

Healthy church 3: Partnerships and Denominations

Introduction

We're currently considering the Bible's vision for a healthy local church: what it is that the Lord wants Immanuel to be and to become. Thus far we've seen that:

- The church is the "gathering" together of God's people. He saves and gathers one vast church invisible, consisting of every Christian in every time and place. That universal church is mirrored in little local gatherings, and every Christian ought to be a committed member of a local church.
- The local church reveals the glory of the Gospel in its relationships. For, diverse people (who in other circumstances would have nothing to do with each other – and indeed may detest each other!) are gathered together in union with Christ and with each other.

Our topic today concerns relationships *between* local churches. Plainly, the New Testament teaches that the local church is the focus for all that God is doing in the world. But how should those churches relate? Are they disconnected islands? How should they work together?

We've two headings and two key words in this session: "Partnership" and "Denomination." And two points to learn: we have a responsibility at Immanuel to help grow other healthy local churches; and we need other local churches to in order to maintain the health of Immanuel.

1. Partnership: working together

One of the great New Testament words describing how local churches ought to relate together is "PARTNERSHIP." (Greek: *koinonia* – sometimes translated as "fellowship"). It is the loving, purposeful, committed, energetic, and sacrificial working together, for the cause of the Gospel.

(a) loving and giving

Classically, we see this in action in Paul's relationship with the Philippian church (see Philippians 1:5, 1:7, 2:1, 3:10, 4:14). Look at these verses from Philippians 1 and 4:

Philippians 1:3-7, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."

Philippians 4:14-16, "Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁵ And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again."

What did it look like for Paul and the Philippian church to be in partnership together? It involved love ("I hold you in my heart") and togetherness even though separated by many miles (they share in his imprisonment and gospel ministry). It involved sacrificial giving (meeting the apostle's needs).

(b) church planting, needy Christians and prayer

Also, we learn of gospel partnership in the book of Romans. One of the great purposes behind Paul's letter is to strengthen his partnership with the Roman church:

Romans 15:22-33, “This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, ²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³ May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

What does partnership look like in these verses?

- **Help for global evangelism and church planting**

Paul needs the aid of the Roman church in getting the Gospel to Spain. Paul envisaged various forms of help and partnership. He wanted to “enjoy” their company for a while – he wanted refreshment from them. He also needed “help” – something more tangible, maybe money or people. But notice the expectation: the Roman Christians will care about the people of Spain, and they will want to help establish new churches in that pagan land.

- **Money for Christians in need**

Romans 15:25 makes clear that Paul is delaying his work among the un-reached people of Spain in order to bring a collection to the poor Jewish Christians in Judea. It seems strange: Paul the apostle to the Gentiles and to the unreached is delaying that work for the sake of poor Christians. The reason is that “they owe it to them” – there is an obligation among the Christian family to exercise love and care, especially for those who first gave the gospel to them and who are now in terrible need.

Actually, there is a deep obligation in the Christian family to meet the needs of brethren we have never seen and who – this side of glory – we will never meet.

- **Praying for gospel workers**

Romans 15:30 invites this little church to “strive together” with Paul in their prayers. How can we best bless impoverished Christians on the other side of the world? How can we best bless the work of churches in Dagenham, Croatia, Ireland and Romford? By partnering together in prayer. The word Paul uses (Greek: *sunagonizomai*) speaks of agonizing: it is hard to pray and to persist in prayer, especially for people and churches who you have never met.

(c) Applications:

For us to be a healthy local church means engaging in mission – locally, regionally and globally. And that means more than just a few coins and a few prayers.

Where possible we want to link with *individual missionaries and churches*, in preference to organisations (in comparison with a common model of relating to an agency which deals with missionaries on the ground). Why? Because partnership is with people not organisations.

And we want to be *deeply committed to a few mission partners*. Why? And because in practice you can't have lots of close, prayerful and meaningful connections.

In practice, we do regularly make financial gifts to a range of organisations (like Reform, Anglican International Development, Barnabas Fund and others). But very deliberately, *it's our privilege to partner*

with just three partners (the Reiths and Becontree church, the Coney family in Croatia, the Jones family in Ireland – as well as a growing relationship with Christ Church Romford).

The “gospel” is about proclamation for salvation, ordinarily through the verbal witness of the local church. *This understanding of “gospel”* has important implications for Immanuel as we involve ourselves in worldwide mission. We work with likeminded partners who are committed to the priority of faithful proclamation, through the building of healthy, Reformed local churches.

That means we need to think carefully and Biblically about “mercy ministries” and the priority of proclaiming the Word in a world of many needs. (Practically, this topic demands significant discussion elsewhere, examining questions such as: What should be our attitude to aid and relief work? What is expected of a local church as an institution, and what is expected of an individual Christian?)

We ought all to be *praying* for them. We can all – from time to time – be in touch with them. Formally, we *communicate* regularly to understand their particular situations with all their joys and struggles. It’s important to visit when possible; to receive their visits joyfully and offer refreshment; to ask about and offer necessary support, encouragement, accountability and training (e.g. via conferences, retreats, etc); give sacrificially; pray persistently.

Just lately we’ve started talking a little more about encouraging our own people to “go.” Please read Andy Johnson’s book *Missions: how the local church goes global* if you want to understand better how YOU might be able to go, either as a full-timer or as a “tent-maker.”

We have a responsibility to work to establish and grow healthy local churches elsewhere. But what of our need of accountability *from* other local churches?

2. Denomination: being accountable to others

When you ask the New Testament “what is church?” its primary answer is “the *local* gathering of faithful people where the Word of God is preached, the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, and where discipline is faithfully exercised.” The local church does have primacy. It’s the earthly expression of the great universal church to which we are all admitted at the moment of our conversion. It’s the place where the Gospel is taught (in Bible-teaching and believing) and where the gospel is revealed (in relationships). However, that does not exhaust the Bible’s teaching on the subject. According to the New Testament...

(a) Groups of congregations can also be described as a “Church”

We see this most clearly in the book of Acts:

There were many, many different local local churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria in the early days of the Gospel. Yet, Acts 9:31 can describe them as “the church” – singular.

Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

There is a unity and a partnership between the congregations in this large region which meant that these churches could also be described collectively as “the Church.”

Similarly, in Jerusalem there were many thousands of Christian believers. (Acts tells us that explicitly – see 4:4, 5:14, 21:20). We’re pretty sure that they didn’t meet in a single mega-church, but in houses with little teams of elders governing each. Yet, Acts 8:1 speaks in the singular of *the* “church in Jerusalem.”

Acts 8:1, “And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

We see the same in Acts 15, in the events surrounding what's often called the Jerusalem Council. There was a crisis in the church in Antioch, so the church there sent a representative group to Jerusalem for help (15:1-3). They were welcomed there by "the church" (verse 3). There then gathered together "apostles and [church] elders," a phrase which is repeated 5 times in the chapter and which describes leaders of a variety of churches who had authority to adjudicate together on this question (verses 2, 6). This Council then delivered a "judgement" (verse 19), in which the apostles and elders made an authoritative decision (verses 23ff). They didn't say that it was up to the local churches to deal with the issue as each saw fit. Rather, judgement was given – and was received with joy (verse 31) rather than resistance.

(b) An application: a regional denomination is a "church" – and is wise

In the light of these New Testament passages it is simply a "fact" that local churches within a region who chose to bind themselves together are properly described as a "church."

But why do we even need to say that? A few years ago it was quite common in Reformed Anglican circles to say of the Church of England things like this: "The CofE is not a church. It is only a practical and administrative tool – a bit like an estate agent – that provides services to local churches." That's an attractive view – not least because it makes it a lot easier to relate to those in the denomination who are in gross and unrepentant error. But it's also incorrect. A denomination *is* a church, with spiritual as well as practical connections and relationships.

Also, given the Bible's teaching about church *and* about human sinfulness it seems wise that local churches should bind themselves together in denominational relationships. The health of the local church will be helped by a wider church – in matters such as disputes over doctrine and discipline, and in the selection, appointment and removal of elders.

Of course, it's not the case that every Reformed evangelical Christian would agree with this argument in favour of denominations. Since the Reformation there have been parts of the Reformed tradition which have argued for "independency": this is the conviction that each local church should be governed only by the members and leaders of that local church. In church history great figures like the Puritan John Owen argued for independency; nowadays, brothers like Mark Dever (who has taught us so much about the health of the local church) argues similarly. We love and respect such brethren.

But Immanuel Church Brentwood is – out of conviction – not an independent church. We believe in the wisdom of denominations. Our elders believe that we need the counsel and the accountability of other churches and of their duly appointed leaders.

Currently we are part of the Church of England, and thus our denomination is "Anglican" in flavour. That means different regions are headed by a Bishop who possesses a large amount of authority, and under him are representative bodies (usually known as local and regional "Synods" to which local churches send representatives).

An alternative means of government would be offered by Presbyterianism, which emphasises the corporate role of the church's "Presbyters" or elders. Together a council of elders governs a local church (often known as the church's "session"); together with the elders of other local churches they sit together in assemblies to oversee the health of churches throughout a region (known as the "presbytery").

Our great problem is that we find ourselves in a dysfunctional denomination. We *need* a faithful denomination, in order to help promote faithful ministry in our local church. Yet we are not *in* a faithful denomination. Sometimes that means churches like ours find ourselves in situations of *functional* independency – for the simple reason that we cannot trust our denomination; and we have to look outside of the denomination for support, help and accountability. Sometimes that's unavoidable. But in the long-term it's not a healthy or wise situation to stay in, because the health of the local church will be enhanced by a godly denomination. Simply, all those marks of a healthy local church which we're considering this term can either be promoted or hindered by membership of a particular denomination.

Further reading

On mission and gospel partnership:

Andy Johnson, *Missions: how the local church goes global*

Kevin DeYoung, *What is the mission of the church*

On denomination and church government:

Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus runs the church*

(This is mainly making a case for Presbyterian church government at both local church and denominational levels.)