

PARTNERS WITH EACH OTHER & THE GOD OF GROWTH

While there is one that says, 'I belong to Paul' and another that says 'I belong to Apollos' are you not being too human? For what is Apollos and what is Paul? The servants through whom you came to believe, and each has only what the Lord has given him. I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but God gave growth. In this neither the planter or the waterer counts for anything; only God, who gives growth. It is all the same who does the planting and who does the watering, and each will have the proper pay for the work he has done. After all, we do share in God's work; you are God's farm, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:4-9)

Reflection on this passage suggests a number of points to me that I would like to share about the nature of evangelisation, especially about the relationships and partnerships it involves and our attitude to them.

Evangelisers are Members of Christ, belonging together

Paul's words here about a mentality that says a person belongs to Paul or Apollos directly take up what he has said in chapter 1 about the issues of factions in the Christian community and church. "I urge you then, brothers, not to have factions amongst yourselves ... Has Christ been split up? Was it Paul who has crucified for you, or was it in Paul's name that you were baptised? (1 Corinthians 1:10 & 13). There are many aspects of Christian unity. Here in chapter 3 Paul is addressing the functional unity of our (evangelistic) work in Christ – but this is founded on a fundamental unity of belonging to Christ. We are members of his body. It is all too easy for us not to see things this way. Paul cites jealousy and rivalry as 2 reasons (v.3) but others could be added. Paul later develops the analogy of the human body to help us realise the beauty, richness and potential of our unity in Christ. "God has put all the separate parts into the body as he chose. If they were all the same part, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you' and nor can the head say to the feet 'I have no need of you.' (1 Corinthians 12:18-21 & throughout Ch 12). We need to work on this vision and reality in love. We need to preserve and build up our unity. We are never truly alone or independent as Christians however much we may feel it at times or even, at times, want to dissociate ourselves from other Christians. Whatever we do, at least implicitly, is done in the name of the church and on behalf of the church, the Body of Christ. We have each come to faith through the ministry / evangelistic work of others and we witness and evangelise, whilst being sustained by the faith, love and prayers of others. Whenever we evangelise we do so as part of a community, and call others to be part of that community too. In practical terms, and this is being increasingly recognised, evangelisation needs to spring up in different forms as the work of local church communities

Evangelisers are Servants of Christ, working together

We not only belong together but we need to work together. Evangelisation is about teamwork. It is too complex for any one person to do it all. We can all contribute in different ways. God gives us different gifts and these only work effectively when they co-operate (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Rom 12:3-9). These gifts are often given to build others up, to release their potential and gifts so that we can as a body better witness and serve and further build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:7-16). It is vital to effective and persevering evangelisation that we see ourselves as co-workers, indeed servants of one another, in Christ. Knowing that God is in charge helps and can take away some anxiety and pressure! A person who is called

to sow need not worry (though he may well choose to pray) if he has no water since God – who is taking overall responsibility for the growth – will send someone else along to do that in the right way and time. We are servants of each other and of Christ. We are stewards to be directed by God, not owners staking and protecting our own claims. God sees and uses us and our ministries that way even if and when we don't. Seeing it God's way helps! God will not always reveal his plans but a God-centred humility and wisdom will help us gain a better sense of what God is doing. It will help us evangelise with peace, joy and trust! We will appreciate what others do and be enriched by it, and not be so judgmental or threatened. We may even evangelise more effectively by forming partnerships under God and for God.

Evangelisers as Instruments of God who Grants the Growth

Not only are we servants of each other and co-workers and servants of each other, we are servants and co-workers of God. This is an enormous privilege – and relief. Fundamentally, evangelisation is God's work in which he asks for our assistance. We are inclined to treat it the other way round! We may even see it as a test that God has set for us, fearing we will only have his blessing if we succeed by our efforts. If we unite ourselves with his will, we will be fruitful though the time and measure of this is for God to determine. We can have great confidence in obediently and faith-fully doing our little bit that it is making a difference. That is not to say that we should not ask serious and critical questions of our efforts and what can be done to make them more effective. We can have great joy – and even heart-felt thanks and awe when we see something of what God has done and that we have a small part in it. This is what Jesus taught his disciples. “This is what the Kingdom of God is like: A man scatters seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord, the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, at once he starts to reap because the harvest has come (Mark 4:26-29). It is vital that we keep God at the centre of evangelisation – he grants the growth. It is his farm and building that are under construction.

Evangelisers who Marvel at the Mystery of God's Mission

It is interesting that both Paul and Jesus use images of growth to describe the work of evangelisation and especially the part played by God at its heart. All language falls short of God's reality yet the imagery of growth and life comes close to the nature of God and to the work of evangelisation which is God's mission. Natural life is not easily suppressed; Divine life even less so! Jesus came that we may have life to the full (John 10:10). God created life by his powerful Word (Genesis 1, John 1 etc). It brims with promise and looks to him for fulfilment. God's Word, which we are to proclaim, remains powerful and full of life. “For as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, so it is with the word that goes forth from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do (Isaiah 55:10-11). The Spirit who hovered over waters bringing forth life, hovers our hearts and those we would touch, bringing forth new spiritual life, so that the face of the earth can again be renewed. We marvel at the mysterious yet real ways God achieves this. We thank and adore God whose mystery we then announce. What a privilege to be part of this ongoing divine project for growth and life! Surely we will keep sowing, watering and reaping – together!

© Andrew Brookes

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