilities.
- *A network is focused on individual churches/leaders; a partnership is focused on the kingdom.* In a network, I help you accomplish your own goals, expecting you’ll do the same for me. In a partnership, we work together to accomplish kingdom goals that we couldn’t achieve by ourselves.

To be sure, we need both networking relationships and partnering relationships. Local networks don’t usually provide all the

expertise, information, and inspiration we need, which is why we lean on national denominations and wide-reaching associations. But it's tough to partner fully for kingdom work with churches that are thousands of miles away, which is why we need to be connected to like-minded churches in our own regions.

These active, gospel-created partnerships are marked by one driving passion: the kingdom of God.

The Gospel and the Kingdom

Some Christians don't talk much about the kingdom of God. They think it's a concept that's just too foggy and undefined. But as Graeme Goldsworthy reminds us, we can't talk meaningfully about the gospel without talking about our resurrected Lord and King. As a result, "the gospel of our salvation is, of necessity, the gospel of the kingdom."¹⁰ We should be celebrating and proclaiming the kingship of Jesus wherever we can!

Some Christians don't think we can have any influence over the kingdom's expansion:

The kingdom is what it is. It does not expand. It does not increase. It does not grow. But the kingdom can break in more and more. Think of it like the sun. When the clouds part on a cloudy day we don't say, "the sun has grown." We say, "the sun has broken through." Our view of the sun has changed or obstacles to the sun have been removed, but we have not changed the sun. The sun does not depend on us. We do not bring the sun or act upon it.¹¹

¹⁰ Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Kingdom of God as Hermeneutic Grid," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (2008): 7.

¹¹ Kevin DeYoung, "Does the Kingdom Grow?" blog post, Feb. 15, 2011, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/02/15/does-the-kingdom-grow/> (accessed Dec. 27, 2012). In personal correspondence, DeYoung added, "The presence of the kingdom can infiltrate more of our world, just like the rays of the sun can break through the clouds and shine upon us with greater intensity." He is still uncomfortable, however, with the idea of the kingdom "advancing."

But in Colossians 4, when Paul talked about Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, he called them “fellow workers for the kingdom of God” (Col. 4:11). Notice that word *for*. Does the sun analogy hold up here? Could anyone ever work *for* the sun? What could you ever do for it? So why would Paul say he and his partners worked for the kingdom? Why would he waste his time doing things that would make no real difference?

In some places where Scripture speaks of God’s kingdom, it is talking about God’s sovereign rule and control over everything. Psalm 103:19 is a good example of this sense: “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” This is why some people view the kingdom as a static entity. If God already controls *everything*, what could you ever add to that?

But that’s not what the Bible always means by the “kingdom of God”—especially in the New Testament. Within the overall reign of God, there is a more specific aspect of God’s kingdom that directly results from the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Greg Beale explains it well (you might need to chew this over a few times, since it’s so theologically rich):

Jesus’s life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already-not-yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith and resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God’s glory.¹²

Jesus’s death and resurrection have established his reign as King over his new creation, and his followers are called to join in his mission to advance his reign. According to Tom Schreiner, the entire storyline of Luke and Acts points us to this part we play in God’s mission. Jesus brought the kingdom through the

¹²G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 23.

Spirit (as recounted in Luke), then he poured out the Spirit (as recounted in Acts) to spread the kingdom through us. “In other words,” says Schreiner, “the kingdom now expands; it reaches the ends of the earth through the work of the Spirit.”¹³

That’s why Paul talked about working *for* the kingdom. He understood very well that Jesus has given us the keys to the kingdom (Matt. 16:19).

The Keys to the Kingdom

Everyone knows that keys are a symbol of authority. Remember when you first got your driver’s license? Car keys were power! Or when you got the key to your first house? That key was proof that you were the king of your castle.

I once worked at a large church with almost a hundred rooms. The number of keys you had was a symbol of how much authority you had, except it worked in reverse. I was the lowest guy on the totem pole, which meant I had to carry around a whole carabiner full of keys, one for every individual office and room I was allowed to access. The guys at the top of the organizational chart had only one key, but that key let them into every door in the whole church. I had to walk around playing “Jingle Bells” on my belt loop all day long—ching! ching! ching!—but they had one key to rule them all.

That’s the kind of power Jesus promised us. He’s not here in the flesh anymore to open the door of the kingdom for people—he’s given *us* the keys. That means we have a joyful obligation to keep ushering more people inside the door, which expands the kingdom’s population and therefore God’s reign.¹⁴ And, if you can believe this, one day we’ll have not only the keys to the

¹³Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 509.

¹⁴That is why the elders in Revelation 5 can say, “You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (v. 10). The kingdom expands as citizens are added to it.

kingdom, but a shared title to the kingdom along with Christ! “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

Of course, there will always be people who misunderstand the kingdom. Building on the kingdom teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and observing the many good humanitarian things Jesus did, they see the kingdom expanding anywhere anyone does anything good. They may have the best of intentions, but they fail to see that we cannot talk about advancing the kingdom of Jesus unless we understand the atoning death of Jesus. Don Carson explains:

Many writers begin with the expression “the gospel of the kingdom” . . . and then expound the gospel entirely in terms of what they judge to be central to the kingdom. Commonly this is carried out by focusing on the social and communal values of the kingdom, and the word “kingdom” becomes an adjective: kingdom ethics, kingdom justice, kingdom community, kingdom gospel. . . . All that the canonical Gospels say must be read in the light of the plotline of these books: they move inevitably toward Jesus’ cross and resurrection, which provides forgiveness and the remission of sins. That is why it is so hermeneutically backward to try to understand the teaching of Jesus in a manner cut off from what he accomplished; it is hermeneutically backward to divorce the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels from the plotline of the Gospels.¹⁵

Without the gospel, we can do a lot of things, but none of them will really advance the kingdom. So when we talk about kingdom churches, we’re talking about churches that are passionately committed to spreading the reign of Jesus as King. And, by God’s design, this is done only through our demonstration and proclamation of the gospel.

¹⁵D. A. Carson, “What Is the Gospel? Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 160.

So if you're going to be rescuing victims of the sex-trafficking industry, you can't be content to get a few girls off the street, get them psychologically treated, and get them trained for a new career. A partnership to assist the homeless can't stop with a weekly dinner along with a distribution of clothes and toiletries. Those might be the first steps, but they don't necessarily advance the kingdom.

Jesus didn't die on the cross, rise from the dead, and ascend to the throne of the universe to make things *better*. He came to make all things *new*, which means we cannot rest until people are redeemed and radically transformed by his grace.

What Kingdom Partnerships Look Like

A partnership that's shaped by the gospel of the kingdom will necessarily look like the kingdom Jesus described. He said:

- *The kingdom should be proclaimed continually* (Luke 9:60). Whatever good things we do in the world, we must first and foremost display the kingship of Jesus and call people to live joyfully under his reign.
- *The kingdom is owned by the poor in spirit* (Matt. 5:3). Kingdom partnerships work best when leaders and churches are poor in pride, selfishness, insecurity, and a sense of entitlement. We're always tempted to look for ways a partnership might enhance the reputation of ourselves or our churches, but a phrase I heard somewhere reminds me to keep this in check: "No egos and no logos." We're not working to put our own stamp on everything, but the King's!
- *The kingdom starts out small and may be slow to grow* (Matt. 13:31–32). The kind of driven leaders who launch ambitious church partnerships are usually ambitiously impatient. But Jesus has been slowly expanding his kingdom for more than two thousand years. Whatever small

corner of the kingdom God might use us to influence will also probably take a few years (or decades!) to develop.

- *The kingdom is gained by forceful people* (Luke 16:16). We're talking about people who aren't afraid to go through serious trials with Jesus for the sake of the gospel. As we'll see in chapter 5, every kingdom partnership encounters opposition at some point, from within or without. It's time to man up.
- *The kingdom gives more responsibility to those who use what they've already been given* (Luke 19:17). We know of a church of about a hundred people that's had a million dollars stashed away in its bank account for more than a decade. This church has also been slowly dying for more than a decade. Coincidence? Maybe. But when we fail to use God's gifts to advance God's kingdom, why would he want to give us more influence? Churches and partnerships thrive when they steward their time, energy, people, and resources wisely for the sake of the kingdom.

When Paul left Antioch for Jerusalem, looking to build a partnership, these were likely the kinds of issues he was investigating as he compared his gospel to that of the other apostles. He knew that the gospel of the kingdom changes everything in life and ministry, and it's the only thing that makes true partnership possible.

Avoiding Gospel-less Partnership

If the gospel is not fiercely guarded as the cornerstone of our ministries, it will quickly be lost. Paul Hiebert saw this happen in the church where he was raised: "One generation . . . believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gos-

pel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the entailments became everything.”¹⁶

The Student Volunteer Movement of the early twentieth century descended into the same tragic spiral. Stirred up by Dwight Moody’s evangelistic ministry in the late nineteenth century, a number of young Christians banded together to form a missions organization.¹⁷ These wild-eyed zealots had a passion for the gospel, along with an audacious goal: “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” In the movement’s early years, thousands of young men and women signed its pledge: “We are willing and desirous, God permitting, to become foreign missionaries.”

From 1886 to 1920, the Student Volunteer Movement steadily grew, and the group sent out close to eight thousand missionaries! During these years, the gospel was highly valued and boldly proclaimed. But by 1920, the group had radically shifted its focus to the implications and entailments of the gospel. At its annual conference, G. Sherwood Eddy told the gathered students, “I heard a voice saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us to build a new social order?’”¹⁸ The vital connection between the gospel and the kingdom had been lost.

Things went downhill fast. In 1934, only thirty-eight missionaries were sent out. The group merged with a number of organizations—first the YMCA, then the United Student Christian Council, and eventually the National Student Christian Federation. In 1969, the group, then called the University

¹⁶Paul Hiebert, cited in D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 26–27.

¹⁷This story is told in Robert P. Wilder, *The Student Volunteer Movement: Its Origin and Early History* (New York: The Student Volunteer Movement, 1935), 58–60.

¹⁸G. Sherwood Eddy, “The Significance of Present Day Conditions to the Students of North America,” in *North American Students and World Advance: Addresses Delivered at the Eighth International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Des Moines, Iowa, December 31, 1919, to January 4, 1920* (New York: SVMFM, 1920), 50.

Christian Movement, voted to dissolve. As one committee member said, “We no longer had any reason to continue.”¹⁹

If we’re not driven by the gospel, *none* of our efforts will have any reason to continue. Our achievements will be nothing more than shacks built of wood, hay, and straw. We must build instead on the foundation of “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What gospel implications are you most tempted to use as gospel replacements (e.g., Christian activity, mystical experience, social/political action, counseling/discipleship, family building, Bible study)?
2. What kind of gospel fellowship have you experienced? Have you seen it move from relational networking to active ministry?
3. Evaluate some ministries you’ve been involved in. Were you advancing the kingdom through the demonstration and proclamation of the gospel? In other words, were you part of Christ’s mission to make all things new, or were you just making things better?

¹⁹ As relayed to David M. Howard, cited in Joseph L. Cumming, “The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions: Its Seeds and Precedents, Its Origins and Early History, Its Growth and Decline” (BA thesis, Princeton University, 1982), 199.



How to Work Together for the Sake of the Gospel

Most churches in the United States have less than 75 members. Many of these congregations barely have enough money to pay their pastor's salary, let alone launch a movement or host a conference. How can they hope to make an impact beyond their own walls?

In *Churches Partnering Together*, Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks show how all churches—big and small—can do more together than they can do apart. Looking to the New Testament for guidance, this practical book will help pastors, church leaders, and laypeople alike think creatively about gospel-driven church partnerships in their own communities and around the world.

“One of the most important lessons from the New Testament is that gospel churches naturally cooperate in gospel ministries. That’s why I welcome this new book by Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Bruno and Dirks tackle this topic with theological depth and practical wisdom. Their strategies for kingdom partnerships will leave readers inspired and well equipped.”

DREW DYCK, Managing Editor, *Leadership Journal*; author, *Yawning at Tigers*

“Can even a small congregation play a large part in the Great Commission? If you want to make a difference in the expansion of the gospel, read this book! It provides simple advice that can yield profound results.”

WILLIAM J. HAMEL, President, Evangelical Free Church of America

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CHURCH LEADERSHIP

