

**Scripture Seminar, April 23, 2003**  
Dr. Walter Hansen, “Transforming Partnerships in Christ”

Dr. Walter Hansen, Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, has served as a pastor, and previously taught New Testament at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. “Partnership” is a quest in his own life.

**Introduction:** Observations on Partnership.

1. *Recent consultations on partnership*, especially in the 1990s. Partnership is an ideal in Christian missions. Lausanne Covenant, 1974: a foundational document for missions worldwide. Consensus: those groups that turn partnering into an art and science will be those that survive and thrive. World Evangelical Fellowship Commission: Manila, “Towards Interdependent Partnership” (1000 established partnerships). The Western church can’t claim a monopoly, because the majority of partnerships are non-Western. Equality, mutuality, repentance, partnership in mission.

2. *Skepticism*. Partnership is like the Holy Grail: everyone is talking about it, but no one’s seen it. The partnership model is an elusive ideal. The partnership term is used less in the South than in the North (viewed as a euphemism for unjust relationships). Some have suggested that we place a moratorium on the use of the term—it’s not to be used unless it’s validated by reality.

3. *Reasons for failure*

- a. Inequality. The Western church is the trustee of the financial wealth of the global church. This also leads to unilateral decisions; talk of partnership sounds like a promotional gimmick.
- b. History. Despite non-Western aspiration for independence, they still have been coached by and are dependent on Western organizations
- c. Globalization. A major counter-force against genuine development. The integration of the world market creates a connected structure holding people in a web. It increases the economic hegemony of the already-dominant group, while further impoverishing/marginalizing the Two Thirds World. How can Christians in the West, enriched by multinational organizations, form genuine partnerships with the least developed parts of the world? How do we ask for reports without becoming paternalistic?

4. *Personal experience*

5. *The purpose of this paper*: explore Paul’s theology of partnership in the letter to the Philippians. We need constantly to reevaluate our plans and progress in light of biblical theology. Paul’s use and transformation of cultural concepts of partnership in his day can instruct us regarding patterns and practices in our day. *Koinonia* was used in his culture, social structure; Paul was transforming it in his partnership with this church. The transformation of the sociocultural concept can guide us in transforming our own involvement in our day.

## **Paul's partnership with the Philippian church**

“your partnership in the gospel”

“no church partnered with me in the matter of giving and receiving except for you”

### **I. A partnership of a joint business venture by consensus (*societas*)**

#### *A. Evidence for a Roman concept of business partnership*

##### *1. The commercial technical terms used in partnership*

Related to Greco-Roman culture: Aristotle on the essence of citizenship. Examples of *koinonia*: marriage, family, friendships, business partnerships, common ownership of property, citizenship.

Paul's use of partnership in his letter in terms of 2 types of partnerships (common):

- a. joint venture by consensus, business partnership: people shake hands, decide to pool resources
- b. common ownership: usually, because we become joint heirs of property, vs. a voluntary one.

##### *2. A Roman institution in a Roman colony*

*Societas*. Philippi: more inscriptions found in Latin than in Greek; a Roman colony although part of Macedonia. Roman legal contract of consensual partnership. Unlike *societas* of family memberships established by lineage, they were set up by persons committed to a common goal. Equal partnership, consensual. Quasi-brotherly relationship. A contractual relationship only needed a simple agreement, not necessarily witnesses. A breach of trust could result in a lawsuit and in termination. Many case-laws were related to the break-up of partnerships.

*Societas*: according to Sampley's study of language: 1. Paul's reference to a gift received in 4:17 was a commercial technical term used of the receipt of formal payment. Paul's commendation, 4:15—appropriation of commercial language of bookkeeping. Gift and need could be reinterpreted in light of commercial language as request for remuneration, and payment. All of this looks like a business partnership.

Equal payment in a contractual relationship for the purpose of the gospel.

##### *3. Partnership based on “like-mindedness”*

*Phrone* (be of one mind—2:2; 4:2). Roman law stipulated binding only as long as partnerships were in agreement, of the same mind. No wonder Paul called on them to be of same mind, and called Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled—it could have terminated

#### *B. Evidence against a Roman concept of business partnership*

Sampley's argument evoked debate. Horsley: Roman context, “philologically unsound.”

*Koinonia* was used in a specialized, technical sense; Sampley going too far.

#### *C. 4 significant parallels between Pauline and Roman concepts of business partnership*

1. *The consensual nature of partnership.* Distinguished from the patronage relationship: hierarchical relationships were the standard Roman structure, starting from the top with the Emperor; the opposite is the voluntary relationship/association; mutuality. Not a hereditary form. Paul is careful to say, this is *not* patronage, this is partnership. 4:10-18—unsolicited gifts. Paul expresses appreciation and commends them for their voluntary support during his imprisonment. They were freely giving to support Paul’s proclamation of the gospel. Not a hint of solicitation or obligation.

2. *The goals of partnership.* Farming, horse-selling, teaching grammar; pearl-selling, etc. Phil 1:5 has a focus on defending the gospel. 1:12--their active participation with Paul in the propagation of the gospel. The Philippians actively participate by more than financial giving: their prayers, fervent witness: a multi-layered partnership.

3. *The equality of partners.* Persons from all strata of society could become equal partners, even slaves who had no social standing in the Roman Empire. Paul was clearly the mentor; not an emphasis on his apostleship.

4. *The danger of disagreement between partners.* Because a partnership was based on consensus, unresolved conflict could easily result in its termination. Zimmerman: when cooperation between parties lost its gravitational pull. The theme of discord is prominent in this letter: Euodia and Syntyche were two influential women (Paul commends them for being *synergous*). Paul names them. This is a letter written to unify the church because tensions, disagreement, strife lead to termination. “Do everything without complaining or arguing” (2:14) echoes Israel’s complaining in the wilderness; Paul’s greeting, “bishops together with the deacons” may indicate this was a problem in the leadership ranks; *erythea and kenodoxia* point to politicalism and factionalism in the church. 1:27, “Make my joy complete”; 2:2, “think the same thing”; 2:4; 2:2. Experience reconciliation, unity, harmony. Without these, there would be no future for the partnership. *Societas* a joint relationship by consensus—a voluntary association of equal partners to accomplish a common goal.

#### *D. Paul’s transformation of a business partnership*

Paul is using language that has a background, but he *transforms* them also:

1. *Partnership is a triangular relationship.* God is the founder and guarantor of this partnership. Paul expresses confidence that the partnership will last because God, who began this work of God, will sanctify. So Hawthorne: sanctification in 1:5 and 1:6 are connected, so sanctification is the secondary sense. Here, there’s a primary, corporate reference. This is God’s mission through the partnership. Phil 2:12-13. Not destroying church by individual self-interest; instead, church unity & support of one another. *Soteria* has spectrum of meaning: here, the health and unity of the church.

2. *A two-way reciprocity.* The nature of joint venture transformed: Paul changes the expectations of reciprocity. Roman world obligated one to return gifts; a change in status from partner to client, a patron-client relationship. Paul’s view of his partnership with the

Philippians: such expectations of reciprocity had to include God in the equation. God will reward all gifts; Paul was under no obligation to do so. True partnership could be maintained. Paul's use of *societas* as a metaphor points to appreciation for their voluntary association with them in gospel. Confidence: initiated, sustained, and reciprocated by God—a theological transformation of the social construct here.

## **II. A partnership of common ownership: *communio*.**

The basis for his appeal for unity is common life in Christ; *paraklesis en Christo* (2:1-2). A realized partnership in the Spirit (2:1); *koinonia* used in sense of *communio*.

### *A. Common ownership of property*

*Societas* is rooted in *communio*. A business partnership is fragile, can fall apart; so Paul develops that idea, but settles it on firmer foundation: because we're in the same family.

*Communas*, according to Horsley, is communion: common ownership of property, usually by inheritance, within a family—partnership is not entered into voluntarily. Common ownership meant that each partner owns the whole 10 acres, not divided up. *Justinian Digest*: a person has the whole use.

### *B. Partnership in the Spirit: koinonia pneumatōs*

Inheritance: have been given the Spirit, placed in the Spirit; Christ's motivation and empowerment. Christians have been given a common ownership of the Spirit. "Of Spirit": the genitive case denotes property held in common by the partnership (subjective or objective genitive?—but in literature where *koinonia* shows up, it emphasizes corporate rather than individual experience of believers. Not to be individualized, but a corporate experience of all inheriting and belonging together in the *communio* of the Spirit.

*Koinonia pneumatōs*, 2:2: involves union with Christ; Chapters 1 & 4: *eis ton euangelion*: business: "you met my needs."

### *C. Partnership in the sufferings of Christ: koinonian [ton] pathematon autou*

In the middle of letter, a deeper kind of partnership: in the Spirit, suffering together for the gospel is grounded in something far deeper. Desire for continuous participation in this life in Christ. "Partnership" is the solidarity of all believers in the life of Christ. Participation in sufferings of Christ: it is granted to them not only to believe but also to suffer for him (1:29-30). This pattern of Christ is reproduced in life of all believers. Suffering is not in vain, but prefaces vindication.

## **Conclusions and applications**

1. The founder of all true human partnerships in mission is God. All grow out of and express the reality of a foundational partnership designed, sealed, enacted by God. The fruit on the tree planted by God. No reason to boast about the origins or to fear the outcome. Removes human aspect of credit.

2. The form of all true partnerships: Christ, who humbled himself, becoming a servant. A servant form, cruciform. Increasing our resources and prestige are counterfeits. Suffer loss of prestige, status; service back-and-forth.

3. The funding of all true partnerships is from God. There is a difficult challenge of reciprocity and mutuality when the rich give to the poor; only when their dependence is on God. The rich are a conduit of God's grace; the poor are God's channel of God's grace. The poor are often rich in prayer and in other gifts desperately needed by rich. The affluent will inevitably dominate; only when there's two-way traffic—when all partners realize how dependent they are on God—is there true partnership.

4. The formation of partnerships. Transformed from utilitarian self-interest; they are to use it as a context for the formation of these partners, that they would grow in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Walter Hansen's father's maxim: "Don't use your partners to get your work done; use your work to develop your partners." People are ends in themselves, infinitely valuable.

### *Questions & Answers.*

1. Regarding the biblical metaphor used for partnership: is there one theology or are there theologies? Does this notion of partnership suggest an ecclesiology that could be dissolved?

One theology of partnership, but differing aspects of it. People agree to pool resources for the advancement of the gospel. A business venture for accomplishing goal: founded on a deeper level, the *koinonia pneumatos* which includes *koinonia ton pathematon autou* (of his sufferings). What undergirds the different levels is that we are in the fellowship of Christ.

An ecclesiology in broad sense, or missiology?

Another metaphor: maintaining the unity of the body, but it's connected to partnership for mission

2. Power: in Philippians, the theme of not pursuing your own interests but rather the interests of Jesus Christ, is followed by narrative of Christ and the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus. *Ekenosen* is a key word to link to partnership. What does self-emptying mean for the Western church in our affluence?