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# PLANTING CHURCHES TOGETHER

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I still remember the night of prayer at the lodge. We had gathered as men to pray for and send out our pastor, Tony Walsh who was leaving to help plant and establish another church halfway across the continent. I remember the tears—both of sadness and joy—that night. I was a young teenager so I didn't fully understand. All I knew was that some of my parents' best friends (and some of mine) were being sent out. And with them, it felt like we were sending our very hearts.

This night of emotion was surprising because the Walsh family hadn't always been with us in El Paso. In fact, Tony had come to our church from another church in our denomination. His family had been sent by another church to our church. Now, years later, it was our turn to do the sending. That night I watched grown men laugh and cry and pray. I watched them tell stories of God's past faithfulness and dream of what God could do in the future. I felt the joy and sacrifice of the moment.

I may not have understood what "missiology" or "ecclesiology" meant, but I did understand a fundamental truth: partnership in our family of churches meant not only receiving, but generously sending.

Often pastors at my church would talk about desiring to build "New Testament churches." We wanted to build churches in the pattern of the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament. We wanted God's Word to guide us. And I believe we still do.

## ***Forged in Partnership***

If we were to drop into the book of Acts in chapter 11, we'd find a church planted not by one person or even one sending church. Believers fleeing persecution in Jerusalem arrived in Antioch and simply told others about Jesus and the number of believers grew. Hearing about this, Jerusalem sent Barnabas—a crucial contribution. Barnabas is described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (v. 24). He skillfully exhorted the church and many were added as the church was built. Barnabas was the kind of man any church would want to retain, but Jerusalem’s generosity with him helped establish this church.

Then Barnabas, seeing a need for further help, went to Tarsus specifically looking for Saul (v. 25). Presumably Paul’s unique position as a highly trained Jewish scholar and a Roman citizen meant he could help build a diverse church in a Gentile context. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch (v. 26). Now, it seems there was a group of believers in Tarsus that Paul had to leave behind. But this investment paid off in gospel fruit as we learn that in Antioch “for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people” (v. 26). The church in Antioch was forged in partnership.

We in Sovereign Grace must be careful to thank God for the legacy of gospel partnership that formed so many of our churches. In my own church, there are inextricable links between our church and churches like Gracia Soberana in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and Center Church in Gilbert, Arizona from our earliest days. We would not be who we are without them, but neither would they be who they are without us.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must remember that just as we were forged in partnership we are called to help build other new works.

## ***Formed by Partnership***

The partnership that forged Antioch didn’t dissolve once the church was established. One of the things that is immediately unique and apparent about Antioch is that the believers there had a strong presence in their own city, while having a heart for other churches beyond their city as well. It is in

Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (v. 26). Clearly they were known in their city and, encouragingly, they were known primarily for following Christ. But when they received insight that a famine would soon afflict the area of Judea, they sprang into action. They not only sent financial aid to Judea, they sent Paul and Barnabas themselves to carry the offering. As the church grew in maturity and numbers, they continued to be formed by their partnership with the other New Testament churches.

Unfortunately, as I've interacted with church planters across various networks and denominations, partnership in mission gets lost after a church is planted. Follow-up and connection fade. Not so in Antioch. This was a church that continued to carry other churches and places on its heart.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must continue to be formed by partnership even when no specific plant is on the horizon. That's the way to keep envisioning new churches into the future.

### ***Forward in Partnership***

When we return to Antioch in Acts 13, we find an encouraging sight: gifted leaders from every background are serving in the church. Perhaps we expect Paul and Barnabas to settle in for a long and successful ministry in Antioch. Instead, we find something unexpected. In a time of prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit calls the leaders to set apart Paul and Barnabas "for the work to which I have called them" (v. 2). But what was that work?

Evidently, that was left to the church leaders to help determine. If I were an elder there I would have wanted to convince Paul and Barnabas that their gifts could be best used "set apart" to build our church in Antioch! Who wouldn't want a scholar and teacher like Paul and a tremendous encourager like Barnabas present every Sunday? But instead we read: "after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (13:3).

It's hard to overstate the significance of this moment in the book of Acts. Up until this point new churches had been planted nearly by accident, circumstance, or persecution. But here we find, for the first time recorded, a church intentionally sending leaders to plant and establish other churches in other

places. And as a result of sending Paul and Barnabas out from among them, there is amazing gospel fruit—churches in Cyprus, Psidia, Iconium, Lystra, and beyond. In fact, most of the churches we find in the New Testament letters exist as a result of Antioch sending Paul and Barnabas out to do the work of church planting.

When you read that Antioch was forged in partnership and when you watch them continue to grow and mature because of partnership, it's no surprise they were the first church to send mission workers forward in partnership. It was simply part of who they were.

The church at Antioch did not simply send Paul and Barnabas out, and turn their attention back to Antioch. Far from it. In Acts 14:24-27 we find Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch “and when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them...and they remained no little time with the disciples.” This was a church that kept Paul's and Barnabas' work on their hearts. There is yet another visit recorded in Acts 18:22 as well.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must each lean forward to sow generously and sacrificially in gospel partnership beyond our own contexts.

### ***Tying Our Values Together***

If you haven't studied it in depth, I highly commend a study of Acts 11-13 for every pastor and church. It provides both inspiration and challenge for each of us. You will find a beautiful blend of mission and partnership that we should emulate.

Indeed, this is what we've committed to in our sixth and seventh Shared Values in Sovereign Grace:

**6. Church Planting, Outreach, and Global Mission.** Our gospel-centrality entails not only treasuring the gospel personally but sharing it passionately. The risen Christ commissioned His church to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). We believe that commission falls to us



and to all believers and that it is fulfilled in a primary way through church planting, whereby the gospel is proclaimed and converts are formed into communities of disciples (Acts 2:21–47; 14:23). We are eager to pursue this mission, relying fully on the Holy Spirit, to see the gospel proclaimed and churches planted throughout the world, that God may be glorified among every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9–12).

**7. United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance.** We believe that the unity for which Jesus prayed among His people should find concrete expression among believers and churches. Indeed, the New Testament testifies to a vibrant interdependence among churches in the first century (John 17:20–21; Acts 16:4–5; 1 Cor. 11:16; Gal. 2:7–10). We seek to express a similar interdependence through our common fellowship, mission, and governance. Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation; we are committed to applying the gospel together in relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness. Our shared governance and mission protects our churches doctrinally and ethically, and enables our individual churches to do far more together than we could ever do separately.

I hope you can see from examining the example of Antioch that these two values can't be separated from each other; they are vitally linked. Mission without interdependence and partnership is not only less effective, but less biblical. And interdependence without mission results in stagnant and ingrown churches. We must keep mission and partnership together.

### ***Implications for Our Partnership***

In that spirit, here are a few key implications for our mission in partnership together:

#### **Mission in partnership keeps each of us healthy.**

During the pandemic we had our hands full with challenges in our own local context. But we had formed a strong partnership with our friend Jaya Prakash Ravuri, a Sovereign Grace pastor in India. And as bad as things seemed in the US, they were far worse in Pastor JP's area of India. The lockdown there meant no one could work, and therefore no one could buy food. Some were literally starving.

So our church partnered with JP to purchase food supplies for everyone in his village that needed food. The thousands of dollars our church contributed resulted in thousands of meals through the ministry of one local church. JP would say that was a key turning point for the work of the gospel in his village and resulted in an openness to him and his church he'd never experienced even after years of faithful ministry.

As significantly as this partnership affected JP's church, I think it had just as important an effect on our church. Where we were tempted to withdraw inward and stop caring about our world and neighbors, partnering with JP reminded us of what God was doing around the world and pulled us outward toward mission. That was a powerful gift to our church in that season.

So in this case, through mission in partnership, a church both in Gundugolanu, Andhra Pradesh and a church in El Paso, Texas were both strengthened and built up. When we pursue mission in partnership we may be aiming beyond ourselves, but counterintuitively, it actually strengthens us as well.

### **Mission in partnership allows more churches to partner in planting.**

Many times a church thinks they can't plant because they don't believe they have everything they need to send a church plant. Perhaps they have targeted a good location and a possible core group but no church planter, or perhaps a man with a burden to plant but no team to send with him. This is where our unique polity and partnership come in.

One of my favorite examples of this is our church in San Antonio, Texas. Mission City Fellowship was planted in an urban area with nearly every church in the region sending people on the church planting team. Our church in Seguin, Texas invested one of their pastors. The church in Round Rock, Texas contributed a worship leader. The whole region contributed financially. Truly, the entire region owned and supported and sent this plant when perhaps none of them could have sent the plant alone. This is what's possible through our interdependent partnership in Sovereign Grace.

**Mission in partnership results in churches that last not just years but decades.**

A number of years ago I happened to be at a gathering of church planting leaders from across the US. One of the interesting side conversations I had was that in one particular case the leader had ambitious targets for the number of churches planted, but no particular goals for how many of those churches would still exist 5-10 years later. When questioned about this by another church planting leader they sheepishly admitted that perhaps that would be a good statistic to track as well.

In Sovereign Grace we care not only about helping churches start, but also helping them to thrive over the long haul. That means that in a given region, perhaps two or three churches will take the lead in a plant, but very quickly that new church plant will need help from the Regional Ordination Committee as they appoint new elders, and may well need help from the Regional Judicial Review Committee to protect and preserve the church. So over time, every church and pastor will play some role in helping churches not only make it through their first year but their first decade.

**Mission in partnership must be carried by the many, not the few.**

Last fall all the Senior Pastors in our West region gathered together as has become our annual tradition. We get away to pray, discuss, dream, and plan together. (Being near the beach doesn't hurt either.) When we gather there are lots of differences in temperament and personality, and lots of differences in church size and situation. Despite all of that, one thing that always strikes me is that each man carries the whole region on his heart. When one church presents a mission opportunity or a potential exploratory work, everyone is leaning in. Even for us, as the furthest-flung church in our region, I truly believe these brothers will be behind us when we plant our next church.

Within our polity, it's only when local churches are taking initiative and pursuing mission that mission moves forward in Sovereign Grace. We are so grateful for our global leaders and those among us with skill in planting and we are happy to learn from them and follow their example. But within our polity church planting only happens effectively if regions and local churches take up the work of planting and carry it forward.

## ***Antioch Churches in Every City***

One of the joys of partnership in Sovereign Grace is that the Tony we sent out from our church so many years ago is still someone I know well. He's now in the Denver area at one of our churches there (Grace Community Church) and his desire has been to spend this stretch of his ministry helping his church be on mission, preparing to plant other churches in the Denver area.

Last summer my family and I stayed with Tony and his wife, Mary for a few days. One night in particular we stayed up late talking and dreaming about mission opportunities in Denver and our West region. Tony has been in ministry for decades but he's still seeking to build New Testament churches. Even in a later phase of his ministry, he wants to be part of establishing the next church like Antioch so that the gospel might continue to move forward. And I want to grow up to be just like him.

When we finally packed up and headed home, one of our sons cried because he loved our time with the Walshes so much. He didn't understand much but he understood that we love them and that they live far away so we won't see them as often as we would like. He is just beginning to see what I saw so many years ago: partnership in our family of churches means not only receiving but generously sending. And it is glorious.

May our legacy be our future as we partner together to plant churches and advance the mission.