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ACTS

LESSONS IN PARTNERSHIP

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The brothers were born four years apart but were similar in so many ways, they were described as “unidentical twins.” They shared an inventive drive and an uncanny ability to conquer complex technical challenges. But they were also very different men. They both loved music; one played harmonica, the other mandolin. Both enjoyed cooking; one made great biscuits, the other specialized in gravy. According to one biographer, the older brother was outgoing, while the younger was painfully shy. One had a vivid memory, the other was forgetful. Like all brothers, they argued, sometimes hotly. But their occasional disagreements catalyzed rather than curbed their collaboration, for they had an unusually strong partnership. “What the two held in common above all was unity of purpose and unyielding determination. They had set themselves on a ‘mission.’”¹ To their neighbors, Wilbur and Orville Wright were just another pair of tinkering, bachelor brothers. But through their partnership, an idea grew into a dream, the dream leapt into reality, and the reality took flight.

Partnerships are powerful. Wise partnerships maximize strengths, mitigate weaknesses, sharpen focus, and prompt action. The power of partnership can be seen in business, in literature, in sport, in the Wright Brothers’ workshop, and in the church. Perhaps nowhere is partnership more powerfully displayed, with more significant results, than in the book of Acts. Scripture’s compelling chronicle of the early church reveals *gospel partnerships as the pattern for multiplying ministry*. Over and over again, gospel partnerships are modeled by individuals and churches, mentors and peers, unnamed Christians and famous apostles, resulting in the saving message of Jesus Christ being spread to the

1. David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 6-8.

furthest ends of the known world. With “unity of purpose and unyielding determination,” the early church engaged in fruitful partnerships to fulfill its gospel mission, leaving us a pattern to follow today.

The Scope of Partnership

It is true that there are a few impressive solo performances in the book of Acts. Stephen disputed, testified, and was martyred alone (Acts 6:8-7:60). Only Philip can verify the story of the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and the sudden transportation to Azotus (Acts 8:26-40). Peter’s ministry to Cornelius and miraculous release from prison are narrated as essentially solo affairs (Acts 10:1-48; 12:1-19).² But these stories are remarkable for their abnormality. The dominant pattern in the book of Acts is that gospel partnerships multiply ministry. Partnerships in Acts take several forms, varying configurations of individuals and churches as the needs of the ministry and the moment required. The gospel partnerships exist between individuals, between individuals and churches, and between churches.

In many cases, Acts depicts individuals partnering together for the sake of the gospel. For example, Paul and Barnabas traveled together, fruitfully preaching the gospel and planting churches on Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 14:1-28). When Paul arrives in Corinth, he joins up with Aquila and Priscilla and together, they work in Corinth for 18 months (Acts 18:1-4). Aquila and Priscilla in turn mentor Apollos, who goes on to fruitful ministry in Greece. Paul is regularly found traveling with an entourage, a rotating collection of gospel partners, including Silas, Timothy, Luke, and others (Acts 15:40; 16:3; 16:10; 17:10; 19:9; 20:4). However, this pattern is not limited to the pages of Scripture. Individual gospel partnerships are seen in Sovereign Grace Churches today when elders, deacons, and other ministry leaders work together to serve the church. Fellow small group members might serve a family in need or organize an evangelistic outing. Even serving regularly in children’s ministry is a great example of individual gospel partnerships.

2. Notice that these examples all occur in the early chapters of the book, as the church is growing, finding her footing, and expanding into new territories. Even Paul’s excursion back through Galatia and Phrygia (18:23) was likely accompanied by younger men in ministry, given Paul’s pattern.

Gospel partnerships also exist between individuals and churches. For instance, at the close of the Jerusalem Council, the Jerusalem church resolved to send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 15:22). Later, the Ephesian church wrote a letter of recommendation for Apollos and sent him to minister in Achaia (Acts 18:27-28). One way churches partnering with individuals is echoed in our churches today is in sending qualified men and their families to invest ten months in training at the Pastors College, and receiving them back for further training or sending them out to gospel ministry. These men and churches follow in the footsteps of the partnerships in Acts.

Finally, gospel partnership is modeled in Acts between congregations in a variety of ways. There was regular communication between churches, sharing news about gospel expansion and needs among other congregations.³ Churches sent teachers to serve distant churches (Acts 18:27) and worked together for doctrinal formulation and ministry direction.⁴ Sovereign Grace Churches continue this tradition today through our commitment to interdependence. The gospel partnership between churches that is modeled in the book of Acts has always been central to Sovereign Grace Churches. It was the basis for the founding of this denomination years ago and now, as we begin our fifth decade of partnership together, it is a chief characteristic of our work together. Our gospel partnership is described in our Shared Values and Shaping Virtues, codified in our *Book of Church Order*, and lived out through conferences, regional events and committees, and church relationships that we enjoy.

The Nature of Partnership

Partnership in Acts is described rather than defined, but perhaps we can venture a definition based on the aggregate of insights that we gain from the book. In Acts, partnership is fundamentally a *gospel* partnership: Christians and

3. For example, communication between Jerusalem and Antioch in Acts 11:22, 27; 15:1-3.

4. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-31 seems to have involved at least the congregations in Jerusalem and Antioch. Notice the ongoing fruitfulness of cooperative ministry formulation and ministry direction: the doctrinal resolutions of the Jerusalem Council are spread among the churches (16:4; 21:25-26) and credited as one of the reasons “the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (16:5).

churches work together to spread the gospel, disciple Christians in the gospel, and build churches upon the gospel. There are at least three characteristics of gospel partnership in Acts: starting churches, strengthening churches, and sustaining churches.

Starting Churches

First, individuals and churches worked together to start churches throughout the book of Acts. This is so obvious it barely needs mentioning, as everyone's Bible has a map in the back of the eastern Mediterranean Sea with colored lines charting Paul's missionary journeys. Follow the lines and you will find the churches Paul started, all with the help of other capable individuals and aided along the way by other churches. The churches in Jerusalem and Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to start what would become some of the best-known churches in the New Testament: Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth.

Strengthening Churches

Second, partnership exists in Acts to strengthen churches. Many churches are planted in Acts, but none are left to survive alone. Paul revisits churches he has planted and his delegates are regularly coming and going, bringing news to Paul and going back with encouragement and help.⁵ The mission and ministry in Acts is regularly punctuated by descriptions of Paul and others strengthening churches.

- Having planted churches in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps, visiting the churches and “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).
- At the Jerusalem Council, “Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words” (Acts 15:32).
- Paul and Silas “went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41).
- After returning to Antioch, Paul “departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18:23).

5. For example, Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5); Timothy and Erastus (Acts 19:22).

Taken as a whole, the depiction in Acts, supplemented by indications in Paul's letters, gives the impression of a growing network of thriving local churches, distributed widely throughout the Empire, dependent on one another and on extra-local leadership for health and strength.

Sustaining Churches

Third, partnership in Acts exists to sustain churches, especially in the form of financial support. Where necessary, individuals and churches gave generously to support the work of gospel mission in other churches. In some cases, wealthy church members sold assets to support needy church members, (Acts 4:34–37) or allowed the church to meet in their homes for services or prayers meetings (Acts 2:46; 4:34; 5:42; 12:12; 18:7). Furthermore, financial partnership is seen as churches support one another in mission, sending funds to the aid of struggling congregations. For instance, the church in Antioch sends Paul with contributions to support the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29). Later, Paul again returns to Jerusalem bringing “alms to my nation”(Acts 24:17).⁶ The awareness of and giving towards needs in distant churches, seems to imply at least a) regular communication between congregations, b) a disposition to help presumably motivated out of Christian love and shared commitment to gospel growth, and c) actual sacrifice on the part of giving churches to meet the needs of others. It is hard to imagine a more direct, tangible expression of partnership than this, especially given Paul's description of the poverty from which the Macedonian churches gave to serve the congregation in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:3-5).

Thus, partnership in Acts aims at specific goals. Gospel partnership points to the gospel goals of starting, strengthening, and sustaining local churches. By God's grace, churches in Sovereign Grace have seen and sought the same goals for our gospel partnership. We cherish church planting: in 2022, Nick Kidwell and a team were sent out from Covenant Fellowship Church, *starting*

6. Peterson notes the collection of funds from far-flung churches to support the struggling congregation in Jerusalem was less important to Luke than it was to Paul. Luke offers only this passing reference, while Paul mentions the collection in Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:3–5; 9:1–5, 12–13 (David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 637).

Valley Creek Church in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Sovereign Grace Churches partner together in our regions—and often beyond our regions—for mutual *strengthening* and encouragement. In 2020, Crossway Community Church sent Mickey Connolly to northwestern Arkansas for two months, serving Matt Gray and *strengthening* Living Hope Church. Finally, Sovereign Grace churches have a long history of *sustaining* gospel ministry through financial partnership together. In the book of Acts, and in churches today, the results of gospel partnership multiply ministry.

The Result of Partnership

Acts depicts the rapid proliferation of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, fueled by the faithful ministry of mobile men and memorialized by the thriving churches they left in their wake. In city after city, despite opposition and obstacles, churches were planted, many of which grew and planted other churches.

How did this happen? Acts 18:8 succinctly describes the process: “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians *hearing* Paul *believed* and were *baptized*” [emphasis added] (Acts 18:8). They heard, they believed, and they were baptized. The process is as simple as it is profound. And such fruit resulted from the multiplication of ministry that gospel partnerships create. Called and qualified men took the gospel to distant lands. Along the way, they gathered, identified, trained, and deployed “faithful men, who would be able to teach others also,” (2 Tim. 2:2) such as Silas and Timothy. Even John Mark, who sparked the separation between Paul and Barnabas, (Acts 15:37–41) would mature greatly and would later become “very useful” to Paul in ministry (2 Tim. 4:11).

The history of the early church without gospel partnership is nearly unthinkable. How would the gospel have spread without the cooperative efforts of individuals and churches? But gospel partnerships led to the conversions of Paul, Tabitha, Cornelius, Timothy, Lydia, and many more. As we continue the pattern of gospel partnership, we have ample reason to expect gospel fruitfulness for generations to come.

Growing Together in Partnership

How can we imitate the apostles and the early church and continue to strengthen our gospel partnership? Three suggestions: First, *pray*. There is no better way to develop your sense of partnership with other churches. A list of Sovereign Grace churches is on the website.⁷ Print it, pray for several churches per week, and by the end of the year, you will be ready to take another lap around. Paul left us many examples of his own prayers for churches that we can use. Ephesians 3:14–21 is a great place to start:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.⁸

Second, we can grow together in partnership by *giving*. Jesus said that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). If you want to treasure partnership, and treasure the churches and ministries with whom God leads us to partner, consider how your church can invest resources in gospel partnerships.

Finally, prioritize partnership by *going* (maybe) and *sending* (definitely). God may lead you to express gospel partnership by going: maybe attending the Pastors College to get equipped for a more robust partnership, or going to help plant a church across town. But it is only a matter of time until you are called to send. Others will go: some on the church plant, some to PC, some

7. www.sovereigngrace.com

8. For more direction on how to pray Scriptures, consider Tim Kerr's *Take Words With You* and D. A. Carson's *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*.

might serve internationally. We partner with them by praying for them, by stepping up to serve in the gaps they leave behind, and by forging newly gospel partnerships with the fresh faces they make room for as they go.

The book of Acts reveals *partnership as a pattern for multiplying ministry*. By the power of the Holy Spirit, our partnership is capable of something far more profound than a new era of human flight. As we work together for the sake of the gospel and for building local churches, may the Lord use our partnership to advance the gospel, for his glory and the good of all the Christians and churches whom he has called us to serve.