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THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP IN GLOBAL MISSIONS

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Michael Jordan is the GOAT of basketball—he’s the Greatest Of All Time. Not the longest career, and thus not the highest stats, but regardless, he was the best player. Case closed. Full stop.

I’m tempted to spend the rest of this article proving this undeniable fact (which really is common sense), but I know I’m already testing the patience of some of you.

Why do I bring up Jordan in an article about partnership in global missions—besides my obvious sports obsession? He was the consummate competitor, “poetry in motion”—a walking bucket, as the kids say. But did you know that it took him 6 years to win his first championship? In his first 5 seasons he increased his scoring to 37.1 points per game, but still couldn’t accomplish his mission. It wasn’t until he realized that he needed to work with his team that he was able to achieve his dream. He needed Pippen and Grant, and later Rodman and Kerr to win it all.

Not many of us are Jordans of the faith. If you’re a pastor, you have probably never preached a Pentecost sermon that led to the salvation of thousands. You’ve likely never single-handedly penetrated an unreached people group with the gospel. In fact, there might be a good number of people in your church who don’t even know your name. But the Bible strikes an encouraging note for weak and faltering people: we are stronger together.

God gave his church a collective mission that *will* be accomplished by his grace and in partnership: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matt. 28:19) This mission is in the plural—the command “make disciples” and accompanying participles, “go”, “baptizing”, and “teaching” are all directed towards a plural recipient. No Christian superman is going to get the job done alone. Like Jordan, it’s only when we work through our local churches and with other local churches that God will spread his gospel to the ends of the earth. So, let’s examine the blessing of extra-local partnership by asking a series of questions.

Is extra-local partnership vital to global missions?

Is extra-local partnership just like a nice bonus package on a luxury car, or do we need it in global missions? ¹ Partnership in the New Testament is more like tires than a heated seat. You simply can’t find a model without them! When we see churches in the Bible, they exist in partnership.

Paul’s missionary journeys are a snapshot of the initial expansion of the gospel that God captured for our benefit today (Acts 13-20). When we read about his ministry, we might expect him to do his own thing—he was an Apostle after all. But this couldn’t be further from the truth. Paul submitted to the sending process of Antioch (Acts 13:3), worked from several different church bases (Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus at least), and collaborated with an astonishing diversity of people (38 different people that we know of, 18% of whom were women). Clearly, he did not want to walk alone!

This same partnership DNA was also evident in the New Testament churches. Among many forms it was displayed in correction (1 Corinthians and Galatians), encouragement (Philippians) disaster relief (Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-4), church planting (Acts 13-20), and the sending and raising of support

1. The definition of missions is hotly contested in church circles, but as we consider global missions here, we are specifically referring to the work of making disciples across barriers. These barriers are sometimes geographic, ethnic, or cultural. A church’s disciple-making efforts in its local community are crucially important, but they are distinct from those that require us to take the gospel to the nations by partnering with existing churches and sending missionaries. See Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions*, (Pioneers USA, 2017), 37.

for missionaries (Rom. 15:24; 3 John 5-8). In the New Testament, partnership between churches was diverse and beautiful, as they depended on one another for their shared global mission. Weak and fledgling churches were stronger because they were united together.

What are the benefits of partnership in global missions?

There are many rich and wonderful benefits to partnership as we consider global missions. Here are just a few.

Greater Impact

Just like Christians are stronger together, thriving in interdependence (1 Cor. 12:12-26), so churches greatly benefit when they share their mission. One of the main benefits of global partnership is our greater impact. It's interesting that Paul never directs churches to initiate work outside of their region in the New Testament.² Instead, churches sent the apostles and teams of missionaries to nurture other churches and begin new works. It was through partnership with the Roman church that Paul hoped to extend the boundaries of the gospel into Spain (Rom. 15:18-24).

The progress of the gospel in Acts is the shared progress of the gospel through all of the churches where Paul labored. Because the churches were partnered together in Syria (Antioch), Galatia, Macedonia (e.g., Philippi), Achaia (e.g., Corinth), and Jerusalem, they were able to share in their mission to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel. Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice in his imprisonment because of the progress it had caused for the gospel (Phil. 1:12-18). This progress was not merely a result of his labors; it was their shared joy in partnership.

When churches work in partnership to reach their communities, plant new churches, and send missionary teams, their labors are greatly multiplied. Churches are stronger together.

2. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1452.

We've experienced this in radical ways in Covenant Fellowship Church. By God's grace, we've planted 15 churches in our near 40-year history. Though sadly a few have closed, others are thriving and planting their own churches. Together, we are reaching neighborhoods we never could have reached alone.

You and I as individual church members also experience this through our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. By God's grace we are witnessing a watershed moment in our denomination's history, as dozens of global churches are seeking partnership into our family. As Mark Prater and Dave Taylor have led us through the adoption of churches, we are seeing our impact spread in ways it never has before. The gospel is advancing among the unreached, among the Latin Reformed World, in Europe, and in Southeast Asia.

Shared Resources

Another way that churches benefit through partnership is in access to shared resources. Antioch was a church that had many prophets and teachers (Acts 14:23), but they didn't hold onto their best and brightest men. They generously sent Paul and Barnabas so that other churches could benefit from them. This resulted in the birth of new churches and the installation of a new generation of pastors to lead them (Acts 13:23).

In Lystra, Paul recruited Timothy to join him in his labors among the churches (Acts 16:1-3). Lystra was a small town and far less culturally advanced than many of the other places where Paul had planted churches (Acts 14:8-18). Surely this was a place sorely in need of someone like Timothy. Yet, they sent him with Paul to be discipled and to bless the churches. Timothy went on to be Paul's dearest companion (2 Tim. 4:9) and his apostolic representative in Ephesus. Titus, Apollos, Tychicus, and Epaphroditus are among those who traveled between churches to strengthen their partnership. All were gifted men, sacrificed for the global mission by their local congregations.

Churches also benefit from partnership in financial ways. In the Bible, no church more dramatically displayed this than Philippi, despite their poverty (2 Cor. 8:2; Phil. 1:5, 4:10-20). This giving allowed Paul to withhold his right of payment in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:12, 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-12; 2 Cor. 9:1-25, 12:15), and use the Philippians' example to challenge the Corinthians

to participate in the relief effort for Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Paul challenges the more wealthy Corinthians that their “abundance at the present time should supply [Jerusalem’s] need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness” (2 Cor. 8:14). We see in these verses that God intends to bless certain churches financially with the expressed purpose of caring for the needs of other churches. How kind of God!

Fellowship and Accountability

Two final benefits of our global partnership are fellowship and accountability. The joy and partnership between Paul and his churches is remarkable. He opens nearly all of his letters with a warm thanksgiving (1 Thess. 1:2-10), and concludes most of them with personal greetings (Rom. 16:1-16; Col. 4:7-18). It’s tempting to skim over these sections because of the strange sounding names, but don’t do this! Paul lingers to address people by name to show the depth of their love and fellowship. As visitors traveled with reports and letters to the churches, they gave updates on the progress of the mission and the health of the churches. All of this enhanced the awareness of each member that they were not alone.

We also benefit from greater care and accountability. Early in the church, Gentiles and Jews were clashing over cultural norms. It was only through the leadership of key members of the Jerusalem Council that the clarity of the gospel was preserved (Acts 15:1-35). In Paul’s letters to Corinth, we also often see a strong degree of accountability when he admonishes them as a loving father (1 Cor. 4:14-21). Peter, Jude, and John joined Paul in calling churches to denounce false teaching and remain steadfast to orthodoxy. (See 2 Pet. 2; Jude 3-16; Rev. 2-3. For examples from Paul’s letters, see Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 11:1-15; Gal. 5:1-15; Phil. 3:2, 18-19; 1 Tim. 1:3-11; 6:2-20; 2 Tim. 3:1-9.) Though this extra-local accountability has necessary limits, it remains

a vital help to churches.³

How can I engage in partnership in global missions?

This beautiful partnership is not only biblical; it's meant to be experienced by you, too. How? Here are a few ways you can do this.

Connect your local mission with the Church's global mission.

In John 17, Jesus prays to his father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18; John 20:21-22). Sometimes this can be misconstrued to mean that everyone is a missionary. Though the Bible doesn't specifically use the term missionary, the missionary concept in Scripture is sufficient to help us define how we use the term today. The need for individuals to physically cross boundaries to deliver the gospel is a necessary and valuable role in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 10:14-17; 15:18-29). Yet, while not every Christian will be a cross-cultural missionary, every believer is sent by Jesus into their community. Every believer should live *missionally*, even if they spend their whole life living in one neighborhood.

For most of us, engaging with what God is doing globally happens as we pursue mission locally. What evangelistic opportunities surround you where you live? Our international partners are not merely partnering with us to reach their neighborhoods; they partner with us to reach our neighborhoods as well. You and I have access to people in ways that our sister churches in other countries could never dream of on their own!

3. There is a balance in the New Testament between the autonomy of local churches and the accountability of their partnership that our own partnership must be careful to protect. The Jerusalem Council illustrates this. It was initiated by a local church (Antioch), and a number of different voices contributed to the decision that was ultimately most influenced by Peter and James. Paul also strongly urged Corinth to handle internal matters of church discipline, despite his apostolic authority (1 Cor. 5). This is one of the many reasons we should be immensely grateful for our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. Our *Book of Church Order* is a wonderful example of guidelines to maintain this balance so that partnership between churches can thrive without an overreach of authority.

When you faithfully engage with evangelism locally, you are the tool of the gospel in the hands of your global Christian family to reach your community.

Pray globally.

In a world of “thoughts and prayers,” prayer can feel like the easy way out of helping someone in need. But prayer fuels the fire of global missions. Without it we will accomplish nothing. Prayer was pivotal to the growth of the early church (Acts 1:14, 3:1, 4:31, 6:4-7), and prayer permeated Paul’s letters. He often asked churches to pray for him (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:25) and expected them to pray for other churches (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:13-14). Our God hears our prayers and uses them as his means to accomplish his sovereign ends. Prayer is the most powerful way that you can partner with missionaries and churches globally.

There are many ways you can encourage global prayer in your life. One way is simply to forge friendships with specific global partners. Perhaps through a mission trip or a church visit, you’ve begun a friendship with a global partner. Pray for them! Ask for updates or sign up for their newsletter to keep your prayers current.

You can also sign up for the monthly Sovereign Grace Missions Newsletter for broader updates.⁴ Pastors, we can also lead in cultivating global prayer by leveraging pastoral prayers towards global needs. Our church prays for our global partners once a month, and holds a few corporate times of global prayer each year in our Sunday service. Churches can also invite global partners to visit or show a video before praying for partners.

Give locally and globally.

As those saved by the incredible generosity of Jesus, we are called to give cheerfully. When Paul reflects on the radically generous financial support of the Philippians, he says that they were collaborators in his travels and mission. They weren’t just supporting his work; they were working with him! When you and I give to our churches, we too are actively participating in our local and global mission. We should be eager to participate in opportunities to

4. This newsletter gives a wider update of our global partnership and provides you with specific prayer requests. You can sign up at www.sgcmissions.org/blog.

support missionaries, compassion ministries, and other projects, but we must be careful that this giving doesn't detract from our giving to the local church. Our global giving should first seek to enable our local church to give globally, and then give beyond this as our hearts are led towards opportunities.

In the United States, SG churches have a goal of giving 10% annually towards our shared mission. Pastors, if your church is not currently doing this, seeking to reach that goal is a great first step in growing your global engagement as a church. Consider ways you can take sacrificial steps and call your church to grow in giving as well. If your budget is tight, you might consider holding specific global offerings to allow your members to direct their giving more specifically toward our shared partnership across the world. Sovereign Grace Development Funds are also great places to direct global offerings.

Consider your own calling.⁵

At this point I'd like to challenge those who feel settled into their current circumstances, or who wonder if the Lord might have something quite different for their lives.

Do you get excited when you hear updates about our global partnership? It may be that God is calling you to take the initial steps of exploring a missionary calling. Desire is not everything in calling. Character, need, and especially gifting are all factors that a church must consider in vetting potential missionaries. The best way to steward your desire faithfully is by asking your church leaders to evaluate you. Ask your church leaders what global opportunities might be available for you. Missionaries are sent from local churches and nurtured by local churches with the goal of planting new local churches. So, as an initial step you should really get plugged into your church.

5. Biblically, "calling" is typically a term reserved for salvation. We are called "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9); we are admonished to "consider our calling" (1 Cor. 1:26). But in missions circles "calling" typically refers to the specific vocation and life direction of an individual. This is how I'm using this term here. See Mack Stiles chapter "The Call of God: Inspired, Informed, Confirmed" in *Cross: Unrivaled Christ, Unstoppable Gospel, Unreached Peoples, Unending Joy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015). A digital copy is available for free at <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/cross>.

Maybe you're not yet ready to take formal steps toward this. That's okay! Consider participating in short term mission trips and engaging with local church ministries that are global in focus. If God is calling you, he will faithfully increase your desire and bring confirmation from your church.

Not every Christian is called to be a missionary, but every Christian is called to think, pray, give, and partner globally. (In large part, this will often occur through your involvement in your local church.) Any time you spend exploring a missionary calling is time well spent, helping you think like a global Christian.

No missionary is a Michael Jordan, but Christ died for us while we were still weak and loves to use us—even with our many insufficiencies. Thanks be to God, he has called us to make disciples in partnership! Our mission is global in scope, but we don't do it alone. Christians, pastors, and churches are stronger together.