

Biblical Partnerships

In the last meeting, the missions committee discussed the possibility of the church getting more involved with national local churches by forming biblical partnerships as a part of their global ministry outreach. [See Baptist Bulletin October, 2000] The meeting concluded with the agreement that more study was needed in the area of strategic biblical partnerships and how the church could be more effectively involved in this type of ministry.

Member 1: Since our last meeting, I found that many churches are talking about biblical partnerships both in the United States and overseas. In today's world, believers come in contact with Christians from other countries everyday at work, at school, and even in the church. It's been fascinating to get to know these believers, and for me, this increased exposure and knowledge has prompted me to think about developing ways to become involved in establishing a working relationship with these believers and churches in different countries.

Member 2: I agree completely. In my research, I found some very interesting Internet sites dedicated to the process of developing biblical partnerships on an international scale. I think it's time we develop a policy to guide our church in the development of a biblical partnership with a ministry in another country.

Member 3: Good idea, but I think we need to start with a clear definition of a biblical partnership. Once we do this, we can develop parameters for building a partner relationship with other local churches. We did this exercise at work, and it proved very helpful to us as we moved our company into the global marketplace.

Member 2: I've been thinking about the process, and it seems to me the idea of a biblical partnership is really a lot like an association of churches, but with the added aspect that churches are not only joined in an association for fellowship, but also agreeing to work together on a specific task or ministry.

Member 1: I didn't think about that before, but it's true. Our church is already in an association with churches from all over the United States. This would simply be an extension of that type of relationship to an international scale.

Member 3: If we start with that as a basis, it seems that it'll be much easier for us to establish both a definition and the operating principles to guide us. We already know how we relate to the other churches that are a part of the association, and we understand the mutual respect and trust we have for each other. If we simply extend this type of relationship to the international arena, we can remain true to our position as an independent Baptist church and still move toward a biblical partnership with other churches around the world.

Member 1: That sounds like a good plan to me. And I think the statement for an international biblical partnership would be very similar to the one we used when we partnered with the churches in the area for the development of the camp. I remember we felt it was imperative that our local church establish biblical guidelines to ensure that the development of a working partnership with these churches was in keeping with the doctrine and practice of all the churches involved in the project. At that time, we entered into what we called a working partnership with three other churches to build and maintain the camp, but I guess we didn't really think about it in terms of a biblical partnership between churches in different countries.

Member 3: I suggest we study a definition of biblical partnership I found being used on a web site dedicated to the development of biblical partnerships. Let me read it to you:

“An excellent definition given by Lorry Lutz and Luis Bush in an article entitled *Partnership: The New Direction in World Evangelism*¹ will serve as the working definition of a biblical partnership for this article.

‘An association of two or more autonomous bodies who have formed a trusting relationship and fulfill agreed upon expectations by sharing complementary strengths and resources, to reach their mutual goal.’²

Member 3: The author of the site also included some further explanation of the definition that I think would be helpful to our discussion.

He said there are several very important points in this definition which need to be developed if we are to establish clear parameters for the formation and ongoing development of biblical partnerships between local churches.

The **first point** is that this is a coming together of two autonomous bodies. The relationship is based on an association model of ministry relationships whereby each party maintains complete control of their respective ministries with the agreement to work in cooperation with each other in specific areas and with well defined parameters. Neither side can dictate to the other concerning doctrine or practice, but all parties in the partnership agree on doctrinal statement, ministry goals, methodology of ministry, and specific responsibilities for each partner. Each organization is overseen by a duly constituted indigenous body or board and maintains their full organizational autonomy while cooperating with other partnering members.

¹ [<http://www.ad2000.org/adoption/coop/partner/PNAingre.htm>], "Partnership: The New Direction in World Evangelism" by Lorry Lutz and Luis Bush

² [<http://www.ad2000.org/adoption/coop/Partner/PNintro.htm>], "Partnership: the New Direction in World Evangelism: Introduction and Definition" [Abridged from documents by Lorry Lutz and Luis Bush]

This is a critical point as principles and practices of ministry may vary in significant ways between various cultures, and this agreement will prevent any possibility of misunderstanding concerning accountability and means of accomplishing the ministry goal.

Member 2: Our church has been involved in missions for as long as I know, and I have been on the missions committee for 10 years. I don't think I have ever really thought of local churches on the mission field as autonomous ministries in the same way I think about other churches in our association. I don't think I've thought less of them, I guess I just don't think about them much at all. I don't even know the names of any local churches on the mission field, and I don't think we even have them listed or even mentioned in our prayer time for missions. I can see now that if we're going to enter into a biblical partnership with a local church in another country we will need to do some significant research to find names and background information.

The **second issue**, and perhaps the most critical point in the definition, is the need for the partners to build a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. All members of the agreement must have an absolute trust in all the other parties. The question of accountability must also be clearly answered prior to the beginning of a biblical partnership. Will the church sending finances be willing to trust the 'receiving' church to use the resources in the way they feel will best accomplish the mutually agreed upon task? Or, will the 'sending' church want to retain the right to control the use of the funds either themselves or through a person from their own culture?

This mutual trust and respect relationship is built on a history of communication via letter, email, phone or even face-to-face meetings. There must be a relationship with a sharing of vision, ministry needs, prayer requests and praises, and an understanding that each church is viewed by God as being equal. This type of relationship can be very difficult to achieve if one of the members of a biblical partnership is wealthy in relation to the other members. An attitude of mutual respect will not be achieved if churches from the United States see themselves as a only a source of funds or other resources. It will come only as a result of each member of the partnership seeing the other members as being truly interdependent, each contributing to the task and each receiving from the other members as God has designed.

The traditional lack of trust between the 'givers' and the 'receivers' has produced many hurt feelings and misunderstandings in the past. Accusations have been made against the 'receivers' that the funds and other material resources were not used in the way the 'givers' intended. Many times the 'receivers' were required to be accountable to someone from the 'givers' culture or organization to insure that all resources were used in an

appropriate way. These actions were interpreted by the 'receiving local church or believers' as a lack of trustworthiness on their part and that the money and resources were given with strings attached.

Member 1: This certainly reinforces what you said about the need to get to know about the church we plan to partner with. We send money to a variety of ministries now, and I think we trust them to use the funds in the best way to accomplish the task. In most cases we don't even have a say in the actual ministry tasks or methodology. I guess, if we don't trust the national local church leadership in the area of finances, we should not even consider entering into a biblical partnership with them.

I wonder how we can even begin to have this type relationship of trust and respect with a local church in another country? At this point we don't even know the name of a church, let alone communicate with them. Is there anyone who could help us get started?

Member 3: I think one of the Internet sites I used is dedicated to this process. I imagine if we were to contact them, they would be able to help us, at least to make the initial contact. The address for the site is <http://www.eglobalpartners.org>.

The **third point** here deals with the sharing of complementary strengths and resources. It is essential in a biblical partnership that all members must be actively involved in contributing to the life and health of the relationship. God has designed the body and has put each member in its place. Each part of the body was designed for a specific reason and purpose and has an essential part to play in the health of the body. The history of missions is built on the model of churches from one part of the world sending people, finances, and other resources to plant and build churches in another part of the world. There has not been an avenue for the receiving churches to send anything back in return. A good test of this is to ask yourself this question, 'Does our church need the churches in Chad, or another country? The typical response is probably negative. We understand how they need us, our resources and our abilities, but we do understand how we need what God has designed for them to offer to the health of the body in general, and to the health of our church specifically.

Member 2: I was talking with one of the guys at work about biblical partnerships, and he said they are already partnering with a ministry in another country. I asked him some questions about the ministry and the national leader, but he did not seem to know anything except that they send money to him because he was too poor to do the ministry. But, as I read these materials, I am not sure we are talking about the same thing. It seems that they are simply sending money to a national leader and supporting him in the place of his own local church. It seems like

that is a very one-sided partnership. When I asked him what their church was receiving from the national church, he said, “They didn’t expect anything in return. After all, the national leader’s church was very poor while his church had lots of money to give.” They were just helping in a ministry that needed money to operate.

Member 3: I can see real dangers if we were to get involved in that type of partnership. I do not want our church to take the role and authority away from a national church in supporting their leadership. I would like to see our church move to the next level, to actually have a biblical partnership with a local church and to think through the complementary strengths and resources we have to both give, and receive.

Member 1: Maybe it’s time we think through the question, ‘Do we really need the churches around the world?’ I must confess I have always thought about those churches as being poor and needing our resources and finances, but not really that they actually had anything to offer us. I mean, what do they have that could be of any help to our ministry?

Member 3: I found some interesting suggestions which dealt with that very question. Look at this list.

- The western church's strengths which can complement the non-western church's efforts are many:
 - Administrative skills and structures.
 - Technology and trainers for such as radio, computers, etc.
 - Sources of funding, though shrinking in the West, still represent about 80 percent of all "Christian money."
 - The vast majority of Christian books have been written and produced in the West. Until more Christian writers and publishers are developed in the Two-Thirds World, most Christian literature in the world will continue to come from the West or be translated from English.
 - Personnel—outpaced by Two-Thirds World, but thousands of quality young people are available, who have the opportunities to receive some of the best missiological training in the world.
- The strengths and gifts of the church in the Two-Thirds World which can complement the missions program of the western church are also many:
 - A more holistic world view of God.
 - Interdependent rather than individualistic, the church in the Two-Thirds World has a deep sense of community and familial responsibility.

- The national Christian leaders know their culture, world view, language and customs and can help us understand them. Nationals have insight that can help us avoid the mistakes and poor judgments we might make without them.
- National Christian leaders bring fresh insights and applications from the Word of God. They share experiences of faith and courage that we in the West may not have known.
- Most national Christian workers know how to live on the simple lifestyles of their own people. Not only can funds be stretched to finance a larger program, but their example is a challenge to those of us in the West who have developed an over-extended lifestyle. The missionary force from the Two-Thirds World is currently growing five times faster than western missionaries. Before the end of this century, Two-Thirds World missionary personnel will make the greatest contribution to our mission partnerships.
- The prayer life of many in the Two-Thirds World church is a challenge to our faith. Prayer patterns such as the early morning prayer meetings of the Korean church, the all-night prayer meetings of the African church, or the 24-hour prayer vigils of a Brazilian mission, can enrich our partnerships.

Complementary gifts are not necessarily stationary. As the Two-Thirds World church develops its leadership and giftedness, it may not need all the resources western partners now offer. Yet as long as the task of world evangelization is uncompleted, we will need to adjust our relationships so that we can continue to work as partners.³

Member 1: Wow, this list is a real challenge to me. At my job, I work with people from many different backgrounds and cultures, and I know I've gained many insights about how to do my job better from working with these men. But I've never talked with, or even read anything by, a Christian from a different country about what they have to offer us. I guess this brings us back to the need to begin the entire process of building a biblical partnership by first developing a trusting relationship with a local church, and through that, really get to know their strengths and resources, and match them with what we feel are our strengths and resources. I hope we end up having more to give to a biblical partnership than just our money!

Member 3: It seems that we have more material things to offer them and they have more spiritual things to offer us. It makes me think about the message pastor preached from 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul compared the true value of spiritual versus material contributions to the body.

³ [<http://www.ad2000.org/adoption/coop/partner/PNAingre.htm>], "Agency Partnerships: Ingredients for Success", Abridged from documents by Lorry Lutz and Luis Bush]

The **final point** of the definition is that of fulfilling agreed upon expectations to reach the mutually agreed upon goal. The partners in a project must have a clear understanding of all the aspects of the agreement. This part of the process can take more time to develop as churches in the United States are not used to communicating directly with churches in other countries, and it requires the building of relationships from the very beginning. It is amazing that even today, with all the possibility for international communication and travel, that local churches in the United States don't take the time and effort to communicate with local churches in other countries to understand their goals for ministry. While this task can be challenging to begin, it is an absolute necessity that all the parties in a partnership have a common definition of terms and an understanding of the historical pattern of relationships.

The question must be asked, 'What are the specific ministry goals of each member of the Partnerships?' This has been an area of great weakness in the work of missions as local churches are typically only exposed to the goals and plans of the missionaries and do not have the opportunity to communicate directly with the national local churches. Do they really want and need what we have been offering? While the response may be a resounding or even a qualified 'yes,' we need to hear directly from our sister churches around the world.

Member 2: I can readily relate to this point. This is a part of developing my team at work. When we are given an assignment, we talk through a project and establish a final goal that each member works toward. We then define the various tasks and divide them among the team members. At the end of the meeting, each member of the team knows what to expect from the other members, and we are all working to accomplish the common goal. And I know this planning time has become more critical since our company has become international, and we have team members from different cultural backgrounds. I have learned how words and concepts are understood in very different ways depending on a person's background and cultural setting.

Member 1: The point that struck me in this section was the question, 'Do they really want and need what we have been offering?' I feel like we need to find out the answer to this question before we begin to even consider the possibility of a biblical partnership.

Member 2: I think the definition and explanation give us some excellent guidelines for our church. There are issues presented in the materials I have never considered before, but I can see them as critical to the building of an effective biblical partnership.

Member 3: The author here also gave a good summary of the **purpose of a biblical partnership, a definition of a working partnership and a sample agreement which could be used as a basis for a biblical partnership.** I

think it's very important that we have a clear understanding of the 'why' of biblical partnerships and 'how' of biblical partnerships before we present any materials to the entire church. I suggest we study both the purpose and definition and see if we can use them in our policy. But I think we have done enough work for this evening. We can continue working on this at our next meeting.