

The Healthy Church (2): Partnership

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Philippians chapter 1 and verse 5, your partnership in the gospel, your partnership in the gospel, the healthy church, number two, partnership.

I've yet to meet anyone who likes to be unhealthy. Nobody likes being physically obese. Nobody likes having mental health challenges. Even if they may put a brave face on it, nobody really likes being unhealthy.

And yet, you know, we have the opposite often in the church. Where it's not merely that we have unhealthy churches, but they like it that way.

They prefer to be unhealthy. And they think that every other church should be just as unhealthy as they are. You know what they say. There's none so blind as those who won't see.

Why anyone would choose to be unhealthy over being healthy, I don't know. And why any church would choose to be unhealthy, I don't know either.

[1 : 13] I'm not just saying these things because you're here, Andrew. Okay, I said them last week. Free Church of Scotland has, as its vision statement, a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

Now, we can choose to focus on the second part of that statement, for every community in Scotland. Which concerns the kind of mission and evangelism we're speaking about on a Sunday evening in our studies of the prophet Jonah.

But over the course of Sunday mornings, we're focusing on the first part of that statement. A healthy gospel church. We want to repent of our unhealthiness and open our hearts to the pursuit of gospel fruitfulness.

Now, last Sunday morning, we saw from 1 John chapter 4 that the primary ingredient in pursuing church health is love. Our love for God expressed in our love for each other.

And this week, from Philippians 1 verse 5, we want to explore another ingredient in church health. Namely, partnership. Partnership. Partnership is vital to church health.

[2 : 22] It is the natural outpouring of love, but is itself an important feature of that love in action. Everyone playing their part.

Vital to the health of a church. As we survey our own church here. Can it be truly said of us that we are partners in the gospel with each other?

Now, the Greek word for partnership is one with which you'll be very familiar. It's the word *koinonia*. Its root meaning is common. Common. Those things we have in common with one another.

The Greek language of the Apostle Paul's day was made up of two types. A classical Greek, which was spoken by educated people like Luke. And *koinia* Greek.

Common Greek. Which was spoken by just about everybody else, i.e. us. *Koinia* Greek is the language the New Testament was written in. It's the common spoken vernacular of the people.

[3 : 31] These two words come from the same root. *Koinia*. Common. And *koinonia*. Fellowship. So we could translate Philippians 1 verse 5 in this way.

Because of your commonality in the gospel from the first day until now. They had the same language. They spoke common Greek. *Koinia* Greek.

They had the same gospel. They shared it in common. *Koinonia*. Faith. Church health consists in this. Basic commonality of the gospel.

Partnership in the gospel. Now as we trace this word *koinonia* or fellowship or partnership in the gospel through the book of Philippians. I want us to consider two features of the kind of gospel partnership we need to pursue with each other if we are to be a healthy church.

Not talking here about Glasgow city and part of the gospel. I'm talking about us as one fellowship in the gospel. First, partnership in the gospel. And second and perhaps more important, partnership

for the gospel.

[4 : 42] Partnership first of all in the gospel. Look at the text with me. The foundational principle of our fellowship, which is another word for partnership, is the gospel.

It's not a shared ethnicity, a shared background, a shared language, or a shared culture, a shared color, a shared tribe, but a shared faith.

As you work your way through the book of Philippians, you find that Paul uses the words gospel and Christ interchangeably. In one place he'll talk of Christ.

In another he'll talk of the gospel. And he's telling us, you cannot have the gospel without Christ, and you can't have Christ without the gospel. The foundational principle of our partnership with each other isn't a set of beliefs, not a vague thing we call faith, but a person, Jesus Christ.

That which constitutes us a genuine partnership is our common fellowship in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, until a few years ago that existed in Glasgow, a Sutherland Association.

[5 : 56] This association existed for people from Sutherland, like myself and like Alec and like Katie, who are from Sutherland, but live in Glasgow.

What bound the Sutherland Association together was our common backgrounds being from Sutherland. Our churches are not to be like that in any way, shape, or form.

In fact, we are to do everything we can to get away from portraying an image of a church for people from gospel. From Sutherland. From Sutherland.

From Lewis. From Nigeria. From China. You see from this verse, The ideal New Testament church is for people with faith in Jesus Christ.

Period. Full stop. The foundation of our fellowship is not a common language, a common ethnicity, a common colour.

[7 : 01] It is faith in and devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. That's what connected the Apostle Paul and his companions with these Christians in Philippi.

Because other than their faith in Jesus, they didn't have much else in common. But if you're partners in Christ Jesus, nothing much else matters. Now, as we trace this word partnership, koinonia, fellowship, through the book of Philippians, we learn more about what it means to be partners in the gospel.

First, it means being partners in grace. And second, being partners in the spirit. And we'll talk about each briefly. From chapter 1 and verse 7, first of all, Being partners in the gospel means being partners in grace.

Partners in grace. Chapter 1, verse 7. You are all partakers with me of grace. Now, Paul knows it. So do they.

The Philippian church began with Paul's mission trip there. With Lydia, the cell in a purple cloth, whose heart the Lord opened. With the demon-possessed slave girl, from whom Paul exercised that demon and released her from her living hell.

[8 : 19] The Philippian jailer with his whole family who were saved through Paul's preaching ministry. Paul saw them all coming to faith during his ministry among them. He saw them receiving grace for salvation.

But the grace they received is no greater nor less than the grace the apostle Paul had received some years before. When on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ had stopped him in his tracks and brought him to know Christ as Lord.

It is the same grace as that which the Philippians received. There is no difference. That word grace removes any notion of superiority or even distinction from among them.

Who among us here in this crowded church this morning earned their salvation? Who among us are saved freely as a gift of God's grace?

Without exception, we had all sinned. But God poured out the grace of his salvation upon us through the death of Christ. which means not one of us can stand taller than any other.

[9 : 39] From the least to the greatest of us, we're all beggars of Christ's grace. We're all dependent upon the death of Jesus on the cross. We all came to Jesus on our knees, repenting of our sin and committing ourselves to him.

We are partners in grace. Ministers and people. Apostles and Philippians. As your minister, I'm entirely in need of as much grace as you.

Paul called himself the chief of sinners. And that not as a young man, but as a mature, grey-haired Christian. We're partners in grace. That's where our fellowship ultimately lies.

Not in status, but in Jesus Christ. And you know a healthy church knows that. But the second way in which Paul uses in Philippians that word *koinonia* or partnership to describe our fellowship in the gospel is in chapter 2 and verse 1.

We are partners in the Spirit. Any participation in the Spirit. Any partnership in the Spirit. You'll know that the New Testament everywhere teaches that whenever someone becomes a Christian, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[10:58] It's not a subsequent gift. It's the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And he comes to live in them. He is the presence of Christ in them. It's in him we exhibit the so-called fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace, patience. And so on. Now in Philippians 2, centered as it is upon the so-called famous hymn, *Carmen Christi* from verse 5 to 10, dealing as it does with the humility of our Lord, the Apostle's pressing home the church's need for vital unity.

And he says, where does that vital unity come from? And of course he says it comes from this life-changing vision of the humility of our Lord, but only in as much, from verse 1, as that humility is being produced and worked out in us by the Holy Spirit.

It's the Holy Spirit's work in us which fosters and maintains that unity, which is why in another place Paul talks of the unity of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4, verse 3. And we are partners together in the Spirit, because as Christians the Holy Spirit lives in us.

[12:14] Well, here's the question. Does a different Holy Spirit live in you from he who lives in me? Are we indwelt by a different Holy Spirit?

Is the Holy Spirit who lives in me determined to produce the bad fruit of division and pride? What is the Holy Spirit who lives in you determined to produce the good fruit of unity and humility?

Or is he the same Spirit whose transforming work is always and everywhere to produce loving, unity-seeking Christians?

Some of you may have seen the 1986 movie *Children of a Lesser God*. That film, *Children of a Lesser God*, is centred on various happenings at a school for the deaf.

It's a very evocative title. Are deaf people children of a lesser God? A God who's not powerful enough or loving enough to grant them the power of healing?

[13:23] Tell me, are any of us here children of a lesser God? Children of a lesser spirit?

Incapable of pursuing the same holiness of Christ himself?

Rather, our partnership in the Spirit means that helping one another and encouraging one another, we shall all press on to spiritual maturity. Not just one of us, but all of us.

Healthy churches are where everyone's working together for the gospel good.

Everyone's working for the Christian good of the other, not just the self. So if we're going to pursue that kind of healthy gospel partnership, ask yourself the question, serious question, in what way am I contributing to the Christian good of the person sitting next to me?

In what way am I contributing to their Christian good? Or have I been contributing? What impact are my attitudes, my words, the expressions on my face, having upon them?

[14:38] Are they drawing them closer to Jesus or are they pushing them away from Jesus? Am I a channel of grace to that person sitting next to me today? Or am I a channel of discontent and grumbling?

Now this question goes even further. For there are those to whom we are naturally drawn by virtue of our ethnicity, our interests, and our personality.

So for example, let's take a random example. Ross McCaskill. We're drawn because of our ethnic background, our shared personality, kind of, and our kind of common interests.

We're drawn together on that basis. But you see, these things are not the basis of our unity as a church. Our partnership is in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So let me ask you an even more challenging question. Look at someone this morning in this church who is not like you at all. Totally different.

[15:44] In what way am I contributing to their Christian good? Someone with whom you've got nothing in common. What impact are my attitudes and my words having on those who are nothing like me at all and to whom I would not naturally be drawn by ethnicity, by interest, or by personality?

Am I drawing them closer to Jesus or am I pushing them away? Am I, by my actions, telling them I belong here but you don't? Or am I, by my actions, embracing them as fellow children of the greatest of all gods?

Partners in the gospel. And then secondly, partnership for the gospel. Partnership for the gospel. Our translation in Philippians 1, you can see this, talks of your partnership in the gospel. But more literally, from the Greek text, we read your partnership for the gospel. For the gospel. Because Paul's taking it for granted that they're already believers in Christ.

What he's referring to is their partnership focused on the advance of the gospel. What we call evangelism or mission. Our partnership, you know, has purpose.

[17:10] The progress of the gospel. What was once called the propagation of the gospel. A church which is fixed inward. And only ever talks about inward things.

Has forgotten the purpose of its existence. For as many as may attend its services, it's unhealthy. For as rich as its heritage.

As bulging as its bank balance. And as impressive as its building. It is deeply unhealthy. You know it's impossible to kill a church like that.

Because it's already dead. It just doesn't annoy it. It's what one writer calls the ingrowing church. The church exists for the propagation of the gospel. That's the ultimate reason we partner with each other. Not to provide a self-help group for each other.

[18:15] But to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. Now before anyone gets antsy. And of course the church exists for the glory of God. Man should tend to glorify God.

But God is most glorified when sinful people, once his enemies, come to know him as Lord. That's what we're talking about today. Partnership with a purpose.

For the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Healthy churches are conscious of their partnership for a purpose. That every single member is engaged in serving Christ with a view to propagating the gospel.

Do we not pray every single week here? Lord, let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the word and the praising of your name.

Are we all, as individual Christians, putting our shoulders to the plow of gospel mission in Glasgow to make that a reality? Well, what does koinonia, a partnership for the gospel, look like in Philippians?

[19:25] Let me suggest it means two things. I'll run through these quickly. Partners in suffering. Partners in grace and receiving.

Partners first in suffering. Chapter 3 and verse 10. Philippians 3 verse 10. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share, be a partaker, have our sufferings in common.

In this verse, Paul tells us that if we want to experience the power of the resurrection of Christ, then we have to be willing to share in his suffering. In other words, he says, Gospel mission comes with a health warning.

If you walk in the footsteps of Christ, if you speak the words of Christ, if you want to reach the same kind of people Jesus reached, you're going to suffer isolation and mockery and rejection.

It's going to be emotionally, reputationally and socially painful. And often those who commit the worst crimes are those on the inside of the church.

[20:45] The propagation of the gospel comes with a cost attached. If you're going to follow Jesus, you've got to deny yourself.

You've got to take up your cross. You've got to follow him. Think of those who have been most fruitful in mission, if I may use these words, are those who by and large have suffered the most.

Think of Kenny MacDonald from Denbegan.

Kenny Sammy. Ha! Made to look like fools by the world around them. Made to look like idiots by the so-called respectable elders of the church.

Think of how much the apostle Paul suffered so that the Philippians could hear and respond to the gospel. He was beaten and imprisoned.

He was mocked. He was thrown out of town. Real partnership for the gospel consists in all of us paying the price.

[21:47] Christians who suffer together, sharing a deeper sense of fellowship with each other. They can listen and speak to one another without using words.

I have a very precious brother in Christ, some of you know to whom I refer, who is suffering greatly at present for his faithful gospel ministry. His mind is broken.

What shall we do with that faithful brother? Shall we discard him? Shall we pity him even? Or shall we share in his suffering?

For he has earned his crown by his faithful ministry. Now this goes even deeper and I want us all to listen very carefully to this. Every congregation, without exception, has 10% of people who do 90% of the work.

And these 10% work hard. And over time they can become disillusioned. Their stress levels rise and they begin to suffer. And all the time. The other 90% make excuses as to why they can't help.

[23 : 08] A healthy gospel church is where everyone takes an equal share in bearing the load of ministry and gospel propagation. A healthy gospel church doesn't leave the 10% to do it all.

Because that's the path to burnout at best and pride at worst. Let me say it again. A healthy gospel church shares the suffering and cost of gospel ministry.

Of peace. Our Sunday school teachers are exhausted. Who among us here today is willing to share in their sufferings by bearing some of their load?

Our Sunday school teachers are exhausted. Ask yourself the question. To what extent am I in my chair sharing in the sufferings of propagating the gospel in this place?

Am I paying the price? Am I bating the cost? Am I sharing in Christ's sufferings? Peter Morrison who prayed earlier often says, The church is not a cruise liner where we get entertained.

[24 : 19] Where your biggest concern is the comfort of your chairs or the colour of the walls. The church is a fishing boat where every one of us fishes for the souls of Clausewitzians.

So ask yourself the question. Sober question. Real question. You're not coming here to be putting a feather pillow and for me to put you to sleep. What part am I playing in the propagation of the gospel in this place?

And if the answer is not enough, not enough. And it is not enough for most of us. Speak to me or one of the elders afterward. Because believe me, there is plenty, plenty, plenty.

We need to do around here to make it a better fishing boat. And then lastly, partnership for the gospel, partners in giving and receiving.

Chapter 4 and verse 15. Chapter 4 verse 15. 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.

[25 : 22] The koinonia, the fellowship of giving and receiving. Now we know that at the time of writing, Paul was in prison. It had not always been this way. But his relationship with the Philippians stretched back to that first visit that he had made to them, and his encounter with Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer.

In Philippians 4 verse 15, he writes these words, In the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. It would seem clear that the partnership Paul had with the Philippians was one where they gave to him what he needed in order that he could keep preaching the gospel wherever he went, so that what they had experienced in Philippi could be experienced in other places as well.

The receiving element of this isn't quite so clear. It could be that they are receiving prayer news from Paul, or Paul's prayers themselves, or latest news about his mission.

From the latter part of Philippians 2, it seems clear the Philippians have been receiving apostolic delegates who are ministering to them, Timothy and Epaphroditus, but the point is this.

[26 : 42] These Philippians are doing what they can to support gospel mission. They're doing what they can. They cannot go to Rome and preach the gospel in the courts of the emperor, but Paul can.

They can support him. They can do what they can by sending him financial aid, because both he and Noah, that while he and they have different roles to play, they remain partners in mission.

That's the important thing. They all have different roles to play in mission, but nevertheless, they remain partners in mission.

Some have roles to play which are more up front. Others have roles to play which are more in the background and supportive. Some have the role of financial giving. Some have the role of encouragement.

Whatever it is, the healthy church is one where everyone has a role. It doesn't have to be a formal role. In many churches, it's far better if it isn't.

[27 : 46] But there are to be no hangers on. A healthy church isn't a one-man show. We might suppose that a church is uber healthy when it's large and headed up by a great preacher.

But often when that preacher goes, leaves to go somewhere else, that church begins to decline, which leaves the question, how healthy was it if it began to implode the moment its superstar left? Everyone has a role to play in this partnership of giving and receiving for the purpose of mission. Now traditionally, and this is no reflection of you up there in the balcony, by the way, traditionally, the church in Scotland has unintentionally absorbed the philosophy of the theatre where up in the boxes in the balcony, the critics throw rotten fruit at the preacher while downstairs, his listeners praise his eloquence.

The New Testament model is diametrically opposed. The church is not a cruise liner and I am not its captain. This is a fishing boat.

It must not, it should not rise or fall upon the gifts and efforts of one man, i.e. its minister. Its health and fruitfulness depends upon the partnership and fellowship of every single member.

[29 : 14] Everyone here. So as we close, let me ask you two questions. Am I fundamentally, first of all, am I fundamentally a partner in the gospel with these Christians here?

Do they believe the good news of Jesus Christ? And do I? If you find that you are not a partner in the gospel of Jesus Christ, then I urge you to become one, to put your faith in Jesus Christ today and to become a member of the church.

I'll stand at the door after the service. The second question is this, a question for all of you to answer individually. In what ways am I? And could I partner for the gospel with these Christians here?

I asked Andrew intentionally what part could a five-year-old play in the vision of the Free Church of Scotland? What can I do to promote the good news of Jesus Christ?

Can I give? Can I volunteer to help in the Sunday school? Can I help in some way? No one likes to be unhealthy. Surely we don't.

[30 : 29] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, there is no other God beside you and your Son Jesus Christ is exalted above all. We thank you that we share in his grace and in his spirit.

But Lord, we pray that you would take away from us that sense that we're here to rest on a feather pillow and to use our presence here as a weapon. Rather, Lord, help us to put our shoulder to the plough in whatever way we can.

It might be the intelligence of our administration. It might mean that we pledge to become prayer warriors. It might mean that we open our homes for hospitality.

It might mean, O Lord, that a range of things, but every one of us here has gifts that you've given us to use for the fellowship of the gospel here and for the good, the good of the gospel in Glasgow. Because our greatest desire is, Lord, as it's always been, Glasgow would flourish by the preaching of the word and the praising of your name. And in that vein, Lord, as we conclude, we remember the city of Glasgow, our great city, our dear green place.

[31 : 40] we thank you for Hope Church, Hope Community Church, Helensbrand, for that first church plant, which you have blessed us in being part of. But we long, O Lord, to see a church planted back in the city centre again that perhaps some of us can be part of, a different kind of church perhaps, a church in the East End perhaps, or a church further west, a church south, a church north, because we long, our greatest desire, Lord, is that Glasgow would flourish in this world.

In Jesus' name, Amen.