

PARTNERSHIP IN EVANGELISM - I INTRODUCTION

Ajith Fernando

Korean for World Missions in Chicago, USA. A Korea for World Mission. So Korea steps forward. About 4,000 people gathered together to reach out with the gospel to the entire world. No wonder I could see why Korea has been blessed by the Lord. Not only that, Korean Christians have entered into other parts of the world. We in Indonesia, are behind Korea and Japan, but we have been moving; we have entered into the five continents of this world.

I would like to share one wonderful thing with you; economically Indonesia is far behind Korea and Japan, but all the missionaries that have been sent from Indonesia have been sponsored financially by Indonesia itself. One hundred percent financed by Indonesia itself. And the Indonesian team has been moved to see the mission at work in the world today.

Second, if we were still in the purpose of the love of Jesus Christ in sharing or preaching the Gospel then we are still in line with the mission, and we are in this movement in Asia. All big changes happening in Asia have opened ways for us to penetrate Asia and the world with the Gospel. Finally, we need the power and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Because preaching the gospel is actually a great war; we have come to realise that we are facing the power of darkness and the power of old religions in Asia. No wonder that we are in need of the reality of Jesus' power in our ministry. Even I sense more and more that we need to hold hands in Asia to reach our own people in Asia. So let us realise the three views of Jesus' ministry.

Geographically, there is not a single area that Jesus has forgotten, so our heart and our prayer should be for every area in Asia and for other parts of the world. We need Christ's compassion in our hearts and to share it with people. For that purpose we need the anointing of the power of the Holy Spirit. For the gospel saves sinners; and the gospel liberates those who are in illness. The gospel also liberates those who are in the power of Satan, for Jesus says, "All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth by the Father." And with this power we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Rev. Dr. Petrus Octavianus, is President of Indonesia Missionary Fellowship, Batu, Indonesia.

Few themes are as important for the church today as that of partnership in evangelism. There are many reasons for this. Let me mention three. Firstly, it is biblical. The Bible does not view the Kingdom of God as consisting of individual units which are independent of others, but as members of a body which are interdependent on and partners of others. This is particularly necessary to emphasize today as people all over the world are arriving at a consensus that, if an economy is to be healthy and grow, free enterprise competition is the way to go. The individualistic, risk-taking entrepreneur is the modern-day hero. It is, therefore, easy for Christians to think that, in the church too, individualism and competition are necessary for growth and health. But these are enemies of biblical ministry, which follows the philosophy of partnership. Secondly, Biblical partnership results in greater and deeper fruits for the Kingdom. It is time consuming and taxing to achieve, and this is pragmatic age which is enamoured by quick results. Therefore many Christians are not willing to persevere in order to make it work. But Jesus was clear in his teaching that a prerequisite for the world to believe was for believers to be one. Thirdly, there are numerous challenges facing the Church which makes partnership necessary and helpful. Some of these challenges will be seen as we go on. There are many, many things that can be said about partnership. In this series of four studies from Acts we will examine just a few lessons on partnership from the early church.

The first two studies will look at some foundational principles essential for partnership from Acts Chapters 4 and 5. Today we think of partnership between churches, between organizations, between groups in different countries. We can call this macro-partnership. But in Christianity we learn about macro-relationships from micro-relationships. This is why Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:5, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own his own family, how can he take care of God's church." We can extend this principle further and

say that if a church does not practice partnership within itself how can it expect to have partnership with churches outside of itself? But we have developed such a result-oriented approach to ministry that we will apply certain principles in a certain sphere of Christianity, and not apply them in another sphere. That is not the Christian way. Christianity believes in absolute principles derived from the nature of the Triune God. Partnership is one them. Christians are always partnership-people in their relationships with other Christians. The basic places to practice partnership are first the home and then the local church. So we will look at the church in Jerusalem practicing partnership. The third and fourth studies will look at Barnabas and the Church he was associated with: the Church in Antioch. They are models of how partnership is put into practice in facing persecution together (Acts 4:23-31) Foremost among the challenges the church is facing today is the widespread persecution that Christians who evangelize non-Christians and press for Christian values in society. This is a factor in most countries in the East and West today. Today's passage shows us the link between persecution and partnership.

THE BACKGROUND (Acts 4:1-22)

You know the background of our passage. It describes what happened after Peter and John were released after their first appearance before the Sanhedrin. Verse 18 says that after the inquiry and discussions were over, 'They called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.' This was more than a warning. It was the legal basis for further action. Their supreme task has been made illegal. But their response in verse 19 and 20 is evidence of the boldness the Holy Spirit gives God's servants in a crisis. "But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'" Verse 21 says, "With further threats they let them go."

SHARING WITH THE COMMUNITY (4:23)

Verse 23 says that the first thing they did when they were released was to go to their fellow believers: "On their release, Peter went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and

elders had said to them." There is no unanimity about who is meant by the phrase 'their own people' (*hoi idioi*). It is sometimes translated as "their companions" (Bruce, NASB). It is probably a smaller company rather than the whole church. In a time of crisis, how important it is to have a support group we can go to. There is great strength and courage that comes from knowing that we are not in this alone. It is easy to get discouraged, to lose our boldness and compromise by not being totally obedient to our call. It is also easy to act rashly and cause unnecessary problems to the cause of the gospel. The strength of community helps overcome these temptations. Because of this it is very important that workers under threat or facing opposition are undergirded by some of "their own people" to use Luke's expression. If they are working in distant areas people should go to them regularly or they should be made to come regularly to where there are other colleagues. This may seem to be a waste of time and money. But it is well worth it, in the long run. So Luke tells us that "they reported all that the chief priests and elders said to them." They unburdened themselves to their loved ones by giving them a full report. How sharing clears the air! It helps us to look at problems rationally. When we keep it to ourselves we can be overwhelmed by the emotional influences of the situations that we can't think straight about it. But in order to share it with others we are forced to think straight about it, otherwise they would not be able to understand what we are saying. The sense that the Church is a worldwide body is also a great strength in a time like this. When we went through some of the darkest hours in our land and we felt weak and vulnerable, one of the things that gave me great courage was the knowledge that Christians in other parts of the world were praying for us. And we must do all we can to foster that sense of the oneness of the Church universal. Even the lonely evangelist in the remotest outpost must have the assurance that people in other parts of the world are with him in prayer. May we use marvelous tools of modern technology in this era of communications to ensure that this happens.

PRAYING WITH ONE ACCORD (4:24)

The first thing they did when they heard about the problem was to pray. Verse 24 says, "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." The significance of partnership in a crisis

is not only the strength that we give each other, but also the way we motivate each other to seek God who is the source of our strength. When we are alone we can be so engulfed by our problems that we could lose sight of the sovereignty of God. Being with fellow-believers helps us to direct our attention to God because God is the reason for us being united to each other. We are told "they raised their voices together." Yet a specific prayer is given. It is most unlikely that, as some have suggested, they prayed the same thing under divine inspiration. Many explanations have been given for this. I prefer that of the 19th century commentator, J. A. Alexander, that one person prayed and that "the whole company gave audible assent" to what he said. This was a common practice in biblical times and the usual way to express this assent was to say, "Amen." Deuteronomy 27.15-26 gives a recitation of the Levites which elicited twelve "Amens" - one after each affirmation! I find that saying something like "Amen" or "Yes, Lord," helps me to concentrate and participate fully in the prayer of another. The word translated "together" is one of Luke's favourite words, *homothumadon*. We will discuss this word in our other study. It means *with one accord*. It appeared in 1:14 also in connection with prayer: "They all joined together (or with one mind) constantly in prayer."

This tells us that a prerequisite for Biblical praying is spiritual unity. Sometimes at our staff meetings we find the staff reluctant to pray. This is very unnerving for me as a leader. But I have come to regard this as a sign of health. The staff who refuse to pray will not permit a hypocritical situation of praying as if there were no problems, when there are actually some serious problems that need to be ironed out. Of course we must take the initiative to do something about these problems. If you cannot pray, you struggle until you have a situation in which you can pray. You meet the people concerned and confront them with those things that bother you. The day we get used to living with such problems without confronting them is the day when a deadly cancer has infected the body. It will do its work of destruction and cause spiritual death in that body.

What a comfort it is to have a community that is of one mind when one is under attack. In my denomination there are some people

who are not too excited about aggressive evangelism among Buddhists and Hindus. Recently some of our evangelists were badly beaten up, the day before some former Buddhists were to be baptized. I think the saddest part of this episode was when some leaders in the church questioned the whole enterprise of going to these unreached areas with the goal of bringing Buddhists to the Lord. Some said this type of work is not appropriate under the present conditions in our land. Others said we must be wise about the way we evangelize under the present conditions. But what they were actually saying was, "This is not the time for aggressive evangelism." Some were very upset that the future of joint social projects they were doing with a Buddhist temple had been jeopardized. They were not of one mind regarding the priority of evangelism at all times. Such people can cause greater discouragement than what comes from outside.

TRUSTING IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Most of the prayer is a reflection on the sovereignty of God. Even the way God is addressed is significant. The NIV and NRSV translate it as "Sovereign Lord." This is not the usual Greek word *kurios*. It is *despotes*, which is the word that was used for the relation of master to slave or servant. That is how it is usually used in the New Testament. The classical writers used it for those who had absolute powers, and it is from this use that we get the English word, 'despot.' Josephus used it regarding confessing Caesar as lord. The Greeks sometimes used it for their gods, but the Jews did not commonly use it in this way.

As we see what follows, we see the wisdom of the translation, "Sovereign Lord." They said (verse 24b), "You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them." When this statement is put together with the word 'Lord' we see that the sovereignty of God over creation is being proclaimed. The implication is that the One who created the world is more powerful than those whom he created. Therefore nothing can thwart his plans.

The prayer goes on to assert how God's sovereignty has been revealed in history. First there is a quotation from Psalm 2:1-2 and it is about the power of those who are opposed to God (verses 25 and

26): "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?' There is a note of cynicism here. The word translated 'rage' is used in late Greek writing, primarily of the neighing of high-fed, spirited horses. William Barclay comments, "Though they may trample and toss their heads and neigh, in the end they will have to accept the discipline of the reins."

The great thrusts of evil are the work of one whose power is limited. Satan is on the loose, but he is on a leash. The next line says, "and the people plot in vain." They may have great plans. But they are in vain. The word used is *kenos* which means empty things. This is what the perspective of God's sovereignty does to us in a crisis. When we are going through the crisis, the enemy seems to be so powerful and his schemes seem to be so well planned that we seem to have no chance. We feel this sometimes in Sri Lanka when people are using the government machinery in their attacks on Christians doing evangelism. Christians seem to be helpless. But they do not have to be discouraged. Evil may seem to have won the day, but history will show that God used it to further the kingdom.

Continuing with the theme of opposition to God, verse 26 gives a general principle. "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." Right through history, the powers of this world have stood against the cause of God and of Christ. Verse 27 gives a specific application of this principle: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." There was an unprecedented joining of all the powerful forces existent at that time. Herod and Pilate who had been enemies before the day of the trial became friends that day. What chance did Jesus have? It seemed like a great defeat. The people even scoffed at him and made jokes to his face. But, says the prayer (verse 28), "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." He foresaw the evil and used it to do the greatest thing that ever happened in the history of the human race: To win salvation for humankind. Can you see the dual perspective here? The prayer takes into account the full force of the enemy. And it is powerful. We would do well to know

the enemy. We would do well to anticipate his moves. Short sighted positive thinking won't do. Biblical positive thinking takes into account the enmity of the evil one to the things of God.

There will be suffering. And it may be quite severe. But God will turn it into good. So while the prayer takes evil into account, it begins and ends with the vision of God and his ways. Evil is a reality. But God is a deeper and more powerful reality. So there is courage to be obedient even to death, because we know that obedience leading to death will be used as a great stepping stone for a great victory by God. The disciples would not have known what was in store for them. What did happen was that the persecution intensified. Stephen was martyred and after that, as Acts 8:1 records, "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

But Luke writing after the incident does not use the word normally used for scattering. In each of the three times in Acts when he refers to this scattering he uses the word *diaspeiro* which is used for the scattering of seed. Everett F. Harrison says this suggests that as the episode was viewed in retrospect by the Church, it was viewed as a providential event to facilitate the mission set before His followers by the risen Lord. He remarks, "The people went as missionaries more than as refugees." The people raged against them with great force. But their raging was the gateway to the growth of the gospel they were trying to destroy. And in a amazing twist of events, the most vehement opponent of the gospel, Paul, became its most prominent propagator. God proved his sovereignty by making the suffering Christians not just conquerors but more than conquerors.

Therefore the most important thing to bear in mind in a crisis of this nature is the sovereignty of God. An envoy came from the Pope to meet Martin Luther, and threatened him of what would follow if he persisted in his course. He warned him that in the end all his supporters would desert him. "Where will you be then?" he asked. Luther replied, "Then, as now, in the hands of God."

Now for these disciples the vision of sovereignty seemed to have come at once. But for other Biblical characters it came only after a

grappling. We must not rest until that vision comes to us. At such times may what we know of God, that is our theology, address our experience, with the truth of sovereignty, even though that truth may seem to run counter to what we are experiencing. To those who grapple in this way God always gives a marvelous revelation of himself, that leaves them stronger in their trust in him.

A PRAYER SATURATED IN SCRIPTURE (4:24-26)

This prayer is saturated with Scripture. This is typical of many spontaneous prayers in the Bible, like those of Mary and Zechariah in Luke 1. It shows that Scripture was stored in the minds of these people. In a crisis, we often do not have time to go to the scriptures. The Scriptures should have been stored in our hearts so as to be used in a crisis. Like the animals that store food during the summer for the cold season, we too need to spend time in the Word as a daily habit. Then when crises hit us, the Word of God hidden in the heart is able to minister to us. There is a lovely quote from Charles Spurgeon, which has been a great blessing to me: *It is blessed to eat the very soul of the Bible until at last you come to talk in the Scriptural language, and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is bibline, and the very essence of the Bible flows from you.* Lest you think this is outdated, let me say that I think the biggest crisis facing the evangelical church today is a spiritually weak leadership. We are wilting when crises come. We are acting without spiritual strength in the face of criticism, hardship, persecution and temptation. And a major cause for this may be that the average Christian leader does not give time for diligent, daily study of the Word anymore. If that is so, we are in serious trouble.

A GLANCE AT THE PROBLEM (4:29)

After that extended reflection of the sovereignty of God, the prayer proceeds to mention the problem. Verse 29: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." There is only a brief passing reference to the problem! Earlier they had reflected on the phenomenon of opposition to the work of God. But that was in order to demonstrate that history shows that opposition is always used by God to fulfil something good. Now

there is only a passing reference to the problem. This is what we can call a belief-directed approach to a problem. The belief in sovereignty has directed the way they are to think of the problem. Indeed elsewhere in the Bible we find people mourning about their problems. That is not unnatural for a Christian. But once the perspective of sovereignty breaks through to us, our problems deserve only a passing reference. When we gaze at our sovereign God, we need only to glance at our problems.

So verse 29 says: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." It was not a prayer for wisdom. It was not a prayer for protection. It was not a prayer for favour with the authorities. And all these are appropriate prayers. But in a time of crisis, the supreme battle we have is the battle for obedience. No evil power can thwart God's marvelous plan. The only way this could be is by our disobedience. By not doing what we should do, by not saying what we should say. There was a time when I could travel to Jaffna, the northern capital of Sri Lanka. I cannot do so anymore as it would not be helpful to our workers there if I go. Even when I could go, there was something of a risk involved. And people would ask me whether I was afraid. Indeed, there was fear. But when I adopted a belief-directed approach, I knew that the one thing I needed to be afraid was disobedience. Would I fail the Lord whose representative I was? Would I say something I should not say, or more importantly, would I fail to say a word for Jesus when I could do so. The biggest battle we have then is the battle for obedience. And the Christians waged this battle in this prayer

THE MINISTRY OF SIGNS AND WONDERS (4:30)

Verse 30 records the second request of the disciples. "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Isn't it significant that the only two requests in this prayer have to do with evangelism, which has just been outlawed. These were people with a consuming passion for evangelism. The only practical things that came to mind in this time of crisis, related to fulfilling the evangelistic task.

Why do they pray for signs and wonders to be manifested? The believers have had a vision of God. Now they want to see the

unbelievers also have that vision. The believers receive that vision by observing the way God has worked in history as it is recorded in the Bible. Unbelievers won't get it that way. Most of them do not think the Bible is worth reading. Their attention may need to be arrested so that they would consider the reality of the living God. And signs and wonders are a common way in which God does that with unbelievers. So the believers felt constrained to ask God to reveal himself to people in this way. It would be appropriate for us too to pray that God would reveal himself in this way, so that people would become open to listening to the message of Jesus.

This is by no means the total gospel. It proclaims just one aspect about God; that God is powerful and worthy of attention. It is not an essential norm for biblical evangelism, as some Christians claim. But it is a means commonly used by God, which is a claim that other Christians deny. They say that signs have ceased. But it seems to me that there is no clear biblical evidence for such a view. So today we have the unfortunate situation of a sign-mania on the part of some Christians and a sign-phobia on the part of other Christians. This ministry has been abused so much in recent years that a word of caution is in order. Firstly, as this ministry deals with power, it is possible for the evangelist to be corrupted by power and give in to pride. The taste of power may cause him to become authoritarian in his other dealings. Thus the plea of all those involved in such 'power ministries' should be for humility. They should seek to train themselves (1 Tim. 4:7) in humility. An effective antidote to the abuses of power is accountability to a community. An active and loving biblical community would not let one of its members persist in pride without battling the pride. It is a source of grave concern to us that many who are engaged in power ministries have not submitted themselves to the discipline of accountability to a community. They are in danger of making shipwreck of their ministries. A second danger comes from the fact that Satan attacks with particular vehemence those who challenge his hold on people. This makes those engaged in 'power ministry' particularly susceptible to the wiles of Satan. Thus they should get spiritually prepared for such ministry. We know of no better way to prepare for this than through corporate and private prayer (Mark 9:29; Eph. 6:18) Another source of strength for battling Satan

is Christian community. Perhaps it is because Jesus knew these dangers that he sent out his disciples for power ministry two by two (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1). When Paul gave his comprehensive teaching on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10-20, he used the plural right through, implying that he expects spiritual warfare to be done in teams rather than alone.

A third danger arises from the fact that the demonstration of power is very spectacular and effective in attracting crowds. This could dethrone the gospel from its place of supreme importance in evangelism. Power ministry must always be viewed as a servant of the gospel aimed at pointing people to the gospel. Paul said that it is the gospel that is the power of God to salvation. (Rom. 1:16) What follows that statement in Romans shows that by 'gospel' Paul meant the work of God in justifying those who believe by the grace which flows from his cross. (Rom. 1:16; 5:21) One who has not understood this basic gospel stands on very shaky ground. In this present age Satan still has power and the effects of the fall are not completely rooted out from the earth. So Christians will have times when God will withhold his power and not answer a prayer in the exact way in which we ask. At such a time those who have no grounding in the gospel could get discouraged and fall away. Those who have a fuller understanding of God's nature are able to believe him in the bleak times. They have the assurance that God will turn even the bleak experience into something good. (Rom. 8:28) Our goal in power ministry should be to elicit a response like that of Sergius Paulus to the power ministry of Paul in Paphos. When he saw the power of God as he struck the false prophet Elymas with blindness 'he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.' (Acts 13:12) Belief was his reaction to the miracle. The teaching about the Lord had been faithfully done. The miracle helped orient him in the direction of accepting this teaching. The gospel facts always have the supreme place. They must figure prominently in our preaching and teaching. The abuses of power ministry are many. But that should not deter us from engaging in it. It is a practice modeled for us by the apostles in the book of Acts. We should never fear to be biblical. It is when this is done in an unbiblical way that the abuses arise.

GOD'S RESPONSE TO THE PRAYER (4:31)

Verse 31 says, "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." In the Old Testament this was a sign that indicated a *theophany*, that is, a manifestation of God in a visible form (Exodus 19:8; Isaiah 6:4). Howard Marshall says, "It would have been regarded as indicating a divine response to prayer." It was God's way of indicating that he was present there, and would answer the prayer. God has his way of confirming to his children that he knows what is happening and that he is involved in the situation. This confirmation comes in various ways. But usually it comes when we are seeking God. On this occasion they were praying. I have often found that it comes during my devotional time, in the form of a clear message relating to the situation from the Word. When we seek God, we open ourselves to hearing from God. And the Bible states that God desires to speak to us.

Next we are told, "And they are filled with the Holy Spirit." This is not a fresh baptism, but a fresh filling. What was the evidence of this filling? We are not told. In the book of Acts, the fullness of the Spirit is used for a state and for an event. People like Stephen and Barnabas are described as those whose lives showed that they were full of the Spirit. At other times, people are said to be filled with the Spirit, as a preparation for a special event. These fillings are often related to the proclamation or defence of the gospel. It is this second type of use that we see here. Campbell Morgan believes that "the new filling was intended to prevent the development of incipient fear." Certainly when one experiences God in a fresh way, one of the first things it does is to give courage. The revelation of God makes us affirm with Paul, "If God is for us, who can be against us." (Romans 8:31) This realization in turn makes possible the answer to the prayer for boldness in proclamation. Verse 31 ends saying that the believers, 'spoke the word of God boldly.' The very same words are used here as in the prayer for boldness in verse 29. Luke uses the imperfect tense for 'spoke'. This is the tense of continuous action in the past. So it can be translated as, "and continued to speak the word of God boldly."

CONCLUSION

What a marvelous sequence we see here! First, there is a crisis. Second, it is shared with the believers. Third, the believers pray with one accord. Fourth, they pray primarily about the sovereignty of God. Fifth, after gazing at God and his acts, they glance at their problem. Sixth, they pray for boldness in witness. Seventh, they pray for God's intervention in demonstrating his power to Non-believers. Eighth, God reveals himself by shaking the place and filling them with the Spirit. Ninth, they continue to witness boldly.

May that sequence be seen when we also face crises in our lives and ministries.

Rev Ajith Fernando is the National Director of Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka and lives in Colombo.