

THE THEOLOGY OF PARTNERSHIP

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1. Introduction

"Partnership is an idea whose time has not yet fully come."¹ So wrote Max Warren in his little book on partnership in 1954. Max Warren was General Secretary of the Church Mission Society from 1942 to 1963. He went on to say that an understanding of partnership may "afford a key to unlock many of the doors which at present divide, and by diving disrupt our life in society, both national and international."² Fifty five years later those indeed seem to be prescient words. In the 1990s, Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama told us that the most pressing and urgent question facing the world was "can we live together?" Seven years ago, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth posed the same pertinent question in his superb book, *The Dignity of Difference*, where he writes, "Can we live together? Can we make space for one another? Can we overcome long histories of estrangement and bitterness? ... Can we find, in the human 'thou', a fragment of the Divine 'Thou'?"³ And finally 2 months ago, the forty-fourth President of the USA, Barack Obama addressed this same question in his Inaugural Speech where he referred to "greater understanding and cooperation between nations." He rejected "protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions" and called for the renewal of "sturdy alliances and enduring convictions" always exhibited with "the tempering qualities of humility and restraint."⁴ So perhaps

¹ M Warren, *Partnership The Study of an Idea*, (London:SCM, 1956), 11.

² Ibid.

³ J Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, (London:Continuum, 2002), 17

⁴http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article5554819.ece?token=null&offset=24&page=3, accessed 21.1.09

the time has indeed come not only to explore this idea of partnership but also to work it out in our world. And if we can find a fragment of the divine 'Thou' in the other, then we are a long way down the road to genuine partnership.

The word 'partner' derives from the Anglo-French, *parcener*, an old legal term which denotes co-heirship. Warren points out that words are strange things – they come to us with all sorts of allusions and resonances, “trailing clouds of glory or of shame, and sometimes both.”⁵ And partner is just such a word. Co-heirship evokes overtones of ancestry with suggestions of property rights, ownership, status and dignity as well as its underside of power, wealth, jealousy, suspicion and litigation. These associations – both happy and unhappy, noble and ignoble, can wittingly or even unwittingly influence our approach towards a word and an idea. The simple dictionary definition of a partner is “one who shares, takes part, is associated with another in action.” Although this seems straightforward enough, we can see the potential for a relationship that can lead us to the heights or into the depths. “Heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17) shows us the sublime heights to which partnership can aspire. However, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him” (Mark 12:7) reveals the dark side and the depths to which it can descend.

2. The Concept of Partnership

Partnership, then, is constituted of 3 factors. Firstly there must be the acceptance by each one concerned of genuine involvement, a committal of oneself to the other partner in trust. This element of trust is foundational and inescapable. We trust the other with the 'keys' if you like; we respect their cultural way of being

⁵ Warren, *Partnership*, 11.

and doing. We learn to give up control and share the responsibility. Secondly there is a ready acceptance of responsibility, the readiness to serve the purpose of the common enterprise. And finally involvement must carry with it a readiness to pay the price of partnership, to accept all the liabilities and limitations which arise. Involvement, responsibility, liability – without these there can be no true partnership. In proportion as they are accepted, so the partnership becomes more satisfying and creative.

Now these 3 factors presuppose the continuity within the partnership of the identity of each partner. Neither partner can become so absorbed or assimilated that his or her own identity is lost. The conscious identity of each partner must survive; the possibility must remain present that either partner can contract out of the partnership thereby ceasing to be responsible or liable. This is precisely because the essence of partnership is that it is a relationship entered upon in freedom by persons who remain free. It is a dynamic relationship which is continually growing and developing – not a static and stale relationship.

Now this may all sound rather dry and heavy – involvement, responsibility, liability – a little like a public school motto. Stiff upper-lip attitudes and dogged perseverance will see us through! But of course partnership, at its most basic level, is a relationship between persons and we as people are dynamic, wonderful, unpredictable. So in addition to talking about the three factors that make partner relationships, we need to think about the way good relationships work in general . . . what we look for in them. So what do we seek for in relationships? We are looking for love, for mutuality, for understanding, for compassion and sometimes (often even?) for forgiveness. Paul Tillich has some helpful insights here,

In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No human relation, especially no intimate one, is possible without mutual listening ... All things and all men [sic], so to speak, call on us with small or loud voices. They want us to listen, they want us to understand their intrinsic claims, their justice of being. They want justice from us. But we can give it to them only through love which listens ... Listening love is the first step to justice in person-to-person encounters.⁶

Perhaps in order to allow partnerships to grow we need more being, more living, more listening and less talking. Ivan Illich says something similar, "only the very brave... dare... to go back to the helpless silence of being learners and listeners – 'the holding of hands of the lovers' – from which deep communication may grow. Perhaps it is the one way of being together with others and with the Word in which we have no more foreign accent."⁷ So here perhaps is a more compassionate, more human and certainly more challenging way of defining involvement – by listening. In life, to listen is to become involved. We all know that from our own experience don't we. Good listening requires humility, vulnerability, availability, receptivity and patience. To be a good listener means to be willing to share in the lives of others – in other words, the first step towards being an authentic partner.

⁶ P Tillich, quoted in Warren, *Partnership*, 14.

⁷ J V Taylor, *The Go-Between God, The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, (London:SCM, 1972), 37.

I would add to listening - seeing; seeing the other. The gift of sight is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our eyes have to be opened to recognise Jesus, just as it was for those first disciples – over the dinner table, in the garden, on the lake, on the Damascus Rd. Once our eyes are opened and we can see Jesus, then the Holy Spirit enables us to see the other person. Sherron Kay George, in her book entitled, *Called as Partners in Christ's Service* states that the “first concern in a partnership is to get to know one another and cultivate relationships by observing [seeing], listening, and asking questions.”⁸ Listening and seeing are vital to all human relationships and vital to partnership if we really want to know the other as a human being.

Tillich goes on to say that “giving” is inextricably involved in relationships. He writes, “It belongs to the right of everyone whom we encounter to demand something from us.”⁹ This is the essence of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship. Gift exchange in a way that both partners practise giving and receiving in a spirit of mutual respect can enrich the relationship. This giving may be as simple as acknowledging that the other whom we encounter, is a person. No more than this but no less.

Hungarian priest story? Look the guards in the eye – let them know that you are a human being, do not let them deny your humanity, involve them in our joint humanity – harder to mistreat you then.

Sacks maintains that our moral responsibility grows out of face-to-face relationships when we see how what we do, affects others. Obama knew this

⁸ S K George, *Called as Partners in Christ's Service, The Practice of God's Mission*, (Louisville:Geneva Press, 2004), 35.

⁹ Tillich, quoted in Warren, *Partnership*, 14.

when he announced that “those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” He used that wonderfully evocative image of the open hand being extended in friendship which can only be grasped and reciprocated if the other will unclench the fist and **give** the open hand. This minimum of giving can lead towards a maximum of self-sacrifice if required. So in terms of partnership, this means responsibility. To be in a partnership means to be committed to giving within the partnership and through it.

Finally Tillich speaks of forgiving – a powerful and essential dimension of any human relationship, of any partnership. This means the acceptance of all the liabilities and limitations from relating with others whose weakness and sin may injure myself, just as for them it involves the acceptance of the liabilities and limitations that follow from my weakness and sin. Mutual forgiveness is the only way forward and without it, any partnership is bound to dissolve or at least fragment.

So the concept of partnership means acceptance of genuine involvement, acceptance of responsibility and acceptance of liability seasoned with intentional listening and seeing, giving and forgiving. How do we do this in a world that behaves so differently; in a world rife with unequal power dynamics, in a world where the powerful are heard and the powerless are not, where the wealthy can choose to give and the poor are forced to receive, where grudges are nursed and revenge considered a sweet dish, where forgiveness is often an alien concept. Let us now consider a theology of partnership which means that we will consider it

as an idea that is ultimately about God and an idea which is consistent with God's creative and redemptive purposes.

3. Theology of Partnership

There are 3 ideas I would like to explore here. Firstly that partnership is an idea essential to the very nature of God. Secondly that partnership speaks of God's relationship with humanity. Thirdly, that partnership indicates the true relationship between human beings.

Firstly that partnership is an idea essential to the very nature of God. I do not think that it is pushing the idea too far to say that we see partnership in the Godhead. God is a community. God is not a monad – God is a community of Three divine persons. God is also one God. These realities allow not only for relationship but also for unity and diversity. This Trinitarian understanding of God, expressed so beautifully in the icon by Rublev, means that we experience God in relationship with the other, in partnership, within community. The concept of the Trinity allows space for the created individual, but only in relationship to the other. So each person of the Trinity has their own divine nature, expressed in relation to the other persons of the Trinity. There is the space to be each divine person, as each person relates to the other. They cannot each exist without this relationship. I did say before that an aspect of partnership appropriate to humanity is the freedom to withdraw, which of course is inappropriate when considering the Trinity. But each person of the Trinity is a distinct person – in a love relationship to the other persons of the Trinity – as we, in a partnership, are distinct individuals but existing in relation to and with the other. Feminist theologian, Catherine la Cugna comments on Rublev's icon,

In Rublev's icon, the temple in the background is the transformation of Abraham's and Sarah's house. The oak tree stands for the Tree of Life. And the position of the three figures is suggestive. Although they are arranged in a circle, the circle is not closed. One has the distinct sensation when meditating on the icon that one is not only invited into this communion but, indeed, one already is part of it. A self-contained God, a closed divine society, would hardly be a fitting archetype for hospitality. [or partnership] We should not miss the significance of the Eucharistic cup in the centre, which is, of course, the sacramental sign of our communion with God and one another.¹⁰

Paul Fiddes, in his book *Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, urges us to do more than just imitate the triune God by actually participating in the Trinity. He claims that this participation then enables us to truly appreciate the other because of our engagement with the other. Engagement in the life of God means an experience of otherness – the otherness of God from humanity, the otherness of the Creator from the created. He writes,

Nothing in the world can prepare us for this gulf of otherness in a God who abides in the unity of love. ...Because it is an otherness which arises in participation within God, it can only be known *through* participation. To engage in the relationships in God means that we are brought up against the challenge of the alien, the radically different, the unlike; but at the same time we have the security of experiencing a fellowship more intimate than anything we can otherwise know.¹¹

¹⁰ C La Cugna, *Freeing Theology, The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, (San Francisco:Harper Collins, 1993), 84.

¹¹ P Fiddes, *Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, (London:DLT,2000), 55.

Our ego is broken open by encountering the Thou in the other and through the Thou of other people we can meet the transcendent Thou, God.

So this leads us to the second idea of partnership speaking of God's relationship with humanity. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus we see most clearly the self-revealing of the activities of God and in the incarnation we see God communicating Himself to us and establishing a relationship with us. Referring back to the concept of partnership, we see that God is firstly involved with us in a supreme act of trust – manifest in the incarnation. Moreover, God is responsible for our redemption and finally God's self-emptying supremely upon the Cross was the liability accepted by God for our creation and freely chosen redemption – should we choose it.

It is important to remember that we are free to respond to God or not. Without this freedom there is no true partnership. It is not a forced relationship – we should not be compelled to enter into a partnership. Jesus never compelled people into a relationship with Him. Think of Jesus' approach to the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:9) or his dialogue with Nicodemus (Jn 3) – in Jesus we find a model of love and respect. Love cultivates mutual sharing, mutual serving, mutual forgiveness and mutual suffering. Love is not feeling sorry for, giving charity to, taking advantage of. It means coming alongside, somehow trying to feel what others feel, experiencing what others experience, taking a walk in someone else's shoes. How do we do this in a world of asymmetrical power relationships?

Let's take this a little further. God's involvement with us is met by our involvement with Him – freely chosen. However, to become involved with God

means to accept responsibility. We are labourers together with God, we are told in 1 Cor 3:9. As we are caught up in this relationship with God, we are called to share his will and purposes. Paul reminds us in 2 Cor 5 :19,20, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." This responsibility by which Christians express their obedience to God, their willing involvement with God, is not an easy thing. In fact this partnership with God, between God and humanity, becomes discipleship. Jesus reminds us that persecution is the least we can expect. Our partnership with God and with others can lead to our suffering and to sharing the sufferings of others. We do this by being present, by feeling their pain, by reacting with compassion and by joining them in solidarity.

Thirdly, partnership indicates the true relationship between human beings. Warren quotes Bertrand Russell who recognised the inherent difficulty of true partnership.

Equal cooperation is much more difficult than despotism, and much less in line with instinct. When men [sic] attempt equal cooperation, it is natural for each to strive for complete mastery, since the submissive instincts are not brought into play. It is almost necessary that the parties concerned should acknowledge a common loyalty to something outside all of them.¹²

¹² Quoted in Warren, *Partnership*, 47.

As Christians, we know the solution to this as disciples of the risen Lord. Perhaps the nearest word in the New Testament to partnership is *koinonia*. Its most basic meaning is “partaking together in” or having a share. The word stands for participation. As Warren writes, “We are then, to seek first for the inward bond which holds the fellowship of the Christians together, which inward fellowship is then externally manifested by the life of fellowship, with its almsgiving, sharing of property and breaking of bread, which we find in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.”¹³ So *koinonia* can be translated as partnership, fellowship, communion, participation or sharing. Our fellowship is in Christ. “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Cor 1:9) The eucharist is also important where we participate in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16) as is our daily fellowship in the power of the Holy Spirit. There are other passages in which the word *koinonia* occurs and which refer to the life of the Christian community. In Rom 15:26, 2 Cor 8:4 and 9:13 the partnership with other Christians is made explicit in the taking of collections of behalf of the needy. In Gal 2:9 and Phil 1:5 the emphasis is on partnership in proclaiming the gospel. What is common here is the transcending loyalty to God – “all are equally involved, all have committed themselves to God in trust, all have a share in a common responsibility, all recognise that they belong together, that if one member suffers they all suffer, all have a liability for each.”¹⁴ This is the adventure of living.

Partners share the sufferings of one another. Walter Brueggemann explains suffering thus, “Suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into

¹³ Ibid, 48.

¹⁴ Warren, *Partnership*, 52.

the pain and giving it voice.”¹⁵ David Bosch writes about “victim-missionaries” who – “in contrast to exemplar-missionaries, lead people to freedom and community.”¹⁶ Could we say the same of ‘victim-partners’? Again in 2 Cor Paul teaches about “the validity of paradox, about a God who, in spite of being all-powerful became weak and vulnerable in his Son.”¹⁷ We live in relationship with a crucified God; do we in our involvement with Him and as His ambassadors live likewise? Koyama complained that too often Christianity exhibited a “crusading mind” rather than a “crucified mind” and that it suffers from a “teacher complex.” What attitudes do we exhibit when we enter into partnership? Do we adopt a crusading mind and teacher mentality or are we disciples and partners with crucified minds, giving up our rights, manifesting the courage to be weak – living the paradox of a crucified, almighty God. Victim-missionaries are not powerful and successful - nor are victim-partners. In this asymmetrical and uneven world, victim-partners will not create what has been described as “a relationship of controlling benefactors to irritated recipients of charity”¹⁸ so that recipients end up experiencing a complex mix of gratitude and resentment at the same time.

4. The Practices of Partnership

Perhaps we see these most clearly in Paul’s letter to the Philippians where he thanks them for their partnership in the gospel. Paul and the Philippians were partners in many ways – in giving, receiving, working, praying, rejoicing, struggling and suffering. They shared in a common project with Paul and were

¹⁵ Quoted in George, *Called*, 69.

¹⁶ D Bosch, *The Vulnerability of Mission*, Occasional Paper No 10, (Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, 1991), 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

partners with him in the defence and the confirmation of the gospel. Partnership in the body of Christ is emphasised in those passages which speak of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12 and Rom 12). Each person is dependent on the gifts given to everyone. Here Andrew Kirk describes partnership "as participating in the life of one another in such a way that the needs of all are met. (Rom 12:6-13)."¹⁹

The example of sharing material resources is given in 2 Cor. Paul expounds the principles of partnership as he exhorts the church in Achaia to match the generosity of the churches further north (2 Cor 9:1-4.) The churches of Macedonia and Achaia are sharing together in a particular ministry on behalf of the church in Judaea. The churches in Judaea who will receive this token of love have shared the gospel with them, "Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Rom 15:26-27)" Note that they are not only in partnership with one another but also with God. God will provide them with more than they could ever hope to give, as long as they go on sharing (2 Cor 8:9-10) and God will receive the praise and thanksgiving.

Sharing in suffering is another practice of partnership that Paul writes about in 2 Cor. He writes that the Christians in Corinth are sharing in his and Timothy's sufferings. (2 Cor 1:7). In fact they are all sharing in the sufferings of Christ which continue in the sufferings of his body, the church. This is a deep

¹⁹ A Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*, (London:DLT, 1999), 189

participation in the broken body and every member feels the suffering of every other member. The suffering may have many causes – persecution, hardships while travelling, hunger, thirst, sleepless nights, insults, exposure to cold, misrepresentation, hard work – these are some of the ways listed in 2 Cor 6 and 11. Perhaps suffering is not only the most difficult but also the most profound manifestation of partnership. Frederick, in a WCC report on Mission in Christ's way, writes, "Participation in suffering and struggle is at the heart of God's mission and God's will for the world. It is central for our understanding of the incarnation, the most glorious example of participation in suffering and struggle. The church is sent in the way of Christ bearing the marks of the cross in the power of the Holy Spirit. (cf John 20-19-23)"²⁰ Partners share in the sufferings of one another and the incarnation is indeed the supreme model for this.

So some of the practices of partnership are giving, receiving, working, praying, rejoicing, struggling and suffering. But there is one issue which distorts all the fine ideals and makes the practice of partnership difficult and demanding. This is the issue of power. It is difficult to have a truly mutual relationship when the two parties possess unequal power. But that is the reality of our world today. We know that money, resources, education, land, access to technology, ownership and much more are unfairly and unequally distributed.

This is where the model of the incarnation can help us. We can only let go of our pride and power, our privilege and sense of entitlement as we empty ourselves following Christ's way depicted in Phil 2. We seek to empty ourselves of our pride and ethnocentrism, our feelings of cultural, religious and technological

²⁰ Ibid., 191

superiority which blind and grip us all. We seek to empty ourselves of the need to initiate, control, dominate, impose, manipulate, run ahead in partner relationships. We seek to empty ourselves of autonomy and independence. Bosch's insights about "vulnerability and "victim-missionaries/partners" are also helpful reminders for us to adopt an attitude of humility and considering others better than ourselves. A related issue here is what the partners are seeking to share. Money, resources, education, land, technology, ownership and power may be unfairly distributed and may lead to distorted exchanges. But what else are we seeking to share? Stories, traditions, ancient knowledge and customs, inheritances, joy, kindness, goodness, beauty, sustainability, difference – these too are to be shared and can restore a balance where there may be uneven power dynamics.

5. Conclusion

So we have seen that partnership is a high ideal and a wonderful idea when practised well. It can indeed lead us to the heights or take us into the depths. It is not an easy ideal. Joint heirs with Christ or such intense jealousy that is annihilates the partner. Some of the requirements for authentic partnership are counter-intuitive to the human condition – vulnerability and suffering, self-emptying and humbling ourselves, submission, listening and learning. Bertrand Russell reminded us that cooperation is more difficult than despotism. And yet the attitudes of listening, giving and forgiving go a long way to enabling partnership to work in fragile human condition and broken world.

Tillich reminded us that listening love is the first step to justice in human encounters. Giving is an essential part of partnership. Partnership is a high ideal whose time has come. God can transform all our partnerships so that something

new can be created – something that neither partner can anticipate or foresee.

Listening, giving and forgiving – these 3 attitudes can lead us not only into genuine partnership but also into the adventure of living.

QUESTIONS

1. **Tillich claims, “Listening love is the first step to justice in person-to-person encounters.” In practice, what does this mean and can you give any examples?**
2. **Do you agree that the 3 virtues listed by Tillich of listening, giving and forgiving are necessary for partnership? Why or why not?**
3. **Gift giving can foster the illusion of superiority and control and can sometimes humiliate the recipient. Have you ever experienced this or can you think of any examples of this in your partner relationships?**
4. **Look at Rublev’s icon of *The Trinity*. Practically, how might this portray a good model of partnership with respect to your partnership relationships?**
5. **What might a ‘victim-partner’ look like?**
6. **How does the model of the incarnation help us with the practice of partnership?**
7. **Some of the practices of partnership are giving, receiving, working, praying, rejoicing, struggling and suffering. How does this work out in practice – with your partner diocese for example?**
8. **What does it mean practically to be involved in partnership in a world of asymmetrical power relationships?**