

THE GRACE OF PARTNERSHIP

*Why Churches are
Stronger Together*

Jared Mellinger

The Grace of Partnership

© 2023 by Sovereign Grace® Churches
12914 Shelbyville Road
Louisville, KY 40243

www.sovereigngrace.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Sovereign Grace® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover Design: Dan Lee

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The ESV® Bible* (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001, Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by Permission. All rights reserved.



From the earliest days of Sovereign Grace, we have believed that churches are stronger together. It has been our shared conviction these four decades that in partnership we can accomplish far more than any one church could ever accomplish on its own. It is also my conviction that this theme of partnership will always be preached most powerfully not through any sermon, but through the example of faithful pastors and churches.

2 Corinthians 8-9 are familiar chapters on generous giving, but these chapters are often misunderstood. There are a few things to keep in mind as we examine this passage. *First*, the giving that is in view in these chapters does not involve *local* needs and *local* ministry, but *extra-local* ministry and needs. *Second*, Paul is not mostly after more money, he is concerned that the independent-leaning church in Corinth learn to demonstrate love and zeal for churches beyond themselves.

And *third*, these chapters are not simply about meeting an isolated, one-time need in the church in Jerusalem, they are about Paul's broader desire to join many churches together in an interdependent mission. This is why this larger section ends in 2 Corinthians 9:13-14 with an encouragement for the church in Corinth to be generous not only toward the Jerusalem saints but also toward "all the others," and Paul describes the Jerusalem saints as longing and praying for the church in Corinth. It's partnership.

Our goal here is not so much to focus on money and giving as it is to consider how these chapters shed light on the great New Testament theme of the unity and communion of churches. It is our hope that this biblical vision of the grace of partnership will deepen the convictions we already hold dear, and that this in turn would fortify our resolve to build strong regions, to send men to the Sovereign Grace Pastors College, to be willing to send out pastors to plant churches and to serve other congregations. The goal is that our churches would continue, for generations to come, to be rich in the grace of partnership.

God's Word to the Church

2 Corinthians 8:1-24 is full of lessons on partnership among churches. Paul writes:

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their

means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother

who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. And with them we are sending our brother who we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love and our boasting about you to these men.

Fight as One

Some might recognize these words:

“There came a day unlike any other when earth’s mightiest heroes were united against a common threat. On that day the Avengers were born! To fight the foes no single hero could withstand!”

That quote introduces one of the major themes of Marvel’s *The Avengers* (featuring Iron Man, Captain America, the Hulk, Thor, and many others), which is the theme of teamwork, interdependence, and working together toward a common

The Grace of Partnership

goal. In their case, that common goal is to prevent the evil Thanos from wiping out the entire universe.

In the beginning, these superheroes are each doing their own thing independently. But they join together in the recognition that none of them can carry out this mission on their own. The opening theme song to the animated Avengers series is “Fight as One.” It says,

“Our world’s about to break, Tormented and attacked ...

But now I’m not alone.

Always we will fight as one, Till the battle’s won,

With evil on the run

We never come undone, Assembled we are strong,

Forever fight as one.”

Now, if you are wondering if I am comparing the churches of Sovereign Grace to superheroes—yes, that is exactly what I am doing. The illustration only breaks down because our churches are more glorious, our union is more epic, and our work is more important. That is certainly not because Sovereign Grace is special. It is because we are the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are therefore, as the church, a cosmic display of the wisdom of God and part of the most important institution in world history.

We are called by God, as churches, to work together for the gospel. We are called to fight as one against the powers of darkness. We are called to joyful participation in the union of churches to which God in his great kindness has joined us.

The Snare of Denominational Superiority

When we talk about partnership, it's important to make a distinction between a healthy passion for partnership and an unhealthy sense of denominational superiority. Denominational superiority is a form of pride, a sectarianism that falls into thinking one's own denomination is the greatest and healthiest thing going. It is when we say, "Well, too bad most churches historically and globally have gotten so many things abysmally wrong. It sure does stink to be them, but hey, at least we are getting it right. We the few; we the faithful; we are the truly discerning."

It was the wise and large-hearted John Newton who insightfully said that every denomination tends to be proud and "abound with bigotry" in favor of themselves, and that all pastors and church members need to be intentional in freeing themselves from denominational pride. How do we do that? Newton says we cultivate denominational humility first by being filled with the Spirit and his fruits, and second, by intentionally seeing and celebrating the abundant grace of God that exists in the larger body of Christ.¹

We must always remember that the church of Christ is much older and much broader than Sovereign Grace Churches. We must always remember that what makes our churches Christian is more important than other denominational distinctives, as important as those distinctives are. We have been wisely led over the years to love and honor and humbly learn from the broader body of Christ, and if we fail to continue

1. Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 210.

The Grace of Partnership

in that practice, it will not bode well for the future of Sovereign Grace.

We still have much to learn and we have many reasons to be humble. Let every pastor and church member in Sovereign Grace continue to say “No” to denominational superiority, and let each of us continue to say “Yes” to the pursuit of a humble enthusiasm and passion for partnership. Our desire is not for everyone to love Sovereign Grace as much as we do; it is for Christians and churches everywhere to be a part of something they love, whether it is Sovereign Grace or another union of churches because *partnership is God's plan for the church*. We love partnership because we know that churches are stronger together.

When Churches Join Together

There is a Peanuts cartoon (Charlie Brown) where Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels, and she threatens him with her fist if he doesn't. Linus says, “What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?” Lucy responds, “These five fingers. Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.” So Linus says, “Which channel do you want?” He turns away and looks at his fingers: “Why can't you guys get organized like that?”

This is true. Individually, one church is significantly limited in what it can accomplish. But when churches are joined together, organized into a single unit, we form a weapon that is terrible to behold. There is power in partnership. There is power in cooperation and unity among churches.

We all know there is a tendency among individual Christians toward independence and autonomy. But the reality is, that same tendency exists among churches: there is a tendency *toward independence and away from joyful participation*.

The late missiologist David Hesselgrave says,

“Westerners (particularly North Americans) have a cultural bias toward promoting overindependency on the part of the churches they establish. Even when their churches actually belong to a larger fellowship of churches, the likelihood of those churches assuming an active role in the larger fellowship is not always great.”²

Like the Corinthians, we have our own independent leanings. It is the danger of the insular church, the solitary and small-minded church that has little vision for anything larger than itself and sees little need for anything beyond itself.

A Timely Challenge

This was the challenge in Corinth, and it is the same challenge we will face in our churches today. Paul Barnett, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, points out that the Corinthians were strong in a number of graces that were local and centered on themselves, but weak in those that were for the benefit of Christians and churches outside.³ He says, “Paul’s words

2. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 300.

3. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 403.

The Grace of Partnership

[in 2 Cor. 8-9] stand as a rebuke to the Corinthians' myopic individualism and congregationalism.”⁴

Ours is an age of “myopic individualism.” It is also an age of rampant anti-institutionalism, which contributes to the sense of urgency I feel around this theme of partnership at this particular moment in our history. In recent decades, and even more in recent years, there has emerged a deadly cynicism and distrust toward churches, denominations, and every other institution. The result is that Christians in any denomination are more likely than ever before to be indifferent toward or even suspicious of denominational affiliation.

This aspect of the spirit of the age poses a serious threat to this particular shared value that we hold dear. I believe that this has become one of the primary leadership challenges we face as pastors. If we are leading our churches into a biblical ecclesiology, the members of the churches we serve should not be indifferent to gospel partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches, they should be informed about what God is doing, and they should be rejoicing in what we get to be a part of.

Biblical Convictions

Pastors and pastors' wives, in fact all church members, need to have a passion for partnership that is informed and sustained by biblical convictions. In the New Testament, local churches are not independent, they are interdependent. Paul devoted himself to planting and building churches, and an essential aspect of the upbuilding of those churches was to build them together regionally for mutual support and mission.

4. Ibid., 449.

Study the book of Acts and you will see the cooperation and fellowship the churches enjoyed—traveling coworkers, reciprocal greetings, detailed updates, generous gifts, bonds of affection, sharing resources, sharing letters, leaders in various churches deliberating matters together, congregations benefiting from external accountability and instruction, churches learning from each other's example, giving up laborers to serve other churches, churches praying and thanking God for each other. We see many of these things in 2 Corinthians 8-9 as well.

The entire framework of the New Testament letters and extra-local coworkers testifies to the necessity and the irreplaceable value that God places upon churches partnering together. New Testament scholar Eckhard Schnabel says that in the New Testament, partnership in the gospel is centrally connected to the progress of the gospel.⁵ How does the gospel advance? Through partnership in the gospel.

Promoting and Protecting the Gospel

Bryan Chapell says,

"No one group can do all that is required for the advancement of the gospel. The varieties of gifts that bless individual churches are broadened and their effectiveness is multiplied when churches connect their efforts... [We] value such connectionism both for what it promotes and for what it protects. By our support of one another we provide more coordinated

5. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1460.

The Grace of Partnership

talent and resources for the promotion of the gospel than any single church could supply.”⁶

Partnership is one of our denomination’s Seven Shared Values, and in God’s kindness it has defined us since our earliest days. In Sovereign Grace, we want to plant and build churches that are rich in the grace of partnership: churches united in fellowship, mission, and governance.

In order to maintain this strength into the future, we need a foundation for our convictions about partnership that is sturdier than subjective experience and shared history alone. Memories of early conferences are not going to cut it.

Over time our experience of partnership will be something less than pure bliss. In every church, and in every denomination, the waves will at times be rough, and if there is no biblical ballast for the principles that motivate our involvement and our joyful participation, we are not going to make it. We will find ourselves slipping into a Corinthian parochialism rather than maintaining a love for partnership.

Three Examples

To inspire us toward the kind of interdependence, cooperation, partnership, and corporate responsibility we see throughout the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 8 holds out three examples. We should learn from each of them: *first*, the churches of Macedonia reveal the beauty of partnership; *second*,

6. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, Rober A. Peterson, eds. *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 200-201.

the self giving of Christ reveals the basis of partnership; and *third*, the commendation of Titus and his coworkers reveals the benefits of partnership.

Throughout 2 Corinthians 8 we see that Paul's method of persuading and appealing to the church is a leadership clinic. He is not laying down commands and burdens. He is inspiring them and inviting them into a fuller experience of the grace of partnership for their own good.

1. THE BEAUTY OF PARTNERSHIP

In the churches of Macedonia, in verses 1-5, we see the beauty of partnership. These churches, which include the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, are described and commended for their extraordinary example. Paul, as always, is relentless in his determination to celebrate the grace of God among the churches. And notice, he wants all of the members of the church in Corinth to be aware of God's activity in other churches.

This is a part of the interconnectedness Paul constantly labored to cultivate. He holds up these churches as an example, and points out their posture toward partnership. He says, "Look at these churches that have such an incredible extra-local concern and love for churches beyond themselves! Look at their external focus, their love, generosity, and joy, the eagerness for partnership among these churches!"

Paul describes this in verse 1 as a grace that was upon them: "We want you to know about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." What is this grace? The Macedonians were extremely poor, but these churches

The Grace of Partnership

faithfully resisted the temptation to turn inward. They had plenty of their own needs as churches, but they excelled at looking to the needs of others.

They gave “of their own accord” (verse 3), voluntarily and without compulsion. Verse 4 says they were begging for the opportunity to participate—“begging us earnestly for the *favor* [or the grace] of *taking part in* [that is, participating in, *koinonia*].” They were begging for the grace of partnership, the grace of participation. That was their passion. There was an overflow of joy, an excitement, about this partnership opportunity.

Verse 5 says they went beyond what was expected of them, as they gave themselves first to the Lord. They then gave themselves to these extra-local workers and the cause of gospel partnership.

God calls our attention to this glorious display of his grace: local churches abounding in love, giving generously and sacrificially, and displaying the beauty of partnership. The smile of God is upon local churches that have an eye to the welfare of other churches.

Lessons from Macedonia

The application of this passage is not so much “You need to give more.” Paul makes clear in verse 8 he is not issuing commands, which at this point might undermine the beauty and liberality of partnership. Paul says later (2 Cor. 12:14) that the last thing he wants is to be a financial burden to them, and he says “I seek not what is yours but you.” In other words, “I am not seeking your money, I am seeking your hearts.”

What God desires from us is this same eagerness, joy, and love—since as verse 8 and verse 24 say, this proves that your love is genuine. It's a matter of the heart. It's a call to love. Generous financial giving is but one aspect of the grace of partnership. It is important, but it is only one evidence and demonstration of the extra-local love for the saints that God has put in our hearts.

Notice, it was not the wealthier church in Corinth that provided a model of partnership, but the much smaller and poorer churches in Macedonia. This is an important lesson: no matter the size and resources in your church, your partnership impact can be immense and can be an example to other churches. We see that in Sovereign Grace as well—relatively small churches are having a massive partnership influence in our mission.

God wants every church in Sovereign Grace to be influenced and inspired by the compelling example of the churches of Macedonia. I encourage you to read Philippians. (Philippi is one of the Macedonian churches.) You will see it in even greater detail: the mutual affection and care, the abundance of joy, the valuable shared history (which is not to be quickly abandoned), the wealth of generosity, the honoring of extra-local workers, the gratitude and the encouragement.

The church in Philippi adopted this posture from the earliest days of the church—they did not wait to have their hearts invested, or to give generously, or to release extra-local workers. They modeled joyful participation from the first day.

The Grace of Partnership

The Flavor of Partnership

In the New Testament we learn what partnership should feel like—the aroma of churches partnering together. It doesn’t feel like a book of rules and procedures. It certainly doesn’t feel like dissension or quarreling or constant debate. It is love, joy, generosity, and gratitude.

I am convinced that the only way we will continue to be effective and fruitful into the future is for each of us to intentionally pursue this aroma, this flavor of gospel partnership seen in the best moments of the early church. Study Philippians and learn the marks of healthy partnership. Learn from the churches of Macedonia that Paul commends in these verses.

I thank God for our polity, but we cannot look to our *Book of Church Order* to preserve cultural values or mature partnership—it was never intended to do that. We are still a family of churches. Let’s learn from each other. Let’s remember that each part is needed and valuable. Let’s always be looking for opportunities, privately and publicly, to praise and commend pastors and churches in other regions, as Paul does here.

Let’s pray that God deepens our denominational unity and joy for decades to come, that we might experience and display the beauty of partnership.

2. THE BASIS OF PARTNERSHIP

The second example, following the beauty of partnership evidenced by the churches of Macedonia, is the self-giving of Christ (2 Cor. 8:9). Here we see the basis of partnership. This fellowship and sacrificial giving among churches is ultimately

motivated and sustained by the gospel itself. Verse 9 is a familiar and precious verse:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

Paul says, “You know the grace of Christ, and yet it is my joy to remind you of it.” Christ was rich with all the treasures of heaven. He was rich as the firstborn of all creation, rich as the preeminent one who is before all things and holds all things together. He was rich in the complete absence of poverty and suffering. Yet he became poor! Born in poverty, tempted as we are, nowhere to lay his head, despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, humbling himself to become obedient even to the point of death on a Roman cross.

Why would the Prince of Glory become poor? Why would the majestic Son of God shed his precious blood? “Though he was rich, *yet for your sake* he became poor.” He did it for your sake! He did it as a demonstration of his great love for you so that you and I, by his poverty, might become rich in the abundance of his grace. As the song lyric tells us:

*“What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer
There is no more for heaven now to give.”*

7. Jonny Robinson, Michael Farren, Rich Thompson, “Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me,” CityAlight Music, Farren Love And War Publishing / Integrity’s Alleluia! Music, 2018.

The Grace of Partnership

Behold, the self-giving of the Son of God! Behold, the riches of divine mercy poured out on sinners!

Maybe you don't have much by way of resources in this world—finances are tight, your car broke down, you had to sell your house, you wonder how you will make ends meet. God is reminding you that for your sake Christ became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich in his grace. We can therefore say with the psalmist, "Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you" (Ps. 116:7). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Primary Application

Notice the primary application of 2 Corinthians 8:9 in context. It is not a secondary application, it is the primary application, and it is this: that the sacrificial other-centeredness of Christ in his death has profound implications for how your church relates to other churches.

That's the whole point of this verse—the gospel, the self-giving of Christ for us, launches local churches (Corinth, and every one of the churches in our union) into generosity, extra-local love, and joyful participation. The gospel is the determining factor in how we will relate to other churches, and how we will engage the partnership needs and mission opportunities that surround us.

It is no coincidence that throughout our history we have sought to be gospel-centered and to excel in the grace of partnership—these things are connected. A stingy church is a contradiction of the gospel. This is why John Murray, in the brilliant things he writes about denominational responsibility,

can refer to the “evil of independentism” that often plagues churches—the evil of “exclusive preoccupation with the work and witness of the local congregation.”⁸ It is a contradiction of the gospel and a failure to apply the gospel in our corporate responsibilities.

Yes, we must be faithful first of all in our local congregation. Faithfulness starts there, but it does not end there. The deeper we go in our understanding of what Christ has done for us, the more his grace inevitably overflows in selfless love and radical generosity toward congregations beyond our own.

Looking Beyond our Own Needs

One specific way we emulate the self-giving of Christ is by sending out leaders. The church I serve, Covenant Fellowship Church, was planted outside of Philadelphia in 1984, when C.J. Mahaney and the other brothers in Gaithersburg, Maryland sent out a team including the Pattons and the Redrups. That doesn’t happen if a church isn’t looking beyond itself and giving of itself. We see the same example throughout our churches, where pastors and members are sacrificially sent to serve in other places.

Do you remember in Acts 13, when Paul and Barnabas are commissioned and sent out by the church in Antioch? Commenting on that sacrificial act, Darrell Bock says, “God loves churches that look beyond their own needs.”⁹ What

8. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 277.

9. Daniel Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 440.

kind of church does God love? What kind of churches do we want to be? Churches that look beyond our own needs. We want to be churches that follow in the footsteps of our Savior—the One who looked to the interests of others and freely gave of himself.

3. THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

There is a third example to learn from 2 Corinthians 8. And here we learn the benefits of partnership in the commendation of Titus. In verse 10 Paul says “this benefits you” and in verse 23 Titus is described as a fellow worker for their benefit. This theme of the benefits of partnership extends into chapter 9.

Obviously there is a lot in 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 about wise stewardship and gaining the trust of others. But we also see the structure of New Testament ecclesiology and mission: churches are interconnected, and these churches have appointed and commissioned extra-local leaders to carry out key functions in service of the churches.

Look at the commendation of Titus. 2 Corinthians 8:16 says that God has put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care that Paul has for the church in Corinth. There was a stirring of affection, a disposition that oriented Titus toward loving involvement in the churches. He is earnest, he is passionate, not about their money but about their maturity. He cares about the church! He wants them to be blessed in their giving. A church that is not generous in having a portion of their budget going beyond their own local ministry and mission is defeating themselves. What does Titus care about so deeply? Not money! He cares about the health of the church.

Brothers with Earnest Care

One of the ways God shows his care for our churches is by placing on the hearts of gifted leaders a desire for our well-being and the flourishing of our churches. It is a beautiful thing in the sight of God when a pastor is given an earnest care for other churches—in fact, that is the only way a group of churches can survive.

For me, one of the greatest joys of serving on the Leadership Team is seeing the care, the genuine love and concern, that Regional Leaders and men on the Leadership Team have for the churches. Mark Prater has led in this—he cannot be kept away from the churches, because he so deeply and genuinely loves the churches. Not only Mark, but Jeff Purswell, Jon Payne, Dave Taylor, and all the brothers—God has put into their hearts a concern for the welfare of other churches.

With Titus are two other unidentified coworkers who would carry the money to Jerusalem. Verse 23 describes them as messengers or apostles of the churches. Whether it is these men or all of the brothers and sisters in the churches who are referred to as “the glory of Christ” in verse 23, it is clear that the people of Christ reveal the glory of Christ. Verse 24 says that a report would go from these men to churches in distant places, who would speak of the grace of partnership that is upon this church.

I love the description of the unnamed brother in verses 18-19. What do we know about this brother? First, according to verse 18, he is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel—all the churches know him preeminent as a gospel-man, a herald of Christ and him crucified.

The Grace of Partnership

Second, according to verse 19, he has been appointed by the churches to labor on behalf of the churches. So he loves the gospel and he longs to serve the churches. He preaches the cross of Christ and he labors for the communion of churches. That's a beautiful ministry.

If I were writing a commentary, this is where I would commence ten pages of guesswork about who these unnamed men are. But because I am not a commentator I will spare us all and simply say I don't know. And in fact, because I am a preacher I will even say it is a glorious thing that these men are not named. Charles Spurgeon has a delightful comment here on the identity of this man. He says,

"It may have been Luke. Probably it was. It may not have been Luke. Probably it was not. We do not know who it was. But it is not important. What does it matter? As Mr. Whitfield used to say, 'Let my name perish, but let Christ's name last forever.'"¹⁰

Yes, we are content to have our names unmentioned and forgotten, if only we can spend our lives as gospel people, who are earnest in serving the church and playing our role in the union of churches to which we belong.

Sowing and Reaping

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul continues to appeal to the church that they have a certain extra-local posture, and includes the fact

10. Charles Spurgeon, "Joining the Church," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 3411, October 24, 1869, <https://spurgeongems.org/sermon/chs3411.pdf>

that this will benefit them as a church—as they sow bountifully (individually and corporately) their congregation will reap bountifully. “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way” (v. 11) which will overflow in many thanksgivings to God (v. 12).

Think of all the blessing and promises given in chapter 9, in light of this context of urging the church toward extra-local participation. God is saying directly and plainly that there are blessings of every kind for local churches that sow bountifully into extra-local fields. These will be the churches that reap in abundance. Paul says to the church, “This benefits you!”

We need to continue to help our churches be aware of and celebrate the irreplaceable benefits of partnership. Our churches need to hear, “This benefits you.” Partnership means we have others who care about us. We experience the blessing of extra-local leadership. “This benefits you!” Partnership provides belonging and accountability. It provides greater stability. It provides increased opportunities for mission. Partnership means we get to be a part of building something larger than just our own church.

Every pastor and every pastor’s wife has the responsibility of modeling joyful participation in partnership. A founding generation set an example for us in this. Let’s continue in what we have learned. Let’s continue to build friendships with other pastors and learn from other churches. Do all you can to send future pastors to the Pastors College. Do all you can to have your wives attend the annual Pastors Conference. Be willing to serve on committees. Contribute at least 10% of the church’s finances to our union. Consider giving personally to Sovereign Grace. Pray for the churches of Sovereign Grace.

The Grace of Partnership

Encourage and honor the brothers who serve our churches. Be willing to sacrificially release gifted men into the broader mission, plant churches, and support global missions.

As you continue to practice joyful participation, *this benefits you*. God will richly bless you in every way and we will together contribute to building something with a lasting impact for the glory of Christ.

The huge redwood trees in California are some of the largest things on earth and the tallest trees in the world. Some of them are 300 feet high and over 2,500 years old. You would think that trees this big have an incredible root system reaching down hundreds of feet, but they actually have a very shallow root system. When storms and winds come, the reason they don't fall is because they are locked together—their roots are intertwined. They don't stand alone, they are joined together, they support and protect each other.

We believe in churches in partnership. Together we will stand, together we will build, and together we will continue to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ among the nations.

When God Strikes the Match

John Calvin pastored in Geneva during a time of great reformation and revival. Calvin was convinced that however faithful and gifted individual pastors may be, reformation would not be sustained if churches were isolated and disconnected from each other. So one of Calvin's leading Reformation priorities was to cultivate unity and interdependence among the churches.

In the 1540s he organized a group of pastors into a formal group known as the Company of Pastors. These pastors originally served three churches in the city and a dozen churches in the countryside. Over the next 50 years, around 130 men would belong to the company.

Dr. Scott Manetsch wrote the book *Calvin's Company of Pastors*. His book repeatedly highlights the importance of interdependence, and pastors of various churches working together in partnership. Pastors all received the same theological training and went through the same ordination process. It was similar to what we do, but their oral theology exam was often led by John Calvin. Dr. Manetsch says that this group of pastors from various churches “depended on one another, learned from one another, were subject to one another, and forgave one another.”¹¹

God worked mightily through those 130 men, and nearly 500 years later we thank God for their labors. It is a reminder to us that our lasting influence in Sovereign Grace Churches is not found in the number of churches or pastors we have in our union. Our God delights to work through the weak and the few, especially when we partner together.

Sinclair Ferguson reflects on how God has worked throughout church history and says,

“It seems to be a divinely employed pattern—even when we may know only one or perhaps two names, those through whom the kingdom has been signally advanced are rarely, if ever,

11. Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305.

The Grace of Partnership

lone wolves. God in his gracious sovereignty characteristically assembles a small community and strikes the match.”¹²

God in his gracious sovereignty has assembled us in our beloved Sovereign Grace Churches. He has joined together this small community, and just as he has often done throughout history, I believe he is striking the match once again.

God has brought us to this point. God has united our hearts. God has made us resilient. And God is empowering us by his Spirit for the mission set before us. We partner not for Sovereign Grace but for the glory of Christ alone. So let’s do it! Let’s abound in the grace of partnership, let’s lead the churches we serve to thank God for the irreplaceable benefits of partnership, and let’s continue to press on, for generations to come, in the conviction we have held from the beginning, that churches are stronger together.

12. Sinclair Ferguson, “Introduction.” In *The Pastor: His Call, Character, and Work*, by Faculty and Friends of Old Princeton (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), vii.

