**Partnership by Roger Brind**

As I begin today I want to acknowledge the great debt I owe to many in Central and Eastern Europe for my spiritual education and particularly in what I believe the Lord would have me say about partnership today.

When writing to the Romans Paul said, “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.” Romans 1:14 I feel that sense of debt today.

Where are we going?

I want to begin by defining partnership.

I want to talk about the experiences I have had in developing my personal views on partnership.

I want us to explore what the bible teaches on the subject.

What is biblical partnership? How do we define it? The Greek word translated as partnership is koinonia (*koy-nohn-ee'-ah)* and is translated in a variety of ways in the New Testament in the many translations we all use.

* It’s used of the personal relationship that we as believers should have with each other (Acts 2:42, Philemon 1:6 and 1 John 1:3)
* It’s used of the way believers handle finance (Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:3b&4, 9:13)
* It’s used of the relationship between believers in the church (1 Corinthians 1:9 & 10:16)
* It’s used of our relationship with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 13:4 & Philippians 2:1&2)
* It’s used of the agreements reached over specific areas of service (Galatians 2:9)
* It’s used over cooperation in service (Philippians 1:4-6)
* It’s used of our relationship with Christ because of his death and resurrection (Philippians 3:10&11)
* It’s used of our responsibilities to other believers (Philemon 1:6, 1 John 1:3,6&7)

***Where I am coming from!***

Some years ago, here in Dömös, Czesław, reminded us what partnership isn’t and then encouraged us to strive for true partnership. His descriptions of imperialism and paternalism challenged all of us to consider our position! I remember how that challenge hit me. My upbringing both in the national culture and church culture bred in me a “British is best” attitude, an imperialist tendency which I’m glad I came to recognise. I believe it is still a tendency we from UK and other similar cultures need to recognise and challenge ourselves about today. I sincerely apologise for it.

My experiences here in Central Europe from 1969 and in Eastern Europe from 1989 had a huge effect on me, my attitudes and perceptions but after Czesław’s lecture as I assessed myself, I recognised I was still paternalistic in many of my attitudes. From that day, true partnership has been my goal. I have on occasions had the courage to ask some of you, am I an imperialist, paternalist or partner?

My education in this respect has come from three sources.

1. My reflections on how godly brothers and sisters mainly here in Central and Eastern Europe have considered me a partner and have drawn me into partnership.
2. My studies of the concept in scripture.
3. My discussions and interactions with brothers and sisters here in Central and Eastern Europe.

My first lesson came from Maria Křesinová the widow of Frantisek Křesina, the man that Tomáš Masaryk, the first president Czechoslovakia called an apostle to the Czechoslovak people. He with his wife at his side did a phenomenal work of evangelism among Czech and Slovak speaking people. Sadly, I never met him, but I was privileged to know his wife. She was remarkable woman of prayer who I know partnered with Susan and me in prayer. She told me, “I pray for you every day”. A fact confirmed by her daughter Dagmar, who told us she heard her as she always prayed out loud, so she heard her praying for us. Sister Křesinová also partnered with me, as she confided in me her deep concern for the divisions growing among Czechoslovak believers and how much she hated it.

My second lesson in partnership came from several believers who partnered with us by the provision of amazing hospitality. The Gwizd, Ždych and Gallo families in what was then Czechoslovakia, the Weidensdörfer family in DDR and the Bozsóki family here in Hungary. They also partnered with us in our service among God’s people

My third lesson and probably the most significant partnership in my life was from several brothers who encouraged me as a partner in ministry.

* There was Józef Mrozek in Poland. We worked together for several years in Christian summer camps. This delightful and highly gifted man in both the scriptures and languages translated for me, helped me develop in scriptural knowledge and to understand the culture of Poland.
* There was Lázló Timar here in Hungary who took our family all around Hungary and introduced me to many of the churches. One of the first places we travelled to was Miskolc where I met Lajos Madarász senior. He was a great encouragement. Whenever I visited he would always ask me to set an afternoon aside for bible discussions and together we explored the scriptures and he taught me an enormous amount not only about scripture but on how to deal with church life, especially when he disagreed with some of the doctrine and practices here in Hungary!
* There was Sandor Bozsóki who took over from Lázló Timar when he was no longer able to travel.
* Undoubtedly my strongest and longest partnership developed with my very dear friend, Henryk Turkanik, who is with us. In the winter of 1979 he invited me to partner with him as one of a number of teachers in the bible school in Jasztrębie Zdrój in Poland and the next summer introduced me to the camp work in Wisła were I first met Marian Pawlas.

I learnt a great deal from Henryk. I saw how he dealt with the many pressures of living in a communist system. I saw how he coped with pressures from brethren at home and abroad and how he partnered with me.

As I look back on these partnerships I’m sure each one was different and based very much on the principles we will explore later in the book of Philemon.

They were all great learning processes. It was mentoring of the highest quality and taught me much about partnership. They had much more to give me than I had to give them.

Now turning to scripture. Our focus in the time I have will be partnership in service and relationships.

I want us to observe that in the New Testament it operated at 3 levels. What I would call the “Big Picture” level, the local church level and the individual level.

I won’t say much about the “Big Picture” level it’s something you may wish to discuss more about in groups later. We know that different brothers and sisters in the first century co-operated in service.

* Apollos, a Jew a native of Alexandria, encouraged in ministry in Europe (Acts 18, 19 and I Corinthians 16:12)
* Timothy described as co-worker, was sent to a number of places (Acts 19:22, Romans 16:21 and 1 Corinthians 4:7 etc.).
* Priscilla and Aquila, Paul’s co-workers in Christ Jesus (Acts 18 and Romans 16)
* Titus, my true son in our common faith, my partner and co-worker among you (2 Corinthians 8 and Titus 1:4)
* Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles.(Galatians 2)

My main focus is the local and personal situation. I suggest that the principles I will focus on are applicable to the big picture as well.

Paul wrote “I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippian 1:4-6.

What did “your partnership from the first day until now” mean for the Philippian believers? Individually they would doubtless remember their first encounter with the apostle. For some it was the meeting by the riverside! (Acts 16:13-15) For others it was the experience when Paul, commanded the evil spirit to come out of an abused slave girl and for others the prison experience and earthquake that resulted in the jailor and his family coming to Christ (Acts 16:16-34). What were the key features of those encounters?

The diverse nature of the team and the range of activities that led people to Christ. People who would not normally work together or have social contact worked together.

We don’t know everyone involved in those early encounters, but we know that Paul and Silas two leaders in the early church who were both Jews by birth and Roman citizens were there, Luke described as the beloved doctor, an outstanding historian and almost certainly a Greek mother tongue gentile was there. Timothy a half Jew and half gentile, which was anathema to an orthodox Jew was there. Lydia a foreign business woman from Thyatira was there as were others. Later in Philippi, a slave who was initially under the control of an evil spirit was there and later still a Roman jailor almost certainly a retired centurion and his family were there. The early church at Philippi was like us here from many nations and they served Christ together.

This was very much a feature of the early church. People from a wide variety of backgrounds served together. As we have already though Aquila and Priscilla, Jews exiled from Rome and Apollos from Alexandria are other examples (Acts 18).

It must have been a quite remarkable sight, seeing an all-male group of travellers make appropriate contact with women of high status and leading some, if not all, to Christ. They would also have witnessed the healing of the demon possessed slave girl as Paul and his companions made their way to the place of prayer. They would have known of the incident in the local prison when Paul and Silas were wrongfully imprisoned and had refused to claim their rights and how God sent an earthquake and the jailor, and his family were converted. This was how the early church operated in evangelism and this is what fellowship in the gospel meant practically.

This was a total change from the way the world operated. It has its political and social classes with traditions and cultural expectations, but these were abolished in the new relationships in Christ.

How did it come about?

Paul wrote, “Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love**, if any common sharing in the Spirit**, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” Philippians 2:1&2.

Koinonia is used here – translated in my English translation as “common sharing”. Their lives had been changed through conversion, but Philippians 2 makes it clear this change required development. Our goal must be likeness to Christ. We don’t have time to explore all that is involved in that today. It is the focus in Philippians 2. However, 2:17&18 is particularly helpful and challenging in our considerations.

“But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.”

Paul talks here about service. His service and the service of the Philippian believers. He described their sacrifice as being a sacrifice of faith and his as being like a drink offering. In Exodus 29 we read of the daily sacrifice of a lamb and of the drink offering added to it. The great apostle says, “I’m delighted to add my drink offering to your sacrifice”. That’s how he saw service and fellowship in service. It’s partnership not only activity but in sacrifice to God.

In summary, partnership in service requires us to be empty of ourselves and being ready to serve together for God and do what He wants as our guide and motivation. It means that our relationship with God supersedes national, cultural and social norms and requires our submission to Christ.

How does this work out personally and how do we encourage each other?

This is a key feature in the letter Paul wrote to Philemon, his family and the church that met in his house we have a wonderful illustration as to how partnership can be made to work. It is evident from the letter that partnership is God’s way, but it does not occur naturally even among believers. It has to be worked through spiritually and wisely.

It’s an extreme example. Onesimus was a slave who had run away from Philemon, his master. In the course of his escape he had stolen money. Philemon as a pillar of the Roman community in Colossae, in the Asian Province, conquered by the Romans, was a law enforcer. The expected penalty for runaway slaves, especially those who stole was death by crucifixion. However, Onesimus had met with Paul in Rome and there he had become his son in the faith.

The new relationship in Christ meant that Paul a Jew with Roman Citizenship and an apostle, Philemon a prominent and wealthy Roman and Onesimus a slave were one on Christ Jesus. This was a challenge to the social and political order of the day as well as to the personal issues between Philemon and Onesimus. Onesimus was to the Christian community, “a dear brother,” who was useful in the Lord’s work. There were however issues in that relationship with Philemon and the church in Colossae which needed to be worked out. Partnership is undoubtedly a principle we all agree with but what it means practically is another issue. It needs to be worked out practically and that is our responsibility.

Paul recognised that for the will of God to be worked out. Partnership must be a reality. It was a relationship priority and it required a guiding and mentoring process.

He considered Philemon and Onesimus partners.

He wrote to Philemon, “I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.” 1:6

He wrote of Onesimus, “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me,” 1:10&11.

“I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel,” 1:13.

“He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me”, 1:16b &17.

However the letter Paul wrote is evidence that working out partnership practically in our lives is no easy task. He could have used his apostolic authority and ordered Philemon to act towards Onesimus as a true believer, 1:8 but he didn’t. Partnership is all about relationship and willingness act God’s way not the world’s way.

**Let us consider the process Paul used**

**Example**

Verses 23&24 present the team that were working Paul when he wrote the letter. There was an addition and that was Timothy who he chose to give the priority place in his writing. In v1 he links himself with Timothy and describes himself as “his brother.” Under Jewish law Timothy was the worst kind of person, he was a half Jew. Ezra 10 indicates that mixed marriages were unacceptable whereas strangers were to be supported and cared for (Leviticus 25). Through the grace of God, Timothy had come to faith and was a key person in the team. Paul had accepted the unacceptable. He has done what he was going to ask Philemon to do. He had fully accepted the unacceptable.

**Understanding of the situation.**

Philemon’s actions would affect his wife, his son Archippus and the church that met in their house. Paul mentioned them in his writing and indicated **their individuality.** He described Apphia as loved, Archippus as a fellow soldier and Philemon as a dear friend and fellow worker.

**Positivity**

Throughout his writing Paul is positive.

* He describes Philemon as “our dear friend” 1:1 – the team view.
* He describes his love and faith, “I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus” 1:5.
* He acknowledges the encouragement Philemon has been,”Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people” 1:7.
* He acknowledges the expected outcome, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask” 1:21.

**Dealing with the Issues**

* Onesimus had stolen money and in so doing betrayed Philemon’s trust.
* There were the constraints of Roman law.
* There was also spiritual dimension. God had overruled the situation so that the fact Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a little had led to his conversion so that Philemon could have him back, no longer as slave but as dearly loved brother.

Paul in this very skilfully written letter deals with them all. In the matter of the money stolen Paul offers to repay it but at the same time reminds Philemon of his moral responsibility.

Paul used Roman Law. The “Law of Fortum” demanded that anyone who found a slave should send him back. Paul wrote, “I am sending him back to you”1:12. This was the law. The **law also stated** that the slave had no rights in this or any situation. The owner could do as he pleased. Paul reminded Philemon of this by the comments which follow.

The spiritual dimension was uppermost in Paul’s mind. What he wanted was that the relationship they both had in Christ would dominate.

He told Philemon he loved Onesimus dearly, “my very heart” is his description. He used humour as he told Philemon, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me” 1:11 – a play on words, Onesimus means useful!

He reminded Philemon of the ways of God, “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.” 1:16&17

We have considered partnership as its relates to our service and our relationship with each other. It is a completely new way of living – it was in the first century and it is now.

I recognise I am still learning what it means to be a partner I know how easy it is to be a child of my culture and believe that even in the spiritual realm that what I learnt and experienced in church life in the UK is the best. I have learnt both practically and biblically this is wrong and damages the work of God. Brothers I want to encourage us all to work in true partnership but more than that I want to encourage us to live out partnership in our everyday lives following the greatest example of all, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.