

Making Christ Known: The Priority of Partnership (Romans 15:14-16:16)

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The lone ranger has a special place in American lore. Think Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, or the number larger-than-life portraits where George Washington stands before masses of fleeing redcoats. We love a good man-against-the-world story and often read the history of Christian missions in similar fashion.

David Brainerd brings Jesus to the Native Americans. William Carey and Amy Carmichael do the same in India. They're joined by Adoniram Judson in Burma, David Livingston and Mary Slessor in Africa, and Hudson Taylor in China. They were the few. The proud. Men and women who really did something to make Christ known. And of course, it all begins in the 1st century with the Apostle Paul dashing across the Mediterranean on one missionary journey after another, doing great exploits for Jesus' sake.

It's an attractive reading because it plays to our affection for superheroes. It's also an unbiblical reading that fails to do justice to the witness of Scripture. Sure, the Lord uses individual Christians to pioneer gospel ministry in incredible ways. But the history of missions doesn't begin with a story of independent superheroes. It begins with a story of interdependent churches where every member of the body is invested in the welfare of the whole.

At the end of the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul recognizes no less than thirty-one individuals, families, churches, or groups of churches. Some are Jews. Others are Gentiles. Some are women. Others are men. Some are young. Others are old. Some are Romans. Others are visitors traveling from other congregations. It's one of those glorious places where Paul shows us just how much Christian missions is a team sport.

We've spent the last few Sundays considering our God-given priorities in the work of making Christ known. Acts 4 established the priority of prayer. Luke 10 affirmed the priority of going. Romans 15-16 asserts the priority of partnership. Jesus does not accomplish his mission in the world through isolated individuals or churches. **Jesus accomplishes his mission through interdependent churches united in gospel ministry.**

The Apostle Paul was not a lone ranger. He was surrounded by an army, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Together, they proclaimed the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9) King Jesus commands us to do the same, to link arms with likeminded churches and accomplish together what we never could alone. Paul's examples provide several lessons about the priority of partnership in the work of making Christ known.

1) THE GOAL OF MISSIONS IS FAITHFUL CHURCHES (15:14-21)

Paul didn't plant the church in Rome. He has yet to visit the church in Rome. But he cares deeply for them as (v. 16) "a minister of Christ Jesus." Paul is acutely aware he is not his own. He belongs to God. The Lord purchased at the cost of his own blood. God's mission in the world is Paul's mission in the world, not because he's an apostle but because he is a Christian, a follower of Christ.

As a Christian, Jesus called Paul to labor among the Gentiles, in the "service of the gospel." Over the course of three missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean world, he explained how Jesus delivers us from death and brings us home to God. Through Paul's teaching and example, Christ brought the Gentiles into glad submission to their Creator. They experienced the joy of becoming more like God through relationship with God.

V. 19 describes the result of Paul's missionary labor. "From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ." Does that seem like an exaggeration? Is Paul actually saying that in a geographic arc stretching from Israel to Albania, the work of bringing the gospel to bear on the hearts and lives of the Gentiles is finished?

He could say "I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel" from Jerusalem to Illyricum because he finished the work of planting churches from Jerusalem to Illyricum. As men and women embraced the obedience of faith in Jesus, Paul gathered them into bodies of believers united by the Spirit to worship God and fulfill Christ's commission to disciple the nations.

As J. Knox writes, "The message had been proclaimed and the church planted in each of the nations north and west across Asia Minor and the Greek peninsula – 'proclaimed' widely enough and 'planted' firmly enough to assure that the name of Christ would soon be heard throughout its borders." Paul's job was to plant

churches in strategic locations. Once that happened, it was the church's responsibility to faithfully continue the work.

The biblical goal of missions is not a greater number of individual Christians. The goal of missions is faithful churches. Biblical missions proceeds out of local churches and results in new local churches. Ps 50:1, "The mighty One, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." How does the glory of God shine forth? Through the corporate witness of Zion, the redeemed people of God. The goal of missions is faithful churches.

2) FAITHFUL CHURCHES PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP IN GOSPEL MINISTRY (15:22-33)

In v. 24, Paul announces his hope to visit Rome on his way to Spain. But it's not a pit stop. It's an opportunity for partnership or shared labor in gospel ministry. And Paul spends the next 10 verses laying out a biblical vision for how faithful churches practice partnership in gospel ministry.

First, partnership is grounded in mutual affection. Paul doesn't begin by reminding the Romans of the finer points of their denominational obligation. He begins with relationship. He longs to see them because he really cares about them. He's eager (v. 24) to "enjoy" their company for a while. Brothers and sisters, when we think about other churches, pastors, and missionaries in Sovereign Grace Churches, our own denomination, we shouldn't think of them as strangers. We should think of them as family because that's who we are. We're part of a spiritual family.

Second, partnership is expressed through financial support. When Paul says in v. 24 that he wants to be "helped" on his journey to Spain, the word he uses refers specifically to material resources. In the same way we provide for our physical family, so too the Lord wants us to provide for our spiritual family. Here's what that means on a practical level.

The financial support we give to our denominational mission fund isn't about paying organizational dues. It's about linking arms with pastors and church-planters from congregations like our own who are breaking ground for the gospel in 38 different countries. When we practice financial partnership with them, the work a

pastor or missionary outside our church is doing isn't just something Sovereign Grace is doing. It's something we're doing with them, no less than the church in Rome with Paul!

That's the reason we've consistently budgeted a 1% annual increase in giving from KingsWay to the Sovereign Grace mission fund enroute to our 10% partnership goal. We want men like Perry Wang to be "helped" and equipped to make Christ known among the Chinese-speaking population in Charleston, SC and from there, throughout mainland China.

It's also why I was on the phone last week with Ken Delage, pastor of Mercy Hill Church in Fredericksburg, strategizing how other churches in our region could join us in providing financial support for Josh and Lieze in Namibia. When we get behind Perry or the Krugers financially, gospel ministry in Charleston or Windhoek isn't just something other pastors or missionaries are doing. It's something we're doing with them.

Third, partnership consists of churches caring for other churches. The vision of partnership in Rom 15-16 is much bigger than congregations supporting individual missionaries or church-planters. It also includes churches supporting one another, even when they're in completely different parts of the world.

"I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints," Paul writes in v. 25, "For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem." The word translated as "contribution" literally means fellowship, emphasizing the relational character of their gift. It wasn't rooted in financial need. It was rooted in the joy of friendship. They were thrilled to help a sister church in need.

Relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century were typically marked by deep-seated animosity. So what happens when the primarily Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia send a significant financial gift to the primarily Jewish church in Jerusalem? They make a loud statement about the reconciling power of the gospel! For Gentiles to give help to Jews and Jews to receive help from Gentiles was a stunning expression of cross-cultural unity in Christ.

KingsWay, that's what we get to do when we send a gift from our International Missions Fund to pay for Jorge Del Castillo's retinal surgery so believers in Santa

Cruz can continue to benefit from his pastoral labor. We're caring for the church in Bolivia. It's what all the churches in our mid-south region did when we gave Joshua Earl a 25k grant to plant Grace City Church in Wilmington. We're caring for the church in North Carolina.

It's why Sovereign Grace launched a relief fund after hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, channeling thousands of dollars to our sister church in New Orleans so they could meet their neighbors' physical needs in Jesus' name. We're caring for the church in Louisiana. Partnership in gospel ministry isn't just a missionary support thing. It's a local-churches-caring-for-one-another thing.

Fourth, partnership is strengthened through persistent prayer. V. 30, "Strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints..." It is so easy to develop a self-centered, "me first" attitude that bends our prayers toward our felt needs like the needle of a compass. The Lord admonishes us to have a "Christ first" attitude that engages in the work God is doing across our denomination by praying for other churches, pastors, and missionaries.

It's what we did last night when we prayed for our missionary partners in Thailand, Bolivia, and Namibia. It's what we did this morning when we prayed for Living Faith Church in Franklin, WV and the growing number of Sovereign Grace churches in the Philippines. It's what you can do during the week by subscribing to our monthly Emerging Nations newsletter and bringing the needs of our spiritual family around the world to the Lord in prayer.

First-century churches in places like Rome, Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem were not isolated or focused on doing their own thing. They practiced partnership in gospel ministry. That's the kind of church we want to be, KingsWay, because that's the kind of church Jesus wants us to be. When that happens, the "fullness of the blessing of Christ" Paul describes in v. 29 cuts both ways. The churches and individuals we care for are refreshed through us, and we receive spiritual encouragement through them.

I want to watch a brief video clip from two pastors at Grace City Church of Wilmington to catch a glimpse of how Jesus accomplishes his mission through interdependent churches united in gospel ministry. < **Play GCC video clip** >

3) PARTNERSHIP IN GOSPEL MINISTRY IS AN EVERY-MEMBER ACTIVITY (16:1-16)

For the average member of our church, all this talk about partnership might sound well and good. But on a practical level, it can feel like something reserved for pastors or other leaders. Many of you have kindly said on more than one occasion, "Matthew, we're so grateful for the friendships you have with other pastors in Sovereign Grace." Trust me, I am too! I couldn't endure in ministry without them.

But if that's all that comes to mind when we think about partnership, something's missing. It's something the early church recognized and something the Apostle Paul celebrated, namely, partnership in gospel ministry is an every-member activity.

The list of men and women Paul commends in the first 16 verses of Ch. 16 isn't limited to pastors. It includes individuals, families, or groups of Christians in various places around the Mediterranean world. He describes them as servants of the church, patrons of many, fellow workers, beloved, kinsmen, fellow prisoners, well known, in Christ, approved, saints, workers in the Lord, hard workers, chosen in the Lord, spiritual mothers and brothers. Let me highlight two examples.

I love the fact that the first fellow worker Paul commends is a woman. Gospel ministry in the early church was not the boys club. It was championed by men and women alike in the roles God ordained for them. Take Phoebe in v. 1. She's a servant of the church in Cenchrea and most likely the bearer of Paul's letter to Rome. Note how Paul asks them to "welcome" and "help" her, requesting hospitality and material support for her no less than he requested it earlier for himself. And he describes her as a "patron of many," someone who hosted all manner of Christian workers in her home, providing financially for them.

Many of you have followed Phoebe's example! Mario and Amy Taracena are members of the Sovereign Grace church in Gaithersburg, MD. They're also planning on moving to Richmond this year to help us disciple and reach out to our Spanish-speaking members and neighbors. You've done an outstanding job welcoming them, KingsWay. I think of Jorge and Siomara Martinez who drove up to their home in Northern VA last week to deliver groceries. Or my in-laws, Mike and Cindy Hickman, inviting Mario and Amy to live with them.

Take Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquilla in v. 3. Acts 18 says they were a Jewish couple from Italy whom Paul met in Corinth after the Roman emperor Claudius ordered all Jews to leave Rome. They were tentmakers by trade, welcomed Paul into their home, and gave him a job to provide for his needs. When Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, they sailed with him so they could serve the church together. And when a gifted, Christian teacher named Apollos showed up in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquilla took him aside to explain “the way of God more accurately.”

By the time Paul writes to the Romans, Priscilla and Aquilla had moved back to Italy. So he thanks them by name on behalf of all the churches they served through practicing hospitality, being generous with their business, and sharing words of spiritual encouragement and exhortation. Partnership in gospel ministry isn't a pastors-only thing. It's an every-member thing.

Bruce Chick from the church in Roanoke still talks about the time he visited us on a Sunday morning when his wife, Hein, was severely ill. We prayed for her as a congregation and the Lord provided in some incredible ways for Hein in the following weeks and month. That wasn't a pastors-only thing. That was an every-member thing.

I think of the way Bev and Walter took Fred & Dawn out for dinner after they returned from missions work in Thailand to honor and encourage them. Or the way Andrew and Sara loaned the Kruger's their van for several weeks when they were in the states on furlough. That wasn't a pastors-only thing. That was an every-member thing.

KingsWay, let's be a church where every one of us, not just our pastors, support, encourage, intercede, and care for Sovereign Grace churches in our region and around the world. They're not just part of our denomination. They're our spiritual family. It's not a public relations liability we minimize. It's a gospel partnership we celebrate and lay down our lives to build and strengthen. The Lord wants all of us, with all manner of different gifts, to bring all we have to the table and say, “Father, use me to advance the work of the gospel, not just in Kingsway, but around the world.” Partnership in gospel ministry is an every-member activity.

CONCLUSION

The greetings going back and forth in v 16 between “all the churches of Christ” and the church in Rome reveal God’s mission strategy. They don’t exist in silos, each one doing their own thing. They are relationally, financially, and spiritually involved in one another’s lives. Perry, that’s why we’re going to keep praying for you. You’re part of our family. We’re cheering for you and we’re going to do our best to support you, even though we live 6 hours away!

In seasons when it’s easy and seasons when it’s hard, may we never relegate our relationship with Sovereign Grace churches to a mere denominational affiliation. It’s not an affiliation. It’s a partnership because Jesus accomplishes his mission through interdependent churches who are united in gospel ministry. It’s been God’s mission strategy from the very beginning. May it be our strategy as well, KingsWay. Let’s pray and ask for the Spirit’s help.