

Partnerships:

Who Can I Link Arms With or Not?

in

Ministry, Missions, Marriage,
Church Membership,
Business, Etc.

By Tim Cantrell

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INTRODUCTION

The Best of Partnerships

Where would global Christianity be today were it not for the fruit of collaboration? The entire modern mission's movement was birthed through William Carey's burden for greater cooperation amongst churches to reach the nations. Out of this came the heroic exploits of the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, China Inland Mission, and countless others who've left an indelible mark for Christ on our world.

Where would we be today without the wealth of biographies and stirring accounts of the Serampore Trio, the Cambridge Seven, the Saint Andrews Seven, the Auca Five and others who gave their lives to see nations won to the Saviour?!

On the African continent where I serve, a great example I've witnessed first-hand is the Reformed Baptist movement in Zambia. In the 1980s university students were converted at Lusaka Baptist Church and began to meet for Bible study and devoured the sermons of Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, and the Puritans. Some of these men were then trained as preachers and were sent out to plant churches.

Nearly 40 years later, today there are 65 churches in their movement, most of which are healthy and reproducing! All because of God's Word at work through good cooperation amongst likeminded churches.¹ Conrad Mbewe, one of their founders, writes:

*We have a nation and an entire continent to bring to the foot of the cross through the propagation of biblical Christianity, and it will necessitate big projects. Too much ground has been lost to the Charismatic movement and the Liberals. If we continue to limit ourselves to small local church projects, we will not have the impact that we need to have. Together we can do so much more!*²

The Worst of Partnerships

God's same gift of cooperation has also been hijacked by Satan to cause untold harm, heresy, and ruin around the world. The very scattering of languages and

¹ <https://sola5.org/biblical-inter-church-associations/>

² <https://sola5.org/reformed-baptist-interdependency-the-zambian-model/>

nations that necessitates missions stands as a permanent warning of the danger of failed partnerships (Gen. 10-11). The rest of the Old Testament is replete with warnings and examples of Israel's demise when she made alliances with pagan neighbours instead of relying upon God and His Word.³

Church history is full of sad tales of cult leaders and sects that upheld a veneer of outward unity for generations. In the name of 'one Church', Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and mainline Anglicanism have each kept nations and continents in darkness without the biblical gospel.⁴

The modern ecumenical movement, with its apostate World Council of Churches, damns countless souls with their social gospel and worldly alliances with political power. In 1957, Billy Graham's New York crusade infamously linked arms with Roman Catholics and liberal churches, and before long prominent reformed pastors were signing "Evangelicals and Catholics Together".⁵

'Big-tent' evangelicalism has never recovered from those costly compromises. What better tool for Satan to use in the final, great apostasy under Antichrist than widespread cooperation in compromise, a 'groupthink' that links arms together in one last, global project that turns millions away from the truth, exactly as the New Testament repeatedly warns?⁶

Common Questions

At every level, spiritual partnerships can be either fruitful and rewarding, or painful and perplexing. Unless you serve in a megachurch that can do almost everything by itself, there are many mission and ministry endeavours that will require you to figure out with whom you can or cannot work. On the back cover of this booklet are listed some of the more common questions; plus here are a few others:

³ Isa. 31:1, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help...." (cf. Deut. 17:16; 2 Chron. 16; Ps. 20:7; 33:17; 40:4; 118:8-9; 146:3; Isa. 10:20; 30:2,7; 36:6; Jer. 2:17-18; 17:5-8; Jer. 43-44)

⁴ <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A356/why-so-many-denominations>;

⁵ As recounted in Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* (Banner of Truth, 2000); also summed up here in his audio message: <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/383>.

See also: <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A149/evangelicals-and-catholics-together>; <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/myth-influence>; <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/how-should-protestants-relate-roman-catholics>; <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-manhattan-declaration>

⁶ Matt. 24:10-15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; 2 Tim. 4:3-4

- Why is it that some of those who speak the most about networking turn out less productive in the long run than the independent plodders?
- What is the role of local church vs. parachurch?
- What is the difference between unity and uniformity?
- How do we make sure networking doesn't get in the way of working, hindering us from actually getting the job done?
- How do I decide between 'better' and 'best' in prioritizing ministry commitments and associations?
- How do I relate to family and friends who are in different kinds of churches than me?
- What about that painful church split we went through and all the damage it caused – was that necessary?
- How do we distinguish between godly separation and sinful schism, between necessary conflict and avoidable conflict?
- Which missionaries and ministries should my church support or not?
- How can we ensure that our “partnerships” go deeper than just fundraising?

These are the kinds of questions this booklet tackles.

Navigating Partnerships

Partnerships worked perfectly in the Garden of Eden, and one day in Paradise Restored, believers will again cooperate in holy harmony and fruitful service around the throne of God. But in this fallen world, working together is often messy and thorny. An entire Trinitarian theology of partnership could be written; but alas, this booklet is my meagre contribution toward the ongoing conversation.

From the earliest days of the Christian mission, even the Apostle Paul and Barnabas had a “sharp disagreement” over John Mark (Acts 15:36-41). We're not told who was right, only that God sovereignly used it to multiply the effort

into two separate missionary teams. It seems the main lesson from that inspired text is not about how Paul or Barnabas handled the conflict, but how Dr. Luke (the author) viewed it through a gospel lens, confident that God used it to further the gospel. In Acts, Paul is almost never found alone, except when involuntary (i.e., imprisoned). Much wisdom could be gleaned from Paul and his churches' shining model of team ministry and gospel cooperation.

I've been in full-time pastoral ministry, missions, and theological education now for the past 25 years (since 1998), and I'm still learning and figuring out this wild-and-wonderful world of partnerships. But I'm thankful to pass on a few things the Lord is patiently teaching me.

Most of these lessons have been especially hammered out with my dear brothers on our eldership and amongst our beloved flock at Antioch Bible Church, along with our seminary faculty and students spurring me on. (Plus my bride, Michelle, and I have been very happily married for nearly 26 years – the best of all earthly partnerships!)

My Disclaimer & Purpose

It is impossible to do justice biblically to this massively important theme of partnerships, which touches on so many aspects of the Christian life, church ministry, missions and more. The Book of Proverbs alone is a treasure chest of divine wisdom on nearly every dimension of friendships. Add to this Ecclesiastes, calling us away from isolation and towards cooperation:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ...a threefold cord is not quickly broken (4:9-12).

My modest aim in this booklet is *to present a biblical doctrine of separation and a working model for cooperation – so that our partnerships in the Christian life and ministry will be God-honouring, lasting, and fruitful.*⁷

With a missionary hero of old, I too pray that the Lord of the Harvest will use these truths for the greater “progress of the gospel” into a lost and perishing world, through wise “participation in the gospel”, and that our “love would abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment”, that we

⁷ This booklet was originally a chapter I was asked to write for a forthcoming mission's textbook. I've since re-named, adapted and enlarged my material significantly and broadened the applications.

would all “approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” (Php. 1:5,9-12).

CHAPTER ONE: **The Doctrine of Separation**

We begin where Christ began in the greatest missionary prayer ever prayed, in John 17 on the eve of His crucifixion. Before Jesus prayed for unity (17:20-24), He prayed for purity (17:6-19). His focus on sanctification precedes His concern for cooperation in reaching a lost world. Jesus’ half-brother, James, does the same, showing that unity is a fruit of purity and not vice-versa: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable....” (Jam. 4:17).

Like sterilization in surgery, necessary separation from apostasy and worldliness prevents infection and saves lives. But recovering this lost doctrine of separation is no easy task. As a veteran pastor laments:

...In my conversations with younger Christian leaders, many of them raised in our own churches, they instinctively recoil at my mention of the doctrine of separation. Oh, they seem to understand that there are incorrect, even false, teachings. But they resist attributing incorrect or false teachings to actual teachers who are incorrect or false. That seems too close to a personal attack. It is so unkind.

...In our own days of doctrinal carelessness and toleration here in the twenty-first century Church, the doctrine of biblical separation is mocked by many, ignored by most.⁸

Phil Johnson describes how unwillingness to separate “has destroyed countless churches and evangelical institutions, not to mention the broad evangelical movement itself.”⁹ Says Palgrave, “We are witnessing a global collapse of the biblical doctrine of separation and a great mixing of truth with error resulting in spiritual confusion and apostasy.”¹⁰

Veteran missionary and missiologist, William Smallman, writes:

The high priority given to evangelism can easily lead to a setting aside of biblical guidelines for cooperation or non-cooperation and opposition of error.

⁸ <https://sharperiron.org/article/forgetting-doctrine-of-separation>

⁹ <https://www.fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2011.06.FrontLine.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://metropolitantabernacle.org/articles/abandoning-separation-from-biblical-error/>

...The present-day ministry environment does not favor a particularity of conviction that limits cooperation among believers in Christ.¹¹

God's Holy Character

To help us recover this essential doctrine of separation we must study the biblical reasons to separate, starting with these: (1) the character of God; (2) the command of God to His people.

Firstly, separation starts with God's righteous nature – as pure and holy.¹² “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). God hates all that is evil; His eyes cannot look on impurity, and His holy zeal for all that is righteous makes Him a consuming fire (Zech. 8:17; Hab. 1:13; Heb. 12:29). The only appropriate response for sinful man in the presence of this thrice-holy God is self-repudiation (Isa. 6:5; Lk. 5:8; 18:13). Sharing in God's holiness through Christ is required for any fellowship with Him and for entrance into glory (1 Jn. 1:7; Heb. 2:11; 12:14). This means that separation from evil reflects the very nature of God.

God's holiness explains why He separates good from evil. In the beginning, Adam and Eve knew only the goodness of God. But when they sinned, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they tasted for the first time the bitterness of evil. God then had to separate them from His presence in Eden's Garden (Gen. 3:6–8, 24). This becomes a recurring pattern through Scripture, as God separates the profane from the holy (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26), not allowing anything to defile His pure presence (Rev. 21:27). God has fixed a vast, impassable, and permanent gulf between heaven and hell (Luke 16:26).

God will forever separate between the righteous and the wicked. As Heffernan summarizes:

God separated between righteous Noah and the rest of the wicked world (Gen. 6:5–8; 2 Pet. 2:5), between righteous Lot and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:25; 2 Pet. 2:7–9), and between the children of Israel and the Egyptians (Exod. 8:23; 11:7; 14:20). He will

¹¹ pp. 216-217, *Missions in a New Millennium* (Kregel, 2000). A recent example is this popular book, linked to an influential movement here in South Africa and abroad: *Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements*, by Powell & James (Intervarsity, 2019). Yet the authors turn the biblical option of collaboration into an extra-biblical moral requirement, at the expense of doctrinal discernment.

¹² The next three paragraphs are adapted from this excellent essay by Ben Heffernan: <https://fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NovDec-2020-lowres.pdf> (pp. 6-9).

separate between the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:30), between the humble and the proud (Ps. 138:6), and between the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:32–33). A biblical separatist, then, simply mirrors the ways of God.

...Just as a father's love compels him to protect his children from danger, so God's love compels Him to separate His own from evil. God has reserved the godly for Himself (Ps. 4:3). Separation, therefore, is not antithetical to love, but rather is a necessary expression of love.

... Jesus Christ came to manifest God's light in human flesh (John 1:4–5; 8:12; 12:46) to a world of people who love darkness because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). This mission of light now defines the purpose of the church as well (Matt. 5:14–16; Acts 13:47; Phil. 2:15). Yet darkness cannot possibly illuminate darkness. The church, therefore, must imitate the One who was "separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26) in order to shine the light of the gospel and to fulfill God's mission of love to this world.¹³

God's Command to His People to Separate

Flowing out of our first reason, this second reason for biblical separation is that laws are always a reflection of the lawgiver. Royal decrees demonstrate the nature of a King and His kingdom, so God's instructions to us are consistent with His nature. We "hate evil and love the good" because we love the Lord and are called to imitate His holiness (Amos 5:15; Rom. 12:9; Ps. 97:10; 1 Pet. 1:16).

We dare not have fellowship with "the works of darkness"; the two kingdoms are incompatible and mutually exclusive, so we must "come out and be separate", as we "walk in the light" (2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:8-11; 1 John 1:5-10). It is God's Word that lights the way for us to discern between good and evil (Ps. 119:105,130).

Separation for the believer begins at the personal level – fleeing sin, temptation, and worldliness of all kinds, and striving for Christlikeness – putting off ungodliness and putting on godliness (Php. 3:11-14; Eph. 4:17-32; Rom. 12:1-2; Col. 3:5-10). Rightly has it been said:

If the believer neglects personal separation, it ensures moral compromise with evil that will certainly weaken the knees of any other stand for Christ

¹³ <https://fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NovDec-2020-lowres.pdf> (pp. 7-8).

*against sin. The crumbling of ecclesiastical separation...results from a failure to practice diligently personal separation.*¹⁴

As the fruit of a holy life, Christ also calls us to ecclesiastical separation in ministry and mission. Scripture calls us to separate from both: (a) false teachers; and (b) disobedient brethren. We separate from heretics by exposing false doctrine, by refusing to support or welcome it (Rom. 16:17-19; Tit. 1:10–14; 3:9–11; 2 Jn. 1:9-11). Consider:

*When grievous error erodes the foundation of truth, the entire house of Christian doctrine, mission, and practice collapses. Paul pronounces a curse upon those who would undermine the gospel with another message (Gal. 1:8–9), and Jude exemplifies the duty of warning against attacks upon the faith (Jude 4; Acts 20:29–31). ...The fundamentals of the faith are those doctrines when once denied undermine the gospel or the authoritative nature of the Bible (1 Tim. 6:20–21).*¹⁵

Yet God’s Word calls us not only to separate from false teachers, but also from unrepentant brethren living in sin or wilful error (1 Cor. 5:5-11; 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15). This is why our Lord teaches that if the wayward persist in unrepentance, Step 4 of corrective church discipline is excommunication, for the purity of the church and integrity of our gospel witness (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1-2). Nathan Busenitz concludes, “An emphasis on personal holiness and moral separateness in the midst of secular culture is not legalistic. It’s biblical.”¹⁶

Costly Failure to Separate – South African Case Studies

Two major studies have been done proving what happens when a denomination (a partnership of churches) fails to separate from theological error, which left unaddressed eventually becomes full-blown heresy. Taljaard shows how the Dutch Reformed Church slowly began to adopt a liberal view of Scripture, no longer upholding biblical inerrancy. They imbibed the anti-supernaturalism of the age, which reshaped their hermeneutics, even though it was a drastic departure from their historic, Protestant confessional standards and formerly high view of Scripture. Because of tolerating these root errors, they eventually bore the fruit of racist ideology, women’s ordination, gay ‘marriage’, homosexual clergy, and many more compromises.¹⁷

¹⁴ <https://fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NovDec-2020-lowres.pdf> (p. 8).

¹⁵ <https://fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NovDec-2020-lowres.pdf> (p. 9).

¹⁶ <https://thecripplegate.com/accommodation-or-separation/>

¹⁷ <https://repository.nwu.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10394/37970/25711989%20Taljaard%20L.pdf>

Likewise, Aucamp shows in the Baptist Union of Southern Africa in their nearly 150-year history still has not taken a strong, confessional stance on biblical inerrancy. This weak doctrinal foundation continues to foster division and decline in churches, giving the foothold to Satan and error.

Aucamp documents how a mere two men (Ennals in the 1920s, Barnard in the 1950s) have done enormous damage, all because the denomination did not openly identify their errors and publicly censure these men and separate from their unbiblical errors. Aucamp also shows how the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty (soul liberty / liberty of conscience) must not be misused as a guise for tolerating deadly error and compromise.¹⁸

The Word of God warns us, ‘a little leaven leavens the whole lump’ (1 Cor. 5). No wonder two of the seven churches of Asia Minor were rebuked for tolerating error (Rev. 2:14-15, 20), while the Ephesian church was commended for “hating” the deeds of false teachers (Rev. 2:6).

When to Stay or Leave a Church?

This biblical doctrine of separation becomes most practical and painful for longstanding members who believe it may be time to leave a beloved-but-compromised church. For some, this could mean leaving behind deep roots, cherished friends, and even relatives and loved ones. Is a pure gospel and a solid church worth such a gut-wrenching, costly choice? MacArthur gives this wise counsel:

Leaving a church is not something that should be done lightly. Too many people abandon churches for petty reasons. Disagreements over simple matters of preference are never a good reason to withdraw from a sound, Bible-believing church. Christians are commanded to respect, honor, and obey those whom God has placed in positions of leadership in the church (Heb. 13:7, 17).

However, there are times when it becomes necessary to leave a church for the sake of one's own conscience, or out of a duty to obey God rather than men. Such circumstances would include:

¹⁸ https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA19968167_1; <https://sats.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Aucamp-CA-Masters-FINAL-Apr-08.pdf>

**If heresy on some fundamental truth is being taught from the pulpit (Gal. 1:7-9).*

**If the leaders of the church tolerate seriously errant doctrine from any who are given teaching authority in the fellowship (Rom. 16:17).*

**If the church is characterized by a wanton disregard for Scripture, such as a refusal to discipline members who are sinning blatantly (1 Cor. 5:1-7).*

**If unholy living is tolerated in the church (1 Cor. 5:9-11).*

**If the church is seriously out of step with the biblical pattern for the church (2 Thess. 3:6, 14).*

**If the church is marked by gross hypocrisy, giving lip service to biblical Christianity but refusing to acknowledge its true power (2 Tim. 3:5).*

This is not to suggest that these are the only circumstances under which people are permitted to leave a church. There is certainly nothing wrong with moving one's membership just because another church offers better teaching or more opportunities for growth and service.

But those who transfer their membership for such reasons ought to take extreme care not to sow discord or division in the church they are leaving. And such moves ought to be made sparingly. Membership in a church is a commitment that ought to be taken seriously.¹⁹

Summary

As argued above from both Old and New Testaments, separation is no new doctrine or recent conviction in Christ's Church. The *London 1689 Baptist Confession* calls for separation from so-called believers "who...destroy their own profession by any fundamental errors, or by unholy behaviour". It also speaks of congregations that "have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be the churches of Christ and have become 'synagogues of Satan'", and then severely condemns the papacy and all of Rome's false doctrines.²⁰ Says one Presbyterian pastor:

¹⁹ <https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA120/When-Should-People-Leave-Their-Church>.

See also: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go> (by Mohler); <https://www.9marks.org/article/if-youre-thinking-about-leaving-a-church/> (by Dever).

²⁰ <https://www.the1689confession.com/1689/chapter-26>

The Bible...from end-to-end demands that in every generation we...practice ecclesiastical separation, and the penalty for not doing so is the gradual lowering of the cross of Christ and melting into a general religiosity which is neither biblical nor has the power to save (Rom 1:16).²¹

It is believed that Spurgeon's 19th-century battle against the doctrinal Downgrade Controversy is what brought the Prince of Preachers to an early grave; but not before he had separated from the Baptist Union. Spurgeon, who saw thousands come to Christ and sent missionaries across the globe, once stated:

Complicity with error will take from the best of men the power to enter any successful protest against it. ...Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin. ...As soon as I saw...that error had become firmly established, I did not deliberate, but quitted the body at once. ...No protest could be equal to that of distinct separation from known evil.²²

Borrowing from Grace Community Church, our seminary in Johannesburg also includes in our doctrinal statement an entire section entitled, "Separation".²³ David Doran sums up this truth well:

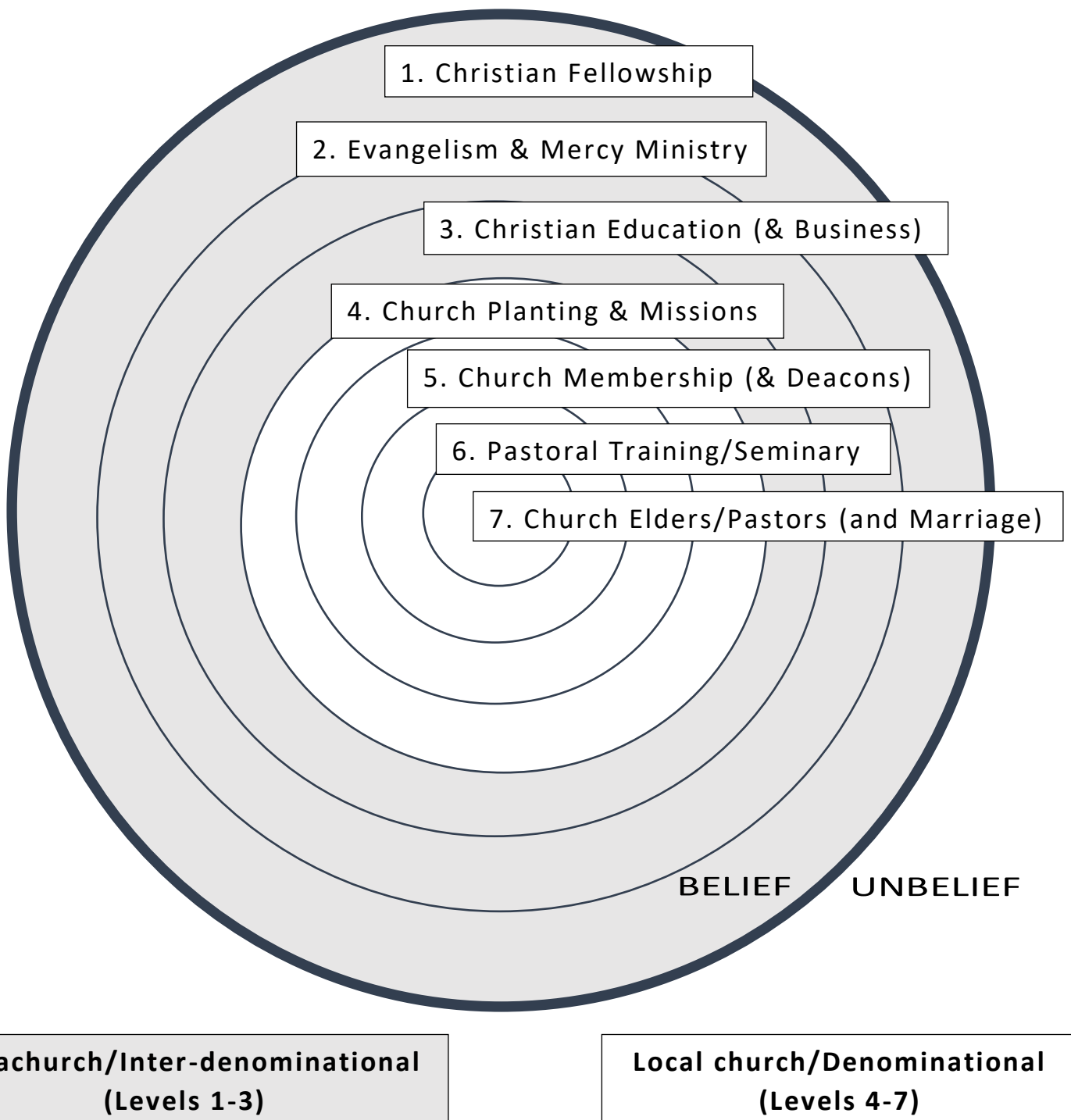
Every great revival has drawn a line between truth and error, between the gospel and its counterfeits, and between the converted and the unconverted. Truth separates. I'd love to see evangelicalism recover the biblical concept that you can't truly stand for the gospel if you won't stand apart from false gospels. Genuine gospel unity flows from genuine gospel separation.²⁴

²¹ <http://wrs.edu/assets/docs/Journals/2004b/Cohen%20-%20BPC%20and%20Separation.pdf> (p. 5)

²² p. 151, quoted in R. McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*; Spurgeon spoke repeatedly about biblical separation – see here: <https://www.reformedreader.org/spurgeon/separation.htm>. See also Spurgeon's faithful legacy still being upheld today at Metropolitan Tabernacle 150 years later: <https://metropolitantabernacle.org/articles/the-doctrine-of-biblical-separation/>

²³ <https://www.shepherdsafrika.co.za/about/doctrinal-statement/>

²⁴ <https://www.9marks.org/article/potential-and-pitfalls-together-gospel/>



Levels of Partnership

(see explanation on next pg.)

Levels of Partnership

(with diagram on previous pg.)

In essentials, unity = Inside the gospel boundary we are one in Christ, regardless of differences; outside that boundary, we cannot have fellowship, but must evangelise them.

In non-essentials, liberty = Each believer and church has freedom of conscience to form biblical convictions and gospel partnerships at differing levels of unity.

Non-essentials are not the gospel boundary, but some of these views are important *distinctives* that influence the extent of our partnerships and define our associations.

*Our goal is not minimal unity but maximal unity around the entire Word of God.*²⁵

In all things, charity = “And I show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....” (1 Cor. 13).

Suggested Confessional Boundaries for Each Level:

Levels 1-2 – Apostle’s Creed & Nicene Creed; *What is a Biblical Christian* booklet, by Al Martin²⁶

Levels 3-4 – Sola5 Confession²⁷; Position Papers & Key Statements on Doctrinal & Ethical Issues of Our Day (see pp. 26-28 below)

Level 5 – Antioch Declaration of Faith²⁸

²⁵ 1 Cor. 1:10; Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:32; Php. 1:27; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:15; 3:16-17; 4:1-5; Ps. 19:7-11; Psalm 119; Jn. 17:17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21.

²⁶ This is our church’s favourite evangelistic tract: <https://www.monergism.com/what-biblical-christian-ebook>

²⁷ <https://sola5.org/confession/>

²⁸ My local church’s doctrinal statement: <https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/what-we-believe/>

CHAPTER TWO: **A Model for Partnership**

God’s Word gives us many reasons for effectively partnering together in the Great Commission. Tom Ascol writes:

*The New Testament points to the financial cooperation of churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia (1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1-7), the doctrinal cooperation between the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch (Acts 15:1-35), and the missionary cooperation referenced in 2 Corinthians 8:19. So cooperation among local churches is obviously biblical and can be beneficial in many practical ways.*³⁰

No diagram is inspired or infallible, and you will need to adapt mine (above) to your own life and ministry context.³¹ It is offered as “a model”, not *the* model. But I pray this simple tool might help you to think through your partnerships (past, present and future) more biblically and wisely.³²

Remember also that no tool can replace godly character. No model or diagram will ever substitute for a Spirit-filled, Christlike life. Nothing is more foundational to good partnerships than the habits of a pure heart and a loving life – a major thrust in numerous New Testaments texts about interpersonal relationships among Christians (Acts 6:1-7; Rom. 12; Eph. 4; Col. 3).

A gracious, forgiving, self-controlled person is a thousand times more likely to succeed in partnerships than one who masters the latest tool or method, but who is self-absorbed, bitter, unkind, prickly, with whom it is hard to get along (1 Cor. 13; 1 Pet. 3-4, etc.).

²⁹ <https://www.shepherdsafrika.co.za/about/doctrinal-statement/>

³⁰ <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalpastors-forum-are-denominations-worth-it-0/>

³¹ Just as my diagram is also adapted from Scott Aniol here: <https://g3min.org/is-it-wrong-to-separate-from-other-christians/>

³² Each reader will have his/her own unique context and applications in which you will need God’s wisdom in how to apply the universal, timeless principles of His Word. All of us must be lifelong learners ever seeking to “excel still more in love” and in every Christlike grace and virtue (1 Thess. 3:12; 4:10; Php. 3:10-17; Rom. 8:29), as well as staying vigilant to each new threat to the gospel and the need for biblical discernment, clear-headed sobriety, and godly courage as those who “understand the times” (1 Chron. 12:32).

Your Sweet Spot

The two most important features of my diagram are:

(a) It is gospel-bounded, not gospel-centred.

(b) It aims for maximal unity, not minimal.

Our ministries should never be less than gospel-driven and Christ-centred (1 Cor. 2:2; 15:3-4; Rom. 1:16-17); but the thicker our gospel, the stronger our unity. The deeper our agreement about Christ, and the more shared biblical convictions we have about the “whole counsel of God”, the stronger our partnership (Acts 20:27; Eph. 4:13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The ‘gospel-centred’ paradigm has become popular, but Scott Aniol cautions:

Over the last fifteen years or so, conservative evangelicals have talked a lot about the gospel as the center of Christian unity—it is what bring us together; it is what we unite around. ...But this thinking actually has it backward. Contrary to these popular evangelical movements, the gospel is not the center of Christian unity; the gospel is the boundary of Christian unity. The gospel does unify believers, but it does so in that it separates us from those who do not believe the gospel.

The center of Christian unity is the truth of God’s Word—all of it. The gospel is the boundary of Christian unity, but the center of Christian unity is the whole counsel of God, all of the truth contained in his inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word.

All of God’s truth matters; all of God’s truth affects Christian unity to one degree or another. The Christian faith is more than just the gospel—it is the whole counsel of God. Doctrinal matters beyond the fundamentals of the gospel like baptism, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, eschatology, and so much more are secondary to the gospel—they’re not the boundary—but they are important and affect the degree to which we can unify and cooperate with other Christians.

...This recognition of the boundary and center of Christian unity was the genius of the idea of fundamentalism that emerged in the early twentieth

century in its battle with liberalism. ...early fundamentalists also insisted that doctrines beyond these gospel fundamentals matter and affect unity and cooperation among those inside the boundary of the gospel. Unity among Christians (e.g., with church planting and church membership) will be dependent upon the level to which Christians agree in other important matters of doctrine and practice.

...True Christian unity can be achieved only by the truth of God's Word, within the boundaries of gospel essentials, and centered in the whole counsel of God. Minimization of any of God's truth inevitably leads to the erosion of doctrine and the ultimate dissolution of true Christian unity.³³

If my above diagram were a tennis racquet, the inner circles would be your 'sweet spot' for most effective ministry – where you want to spend most of your limited time and energy for Christ in this short life.³⁴ Why would we not aim for the 'bull's eye' of an ever-increasing unity and usefulness, as is so often encouraged in Scripture: "one heart", "one mind", and "one soul"?³⁵

Baptist leader, B.H. Carroll, over a century ago (in 1903) saw the dangers of shallow unity and warned:

All the modern hue and cry against dogma is really against morals. The more we reduce the number of the creed articles, the more we undermine practical religion.

Neither Christ nor the apostles predicate morals on any other than a doctrinal foundation (e.g., Eph. 4-6 is built on Eph. 1-3; Col. 3-4 upon Col. 1-2; Rom. 12-16 upon Rom. 1-11). A Christian's creed should enlarge, and not diminish, up to the last utterance of revelation in order that each article might be transmitted into experience.

³³ <https://g3min.org/unity-and-separation/>. Trueman makes a similar argument: <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalhow-parachurch-ministries-go-rails/>.

³⁴ Mbewe makes this same point in pp. 24-25 of his booklet, *Biblical Inter-Church Associations*. Grudem's influential *Systematic Theology* begins with this aspiration: "I believe there is still much hope for the church to attain deeper and purer doctrinal understanding, and to overcome old barriers, even those that have persisted for centuries. Jesus is at work perfecting his church 'that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:27), and he has given gifts to equip the church 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph. 4:13). Though the past history of the church may discourage us, these Scriptures remain true, and we should not abandon hope of greater agreement" (pp 17-18).

³⁵ 1 Cor. 1:10; Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:32; Php. 1:27

...A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.

The modern cry, 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy.

*Definitive truth does not create heresy – it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly.*³⁶

Need for Triage

Typical triage diagrams serve a real purpose in showing how Scripture (plus church history and pastoral wisdom) prioritizes essential, primary doctrines and in warning us against needless conflicts and fleshly divisions in the body of Christ.³⁷

The sin of schism still exists, and schismatics still deserve public rebuke. Countless splits and painful fractures could be avoided by theological triage, and untold heartache could've been prevented by heeding biblical basics of conflict resolution and Christian peace-making. Every Christian leader must learn to discern biblically and pastorally the difference between godly separation and sinful schism (and ungodly sectarianism), which can be hard to decipher in some situations.³⁸

Phil Johnson rightly warns:

[We must] remain committed to separation from those who deny essential gospel truths. But [we must also] be equally committed to spiritual unity

³⁶ <https://founders.org/articles/healthy-christianity-is-confessional/>;

<https://founders.org/articles/b-h-carroll-and-robust-confessionalism/>

³⁷ See here for a brief summary of three popular triage diagrams (one of which is found in back of the ESV Study Bible, pp. 2506-07): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/not-all-doctrines-are-at-the-same-level-how-to-make-some-distinctions-and-determine-a-doctrines-importance/>. See here for Mohler's influential article:

<https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity>.

³⁸ <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A253/sectarianism-and-schism>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/schism-and-local-church>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/degrees-separation>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/guidelines-separation>

and brotherly kindness among those who affirm the essential truths of the gospel.

Above all, [we must keep our] focus on doctrines that are truly fundamental, not get sidetracked all the time over secondary issues, petty preferences, man-made rules, or foolish questions and useless contentions over matters that are unprofitable and vain.

...let's make sure that our militancy is genuinely motivated by a love for the gospel and a passion for truth; not by a perverse enjoyment of controversy for controversy's sake. [We must cease to be] rash and impulsive in [how we] separate from other brethren without any kind of admonishment and without due process.

Limitations of Triage

I'm concerned that *the popular triage-triangle diagrams fall short in explaining the secondary-yet-crucial role of non-essential doctrines in a church's life, health and unity, and in helping us make hard decisions around levels of separation and inter-church cooperation.* This booklet and diagram seek to fill that gap.

In less discerning hands, theological triage tools are employed for a minimal, middle-of-the-road, gospel-only, never-offend kind of thin veneer of unity as the goal and pinnacle of Christian fellowship. These kinds of shallow partnerships have been repeatedly exposed and fractured in recent years in the face of growing fault lines, and it only leads to more division and heartache.³⁹

Why would we not prevent that if we could? In heaven one day, the apex of our corporate worship and eternal partnership around the throne of the Lamb will not be minimal agreement but maximum unity: “when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ...then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12)

Indeed, we must guard against any number of secondary, tertiary, or peripheral matters displacing Christ and His cause as the heart and soul of our fellowship (1 Cor. 1-3; 2 Cor. 11:2-3). But every biblical doctrine understood rightly should have Christ at the centre as Lord of all, the King who has given us His Great Commission, the Head of His Church whose presence and fulness should

³⁹ Taken from Voddie Baucham's crucial book, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Salem, 2021). See also my Footnote #42 below as a further illustration.

permeate everything (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; 4:11-16; Col. 3:16-19; Matt. 28:18-20; “[the Scriptures] bear witness of Me”, John 5:39).⁴⁰

The Boundary

Notice the bold outer line in my diagram: “The truth”, “the faith” has been “once for all handed down” to us in Christ and His Word; we dare not move that God-given barrier and biblically established fence (Jude 3-4; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:4). We are not even permitted to “greet” or “receive” false teachers who deny this gospel; they are “to be accursed” (2 Jn. 9-11; Gal. 1:6-9). Outside the biblical gospel, there is no Christian fellowship or ministry partnership (2 Cor. 6:14-18). As Scott Aniol writes:

*There can be no unity with those who do not believe the gospel; Christian fellowship is impossible with those who deny the fundamentals of the gospel, including the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The gospel is the boundary of Christian unity.*⁴¹

Conrad Mbewe firmly applies this to us here in post-colonial Africa:

*We should refuse to join those who have the agenda of making “African Christianity” the issue to fight for in the church. Instead, we should insist on fighting for the purity of the gospel in any culture.*⁴²

Out of Bounds

Truly we should have non-Christian friends, neighbours, and fellow citizens of earthly nations that we care for and want to reach for Christ (1 Cor. 5:10; 10:27). We also collaborate with them often in all kinds of temporal causes – from business and sport to neighbourhood watch, military service, defending civil liberties, and much more, which is part of our Christian influence as salt and light in a dark and decaying society (Matt. 5:13-16). Yet as I’ll explain below, we must be careful not to be “unequally yoked” in marriage, close friendships, or business ownership (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

⁴⁰ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/essentials-unity-non-essentials-liberty-all-things>

⁴¹ <https://g3min.org/is-it-wrong-to-separate-from-other-christians/>

⁴² <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-theres-no-such-thing-as-african-christianity/>

When it comes to partnering in the gospel at any level, God has drawn a very clear line for us. *What good is a gospel partnership when you don't agree on the gospel?!* More harm has been done in missions by ecumenicism and gospel compromise than by all other unresolved conflicts, relational difficulties and failed partnerships combined! As Bauder writes, “one of the oldest insights of Christianity is that not everyone who names the name of Christ professes the true gospel” (Matt. 7:21-23).⁴³

This is the chief reason why the historic creeds, confessions and catechisms have been written – to be explicit about what saving faith is and is not, and to defend gospel clarity against every attempt to blur the line. Wise collaboration in ministry always starts with “guarding the gospel” (1 Tim. 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 1:12-14). As Adrian Rogers famously stated amidst the Baptist inerrancy battle of the 1980s, “Better to be divided over the truth than united in error.”

Another battle rages today for the soul of that same Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), as prominent leaders like Rick Warren naively deny such a threat. Megan Basham reports:

*...Warren insisted that concerns of leftward drift in the SBC generally and Saddleback specifically are unfounded. ‘This is not a battle between liberals and conservatives,’ he said. ‘All the liberals left a long time ago.’ Yet there is significant evidence that his church is already sliding toward liberalism when it comes to homosexuality and gender identity.*⁴⁴

In contrast to that extreme naivete, we have a faithful example of guarding the gospel here on our African continent in Rwanda, with the “Kigali Commitment” (April 2023), which boldly declares (on behalf of 1,302 delegates from around the world):

In a couple of weeks, King Charles III will swear in his Coronation Oath to maintain and defend “the true profession of the gospel... the Protestant Reformed religion”. Sadly, the current leadership of the Church of England has chosen not to maintain and defend this faith but to subvert and replace it with something else more amenable to modern culture.

⁴³ p. 31, *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*.

⁴⁴ <https://americanreformer.org/2023/04/mr-smith-goes-to-the-convention/>. See another recent example here: “The hesitancy of denominational leaders to publicly correct church members who are flagrantly violating church teaching risks undermining the denomination’s official statements and doctrinal commitments.”

<https://washingtonstand.com/commentary/the-christian-reformed-church-the-pressing-need-for-doctrinal-clarity>

*...We delighted in our unity in Christ and the love that we share....
[However] The current divisions in the Anglican Communion have been caused by radical departures from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some within the Communion have been taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophies of this world (Colossians 2:8).
...fellowship is broken when we turn aside from God's Word or attempt to reinterpret it in any way that overturns the plain reading of the text in its canonical context and so deny its truthfulness, clarity, sufficiency, and thereby its authority.
...Any refusal to follow the biblical teaching that the only appropriate context for sexual activity is the exclusive lifelong union of a man and a woman in marriage violates the created order (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6) and endangers salvation (1 Corinthians 6:9).*

...Public statements by the Archbishop of Canterbury and other leaders of the Church of England in support of same-sex blessings are a betrayal of their ordination and consecration vows to banish error and to uphold and defend the truth taught in Scripture.

...Since those who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1), we call upon those provinces, dioceses and leaders who have departed from biblical orthodoxy to repent of their failure to uphold the Bible's teaching. This includes matters such as human sexuality and marriage, the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, his bodily resurrection, his promised return, the summons to faith and repentance and the final judgment.

[We seek to uphold] the true profession of the gospel, the Protestant Reformed religion.

We long for this repentance [of Anglican global leaders] but until they repent, our communion with them remains broken. ...We consider that those who refuse to repent have abdicated their right to leadership within the Anglican Communion, and we commit ourselves to working with orthodox Primates and other leaders to reset the Communion on its biblical foundations.⁴⁵

Levels of Partnership

⁴⁵ <https://www.churchsociety.org/resource/the-kigali-commitment-the-statement-from-gafcon-4/>

Iain Murray states, “Believers are going to hold convictions on all that Scripture reveals”, so we must carefully define what are the ‘non-essentials’ versus the “essentials”.⁴⁶ But that begs a prior question, ‘Essential for what? For salvation, for church planting, for eldership, etc.?’ Clarify your purpose, *then* decide the level of unity required. My diagram is merely suggestive, based on my own application of biblical principles as a pastor.

Allow me to explain each of these seven levels so that you can better navigate your partnerships and decisions about cooperation and non-cooperation. I tend to see Levels 1-3 (in grey) as allowing for parachurch and inter-denominational relationships, beyond that of your own local church.⁴⁷ But Levels 4-7 (in white) seem more closely linked to local churches or to associations of likeminded churches. There will be much overlap between these two major layers (the grey and the white); it’s only a tool and guideline to aid our thinking, our relationships, and our hard decisions at times.

The PARACHURCH/INTER-DENOMINATIONAL Levels (Levels 1-3, grey on diagram)

*Elect from every nation,
Yet one o’er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth.*
(Samuel J. Stone, 1866)

If we believe what we sing in that great hymn, it must show in our union with all true believers. I am a convinced credo-baptist, but for over three decades now I have enjoyed sweet fellowship with paedobaptist brothers in Christ around the world, and I continue to profit from their books, sermons, hymns and prayers.

I am an outspoken cessationist, yet for the longest time I have maintained friendships with continuationist (and charismatic) fellow servants of Christ. We wouldn’t join the same church, nor serve in many of the same ministries, yet we

⁴⁶ <https://www.9marks.org/article/senior-saint-unity/>

⁴⁷ I define “parachurch” as any ministry that serves and “comes alongside of” (*para*) or assists the local church in ministry, always subordinate to the church and never replacing her (as a supplement, not a substitute; typically having its own board, own budget, etc.). Here are some good, brief explanations of what parachurch should and should not do:
<https://www.9marks.org/article/church-which-parachurch-ministries-should-you-support/>;
<https://www.9marks.org/article/journalnine-marks-healthy-parachurch-ministry/>;
<https://www.9marks.org/article/are-parachurch-ministries-evil-bad-and-good-arguments-parachurch/>

can still cheer on one another as long as the true Christ is preached (Php. 1:15-18; Mk 9:40). It slanderous and uncharitable to equate all theological errors with full-blown heresy.⁴⁸

For this reason, every Sunday in the pastoral prayer at my church we pray for at least one other church, to help prevent us from being too inward-focused. As J.C. Ryle noted, ‘Denominational fences serve a purpose, but shake hands across the fence often.’⁴⁹ But what does this gospel attitude look like in our partnerships? Let’s dive in now to the differing levels of cooperation:

(1) Christian Fellowship – Amidst this lost and lonely world of unbelievers, few joys light up the darkness for me like meeting a new family member for the first time, part of the most amazing organization on the planet, the universal Church, the worldwide body of Christ! No matter what your denomination, background, culture or language, when I learn that you believe the same biblical gospel as me, I gladly call you “brother” or “sister”, unite with you in prayer, in song, in spiritual conversation and informal fellowship. As we grow to know and trust one another, there may be other kinds of cooperation that develop (as seen below). Mbewe captures it well here:

*...inter-church boundaries must not be applied at a personal level. In other words, I can associate with a fellow believer in my office or neighbourhood at a spiritual level, even if he belongs to a denomination that I would not agree with in terms of its doctrine and practice.*⁵⁰

(2) Evangelism & Mercy Ministry – Christians from various denominations and persuasions may come together to meet pressing needs, convinced they can

⁴⁸ “WE AFFIRM that heresy is a denial of or departure from a doctrine that is essential to the Christian faith. We further affirm that heresy often involves the replacement of key, essential truths with variant concepts, or the elevation of non-essentials to the status of essentials. To embrace heresy is to depart from the faith once delivered to the saints and thus to be on a path toward spiritual destruction. We affirm that the accusation of heresy should be reserved for those departures from Christian truth that destroy the weight-bearing doctrines of the redemptive core of Scripture. We affirm that accusations of heresy should be accompanied with clear evidence of such destructive beliefs. WE DENY that the charge of heresy can be legitimately brought against every failure to achieve perfect conformity to all that is implied in sincere faith in the gospel.” (Article IX of Statement on Social Justice, <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/#affirmations-and-denials>). See also: <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/article-9-heresy-explanation-by-justin-peters/> (Justin Peters’ helpful distinction).

⁴⁹ Or as Conrad Mbewe states, “Let those who see things differently from us associate also among themselves so that their association is also a like-minded one, just as ours should also be” (p. 23, *Biblical Inter-Church Associations*).

⁵⁰ p. 24, *Biblical Inter-Church Associations*. See also by Phil Johnson: <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A323/unity-across-denominational-lines>

be more effective together than separately. Church and missions' history are filled with fruitful examples of Christian hospitals, orphanages, rescue missions, crisis pregnancy centres, emergency aid and relief, and much more – all for the sake of gospel witness, and all ministries that were started because fellow believers shared a burden to get the job done.

It may be ideal when such ministries are under a strong local church or denomination; yet that isn't always possible, nor is it biblically required. For example, believers have assisted one another to evangelize in the workplace, on school campuses, through sports outreaches, and through chaplaincy services in the military, in prisons, and hospitals, and elsewhere. New converts should then be directed to faithful local churches (Acts 2:41-47).

Where would our world today be if it were not for Wilberforce's Clapham Sect who laboured together to abolish the evils of the slave trade? No wonder then that the great lover of orphans, George Mueller, embarked on a series of international preaching tours (between 1875-1892, at the ripe age of 70!), with this as one of his stated goals:

*To promote among all true believers, brotherly love; to lead them to make less of those non-essentials in which disciples differ, and to make more of those great essential and foundation truths in which all true believers are united; to help all who love and trust one Lord to rise above narrow sectarian prejudices, and barriers to fellowship.*⁵¹

One of the deacons in our church heads up a thriving parachurch ministry to orphans that allows various evangelical churches and believers to volunteer to varying degrees. With careful oversight but broad involvement this ministry has been a great blessing in reaching many children for Christ, and in discipling many saved staff members from various churches near and far. Partnership is crucial as we seek to find and equip Christians to adopt innumerable orphans in dire need.

Iain Murray tells of how the great evangelist, George Whitefield, never could've accomplished all that he did were it not for his big-hearted concern for other churches. Whitefield was openly Calvinistic yet renowned for his catholicity of spirit, which was one of the secrets to all his gospel success (i.e., we can have a biblical ecumenicity, while rejecting unbiblical ecumenicism). Whitefield once wrote:

⁵¹ <https://www.georgemuller.org/devotional/the-period-of-world-wide-witness>

*I despair of a greater union among the churches, till a greater measure of the Spirit be poured from on high. Hence, therefore, I am resolved simply to preach the gospel of Christ, and to leave others to quarrel by and with themselves.*⁵²

Yet Whitefield still guarded the gospel boundary vigilantly throughout his ministry, and so must we, never becoming muddled in defining what it means to be a Christian.

(3) Christian Education (& Business) – In the face of an increasingly aggressive, anti-Christian society, the need has never been more urgent for Christian families to unite to educate the next generation. Who will fill the ranks when we are gone if our youth are not well-grounded and fully trained as soldiers of Christ to stand for His gospel against all odds?

Again, we recognize that some churches and denominations can start their own schools and universities, which may be ideal.⁵³ But when that is not possible, it may be better to establish para-church institutions with faculty that are at least unified on the fundamentals, rather than continuing to have our children indoctrinated by government schools.

Parachurch schools can still ally closely with likeminded churches through their board members, doctrine, by-laws, and by ensuring that their teachers are members-in-good-standing of a solid church, and by referring students and parents to good churches.

For many years my wife has led an amazing team of mothers doing a classical Christian homeschool co-op (of 80 families at present)⁵⁴, where every parent signs an agreement that their child will be taught from the basis of our Sola5 Confession of Faith, even though the families come from a wide variety of church backgrounds.⁵⁵ Parents are happy to fine-tune the theology of their

⁵² <https://www.9marks.org/message/whitefield-and-catholicity-iain-murray/>

⁵³ Here's a good summary case for the role of Christian education in the mission of the church and under her oversight: <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/sbc-life-articles/christian-colleges-accountable-not-autonomous/>. Here's a great African example with good friends of mine: <http://acu-zambia.com/>. Yet I also know experienced pastors who've tried church schools but now suggest a separate school board, still accountable to a church elder board (and aided by deacons) but not swamping the elder board with endless matters of school administration that cause them to neglect the preaching of the word, prayer, and care for the flock (Acts 6:4).

⁵⁴ <https://www.graceandtruthco-op.com/>

⁵⁵ <https://sola5.org/confession/> (Essentially an abbreviated version of the 1689 London Baptist Confession)

children at home, rather than needing to detox them from an anti-God education.

This approximate level of cooperation could apply to many other broader, parachurch Christian ministries that have borne much fruit for Christ's kingdom, such as publishing houses, Bible societies, Bible translation, Christian camps and conference centres, Christian choirs and music ministries, Christian school curriculums, biblical counselling centres and certifying/accreditation bodies⁵⁶, Christian rehabilitation centres, half-way houses and much more.

Who among us has not benefitted from well-run, biblically rich conferences, seminars, workshops, and more – all of which equip us to serve our Lord and His Church better? These may run best under one eldership and local church; yet that isn't always possible or necessary. I've also seen such ministries also done well by a likeminded coalition of churches.

Iain Murray tells of how the Second Great Awakening led to gospel cooperation on a level not seen since the days of the early church:

*It was unity of this kind...that gave rise to those great trans-denominational efforts of the nineteenth century which shaped the history of the world. I am thinking of missionary societies, Bible and Tract societies, etc.*⁵⁷

Yet in all these noble causes we must not take our eyes off the gospel boundary. Satan unceasingly tries to poison our fellowship, distract or discourage our work, confuse the meaning of salvation, and weaken doctrinal and ethical foundations.

In our day, many have been greatly helped by definitive statements in response to where the cultural winds are blowing most fiercely (with varying degrees of application at Levels 1-7):

⁵⁶ One such example from which my church, seminary and my family have benefited immensely – the Association of Certified Biblical Counsellors: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/>. Note they still have very clear, specific, and detailed doctrine and standards, yet are still inter-denominational for their purposes.

⁵⁷ <https://www.9marks.org/article/senior-saint-unity/>

- On spiritual gifts (Continuationism vs. Cessationism).⁵⁸

<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/TM13-7/a-case-for-cessationism-tom-pennington>

https://gracefellowship.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/James_Joel-Q_A-Healing-Tongues-Prophecy.pdf
- On complementarianism and gender roles (including homosexuality, gay ‘marriage’ and transgenderism):

<https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/elders-theological-distinctives/> (on “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage & Sexuality”)

<https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>

<https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>
- On biblical counselling vs. psychology:

<https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/sufficiency-of-scripture>

<https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/biblical-counselling/>
- On creationism and the age of the earth:

<https://answersingenesis.org/creationism/young-earth/young-earth-creationist-view-summarized-and-defended/>

<https://www.icr.org/article/should-church-take-stand-creation>
- On social justice and woke ideologies:⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See also my summary: <https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/multimedia-archive/why-i-am-a-cessationist-2-peter-1/> (audio); https://youtu.be/IEmrEiH_El8 (video); and this: <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/gift-of-tongues>

⁵⁹ "I have been in the ministry almost 50 years, and [wokeness] is the most insidious and dangerous and pervasive ideology that I have ever seen in all of my life, in all of my ministry. And it is dangerous to the Christian church as well as to our culture." (Tommy Nelson, Denton Bible Church)

<https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>

<https://www.shepherdsafrika.co.za/2020/08/14/on-social-justice-the-woke-church-affirmations-denials-by-the-faculty-of-shepherds-seminary-africa/>

- On church-state spheres and civil liberty (especially after unlawful Covid lockdowns assaulting religious freedom):

<https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B200723/christ-not-caesar-is-head-of-the-church>

<https://frankfurtdeclaration.com/>

- On climate change:⁶⁰

<https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/the-cornwall-declaration-on-environmental-stewardship/>

<https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>

Teaching biblically through such careful statements, discussing them with your team/ministry/association, answering questions, and asking that all subscribe to them – this can guard gospel clarity, prevents division, strengthen relationships, and build a stronger unity in the truth to stand for Christ together.

In facing the burning questions that every age must face (doctrinally, ethically, etc.) in defending a biblical worldview, it is a mark of mature friendship and healthy Christian fellowship to engage in brotherly arm-wrestling as needed, “as iron sharpens iron,” working through these kinds of confessional statements that draw lines (Prov. 27:17). When discussed with Christian charity and mutual respect, such dialogue can help defuse and depersonalise the issues and clarify one’s position. The art of patient persuasion is an often-neglected labour of

⁶⁰ See also: <https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/protect-the-poor-ten-reasons-to-oppose-harmful-climate-change-policies/>; <https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/the-biblical-perspective-of-environmental-stewardship-subduing-and-ruling-the-earth-to-the-glory-of-god-and-the-benefit-of-our-neighbors/>; <https://sovereignnations.com/2023/04/13/covid-climate-emergency-same/>; <https://www.biznews.com/health/2023/04/14/climate-change-4>

love in our thin-skinned, over-sensitive age that takes things personally far too quickly.⁶¹

Shared convictions around ethical, moral and wisdom issues (which are thus cultural as well) will not come overnight, or through dumping all these confessional statements into an e-mail or a text message and demanding an answer by end of the day! As I explain below in Levels 4-7, this kind of growing unity is best fostered in a well-led, well-fed local church family, “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Yet this godly skill and relational virtue must also translate to our wider Christian fellowship and cooperative efforts.⁶²

One inspiring example of this Level 3 kind of cooperation has been the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (comprised of various reformed evangelical denominations, including both paedobaptists and credobaptists), with their 1996 “Cambridge Declaration”, clearly diagnosing the root of what ails the modern church:

In the past the word ‘evangelical’ served as a bond of unity between Christians from a wide diversity of church traditions. Historic evangelicalism was confessional. It embraced the essential truths of Christianity as those were defined by the great ecumenical councils of the church. In addition, evangelicals also shared a common heritage in the “solas” of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation.

Today the light of the Reformation has been significantly dimmed. The consequence is that the word ‘evangelical’ has become so inclusive as to have lost its meaning. We face the peril of losing the unity it has taken centuries to achieve. Because of this crisis and because of our love of Christ, his gospel and his church, we endeavor to assert anew our commitment to the central truths of the Reformation and of historic evangelicalism. These truths we affirm not because of their role in our traditions, but because we believe that they are central to the Bible.

...The faithfulness of the evangelical church in the past contrasts sharply with its unfaithfulness in the present. Earlier in this century, evangelical churches sustained a remarkable missionary endeavor, and built many

⁶¹ Remember: “love...is not easily provoked, keeps no record of wrongs”; and, “the Lord’s bond-servant must be...patient when wronged”, since “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Cor. 13:5; 2 Tim 2:24-25; 1 Pet. 4:7).

⁶² Our Sola5 family of churches in southern Africa has this excellent list of 23 Core Values on many ethical matters of our day: <https://sola5.org/values/>

*religious institutions to serve the cause of biblical truth and Christ's kingdom. That was a time when Christian behavior and expectations were markedly different from those in the culture. Today they often are not. The evangelical world today is losing its biblical fidelity, moral compass and missionary zeal.*⁶³

In their 70-year history, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has maintained a narrow focus and clear purpose. They don't claim to be a denomination or association, nor to plant churches or start institutions. But they have continued with faithful publishing, broadcasts, and fruitful conferences that have championed the five solas of our Protestant faith.⁶⁴

This year will be their 50th annual Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology – a milestone indeed of a faithful biblical witness.⁶⁵ This conference fostered Sproul and Boice's historic friendship, which was foundational to the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.⁶⁶ The ICBI produced the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* of 1978 (and numerous books that followed) – the definitive creed ever since for defending biblical inerrancy in our day.⁶⁷

Which Hills to Die On?

Gavin Ortlund has written a popular new book on theological triage, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* (Crossway, 2020), full of many good insights. Yet he begins the book by admitting that he avoids “cultural, wisdom and political issues”. As the culture increasingly turns against the Church and redefines fundamental ethics and morality, Christians will not have the luxury of avoiding these issues in the name of being gospel-centred. Jeff Straub's gives this helpful review of Ortlund's book, wisely observing:

One's understanding on doctrinal importance really amounts to how a tertiary doctrine is determined and by whom. Within the boundaries of a local church, for cessationism and continuationism to co-exist would likely mean that one group or the other does not take their view seriously. The same is true with creationism and complementarianism/ egalitarianism. ... While the church seeks to display the unity of the Spirit, the hard truth is that there are too many issues that divide us that we believe are too important to overlook within the confines of a local assembly.

⁶³ <https://www.alliancenet.org/cambridge-declaration>

⁶⁴ <https://www.alliancenet.org/what-is-the-alliance#History>

⁶⁵ <https://www.alliancenet.org/philadelphia-conference-on-reformed-theology>

⁶⁶ Nichols, Stephen J. *R.C. Sproul: A Life* (Crossway, 2021)

⁶⁷ https://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf

...Ortlund's tertiary issues are tertiary for him, but perhaps not for others, not because they are gospel-critical, but because within a local church, some issues simply shape the way the church sees its ministry.

...The closer our working relationship and the narrower the purpose, the narrower our theological sensibilities will become.⁶⁸

That is what this booklet is all about.

Unequally Yoked in Business?

Here's a shorter, biblical answer and wise pastoral counsel from MacArthur:⁶⁹

Paul says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness? And what fellowship has light with darkness? And what harmony has Christ with Belial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:14)

The point is that if you are in the same yoke, pulling the same plow down the same furrow — that is, if you are working side by side in the same enterprise, partnering together with an unbeliever — you've got a problem.

Truly, that would refer to marriage because there's no firmer, stronger, more binding yoke than marriage, right? If you go beyond that and ask, "What about a business partnership?" it would depend upon the nature of that partnership. If, for example, there's a limited partnership involving a group of investors and you're one of those investors, that's one thing. A person might put money in a bank; that's also a form of partnership with other people. I don't think that's the issue here.

The issue here is linking up with an unbeliever, side by side, under the same yoke, pulling the same furrow, in the same direction, with the same goals and objectives. Now, that might mean a partnership in a common business — if it is likely that the nature of your partnership will lead to compromising situations down the road when your worldviews collide.

⁶⁸ pp. 180-81, Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, Vol. 26, 2021

⁶⁹ <https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA196/unequally-yoked>

Beyond all that, however, the primary application of 2 Corinthians 6 is with regard to spiritual enterprise. The primary warning is to never link up with an unbeliever in spiritual pursuits.

So the obvious thing, first of all, is to avoid any common spiritual enterprise with an unbeliever (including things like marriage or religious ecumenism). And then secondarily, to be very careful in other areas of life (like business) if you're pulling the same yoke with an unbeliever, because it's inevitable that there will be conflict – since the standard by which you operate is inherently different.

Practically speaking, you will have to make the judgment as to what a particular partnership involves and whether you can be part of it – based on biblical principles, prayer, and godly counsel. The Spirit of God will lead you in that.

Here's a further, excellent explanation from Alcorn:⁷⁰

Obviously it's not inherently wrong to be employed by a nonbeliever, but employment is not partnership in the full sense of working shoulder to shoulder pulling the plow. If an employee has to draw the line because his boss is violating biblical principles, he can take a stand or quit, and is not responsible for the employer's attitude or actions.

A partner can take a stand, but the unbelieving partner is in effect representing him even when the believer isn't present. They have a legal and moral yoke that is often complex. When the unbeliever acts, he is acting on behalf of the believer, but how can he bring his partner's convictions fully to bear? Bosses and employees don't always fully represent each other, but those in a partnership are assumed to—hence the danger of the unequal yoke, in which believers are compromised by their unbelieving partners. (Even some Christian partners betray the Lord; the yoke is made unequal by the fundamental difference between the spiritual state of the partners, regardless of their profession.)

In situations where you're not partnering with an unbeliever, but you're working together with nonbelievers, I would ask myself: whose ends am I furthering by becoming a part of their world? Am I doing it on their terms, or God's? Who is going to influence whom? Am I coming into their world

⁷⁰ <https://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Mar/18/how-broad-command-not-be-unequally-yoked/>

where I will effectively represent Christ, or where they will politely nod at my being a Christian but will expect me to align myself with their values? Maybe 90% of the time our goals and general values will overlap, or at least not contradict. But what happens in the 10%? Will they come closer to following Jesus, or will I come closer to following their idols?

You have to ask yourself, are you really prepared to represent Christ there in an uncompromising way, which will require a certain boldness? There will be situations where you have to make a choice whether you're going to stay at the table and listen to a story about a guy taking a woman to bed last night, or whether you're going to excuse yourself and walk away.

And will the urge to not appear self-righteous constrain you to politely listen to the story and become a participant in the unrighteousness? And when you've done it once, will you do it again and again, and will it become normal, and will you then start laughing and one day tell your own immoral story? I've seen it happen to others.

I know of a talented musician who performed at events around the world. He decided to cross over to make an impact in the secular world. He told himself it wasn't just to further his profession as a musician, but it was to reach people who need the Lord. He is now singing in nightclubs, rarely about the Lord, and his friends say he has lost his spiritual edge. Last I heard, he was in danger of becoming indistinguishable from the very people he stepped away from Christian ministry in order to reach (ironically, he had been reaching a fair number of unbelievers through that Christian ministry).

I also know Christian writers who have determined they're going to cross over to the secular market to reach more people. They are now reaching more people—but what are they reaching them with? In some cases, the answer is, not much. Certainly not the gospel. Just a cleaner than average, generally redemptive story that doesn't curse God or make fun of Christians. That's not a very strategic impact.

In closing, here is a helpful illustration and summary:⁷¹

Suppose that a Christian OB/GYN who does not believe in abortion enters into partnership with another OB/GYN who is not a Christian. If the non-

⁷¹ <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/business-partnerships-between-christians-and-non-christians/>

Christian partner insists on performing abortions or otherwise compromises the Christian partner's values or inhibits his testimony, then this would be an extremely undesirable and unwise arrangement. But it can be handled ahead of time by setting up a buy/sell agreement between the parties and mapping out a mutually satisfactory exit strategy.

Bottom line: as Christians, we believe that God has put us on this earth primarily to bear witness to His truth and to serve as representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you're entering into a relationship of any kind – especially a formal and legally defined relationship like a business partnership – you need to ask yourself, "What is the likelihood that my testimony for Christ will be compromised or harmed?" That's the determinative and all-decisive issue.

The LOCAL CHURCH/DENOMINATIONAL Levels (Levels 4-7, white on diagram)

Missions is the job of the church. Jesus did not entrust His kingdom keys to any other organization, parachurch ministry or mission agency, but to local assemblies. Other ministries can be greatly used of God, but our Lord has not called them to baptize new converts, receive them into membership, admit them to the Lord's table, or excommunicate them if unrepentant. Christ our Head has uniquely delegated that authority to the local church (Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 20:23; Acts 2:41-47). Mission agencies may help the church do her job; they can do it *with* her, but not *for* her.⁷²

While churches can benefit from parachurch organizations for broader tasks, parachurch organizations *always* need the local church – to verify who is converted, and to uphold sound doctrine. No other body of Christians can replace the church's high-calling of gospel proclamation and preservation, as "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15-16; Tit. 1:9). That starts with spiritual 'fence-repair' – to keep drawing that thick line (the gospel boundary in my diagram) by guarding the gospel and fundamentals of the faith.

As we move inward (on my diagram), watch how the gospel purpose of each new level of partnership requires greater trust and deeper unity:

⁷² For a brief biblical defense of mission agencies: <https://www.abwe.org/blog/3-reasons-mission-agencies-are-biblical>. As originally outlined in 1792 by William Carey, 'Father of Modern Missions', in his famous *Enquiry Into the Use of Means* (pp. 82ff): <https://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/enquiry/anenquiry.pdf>

(4) Church Planting & Missions – Jesus rebuked His lethargic, procrastinating disciples when He said, “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest’” (Jn. 4:35). In other words, ‘Stop your small-minded, inward-focused barn gazing and start harvesting!’ As Conrad Mbewe states:

*Churches that are always inward-looking will never do much for Christ. It is those churches that are conscious of the magnitude of the task that Jesus left with the Church who see the need to not only relate to other churches but also to cooperate with them.*⁷³

The missionary heartbeat of any church starts with passion for Christ and compassion for lost souls – a soul-winning focus on personal evangelism in your own spheres of influence (Matt. 4:19; 28:19; Acts 1:8; 8:4). Level 4 brings us to the heart of what gospel partnerships are all about. In the Book of Acts, Christ’s pattern is clear for how His Great Commission will be obeyed – by *churches planting churches*.

Undoubtedly, God sovereignly scatters His witnesses who also plant churches as they take the gospel with them. But the Holy Spirit’s main method was for the Antioch church to send out Paul and associates on at least three successive church-planting missions (Acts 13-20).

As mentioned above, larger churches may also be able on their own to do Christian schools, orphanages and much more. Those are ministries they *could* do; but biblically speaking, missions is what we *should* and *must* do. This is where a sending church may need other likeminded churches to partner with them to support full-time church planters and foreign missionaries.

Role of Associations/Denominations?

Level 4 partnerships may come through more formal denominations/associations or through informal networks, fraternals or other inter-church relationships built on a common history, shared doctrine, mutual trust and respect, battle-tested loyalty, and/or common interest in a certain mission field, target location, promising candidate, or other factors. Mbewe sums it up well:

Wherever we find a common doctrinal confession and a common church order, let us labour with such in the Great Commission. You will find that

⁷³ p. 230, *God’s Design for the Church* (Crossway, 2020)

*our hearts will love them and we will easily labour with them in the gospel. Inner association must precede outward association, not vice versa!*⁷⁴

Here's one of my favorite stories of inter-church cooperation:

The 1640s and 1650s were tumultuous years in English history, as the land was convulsed in civil war and experienced massive social, political, and economic upheaval. The Calvinistic Baptists flourished, however, and their commitment to Associations [of churches] played a vital part in their growth. Associations provided mutual strength and fellowship, an instrument for preserving congregational integrity and orthodoxy, a means of providing for the financial needs of poorer congregations, and a way of supporting church planting and evangelistic endeavors.

*The Calvinistic Baptist cause expanded from the seven churches in London in the mid-1640s to around 130 throughout England, Wales, and Ireland by the late 1650s! It was indeed a unique time of spiritual harvest and blessing.*⁷⁵

Imagine – a reformed-baptistic cooperation that led to more than a hundred new churches in barely a decade, and eventually birthed a William Carey and the modern mission's movement!

A Dose of Realism

With all the current rage about collaboration in reaching cities, we must also remember the clear biblical (and longstanding Baptist) principle of local church autonomy, meaning that partnering with other churches is never compulsory but always voluntary.⁷⁶ Much prayerful wisdom will be required to ensure that we neither expect too little from our inter-church associations (“Attempt great things for God, expect great things from Him!”, said William Carey). Nor should we expect too much from an association or forget that it exists to help local churches not to replace them.

Some alliances/societies are not likeminded enough to plant churches or train pastors together (more suited to Level 3 above; in contrast to Levels 5-7 below), yet can still be very useful for mutual pastoral encouragement, fraternal

⁷⁴ p. 25, *Biblical Inter-Church Associations*.

⁷⁵ M. Haykin, *Kiffins, Knollys & Keach*; Carey, 1996.

⁷⁶ <https://centralseminary.edu/thoughts-on-baptists-and-independence/> (by Kevin Bauder).

Bauder's survey of pros and cons of churches partnering together is also helpful:

<https://sharperiron.org/article/baptist-church-cooperation-part-5> (a 5-part series).

relations, good communication about member movement between churches (especially when members are under discipline), and in presenting papers and hosting roundtable discussions around key ministry topics or battlefronts for the gospel in our day (e.g., working through some of the above position papers, declarations, and affirmations-and-denials, pp. 25-26 above; and the example of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, pp. 27-28).

In my own church, God has been gracious to give us church planting opportunities (and church revitalizing), and even granddaughter churches! Some of our planting has been on our own, some by partnering with churches in our association, and some in cooperation with other churches in our seminary circle. As an eldership, we've learned to be clear about who is the sending church, while partner churches can serve in a vital supporting role.

Christ has entrusted this authority to the elders of the sending church to oversee a church plant until it is autonomous. Likewise, a sending church identifies, trains and sends foreign missionaries and provides the ongoing care and oversight they need while on the field – no small task (Acts 13:1-3; 3 John 6-8)!⁷⁷

All the while, as our local churches keep our hand to the plow in the work of missions and church-planting, we must also keep our eye on the gospel boundary.

How do We go from Paternalism to Partnership in the Handover to Indigenous Leaders?

Introduction

This is a huge question in itself, worthy of numerous books; yet a booklet on partnerships must at least touch on it. I raise this question here under Level 4, rather than Levels 5-7 which apply more to a local church context. In some of our ministries, like here in urban South Africa and in a growing number of

⁷⁷ Here is our elders' statement: <https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/antioch-missions-philosophy/>, flowing out of our church Declaration of Faith as members: "We believe that missions is the process of evangelizing the lost and planting churches; and we believe that it is our great privilege and responsibility to participate in this cause both locally and internationally." An excellent resource is Andy Johnson, *Missions* (Crossway, 2017), in which he has a whole chapter on "Healthy Missions Partnerships" (chp. 5).

global cities, the process of ‘indigenising’ a local church may look very different from traditional cross-cultural missions.⁷⁸

Yet even if some of us are called to pastor multi-ethnic churches, we are no less concerned about raising up the next generation of leaders (see pp. 45-48 below, under Levels 6-7), and no less burdened to send out church planters to penetrate any culture with the gospel. Missionary pioneer and hero, John Paton, gave this sage counsel to a new missionary:

Plant down your forces in the heart of one tribe or race where the same language is spoken. Work solidly from the centre, building up—with patient teaching and lifelong care—a church that will endure. Rest not till every people and language and nation has such a Christ-centre throbbing in its midst with the pulses of the new life at full play.

Rush not from land to land, from people to people in a breathless fruitless mission. The concentrated common sense that builds for eternity will receive the fullest approval of God in time.⁷⁹

The Idol of Indigeneity

Any discussion of indigeneity in missions today requires much biblical discernment, as the woke winds are blowing stronger than ever (Eph. 4:14). We must not be “taken captive” by the worldly ideologies of decolonisation, Marxism, Critical Theory, and other forms of deconstructionism (Col. 2:8). Too often, the church has “conformed to the spirit of this age” (Rom. 12:2), exalting contextualisation, indigeneity and cultural relevance above a biblical philosophy of missions and faithful ministry.⁸⁰ This also means we need careful

⁷⁸ Some of us minister in English-speaking congregations that are increasingly heterogeneous and diverse, reaching people from many different cultures. Here in South Africa and elsewhere, I know of various flourishing churches with an atypical, international, long-term pastor (often a permanent resident, a kind of ‘localised/adopted foreigner’), under whose leadership that church is able to plant indigenous churches, strengthen other local churches, start schools, and train up national pastors and leaders.

⁷⁹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-case-for-long-term-missions/>

⁸⁰ <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-plea-for-gospel-sanity-in-missions/#part3>, a warning against being over-eager for contextualisation. Even secular sources are warning of how the woke movement has hijacked indigeneity:

<https://www.dorchesterreview.ca/blogs/news/woke-ness-captures-albertas-law-society>; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/27/its-time-to-rethink-the-idea-of-the-indigenous>; <https://newdiscourses.com/2022/11/how-to-kill-a-science-the-process-of-dialectical-inversion/>; <https://sovereignnations.com/2020/09/29/lets-stop-ignoring-history-conquests-atrocities-committed-non-europeans/>

thinking how the gospel impacts culture, about a theology of culture, and about wise application of a biblical worldview in cross-cultural settings.⁸¹

We must not naively think that just because Paul raised up leaders quickly in the Book of Acts, we can do the same today. That is not only bad hermeneutics (turning the descriptive into prescriptive), it is also historically incorrect. Paul began most of his church plants with converted, monogamous Jews and God-fearing (Hellenised) Gentile proselytes saved out of the synagogues, who already had rich biblical background and foundation. As Bavinck states in his classic text on missions:

*Paul worked within his own world and with people who had attained a certain level of civilization, people with whom he held certain cultural values in common. Modern missionaries, in contrast, are often faced with a world that is completely different from their own. Quite frequently, the latter must work in the midst of extreme illiteracy, dire poverty, a world without regular schools, a world that is extremely primitive in every respect. ...[Such a new church plant] requires the help of the missionary in a thousand things.*⁸²

When my parents lived in Kenya, one of the senior missionaries (after three generations of his family ministering in remote northern Kenya) told me, ‘Much patience is required in pioneer church planting. It might only be the grandsons of our first converts who will be biblically qualified elders to whom we can handover the work.’

We must also guard against window-dressing with prematurely appointed indigenous leaders who are indefinitely (if not permanently) dependent on overseas funding. Until the local church(es) take full ownership of a ministry, it will not mature and stand on its own feet to the glory of God.⁸³ Any parent desires that satisfying joy of becoming a grandparent – when your married,

⁸¹ Kevin Bauder provides a good introduction in his chapter, “A Prelude to a Christian Theology of Culture”, in *Missions in a New Millenium* (Kregel, 2000). Scott Aniol is also provides rare insights in this field: <https://g3min.org/the-culture-changing-gospel/>; <https://g3min.org/is-culture-the-same-as-ethnicity/>; <https://artistictheologian.com/2018/07/07/differences-and-universals-in-music-across-cultures/>

⁸² p. 196, J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (P&R, 1960).

⁸³ Here is an excellent summary of the biblical case for the classic, three-self approach to church planting (self-governing, self-funding, self-reproducing) by Paul Schlelein: <https://betweentwocultures.com/2022/11/18/a-case-for-three-self-churches-2/>; and here: <https://youtu.be/SdnjX6SJHhI>.

employed son has his first child, and is now raising his own family independently of you. From that point, you enter into a whole new level of adult, peer friendship, camaraderie and partnership with your offspring. Why would we desire anything less in growing the family of God and establishing His household?

The Importance of Handover

While emphasising a long-term view of church planting and missions, still the opposite danger remains of missionaries staying too long, hindering growth, stunting maturity, and preventing real ownership of the ministry by the locals. I cannot improve here on the seasoned counsel of Conrad Mbewe, based on his extensive research and experience:

...It is a well-known fact that one of the greatest challenges in the work of missions is the handover process from the foreign missionaries to the indigenous leaders. Relationships that were once warm and friendly have often become sour and bitter because of the failure to handle this process properly. A work that was once thriving has become shrivelled at best or even fragmented, resulting in many breakaways that spoil the ecclesiastical landscape. Hence, churches and denominations that are involved in church planting missions have asked themselves how they can do it differently so that their good is not spoken of as evil (Rom. 14:16).

The ability of a missionary to relate to indigenous people with respect and admiration is often a result of unconscious training that takes place in that person's early childhood years. The way in which that person's parents and older siblings related to the disadvantaged in their society often rubs off on them without their knowing it. Sadly, the opposite is equally true.

Prejudices based on skin colour or education or wealth is often learnt from parents and older siblings, or even important people in the community, while a person is still very young. It would be wrong to deny a person the right to serve as a missionary simply because of such a past. Therefore, something must be done in the training of missionaries to address this matter.

Part of the required reading for potential missionaries while undergoing training should be the reading of biographies where pioneer missionaries seamlessly handed over the work to indigenous leaders. These examples need to be studied and woven into the curriculum. One such example in Zambia is Olive Doke, the South African Baptist missionary who, together with others, pioneered Baptist work in Zambia one hundred years ago.

Her relationship with the first Zambian indigenous leader, Paul Kasonga, speaks of mutual respect and admiration, which resulted in a seamless hand over of leadership in the Kafulafuta Mission. This working relationship grew and matured over a period of no less than twenty-five years.

...Then at a more doctrinal level, it is important to include in the missions training some teaching and exercises that will enable them to see that all human beings are created equal. The fact that we received the gospel before others, and benefited from its fruit of development and culture, does not mean we are superior to those who are only now receiving its light.⁸⁴ Missionaries need to know that missions, especially church planting missions, must have a terminus. That does not mean the missionary should leave the field. It means that the keys of the tools of ministry should be handed over to indigenous leadership at some stage. This must not simply happen but should be deliberately worked towards through a well thought-out road map. This road map should include teaching the converts about it. It is this failure to deliberately work yourselves out of a job that really frustrates the local leadership.

This will involve the missionaries spending a lot of time building deep relationships with the leaders being groomed in an atmosphere of openness, integrity, and mutual accountability especially over money matters. Ignorance feeds suspicion; transparency shows humility.

However, as they see how the missionaries handle their own lives, the demands of the work, etc., the local leaders will grow in their respect and admiration for them. The same will happen the other way around. The missionaries will also grow in their respect and admiration for the local

⁸⁴ Our seminary's statement seeks also to do this here in South Africa: "We affirm that all humans are made in God's image, possess inestimable value and dignity as His image bearers, and are all of "one blood" and one human race. We further affirm that redemption removes what formerly divided human ethnicities and thus makes of us a new "humanity": a new race in Christ. We deny that the Bible teaches separate "races", as understood by Darwinism, Critical Theory, or intersectionality, or that differing ethnicities, sex, religion, or socioeconomic status affect one's worth as an image-bearer of God. (Acts 17:26; Ephesians 2:11-19; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 3:28, 6:15; 1 Peter 2:9). See also sections on: 'Godly Communication and Understanding', 'Unity Amidst Diversity', 'Culture and Multiculturalism', 'Christianity and African Identity', 'Equality, Oppression, Justice, Racism', etc.: <https://www.shepherdsafrika.co.za/2020/08/14/on-social-justice-the-woke-church-affirmations-denials-by-the-faculty-of-shepherds-seminary-africa/>

leaders as they see the way they handle issues in their lives and work in the church. This will help to make the withdrawal process less nerve-racking and traumatic.

Finally, there must come a period when the missionaries refuse to take on responsibilities that they know the fledgling church leaders should start doing, even when they are floundering. It is part of the growing-up process. We have all made mistakes and learnt a lot from them!

Missionaries should work themselves out of a job. They should do it in such a way that after a period of training and handing over, they can cry... "I have finished the race" (as Paul did in 2 Tim 4:7).

As Africa joins the great missionary movement in sending out missionaries right across the globe, let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. The task of missions is still vast when one thinks of the 10/40 Window, the rural areas of Africa, etc. Let us ensure that the early and legitimate paternalism with which we begin the work of missions soon gives way to a true partnership built on mutual respect and admiration with the indigenous leaders we will be grooming to take over the work.⁸⁵

Or as Steve Saint, son of the famous Nate Saint of the Auca Five martyrs, later wrote about their lasting ministry among the very tribes that killed his father:

It is critical that we keep sight of what the purpose of missions is. Missions is not to go in and create and control a church for other people nor be the church for them. It's not our job to insure that it functions. It is simply and only to plant the church in every people group and nurture it until it is able to propagate, govern and support itself. When missions go beyond that, then they are imposing themselves in the area of responsibility that belongs to the indigenous people and then everything gets out of whack.

I don't get this from books on missiology, but just from the Scriptures. In Matt. 28, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me. You go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." He was talking to eleven ...men, sending them out to make disciples, who would teach other people to follow Him on their own, observing all that He had commanded them.

⁸⁵ Mbewe, *Insights from the Lives of Olive Doke and Paul Kasonga for Pioneer Mission and Church Planting Today* (Langham, 2014). Or summarised here in this journal article: https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/32599/Mbewe_From_2012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

*This means that the Huaorani [Auca] believers need to be disciplined so that they can make disciples also. But if they're not given the chance to do that, if other people dominate them and keep doing the things that the Huaorani should do, then they never grow up.*⁸⁶

No 'African Christianity'

Let me close this section with a timely application from Mbewe:

When the first generation of indigenous leaders takes denominational power from Western missionaries, there tends to be an over-reaction. The leaders emphasize their ethnicity so much that someone listening to them may soon start thinking that the new agenda in the church should be to rid themselves of anything that smacks of the West. We must now be truly African.

This is worse when the handover of church power takes place while a country is undergoing political change from Western colonialism. The one-stringed banjo that's played over and over again is that Africans have their own way of worship and must return to it. What we have inherited is Western Christianity, and we must now get rid of it. That becomes the popular cry: 'We are African Christians.'...

...Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as African Christianity or Asian Christianity or Western Christianity. The Christian faith is one, and it's portrayed for us as such in the Scriptures.

One of the greatest fights waged by the apostles was to ensure that Jews and Gentiles worshipped together in the same church despite being different in many ways. They weren't willing to yield to the pressure of two divergent religious cultures that had become set in concrete. There was only one gospel, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:5–6). Therefore, there was to be only one church—the Christian church.

"For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28). Might I also add that, in Christ, there is neither African nor Asian nor Caucasian?

⁸⁶ <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/fighting-dependency-among-the-aucas>

Anything that brings chasms into the body of Christ should be challenged on the basis of Scripture. We are one church. ...We should refuse to join those who have the agenda of making 'African Christianity' the issue to fight for in the church. Instead, we should insist on fighting for the purity of the gospel in any culture.

Let the world wage its cultural and ethnic fights. It has no common ground. However, let them see something totally different when they come into the Christian church. Let them find a gospel that has broken down all our barriers, a gospel that causes believers to work lovingly toward mutual edification rather than to create yet another war zone in the guise of acknowledging our ethnicity, which may or may not have been previously suppressed. Brothers and sisters, we are Christians who happen to be Africans, not Africans who happen to be Christians. Let us get the biblical emphasis right!⁸⁷

(5) Local Church Membership (& Deacons) – Spiritual unity in the gospel is an awesome, unseen reality where faith in Christ join us to His universal Church worldwide (Eph. 4:4-6). But that invisible unity only becomes visible when we are baptized into a local church (1 Cor. 12:12-13,27). New converts gather and join a congregation to labour side by side in the work of the gospel.

Elders should take seriously their role to guard the front door of the church, only receiving into membership those with a credible profession of faith. This is why our church requires a thorough, four-session membership course and an in-depth interview with an elder/pastor, plus informal observing and fellowshiping with every applicant over a few months. This includes accepting the practice of church discipline, which has become all too rare.⁸⁸

We also require that they not merely attend on Sunday morning but are also normally required to attend some midweek small-group before we admit them into membership. Plus we strongly encourage attendance at Sunday night corporate worship – to cap off our Lord’s Day together as a church family and to push back against the secular encroachment on Sundays.

This shows new members that Christ calls us to meaningful membership and true, spiritual fellowship and authentic love as His body, “being fitted together

⁸⁷ <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-theres-no-such-thing-as-african-christianity/>

⁸⁸ Our practice of the four steps of Matt. 18 are spelled out in our church constitution, as also explained here: <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/church-discipline>

by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). Our world doesn’t need any more churches whose unity is merely based on ‘don’t rock the boat’, rather than a firmly grounded, ‘we-believe’, confessional unity deeply rooted in sound doctrine and shared biblical convictions.

Once admitted as members, close partnership is expected since the local church is God’s best evangelistic method. Jesus said the world will know we are Christ’s disciples by our love for one another (John 13:34-35). This includes a robust commitment to biblical peace-making and godly conflict resolution.⁸⁹ The businessmen in my church remind me how cut-throat the world’s partnerships are and how it ought to be radically different among God’s people (Rom. 12:1-2).

This is why my church family has found our Church Covenant to be a helpful biblical tool and a regular reminder of specific ways that Christ calls us to love one another.⁹⁰ This includes pledging that, “We will seek, by our example and witness, the salvation of family, friends, and others. We will also endeavour to disciple those who are younger in the faith.” Likewise, we declare that “We will contribute cheerfully and regularly...to the spread of the Gospel through all nations.” This means we fulfill our mission together, not in isolation.

Often in our day there is a misunderstanding of what local church unity should look like. As we state in our seminary’s recent statement, “On Social Justice & The Woke Church”:

We deny that diversity is simply a plurality of variegated views tolerated under the same roof. True diversity is seen in 1 Corinthians 12, where differences unite in a single organism, whereas false diversity allows for independent co-existence. The body of Christ is not a host for competing worldviews and divergent sensibilities, but a body where people diverse in appearance, background, and social status strive for “one mind” (Eph. 4:1-3; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 13:11; Php. 1:27, 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8).

The biblical criterion for deacons is the same as for elders in terms of blameless character and a consistent Christian example; the chief difference is that deacons are not assigned teaching roles (1 Tim. 3:8-13). Some churches may

⁸⁹ I’ve found these books very helpful in handling disagreements and conflict: Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Baker, 2004); *The Peacemaking Pastor* (Baker, 2006). See also Tom Ascol’s wise counsel: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/church-splits>

⁹⁰ <https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/our-church-covenant/>

appoint a man as deacon who could not serve as an elder, due to minor or secondary differences in doctrine. Yet if he is man of proven character who guards the unity of the church, he can still serve fruitfully (knowing also that his elders will continue persuading him towards greater doctrinal unity). But this assumes that deacons are not acting like elders/overseers leading the church and are men of proven and reliable character, who are serving as biblical deacons, under elder oversight.

(6) Pastoral Training/Seminary – Praise God for great seminaries and academic institutions that have been bastions of biblical orthodoxy. But in many fields of service, such institutions are unavailable (or have gone liberal), so local churches are having to rediscover their God-given role in pastoral training. From passing the buck to parachurch schools, the local church must return to *passing the baton*, “entrusting these things to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). But this will require strong theological unity and in-depth cooperation amongst one or more churches and their leaders.

Patterned after good models and mentors⁹¹, our seminary is the fruit of twenty years of church planting and church-strengthening, until we had a coalition of five likeminded churches ready to take on such a large project. Each church donates their pastor’s time, as part of his biblical calling to raise up the next generation of pastors (1 Tim. 5:22). Christ has ordained that churches produce pastors; other institutions may assist but cannot replace the church’s role.

Our students should be biblically qualified, gifted men whom God has clearly called into pastoral ministry through their local church identifying them. Too often a man ‘went’ to seminary instead of being *sent* by his local church who can verify and vouch for his godly character and gifting (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). At our seminary we tell applicants, “You need to smell like sheep to study at Shepherds’ (Seminary).” We take it very seriously when a local church sends us one of their best treasures – a proven and tested man, to undergo our rigorous, four-year program.

While in seminary, our job is not to expose students to a smorgasbord of views, but to impart a definite body of sound doctrine and biblical truth so that we produce pastor-theologians ready to love and lead a flock (1 Tim. 4:6-16; Acts 20:17-35).⁹² To do that we must have a faculty of teachers who are united not

⁹¹ <https://expositors.org/>; <https://www.9marks.org/article/church-classroom-history-masters-seminary/>; <https://www.9marks.org/article/raising-pastors-churchs-work/>; <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-do-pastors-raise-pastors/>

⁹² That doesn’t mean we don’t teach students to understand opposing positions thoroughly, to represent that position accurately and refute it biblically, logically, and precisely.

only in doctrine but also in ministry practice, and who can model pastoral ministry outside the classroom in healthy local churches and in mentoring our men. This is the accreditation that matters most in God's eyes.

Typical seminary graduates in today's Church depart with more questions than answers, more doubts than convictions. How then will they ever lead a flock with confidence and feed them with sound doctrine? May God use our cooperation as local churches to train up faithful shepherd-expositors who will show their love for the Chief Shepherd by feeding His sheep (Jn. 20:15-19; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).

The Apostle Paul's mandate to young Pastor Timothy is clear, "Retain the standard of sound words.... Guard the good deposit...." (2 Tim. 1:13-14). J.C. Ryle summons every preacher:

Dare to make up your mind what you believe. Dare to have distinct views of truth and error. Never, never be afraid to hold decided doctrinal opinions. Never...rest contented with a bloodless, boneless, tasteless, colourless, lukewarm un-dogmatic Christianity. ...Take up a distinct, sharply cut, doctrinal religion!

...Christianity without distinct doctrine is a powerless thing. ...The men who have done the most for the Church, and made the deepest mark on their day and generation, have always been men of most decided and distinct doctrinal views.

*...It is doctrine, clear, ringing doctrine, which, like the ram's horn at Jericho, casts down the opposition of the devil and sin!*⁹³

(7) Local Church Elders/Pastors – Every child soon learns that if he/she can drive a wedge between Mom and Dad, the battle is won! Divide the parents, conquer the household. It is no different in God's household, the church. The highest level of spiritual unity should be that of fellow overseers tasked with shepherding the blood-bought flock of Christ through teaching and defending sound doctrine. To harm a church, Satan's first target is always her leaders. Usually, it is not churches that split; it is the leadership that divides, then the rest is history.

Because of the weight of spiritual responsibility entrusted to them, God holds pastors/elders to the highest standard in life and doctrine (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Tim.

⁹³ pp. 416-19, *Holiness* (1889).

3:1-7; 4:6-16; 5:17-25; Tit. 1:5-9; Jam. 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). This is why churches are often helped by some kind of structured ordination process for training and recognizing qualified elders, and helping the church hold them accountable to their solemn vows.⁹⁴ Ordination should be the job of the church, not seminary.

Our church has produced a helpful booklet, *Ordination Manual: For Preparing & Appointing Elders/Pastors for Your Church*, which provides a biblical explanation and various practical tools and materials we've used over the years in training up elders, deacons, small group leaders and others.⁹⁵

God has also ordained that churches be led not by a single pastor but by a pastoral team, a band of faithful shepherds and examples to the flock (Acts 20:17-35; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). This includes modelling for the church body Christian love and unity amongst themselves. How will a church's deacons, members, or missionaries ever handle conflict in a godly way if their overseers cannot do so? Shared doctrine is at the heart of eldership cooperation. At the end of our church's Declaration of Faith, all members are made aware of the greater theological unity required of our elders through subscribing to a more extended doctrinal statement.⁹⁶

In addition to this, we as elders continue to produce position papers on core doctrines and practices, to further teach, edify and unify our flock.⁹⁷ (When it comes to visiting preachers, we do not require the same level of unity as for eldership, although we must trust his life and doctrine, and his skill as a faithful expositor, who also will not confuse our people on any matters of secondary differences.)

⁹⁴ <https://dbts.edu/2012/06/27/the-lost-practice-of-recognition-councils/>; <https://baptistbulletin.org/the-baptist-bulletin-magazine/when-the-minister-moves-from-church-to-church/>; <https://faith.edu/faith-news/the-ordination-of-men-to-the-ministry/>; https://opc.org/qa.html?question_id=10; <https://www.gotquestions.org/ordination.html>

⁹⁵ Available upon request at Antioch Bible Church.

⁹⁶ It states, "This Declaration of Faith is a summary of two larger, more detailed doctrinal statements by which the elders at Antioch are guided in their beliefs and teaching:

(a) The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (b) The "What We Teach" statement of Grace Community Church (which is basically the same as our Shepherds' Seminary doctrine).

⁹⁷ For example: <https://www.antiochbiblechurch.org.za/children-conversion-and-baptism/>.

In doing this, we follow the example of older, model churches – such as the eldership of Grace Community Church: <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/index> (e.g., on Lordship Salvation, Role of Women, Roman Catholicism, God's Sovereignty & Human Responsibility [unconditional election], etc.) See also other helpful position papers on contemporary issues that trouble churches and divide ministries here:

<https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/statements-from-the-board/> (e.g., on Mental Illness & Medicine; on Guidance, Revelation & Miracles; on Female Pastors; on Gender)

Look at current debates over Christian nationalism and the demise of Christendom in the West. Where you land on such issues will be largely determined by your eschatology, your view of whether there is a future for the Jews or not, of whether the Church has replaced Israel or not (which also reveals your ecclesiology), and of what to expect the world to progress or regress until Christ returns.⁹⁸

Reasons Never to Date or Marry an Unbeliever⁹⁹

God's Word is very clear: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). That text gives a clear condition only to marry another person who is "in the Lord", i.e., a fellow believer. And here's another text that implies the same thing:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? (2 Cor. 6:14-15)

What kind of "yoking" and partnership could be closer than that of marriage? Surely God forbids such unequal yoking; it's the clash of two kingdoms, of darkness trying to be married to light, a child of the devil uniting with a child of God – unthinkable!

God's prohibition against a Christian marrying a non-Christian is not unique to the New Testament either. It is grounded in God's Word in the Old Testament:

⁹⁸ As illustrated in these biblically discerning responses: <https://g3min.org/christian-faithfulness-the-biblical-alternative-to-christian-nationalism/>; <https://g3min.org/a-review-of-mere-christendom-by-doug-wilson/>; <https://g3min.org/the-different-shades-of-christian-nationalism/>; <https://g3min.org/the-mixed-blessings-of-a-christian-nation/>; <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/20928>, "Christian Nationalism: Living Stones vs. Voting Blocs", by Jesse Johnson.

⁹⁹ Here is my first assignment I always give to a dating couple considering engagement/marriage, to ensure if they are equally yoked: <https://cfcjax.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/should-we-get-married-5-questionsfor-pre-engagement.pdf>

You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly (Deut. 7:3-4).

And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? (Neh. 13:25-27)

Notice in the above OT texts: God is not opposed to intermarriage with the Canaanite nations for ethnic or racial reasons. The problem is their false gods, that they have a foreign faith and an idolatrous religion which is incompatible with true worshippers of God.¹⁰⁰

It is also possible for two believers still to be unequally yoked in marriage (or business or other close relations) if they are theologically incompatible and unable to work together in good conscience.

What if it is too late and one is already married to an unbelieving spouse? This is not a new problem but was common from the earliest days of Christianity. God's Word has much comfort and wise counsel for those who are unequally yoked.¹⁰¹ I know of many spouses who testify of God's all-sufficient grace sustaining them in such a marriage for decades, and some have seen unsaved spouses converted to Christ (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

¹⁰⁰ See also: <https://www.9marks.org/article/can-christians-marry-non-christians-a-biblical-theology/>; <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/get-help/when-thinking-about-marrying-a-non-believer/>; <https://www.gotquestions.org/date-marry-unbeliever.html>; <https://www.gotquestions.org/missionary-dating.html>; <https://www.gotquestions.org/date-denominations.html>

¹⁰¹ For further biblical counsel and comfort: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-unbelieving-spouse>; <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/60-31/how-to-win-your-unbelieving-spouse>; <https://counselingoneanother.com/2014/11/19/to-the-man-with-an-unbelieving-wife/>; <https://www.gotquestions.org/married-unbeliever.html>.

CONCLUSION

*Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:*

*Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!*
(Samuel J. Stone, 1866)

Of all the periods in history where our sovereign Lord could've placed us, He has called us to serve Him this age, as we watch the disintegration and demise of the West. The evangelical church has not been immune to this fragmentation and is facing severe fault lines and divisions of our own.¹⁰² Some separation can be avoided or delayed in the name of biblical unity and peace-making; but other separation is unavoidable and necessary for those with the courage and clarity to do so by the grace of God.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Kevin DeYoung recently categorized four major divisions among reformed evangelicals: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/why-reformed-evangelicalism-has-splintered-four-approaches-to-race-politics-and-gender/>. Yet this again raises the question about when separation is required from positions that have become antithetical to the biblical gospel, e.g., those embracing Critical Race Theory (CRT)? See above links (p. 27) to two key recent statements explaining why CRT and wokeness endangers the gospel boundary and is derived from unbelieving outsiders. "The social justice movement is not Christianity. The message, the methods, the mission, the desired outcomes are not Christian. It is an anti-Christian philosophy disguised as truth and love that has captured much of the visible church. Like a virus, it is a foreign antibody injected into the body of Christ. The social justice movement . . . is poisoning the church, spreading strife, and attacking the very heart of the gospel." (Jon Benzinger, *Stand: Christianity vs. Social Justice*). See also, "The Spiritual Deception of Wokeness", Darrell Harrison's 2023 seminar at Shepherd's Conference: <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/20925>. Plus: MacArthur, "Social Justice and the Gospel": <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/45SJ>, and <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/no-division-in-the-body/>; Phil Johnson, <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/gospel-issue/>; James White, <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/biblical-view-unity/>. Plus this: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christianity-or-critical-theory#fn8>.

¹⁰³ One of the best and only books I've found on levels of cooperation, discerning partnerships and knowing when to separate or not: *On the Level: Discovering the Levels of Biblical Relationships Among Believers*, by a father-son Gregory team (IFCA Press, 2005). Read a summary here, including their helpful, "Pyramid of Responsibility": <https://www.ifca.org/file/bdb8e070-ebbb-11e9-afe3-0614187498c1>. Or as another has stated,

It is unfair to label another believer, church (or group of churches) ‘elitist, snobbish, parochial, cliquish, sectarian, isolated, etc.’ simply because they don’t seek cooperation with me or my tribe, or don’t prefer as much broader cooperation as me. Christian charity compels me to assume that they simply believe (unless stated or proven otherwise) that they can be more God-pleasing and productive for the kingdom in a narrower, focused way, rather than pursuing wider associations (1 Cor. 13). Likewise, we must not judge those who have a unique calling to partner more broadly (e.g., mostly at Levels 1-3), if that is where they can be most useful to the Lord and His kingdom.

But I am concerned that in some evangelical circles there is an addiction to collaboration at almost all costs, and a willingness to sacrifice too much on this golden altar of partnerships, as if cooperation were a higher virtue than faithfulness to the truth. If I’m not willing to risk cherished friendships and close relationships for the sake of Christ, then my discernment is endangered, my alliances will be compromised, and my allegiance to King Jesus is in question.

In my earlier days of ministry, I seemed to view collaboration as a necessary proof of my humility and of forsaking selfish turf mindsets or ministry tribalism. But that is exalting cooperation to a higher level than is biblically justified.

Yet wise cooperation and strong gospel partnerships still offer great potential for kingdom impact and Great Commission fruitfulness. Sober biblical thinking about separation and cooperation is more urgently needed than ever! There is a lost, perishing world still to be reached, and this still requires self-denying teamwork, creative association and bold collaboration for the kingdom.

May our risen Lord equip us with heavenly wisdom and strengthen us in these dark days to shine the light of Christ and to hold forth His life-giving Word to perishing souls.

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement
give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,
so that with one heart and mouth you may
glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5-6).

“Let us fellowship where we can. Let us separate where we must. Let us love no matter what.” (<https://sharperiron.org/article/forgetting-doctrine-of-separation>)

Appendix: Against Movement-ism & For Independency

(by Phil Johnson)

...One of the really good things about historic fundamentalism was that it created an environment where independency flourished. I've never been fond of denominationalism, and I think the fundamentalist exodus from the denominations was a wonderful, triumphant thing—not at all a defeat, the way many chroniclers of the fundamentalist movement have suggested.

It was the early fundamentalists who left the denominations to form hundreds, perhaps thousands, of independent churches that kept the gospel witness alive and thriving while the mainline denominations all basically crumbled under the weight of their liberal unbelief. It's my conviction that independency is the biblical pattern. There's no evidence of any denominational-type hierarchy in the Bible.

... I'm not looking for a movement to join. I belong to one local church. That's enough for me. And I'm willing to work alongside anyone and everyone who shares my essential biblical convictions, whether the label they would slap on themselves is "fundamentalist," "evangelical," "strict and particular Baptist," or just plain old "Christian."

... The true vitality of the church is traceable through the nonconformists, the independents, the true biblical separatists. The true secret of their power is not—and never has been—in earthly organizations, political clout, or visible movements of any kind. Their power is derived from the biblical truth they preach. And the influence of that kind of power has always been what determines the relative health and spiritual vigor of the church.

In fact, if you want to see a Who's Who of influential people in British church history, visit the nonconformist burial ground at Bunhill Fields in London. These are the people whose influence has done the most good for the church throughout her history. They are the ones that were ejected from the established Church for refusing to conform to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. They built independent churches, and they were devoted to the truth and opposed to every kind of spiritual compromise. They were militant in defense of the truth. And they will stand alone if necessary.

...When the spirit of independency flourishes, the church thrives. When simple gospel truth is proclaimed and human hierarchies are kept to a minimum, the

*church flourishes. When organizations, hierarchies, and human clout comes to the forefront, the church's power wanes.*¹⁰⁴

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**What will it take to send more missionaries,
plant more churches, and train more leaders
in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission?**

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**How do we build a likeminded ministry team?  
How do we go from paternalism to partnership  
with indigenous leaders?**

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**Which coalitions, alliances, networks and
associations/denominations should we join or not?**

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**How serious are the growing fault lines?**

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**What does it mean to be unequally yoked?
In a marriage, a business, a ministry?**

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**Which church should I join?**

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When must I separate from other believers?

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**Should non-essentials divide us?  
Should secondary distinctives define us?**

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