



A VISION FOR CHURCH PLANTING NETWORKS

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Introduction

Abstraction is the enemy of application. It impresses momentarily, then withers under the call for concrete action. Tell a man to treasure his wife and he stares unblinkingly through vacant eyes. But tell him to date his wife and he's found a trailhead to treasuring her. Abstraction evaporates under the clarifying light of application.

Most church planting networks want to be gospel-grounded, unified, diverse, and mature. If these aims remain bubble-wrapped in an uptown closet and never walk the concrete streets of our real lives, however, abstraction becomes ruination. The meaning of *network* will become the old-school inkblot test—flash the “network” inkblot and tune in for the innumerable interpretations.

Abstraction will win and the mission will be lost. Just as local churches thrive on clarity flowing from leadership to members, a church planting network needs clarity on what it is and how it works for prospective and current member churches.

Therefore, let's together explore two frequently asked questions:

1. How should we define “church planting network?”
2. What does it mean for pastors/churches to participate in a network?

How Might We Define a Church Planting Network?

God's first words spoken over his image bearers were: it's not good for man to be alone.¹ Humans are created for community because they are made in the image of the Triune God who is never alone. We are relational creatures because we have our origin in a relational Creator. As God exists in Trinity, so we are made to exist in community.

We are hard-wired for connection.

Local churches are no different. Just as people wither and perish in isolation, so does the local church. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, thanks God for them: "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."² Though the church in Philippi had their own elders, deacons, and members, they were also vitally connected with an entity *outside* of their community—Paul and his helpers.³ The Philippians were a strong, established church, but they were not an independent church. The result of this arrangement was not a bloated bureaucracy, but a relationally connected *partnership* of joy (v. 3).

As we follow Paul's ministry in the New Testament, we see a beautiful pattern emerge: Paul establishes a church in a new location, he moves on to plant another church in a new city or region, and then he returns to previously planted churches to further cultivate his connection with them. Paul's ongoing collaboration between churches strengthened relationships, encouraged their leaders, and advanced the mission in tangible ways.

Perhaps these churches could have survived on their own, but history proves they were better together. They gave generously to the poor together, contended for orthodox theology together, and helped plant more churches throughout the Mediterranean together.

¹ Genesis 2:18. Although it is understood that this text specifically speaks to the marriage relationship, it does provide early insight to us on God's plan for all relationships and forms the first in a long litany of scriptures that evidence our need for others at an individual, as well as a group level. As God exists in Trinity, we too are made to dwell in community.

² Philippians 1:3-4.

³ This will be unpacked deeper in the paper, but just to kickstart the readers thinking: Robert Banks describes the relationship between extra-local workers and local churches: "The two groups are interdependent and assist one another in their work, but the purpose for which each exists, the skills upon which each depends, and the authority through which each lives are not identical." (*Paul's Idea of Community*, 164) And, "Paul views his missionary operation not as an *ekklesia* but rather as something existing independently alongside the scattered Christian communities. Only in a secondary way does it provide the organizational link between the local churches, suggesting the basis for a wider conception of *ekklesia* of a 'denominational' kind. Paul's mission is a grouping of specialists identified by their gifts, backed up by a set of sponsoring families and communities, with a specific function and structure. Its purpose is first the preaching of the gospel and the founding of churches, and then the provision of assistance so that they may reach maturity. While this clearly involves interrelationship with the local communities, Paul's work is essentially a service organization whose members have personal, not structural, links with the communities and seek to develop rather than dominate or regulate." (*Paul's Idea of Community* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994], 168-169)

Every generation of leaders must strive to enjoy the kind of fruitful interdependence that reproduces this biblical pattern. “The narrative of Paul’s missionary work,” writes Eckhard Schnabel, “provides a paradigm, a model for the mission of the church.”⁴ Paul’s ministry provides a pattern for the mission-minded interdependence reflected in some denominations and networks today.

Radical autonomy is never celebrated or encouraged in the Scriptures—nor within the Trinity. The need for deep connection across diverse churches does not undermine the autonomy of local churches any more than the deep communion experienced between Father and Son diminishes the role of the Spirit. In other words, churches who lead with absolute independence from other churches have missed God’s design for both the local and universal church.⁵

There is room in Scripture to interpret this interdependence in various ways and we must be careful not to over-spiritualize our own preferences or traditions.⁶ One method growing in popularity is the emergence of church planting networks.⁷ A network exists to balance the tension between God’s local design for elder-led congregations and his global design for vitally connected churches united in order to multiply. Paul Hiebert, Professor of Missions, puts it this way:

The future of missions is based in the formation of international networks rather than multinational organizations. Networks build up people, not programs [sic]; they stress partnership and servanthood, not hierarchy; they help to build up the local church, not undermine it.”⁸

Networks are voluntary associations, not hierarchical obligations. They are flexible, dynamic and nimble.⁹ They are not focused on organizational growth, but on strengthening and equipping

⁴ Schnabel, Eckhard, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 377.

⁵ Thomas Nettles brings great insight into this challenge in saying, “The Baptist...view of the autonomy of the local congregation has caused numerous difficulties in maintaining the full cooperation of its many local congregations in a united action for missions.” Klauber, Martin I., Scott M. Manetsch, ed., *The Great Commission* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2008), 102.

⁶ Eckhard Schnabel’s reminder is freeing: “Christians, missionaries and mission agencies should realize that they do not need to substantiate or defend every action, program or initiative with a biblical passage.” *Early Christian Mission*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2004), 1572-1573.

⁷ In the April 24th, 2015 issue of *Christianity Today*, Ed Stetzer identified the explosion of church planting networks as one of the three most important trends which will continue over the next 10 years.
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/april/3-important-trends-in-church-in-next-ten-years.html>

⁸ *Partners in the Gospel*, edited by James H. Kraakevik & Dotsey Welliver; a BGC Monograph. p. xiii.

⁹ In *Center Church*, Tim Keller contrasts “movements” (which would include networks) with “institutions.” The four characteristics of a movement include: “vision, sacrifice, flexibility with unity, and spontaneity.” Keller, Tim, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2012), 339.

churches for mission.¹⁰ Though we talk in terms of network *churches*, the primary target for network training, counseling, and care, is most often *pastors/elders*. When a network aims at these leaders rather than churches, it ensures mission goals are not created without the role or authority to achieve them.¹¹ So, the aim to strengthen churches is achieved primarily through the training and care of local church leaders. But the lines are soft enough to allow networks to speak of “member churches” or “churches partnering together.”

This brings us to a working definition of a church planting network:

*A church planting network is a group of churches joyfully partnering to multiply churches, train leaders, facilitate relationships, and supplement the care of pastors and elders.*¹²

What Could it Mean for Leaders/Churches to Participate in a Network?

The second question, “What does it mean for leaders/churches to participate in a network?” is answered by demonstrating some of the ways to apply our definition. Specifically, we want to clarify how churches and church leaders joyfully partner with one another.

It Means Joyful Partnership Through the Gospel

The joy Paul describes in Philippians 1:3-8 is not based on a mutual love for a sports team or style of music, but a deep fellowship experienced between Paul and the church as a result of their partnership *in the gospel*. The deep joy evoked in Paul springs from the unity they experience in the whole gospel—the life-transforming news of God’s kingdom breaking into this world through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this partnership flows from a deep well of confidence in the reality that we are not only forgiven individually by Jesus, but we are now adopted corporately into the family of God by grace. As the family of God, we are called to enter into the family venture of putting the message into motion. For the church to be faithful to the purpose of its existence, it must put the gospel into circulation (Matthew 28:16-20).

¹⁰ Speaking more globally, David Garrison says, “Without exaggeration we can say that Church Planting Movements are *the most effective means in the world today for drawing lost millions into saving, disciple-building relationships with Jesus Christ*.” Garrison, David, *Church Planting Movements* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 28.

¹¹ Elders have the authority to lead the local church. If a network creates a mission aimed at autonomous elder-led churches, it assumes an authority it does not possess and potentially circumvents the elders’ role in leading the church. The best way for networks to serve churches is by serving pastors.

¹² In their book *Churches Partnering Together*, Bruno and Dirks define the partnership this way: “A kingdom partnership is a gospel-driven relationship between interdependent local churches that strategically pray, work and share resources together to glorify God by kingdom-advancing goals they could not accomplish alone.” Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Press, 2014), 18.

“Gospel” is in vogue right now, at least in the world of networks. Slapping the word gospel on the side of any network hardly distinguishes it (if that were even a goal). For a network to flourish, the gospel message must move from clinical abstraction to concrete application. It must mean more than mission. This means we must help fellow leaders and member churches aggressively plant churches without losing sight of the implications of the gospel on a leaders conduct.

When Paul arrived at Antioch, he found Peter pandering to the Jerusalem celebrities. At first blush it seems as if Peter is being a hypocrite, but Paul discovers a more egregious error. Peter’s conduct was “not in step with the truth of the gospel.”¹³ We want to embrace the gospel and develop partnerships with a certain depth of love and trust. If a leader strays down Peter’s path, whether in private life or public leadership, another leader will play the loving role of Paul and call them back to the gospel. Or if a leader encounters divisive parties in his church or community—like the Philippians—they can be warmly reminded by peers that, “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

If a church planting network is successful, it will be because the gospel functions powerfully in the lives of the pastors. Through these partnerships, leaders call one another to gospel conduct.

However, if a church planting network fixes its vision solely on helping each other enjoy and apply the gospel, something is missing. The churches may swell with life, but the work will become sterile—unable to reproduce offspring. Partnering in the gospel can never be defined apart from mission; partnering to *spread* the gospel. Here networks mobilize to deploy network resources (network pastors, expertise and money) for mission. This includes using network resources to identify church planters, resource church planting, strengthen churches, and train pastors for mission sharpness.

A true partnership in the gospel is a partnership that multiplies churches through the gospel.

It Means Joyful Partnership Through Gifted Leaders

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 signals the geographical scope and strategy of the Church’s mission, and it pulses with present-day significance.¹⁵ The first-century churches in Jerusalem and Antioch applied the Great Commission by looking beyond their own immediate

¹³ Galatians 2:14.

¹⁴ Philippians 1:6.

¹⁵ “The primary historical significance of the Great Commission lies in the fact that it gives to the church the pattern and purpose of missions. It defines and delineates the missionary task. We have in the Great Commission a compass, a charter, and a plan.” A Biblical Theology of Missions, by George W. Peters, Moody Press: Chicago, IL; 1972. P. 178

locales and sending out men to take the gospel to distant places.¹⁶ The book of Acts shows how the call to make disciples of the nations was accomplished through churches identifying gifted people and then partnering together with them to plant churches. Under the guidance of this inspired compass, our global mission is best seen as an ecclesiastical task that is mobilized through interdependence—churches connected to each other through partnerships led by catalytic leaders.

To be clear, elders are entrusted with the glorious stewardship of leading local churches in the mandate Christ has given to the church. This includes inspiring and involving the church in Christ's call to make disciples locally and extra-locally. Yet the elder's role does not represent the entire strategy for New Testament gospel expansion. Elders also carry the responsibility to ensure their churches are vitally connected to network leaders—those who are gifted and set apart by the churches to facilitate interdependence, encourage collaboration, and help steward the broader mission. In the metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ¹⁷, these gifts represent the legs that help the body move toward mission. Yes, a body can conceivably live without legs. But the body thrives, and forward progress is substantially enhanced, by a strong set of legs.

Can the role and function of these network leaders be found in Scripture? Absolutely! One often-overlooked aspect fueling New Testament missiology is found in the apostolic-type function of catalytic men who are set apart by the church for the broader mission of expansion and consolidation.¹⁸ Such men are gifts from the ascended Christ to the church. Their work stokes church planting and mission projects, cultivates relationships and interconnectedness among churches, strengthens and encourages churches toward maturity, and serves churches in various other ways that transcend a single congregation.¹⁹

¹⁶ Charles L. Chaney, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.; 1991), 130.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

¹⁸ While I believe network leadership (leading pastors) rests in the hands of men, it certainly does not eliminate the need for gifted women. Schnabel says, "The circle of Pauline coworkers included a considerable number of women. Andreas Köstenberger estimates that 18 percent of Paul's fellow missionaries were women. In the list of greetings in his Epistle to the Romans Paul mentions the following female coworkers who are now residing in Rome: Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Priscilla (Rom 16:3), Mary (Rom 16:6), Junia (Rom 16:7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:12) and Persis (Rom 16:12). Other women whom Paul's description reveals to be coworkers are Apphia (Philem 2) and Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3). Their participation in Paul's missionary work is indicated by the prefix *syn-* ("with"): they have struggled "with" Paul for the gospel (Phil 4:3). They evidently preached the gospel along with Paul." Schnabel, Eckhard, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 1428.

¹⁹ In any movement, apostolic people and organizations serve three critical functions:

1. They act as catalysts: they create and kick-start movements.
2. They inject vision, commitment and energy into movements at critical junctures to sustain momentum.
3. They play a critical role in the development of leadership—an essential component for the ongoing health and vitality of movements. *Beyond the Local Church*, Sam Metcalf, p. 183

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.²⁰

Christian history readily confirms that the work of gospel expansion and church consolidation, begun by Paul and his coworkers, continues beyond their lifespan. In an important sense, we can legitimately affirm that there are specific aspects of this apostolic work in the early church that continues today and lasts “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” (Ephesians 4:13)²¹ As we study the unfolding strategy for missions in the New Testament, we see the important role played by organized churches connected to extra-local ministry teams (today’s network leaders) who existed alongside local churches in order to serve those churches in their mission.²² Partnering with those who have been recognized by the church as gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve in these tasks remains an effective model for local churches to carry out their broader mission.

Do these extra-local or network roles undermine the church’s responsibility in the mission of God? Certainly not! But we must be clear and Scripture-minded when defining the means by which mission happens. Churches plant churches by uniting together and partnering with the type of gifted leaders described above. But these leaders are not dropped from heaven or

²⁰ Ephesians 4:11-13.

²¹ In Scripture, the Twelve Apostles will always hold a unique place in the purposes of God (Rev 21:14). But the New Testament concept of apostle has various applications, including the eleven disciples, Paul, and others whose primary function was the planting and establishing of churches. (See Acts 14:4; 1Co 4:6, 9, 9:5–6; Gal 1:19; 1Th 1:1, 2:6; Phil. 2:25)

“In the NT, *apostolos* can mean delegate, envoy, messenger (Philippians 2:25; 2 Corinthians 8:23). Perhaps even missionary. One especially commissioned. One who proclaimed the gospel.” (Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon, 99).

“Denotes (the) bearers of the NT message, first the twelve...then the first Christian missionaries” (W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Theological Dictionary, 70.)

“Modern gifts...are analogous to but not identical with apostolic gifts and Messianic gifts.” (Vern S. Poythress, Modern Spiritual Gifts as Analogous to Apostolic Gifts (Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA), 6.)

²² In the New Testament, there appears to be two groups totaling 38 people who extended the Great Commission work of planting, connecting, strengthening and multiplying churches. The first were the Ephesian 4 apostles, such as Barnabas (Acts 14: 14; 1Cor 9:5-6), Apollos (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4--4:6) and Silas (1Thess 2:6-7). Others were the helpers (Acts 19: 22) of Paul who include: Timothy (1 Thessalonians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10; Philippians 2:19-24), Mark (Acts 12: 25; 15: 39; Col. 4: 10; Philemon 24), Aristarchus (Acts 19:29; 20 4; 27:2; Col. 4: 10; Philemon 24), Epaphras (Col. 4: 12; Philemon 23; Col. 1: 7) Luke (Col. 4: 14; 2 Tim. 4:11), Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1) and Sopater of Berea (Acts 20:4). Any references to apostolic work or function today would find their Scriptural continuity, not with Paul or the Twelve, but with these ministries that existed to help plant and strengthen local churches.

authorized because they have seen Jesus. Network leaders are, most often, products of local churches. They emerge from local churches, and upon displaying the fruit of proven gifts and character, take their place alongside churches establishing the connections that become networks.

This idea may feel unsettling. It did for me. Cut me and I bleed the local church. That's why I've been a pastor for 33 years. But there are unhelpful ways of understanding the church's role in missions that make the church too exclusive or self-sufficient; ways that make it appear that each church contains all the gifts needed to exhibit interdependence, plant churches or engage in missions. This is particularly dangerous for larger, well-funded churches who assume their size or income constitutes a call to greater autonomy.

As an elder for many years, I had to eventually recognize that the sweep of mission history is not largely the story of local church elders developing burdens for missions and then multiplying churches. In fact, in most cases, elders trend, not toward the multiplication of the church, but toward the care and protection of it.²³ To truly understand why God raises up networks and gifted leaders, one must come to terms with the reality that missional advances in history have not been largely catalyzed by local church elders.²⁴ As George Peters observed, "The history of the church in missions is in the main the history of great personalities and of missionary societies. Only in exceptional cases has it been the church in missions."²⁵

This historical reality does not discount the church, nor does it relieve elders of their responsibility for mission momentum, both locally and beyond. The missing link is around *the means of mission*. Local churches deepen their participation in the mission of God by raising up, deploying, and then partnering with gifted and catalytic teams who can form or lead entities, like networks, to help mobilize churches for mission and serve them in growing stronger. These leaders emerge through local churches, are authorized by local churches, and can remain accountable to local churches. But they are indispensable to expansion and connection. In fact, it can be observed that churches in the New Testament did not randomly stumble upon one another and then become networks or denominations. Churches, rather, were most often connected through the agency of these extra-local workers like Paul and his helpers. Together,

²³ "The local church is a stationary rather than a mobile witness of the gospel." Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and The Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1455.

²⁴ As far as we can discern, every observable, highly transformative apostolic movement that achieved exponential missional impact has operated with *some* expression of fivefold ministry. We are absolutely convinced of this: it is clear in the explicit teachings of Scripture, evidenced in mission's history and in contemporary apostolic movements in the global church, and confirmed by the best thinking in the social sciences. The rediscovery and reapplication of this one piece of Pauline ecclesiology has massive consequences in our time and place. Alan Hirsch & Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution* (San Francisco, CA; Jossey-Bass, 2012), 5.

²⁵ [A Biblical Theology of Missions](#), by George W. Peters, Moody Press: Chicago, IL; 1972.p. 214. When using the term "great personalities", Peters is referring not to celebrity leaders, but rather to courageous catalytic leaders and missionaries whose stories were later captured in compelling biographies.

the partnership between these churches, facilitated and served by the gifted leaders, resulted in church planting initiatives throughout the Mediterranean world.

God builds his church locally and globally through gifted people and invites churches to partner together through their service. In doing so, the mission goes forward and the body of Christ enjoys access to a fuller range of Christ's generous gifts to his people.

It Means Joyful Partnership Through Relationships and for Soul-Care

Should "mission" be understood *only* through planting churches or frontier mission initiatives? To answer correctly, we must take into account the sweep of the Great Commission and the mission activity for Paul and his helpers.²⁶ For network success to be truly biblical, it can't be defined merely by being sent, starting ministries, or short-term impact. Mission, in fact, must be applied in a manner that fosters local church health, soul-enriching relationships, the presence of fruit, and the ingredients to sustain mission effectiveness for the long term. We're talking durable, multi-generational sustainability (2 Timothy 2:19).

To illustrate this broader understanding of mission, let's return to Paul's use of the word *κοινωνία* (partnership) in Philippians 1:5. This New Testament Greek word is rich with warm relational tones. Just listen to Paul's heart for the Philippians:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel. It is right for me to feel this way about you because I hold you in my heart; I yearn for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:5-8).

Paul is not merely addressing a group of ministry professionals mobilizing for breathless gospel expansion. Paul is speaking to those he knows and loves. The idea of *κοινωνία*—a partnering fellowship—was bound in brotherhood.

Yet the relationships had intention.²⁷ Paul's ongoing connection with the Philippian church, and the other churches he founded, was one of nourishment and strengthening. As Peter T. O'Brien

²⁶ We must allow the full scope of the Great Commission's mandate to inform our approach and understanding of missions. *Going* without *making disciples* is an aborted commission. *Baptizing* without *teaching* is birth without growth. To execute the full commission, we must endeavor to respect and apply each component, as if the harvest depends upon it. If our mission strategy is to relocate to Eritrea to simply preach the gospel, then we may only be *going* and *baptizing*. Though well-intentioned, we may have settled for a "good commission" while neglecting the Great One.

²⁷ "Paul's mission is a grouping of specialists identified by their gifts, backed up by a set of sponsoring families and communities, with a specific function and structure. Its purpose is first the preaching of the gospel and the founding of churches, **and then the provision of assistance so that they may reach maturity**. While this clearly involves interrelationship with the local communities, Paul's work is essentially a service organization whose members have personal, not structural, links with the communities and seek to develop rather than dominate or regulate." (emphasis

rightly notes, “It is clear that the nurturing of the emerging church is understood by Paul to be an integral feature of his missionary task.”²⁸ For a network to be truly Pauline, it must call the participants not merely to the front-end activity of planting churches but to the more wholistic call to help them grow, mature and multiply. A network must possess the foresight to ask, “How can we thrive over the next 30 years, and what should the fruit of our resources and efforts produce?”

For Paul, *κοινωνία* included care. For a healthy and durable mission, it was not optional.

But the *κοινωνία* between Paul and many New Testament churches expanded in unique and reciprocal ways. They were asked to pray for Paul’s extra-local mission,²⁹ they received detailed updates on the extra-local mission,³⁰ they hospitably welcomed extra-local leaders,³¹ and they developed and released coworkers.³²

Network goals should look beyond a strong or well-financed start. Resilience and succession should be in view when building, so that the pastors can transfer the gospel work over to the next generation (2 Timothy 2:2). To accomplish this, our mission must include relational aims and soul-care.

It Means Joyful Partnership Through Distinct DNA

Abstract concepts of the local church incite pastors to become fashionable innovators rather than historically-grounded practitioners. Instead of being trendy, we must seek to embed ourselves in historic church practices. From a deep-rootedness in Scripture and church tradition we can be unapologetic over the unique genetic imprint God stamps upon our network because

mine) (*Paul’s Idea of Community* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994], 168-169)

²⁸ *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*, by P. T. O’Brien (quoting W. P. Bowers) Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993, 42.

²⁹ Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:2-4; Romans 15:30-32; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.

³⁰ Colossians 4:7-9; Ephesians 6:21-22; Acts 14:27.

³¹ 3 John 5-8; Philippians 2:19-30; Colossians 4:10; 2 Corinthians 8:16-24; 1 Thessalonians 3:2.

³² Acts 11:22-26, 13:1-3, 15:40, 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:17-18; Romans 16:3-4; Philippians 2:25; Colossians 1:7, 4:12-13; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 13 For useful chapters on partnership in missions between local churches and an extra-local team, see: Chapter 16 (“The Relationships Continued”) in Hesselgrave’s *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* (Hesselgrave, David, J., *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000]); Chapter 16 (“The Mission and the Churches”) in Banks’ *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Banks, Robert J., *Paul’s Idea of Community* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994]); Chapter 6 (“The Church and Missions”) in Peters’ *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Peters, George W., *A Biblical Theology of Missions* [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1984]); Chapter 1 (“In Pursuit of True Christian Partnership: A Biblical Basis from Philippians”) by Luis Bush in *Partners in the Gospel* (Kraakevik, J.H. and D. Welliver, ed., *Partners in the Gospel* [Wheaton, IL: Emis/Billy Graham Center, 1992].

when the Spirit gifts leaders, unites people, and breathes on churches, a specific DNA emerges.³³

As churches experience and embody a distinct DNA, church models are born. We hold up mature expressions of a certain biblically sound DNA to encourage, strengthen, and guide other churches. In the early church, Thessalonica was called to imitate the church in Jerusalem.³⁴ The Thessalonians in turn became a model for the Macedonian churches, who then repeated the process for the Roman and Corinthian churches.³⁵ As an aside, we should take special note that the Macedonian churches were neither particularly large nor financially well-endowed.³⁶ Yet their model and DNA made a huge impact upon other churches.

Biologically, this comes naturally to us. Daughters learn how to be women from their mothers as sons learn to be men from their fathers. Young churches look to more mature churches to learn how to grow healthier. To succeed as a network, a group of churches must humbly acknowledge each local church's limitations and joyfully receive, as gifts from God to the network, the models set forth by more mature churches.

Good models also define and distinguish. There is plenty of room within orthodoxy for those who disagree with widespread particulars of a given network, but there is little room for them as members of that network. This is not because networks think themselves superior or presume they have arrived at the "true church model." Instead, wise network leaders and their participating churches discern that their genetic coding and cultural distinctives represent the unique imprint of how the Spirit moved among them.

Because every network has this specific DNA and these models, a pastor should expect to be challenged by what he sees and hears as more and less mature churches gather together in partnership. A church's culture, systems, structures, and strategies may be cross-examined under the light of the models of more mature churches who have been schooled longer in the grammar of the gospel. Large-church leaders may humbly learn from small-church leaders. Similarly, rural leaders may make vital contributions to the thinking or practice of urban or suburban pastors. For leaders pursuing humility, it's not about venerating church size but valuing church health. honoring

Partnership involves uniting over a shared message, with gifted people who share a similar spiritual DNA, building humble, gospel-church models. This kind of partnership brings leaders great joy!

³³ "Organizations should have both institutional characteristics and movement dynamics." Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012), 338.

³⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2, 4; 2 Corinthians 8.

³⁵ Rom. 16:26-27; 2 Cor. 8:1-5

³⁶ "By the time of Paul's writing, Macedonia was known for its extreme poverty (2 Cor. 8:2), even in a world where poverty was the norm." Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together, Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* (Crossway Books, 1300 Crescent Street, Wheaton, Illinois 60187)

It Means Joyful Partnership Through Sharing Resources

In his closing remarks to the Philippians, Paul thanks them for supporting his ministry financially. He commended this church saying, “no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.”³⁷ Not only does this illustrate the precedent of churches partnering financially with outside entities (Paul, in this case), but it also holds up their giving as evidence of the kind of mission spending that pleases God.³⁸

In the New Testament, partnership support was not an abstraction or virtual experience. It was concrete, with real money sacrificed for real mission.

The generosity of the Philippians had two apparent results—one direct and one indirect. First, their money allowed Paul to fulfill his role in fostering and feeding partnerships that reaped a harvest of gospel fruit. Their money led directly to planting new churches and to strengthen existing ones. As Schnabel observes, “Since Paul refers in Philippians 1:12 to the ‘progress of the gospel,’ the believers in Philippi contribute to (this) progress of the gospel through their financial support of the apostle and through their own missionary activity in Philippi.”³⁹ Paul was emphatic on this point: the Philippians’ giving contributed to the progress of the gospel.

If gospel progress is the only result of giving, they (and we!) would have more than enough motivation for committing dollars to our doctrine. But there is another less-direct benefit.

After saying their gifts were pleasing to God, Paul tells the Philippians that, “my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁰ Paul wanted the Philippians to know that their generosity came with a promise—God would supply their needs even as they supplied Paul’s. Don’t miss the point: Generosity toward a partnership grows God’s work elsewhere *and* fosters God’s work in us.

The fact is, few churches feel an abundance of resources. We often believe the lie that we live in a world of scarcity. Hoarding, however, does not help. We experience the abundance of God’s grace by giving. We destroy the lie of scarcity by acting on the truth of abundance by faith. Specifically, the Philippians’ generosity to the partnership put them in a place where they could learn to trust God as they experienced his goodness.

³⁷ Philippians 4:15(b).

³⁸ Philippians 4:18.

³⁹ Schnabel, Eckhard, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 1460.

⁴⁰ Philippians 4:19.

As one of the more stable churches in the New Testament, the Philippians' maturity was expressed in their eager support of this partnership with Paul and other churches. In contrast, the church in Corinth was chastised for their immaturity because of hesitancy toward an extra-local partnership with Paul. In fact, when Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he commends the maturity and example of the church in Philippi, especially in their extra-local vision and generosity.⁴¹ Larger and well-resourced churches would do well to consider the reality that the Philippians' growth and maturity did not result in a growing independence from partnerships but a greater degree of service and support. This biblical pattern challenges the consumerism and transactionalism that sometimes creeps into growing churches regarding their network giving.

In the New Testament, partnership included money. For networks today, member churches accept this invitation from God on multiple levels. As a local church, member churches typically contribute a certain percentage of their annual giving to the network. The network leadership then works to maximize these resources for the goals of the network. Individually, local church leaders also expect to experience a discernable investment from the network. It is a reciprocal relationship of generosity flowing in both directions, building a deeply intertwined *κοινωνία* for God's glory.

George Peters' description of partnership in missions is compelling:

Partnership in missions is a sacred and comprehensive concept of equals bound together in mutual confidence, unified purpose and unified effort, accepting equal responsibilities, authority, praise and blame; sharing burdens, joys, sorrows, victories and defeats. It means joint planning, joint legislation, joint programming, and involves the sending and receiving churches on an equal basis. Only the closest bond in Christ, savored by a rich measure of humility, love, confidence and self-giving, will actualize partnership.⁴²

Conclusion

A church planting network is a group of churches joyfully partnering to multiply churches, train leaders, facilitate relationships, and supplement the care of pastors and elders.

To put it in the parlance of our network, Great Commission Collective, it's healthy leaders in strong churches that multiply around the world, together. This happens behind a shared message, alongside gifted people, through a recognized DNA producing humble church models who generously share resources. Though it is possible for a church to survive in isolation, survival is too small a goal when grace is unleashed upon the soul. Only a gospel-flourishing,

⁴¹ The "churches of Macedonia" in 2 Cor. 8:1-5 has Philippi primarily in view.

⁴² Peters, George W., *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1984), 238.

soul-satisfying, church-loving, promise-anticipating network will do for the advance of the gospel.

Networks exist because it is not good for a church to be alone. Certainly, they can be cumbersome. Perhaps churches could move faster by themselves. But we will go further, flourish better, and enjoy the gospel in greater measure if we remain determined to finish in the New Testament pattern—together, for God's glory, and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.