

## **Patron-Client Κοινωνία:**

### **Exploring the Partnership Paradigm of Paul and the Philippians**

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#### **Introduction**

##### **Purpose of the Study**

The prevailing belief in pastor-centeredness significantly impacts the nature of relationships between leaders and members in a church setting. In my observation as a minister, there are Filipino churches that perceive the dynamics of ministry predominantly as the sole duty of the pastor. Meanwhile, members bear the responsibility for financial sustenance. This situation seemingly portrays a patron-client relationship, especially among affluent members who act as patrons, with the pastor assuming the role of the client. This reality prompts the question of whether such relational patterns align with the intended design of the church according to biblical principles. With that in mind, this paper explores the concept of *κοινωνία* as “partnership” in Paul’s letter to the Philippians and how it could serve as a paradigm for a leader-member relationship by considering its theological foundations and practical applications.

##### **Patron-Client Relationship in the Ancient World and the New Testament**

In a nutshell, Crook asserts that the patron-client dynamic in ancient Rome was defined by the relationship between the patron (giver) and the client (taker). This relationship created an expectation of duty from the client to reciprocate favors and express gratitude to the patron. Consequently, clients honored their patron’s reputation in various ways within the public court.<sup>1</sup> MacGillivray characterizes this paradigm as a voluntary, albeit often

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<sup>1</sup> Zeba Crook, “The Divine Benefactions of Paul the Client,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 2 (2001): 10–11.

exploitative, reciprocal relationship that prevailed in early Roman culture.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, MacGillivray contends that the relevance of the patron-client relationship to Biblical and New Testament Studies makes it essential knowledge for scholars in this field.<sup>3</sup>

According to Syverson, there were many forms of patron-client relationships in the ancient world: personal patronage, friendship, public benefaction, literary patronage, divine patronage, political patronage, and brokerage.<sup>4</sup> Crook argues that the New Testament writers' masterful use of patron-client language proves their understanding of the concepts of patronage and clientage. They either supported or opposed it as a social structure.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the New Testament presents the patron-client system both in a positive and a negative light. For this study, I examine the patron-client relationship wherein the church members act as the patron or the benefactor, and the church leader serves as the client or beneficiary, particularly of material needs.

### **Patron-Client Relationship as a Church Problem**

The virtue of patronage and clientage as a social structure depends on the context. For instance, the patron-client relationship, in which the church members serve as the patron of the physical necessities of their leader in the Filipino context, can be problematic. Various dangers might arise considering the Filipino culture of *utang-na-loób* (debt of goodwill; debt of gratitude). Cleofas indicates that while this Filipino cultural practice can be viewed as a virtue, its applications in the context of nepotism, patronage politics, lifelong servitude, corruption, and other forms of injustice raise

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<sup>2</sup> Erlend D. MacGillivray, "Re-evaluating Patronage and Reciprocity in Antiquity and New Testament Studies," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 6 (2009): 38.

<sup>3</sup> MacGillivray, "Re-evaluating Patronage," 38.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey R. Syverson, "Grace in Paul's Letter to Titus in Light of Greco-Roman Patronage" (Master's thesis, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, Oregon, 2009), 20–25.

<sup>5</sup> Crook, "The Divine Benefactions," 14.

moral concerns.<sup>6</sup> And a church setting is not an exemption. Some local churches in the Philippines face such a difficulty, particularly the pastors. An acquaintance overseeing an organized church in an urban setting once told me about his frustrations in ministry. He could not fully exercise his function as the church administrator without the approval of the so-called “big givers” or those members who provide a huge chunk of the church’s financial support, including the pastor’s material needs. In this sense, the relationship of the pastor and members becomes employer-employee. But is this what God wants as the common practice in his community? What does the New Testament say about such a situation where churches provide the material necessities of their leader, similar to the Philippians to the Apostle Paul?

### **The Partnership of Paul and the Philippians as a Paradigm**

This paper investigates the relationship between Paul and the Philippians, particularly their *κοινωνία* (partnership). Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi while most likely imprisoned in Rome around A.D. 62.<sup>7</sup> With Jesus as the ultimate example, Paul exhorts the Philippians to live virtuously, deepening their dedication to serving God and one another. In addition, he wrote to the Philippians to inform them of Epaphroditus’ recovery from a severe illness, to uplift their faith, to reassure them of his good health, and to express gratitude for their ongoing support.<sup>8</sup> The Philippians had been faithful in financially supporting Paul. Thus, materially, they can be perceived as the patron and Paul as the client. Jennings states that Paul speaks candidly about the gift the Philippians gave him in 4:10–20, which he wanted the church to see as a sanctified, righteous fruit that validated the church’s faith. The Philippians’ financial aid to Paul proved their loyalty to him and the gospel mission. Hence, Paul transformed the

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<sup>6</sup> Jacklyn A. Cleofas, “Towards a Practical and Empirically Grounded Account of Utang-na-loob as a Filipino Virtue,” *Kritika Kultura* 33, no. 34 (2019–20): 156–179.

<sup>7</sup> “Introduction to Philippians,” *ESV.org*, accessed April 2024, <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-philippians/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Introduction to Philippians,” *ESV.org*.

financial support of the church from a common practice to a unique manifestation of their unity within God's design for the community of believers.<sup>9</sup> To further comprehend the relationship between Paul and the Philippians, I suggest analyzing the concept of *κοινωνία* (partnership) anchored in three theological themes (see Figure 1): Christology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology.



Figure 1: Three Theological Themes of Κοινωνία (Partnership) in Philippians

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Avery Jennings, "‘Make My Joy Complete’: The Price of Partnership in the Letter of Paul to the Philippians" (PhD diss., Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2015), 260.

## **Κοινωνία in the New Testament**

The Greek *κοινωνία* is one of the most common Greek terms church members know, which is often understood as “gathering together.” But in the New Testament, *κοινωνία* is translated into English in manifold ways. Strong defines *κοινωνία* as “partnership, i.e. (literally) participation, or (social) intercourse, or (pecuniary) benefaction:—(to) communicate(-ation), communion, (contri-)distribution, fellowship.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, according to Strong’s G2842, KJV translates *κοινωνία* in the New Testament in the following manner: fellowship (12x); communion (4x); communication (1x); distribution (1x); contribution (1x); to communicate (1x).<sup>11</sup> In Philippians, KJV translates *κοινωνία* as “fellowship” (1:5) and *ἐκοινωνήσεν* as “communicated.” However, the ESV translates both terms as “partnership,” which I deem more fitting as I consider the relationship between Paul and the community of believers in Philippi, given that the Philippians serve as a patron and Paul as a client, specifically with material provisions.

### **Christological Foundation: Sharing a Common Example**

#### **The Philippians Partnership in Sharing Troubles**

Philippians 4:14–15 provides a picture of the depths of Paul’s relationship with the Philippians and vice versa. Paul appreciates the benevolence of the Philippians’ sharing in his troubles through partnership. In v. 14, the phrase “to share my trouble” is translated from the Greek *συνκοινωνήσαντες*, while “partnership” in verse 15 is from the Greek *ἐκοινωνήσεν*. Both of these Greek terms share a similar *κοινός*-root, which means “common,” the same as *κοινωνία*.

In the New Testament, “sharing in others’ trouble” is frequently admonished in the early church. In Acts, Luke records the giving of possessions to share in the trouble of the needy (4:32–35), including daily distribution of food for the widows (6:1). Paul encourages believers to bear

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<sup>10</sup> James Strong, “Strong’s Concordance,” *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed April 2024, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2842/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

<sup>11</sup> Strong, “Strong’s Concordance.”

one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) as he teaches participation in others' sufferings (1 Cor 12:26). Furthermore, John commends the love and hospitality of the church toward traveling missionaries and strangers by supporting them (3 John 5–8). These exemplify the principles of sharing others' troubles through sacrifices to meet various needs. But why did they need to do this? Paul provides an answer in Galatians 6:2: “and so fulfill the law of Christ” (ESV). The church principle of sharing others' troubles is rooted in Christ. It is the fulfillment of His law, in which He serves as the ultimate example.

### **Christ's Example of Humility and *Kenosis***

In Philippians 2:1–11, Paul discusses Christ's example of humility. Paul appeals to the Philippians to put the interest of others above their own (v. 4), telling them to have a common mind in Christ (v. 5). In the succeeding verses, Paul reminds them about the example of Jesus who “emptied himself” (v. 7), sharing the trouble of all humankind as he died on the cross, bearing everyone's sins (v. 8). In this context, Jesus' emptying of self is referred to as *kenosis*, from the Greek *κενόω*, meaning “to empty.”<sup>12</sup>

Examining *kenosis* in Philippians 2, Josette and Baholy expound that:

In the intricate explanation of this epistle, a central theme emerges—the “Kenosis of Jesus Christ.” The humility of Christ, as elucidated in Philippians 2:5-11, becomes the touchstone of Christian life. “Kenosis,” a term coined to encapsulate Pauline Christology, unravels the divine act of God humbling Himself. In the voluntary abasement of Jesus Christ, God's love unfurls, laying bare the path to salvation. Without the divine descent into humility, the tapestry of redemption remains incomplete.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, for the church to fulfill the law of Christ in sharing others'

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<sup>12</sup> Strong, “Strong's Concordance.”

<sup>13</sup> Ramarolahy Patricia Josette and Robijaona Rahelivoloniaina Baholy, “The Kenosis of Jesus Christ: Model of the Christian Life According To Philippians 2:5-11,” *Britian International of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2024): 26.

troubles, the community of Christ ought to share a common example who is the ultimate model of humility and selflessness—Jesus Christ. Christ’s *kenosis* exemplifies the depth of humility and selflessness that serves as the bedrock of Christian conduct. His sacrificial act of emptying Himself not only provides the ultimate example but also establishes the framework for how believers are to live out their calling. With this understanding of Christ’s humility in mind, the focus now shifts to how this principle of imitation manifests through shared suffering.

### **Imitating Christ through Shared Suffering**

In Philippians 3:10, Paul uses the Greek phrase *κοινωνίαν [τῶν] παθημάτων*, which translates as “fellowship of sufferings,” in reference to sharing the suffering of Christ. Throughout the New Testament, Paul and the early church recognized that following Christ meant partaking in all of His triumphs as well as His trials, which occasionally included suffering (Matt 5:12; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:17; Phil 1:29, 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 3:12; Heb 11:25; 1 Pet 3:17, 4:1, 12, 13, 19).

Sharing in Christ’s suffering is one of the overt Christological foundations of the partnership of Paul and the Philippians as they both strove to imitate the Lord (Phil 3:17; cf. 1 Cor 11:1). Asumang concludes that the Philippians undoubtedly provided a model for developing a doctrine of imitation that fully explained the cruciform nature of Christian existence, which encompasses the sacrificial work of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as a patron, Jesus gave His life to provide humanity’s utmost need—salvation. Imitating His example, the Philippian Church, as material patrons to Paul, selflessly supported him amid their own difficulties (Phil 4:14–20). In the same way, he, as a spiritual patron to the early Christians, including the Philippians, sacrificially ministered to them despite imprisonment (1:7).

The shared suffering with Christ, as outlined in Paul’s teachings, reveals the cruciform nature of Christian existence, highlighting the importance of

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<sup>14</sup> Annang Asumang, “Modeling the Gospel in Joyful Partnership: Exemplars and the Uniting Theme of Philippians,” *The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 13, no. 3 (2012): 42.

aligning with His example in all aspects of faith. The Philippians' willingness to endure hardships in solidarity with Paul mirrors this sacrificial model, demonstrating the enduring impact of Christ's example on the life of the church. This exploration into the mutual influence of suffering and imitation underscores the relevance of these principles for contemporary believers.

## **Ecclesiastical Call: Sharing a Common Mission**

### **The Philippians' Partnership in the Gospel**

In Philippians 1:5, Paul delightfully acknowledges the partnership of the Philippians in the gospel: “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (ESV). In this verse, he uses *κοινωνία* in describing his partnership with them in sharing in the gospel. This commendation highlights the call of the church to preach the gospel, beginning with the commission of Jesus to His disciples (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:15–16; Acts 1:8). Schaller explicates that undeniably, the essence of New Testament ministry centers on the gospel. The ministry of gospel preaching was established by Christ's core commission to His disciples. Consequently, imparting obedience to His commands—different from simple ethical precepts—aligns with this mission.<sup>15</sup>

The apostles passed on the call to preach the gospel to the succeeding generation of Christians. One of the vivid examples of this is Paul's charge to Timothy (2 Tim 4:2). However, it is also clear that Paul shared this call with the Philippians. In the ESV, the term “gospel” recurs throughout Philippians twelve times, emphasizing the partnership of Paul and the Philippians in the gospel. In 1:12–14, Herrick comments that Paul's preaching continues to advance the gospel despite his imprisonment. His incarceration appears to further the gospel. Because of this, the reason he was chained became known to the entire imperial guard. And other brothers

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<sup>15</sup> John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry” (1981): 1-12, accessed April 2024, <https://essays.wisluthsem.org>.



and sisters spoke out about the gospel with more courage.<sup>16</sup> The Philippians' dedication to the gospel, as celebrated by Paul, emphasizes a substantial partnership that reflects the essence of New Testament ministry and sets the stage for their ongoing commitment to the mission.

### **Evidence of the Philippians' Commitment**

In some other verses, Paul's partnership between Paul and the Philippians is further evidenced by their unwavering support during Paul's imprisonment and their active involvement in spreading the gospel (1:7). Also, Paul and the Philippians worked together to share the gospel and showed their dedication to upholding the faith in the face of adversity as they lived worthy of the gospel (1:27–30). Moreover, Paul urges the Philippians to be powerful witnesses because of their outlook and commitment to sharing their light as children of God in the world, which would complement their cooperation in advancing the gospel (2:14–16). Campbell points out that Paul's ministry emphasized the struggle to advance the gospel, a theme reflected in both his disputed and undisputed letters.

However, churches founded during Paul's missionary journeys, including the Philippian Church, maintained a consciousness of proclaiming the gospel despite adversity.<sup>17</sup> The steadfast commitment of the Philippians demonstrated through their support and active involvement in advancing the gospel illustrates their deep partnership with Paul and sets the stage for exploring the mutual benefits of their collaboration.

### **Mutual Benefit in Partnership**

In the twenty-first-century context, Christenson observes that the phrase "partnership in mission" has gained popularity within mission circles. However, forming collaborations among Christian organizations—even

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<sup>16</sup> Greg Herrick, *Philippians: The Unconquerable Gospel* (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Campbell, "The Struggle for the Progress of the Gospel at the Heart of the Pauline Mission," *Irish Biblical Studies* 21 (1999): 77–78.

those that share a dedication to evangelism and Scripture—is challenging.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, around two thousand years ago, Paul and the Philippian church enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership wherein both parties benefited from the reciprocal nature of their relationship. The Philippians provided material support to Paul, allowing him to focus on his ministry, while Paul reciprocated by offering spiritual guidance and teachings to them. As a patron, the Philippian Church enabled Paul to continue the church’s mission through material support as he worked to spread the gospel. In turn, Paul served as a spiritual patron to them, evidenced in his prayers for them and desire for their spiritual growth. It resulted in the Philippians actively participating in the common mission of the church, not only financially but also through their lives and preaching.

The mutual benefits in the partnership between Paul and the Philippians not only advanced the gospel but also enriched both parties spiritually and materially, providing a model of effective synergy that remains relevant for the present mission endeavors.

### **Eschatological Anticipation: Sharing a Common Hope**

#### **The Vision of Partnership and Hope**

The vision of partnership lies in the sharing of a common hope. So, what is the hope of Paul and the Philippians? Paul’s words in Philippians 3:13–16 provide a good response as he emphasizes the one thing he does in verse 13: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (ESV). Paul further expounds in v. 14: “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (ESV). Then, he exhorts the Philippians in verses 15 and 16: “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold to what we have attained” (ESV).

Paul discusses his viewpoints on Christian development and maturity in these verses, accentuating the importance of looking forward rather than dwelling on past transgressions or triumphs. The ultimate aim of the

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<sup>18</sup> Joel Christenson, “Koinonia: DNA of Gospel Partnership,” *Mission Round Table* 10, no. 1 (2015): 12–15.

Christian life is to become more like Christ—the “goal” of which he speaks. Believers receive a heavenly calling and eternal life with God as their “prize.” Paul inspires mature believers to think alike and share this as a common perspective. He displays trust that God will reveal the truth in time. Consequently, believers must hold fast to their faith and continue growing while keeping their focus heavenward. That said, Bieringer contends that Paul balances the “effort-reward scheme” of athletic language with the “giving-receiving scheme” of his call language. In doing so, he emphasizes the future-oriented nature of his message, which is a hallmark of his preaching and lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Paul’s emphasis on forward-looking faith and communal maturity sets the stage for understanding the nature of believers’ ultimate hope and glorification, framing their journey towards a higher calling.

### **The Hope of Glorification**

Moreover, in Philippians 3:20–21, Paul writes: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (ESV). These verses distinguish between believers’ earthly and heavenly citizenship. Christians’ true home is in heaven, while earthly citizenship is temporary. The phrase “await a Savior” expresses eschatological hope—the anticipation of Christ’s second coming. The transformation of believers is symbolized by the transformation of their bodies. Thus, Jesus, through His power, will transform our bodies into the likeness of His own gloriously restored body.

Paul’s vision of glorification transcends mere physical change, reflecting a significant shift from earthly limitations to divine perfection (1 Cor 15:42–44). This promise of a glorified body offers not just hope but also a profound sense of purpose and direction for believers (Rom 8:18). It provides a transformative lens through which the struggles and sacrifices of this life are understood in the light of eternal glory (2 Cor 4:17). The anticipation of such a momentous change encourages believers to live with a forward-looking faith, deeply rooted in the certainty of Christ’s return and the ultimate renewal of creation (Phil 3:20–21; Rev 21:1).

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<sup>19</sup> Reimund Bieringer, “... Striving for the Prize’: The Theological Significance of Athletic Language in Philippians 3:12-16,” *Studia Nauk Teologicznych PAN* 14 (2019): 85.

## Living Out the Eschatological Hope

Paul's eschatological anticipation is further illustrated in Philippians 1:23. Heinz concludes that Paul indicates his hope that salvation will be fulfilled right away after death.<sup>20</sup> He adds that Paul and other New Testament writers are not the only ones who have this viewpoint. Some academics contend that the New Testament does not consistently teach Christ's impending Second Coming.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Paul and the Philippians share the same hope and, thus, await the same Savior. Their partnership, driven by eschatological anticipation, leads them to move forward. Hence, all of their sacrifices for one another, both as patron and client, are beyond the external but towards the eternal.

In the New Testament, this common hope pushes the community of believers to endure suffering until the very end (Matt. 5:10–12; Rom. 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 4:17–18; 1 Peter 5:10; James 1:2–4). Middleton asserts that what influences how Christians try to live in the present is what they hope and anticipate as the climax of salvation. Thus, a lived eschatology is ethics.<sup>22</sup> As George Eldon Ladd put it, “the presence of the future.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the shared eschatological hope between Paul and the Philippians not only underpins their mutual sacrifices but also redefines their present experiences, aligning them with the promise of future glorification and eternal glory.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that leaders and members of the church must have a reciprocal patron-client *κοινωνία* (partnership), imitating a common example (Jesus Christ), fulfilling a common mission (preaching of the gospel), and holding on to a common hope (heavenly reward) (see Figure 2).

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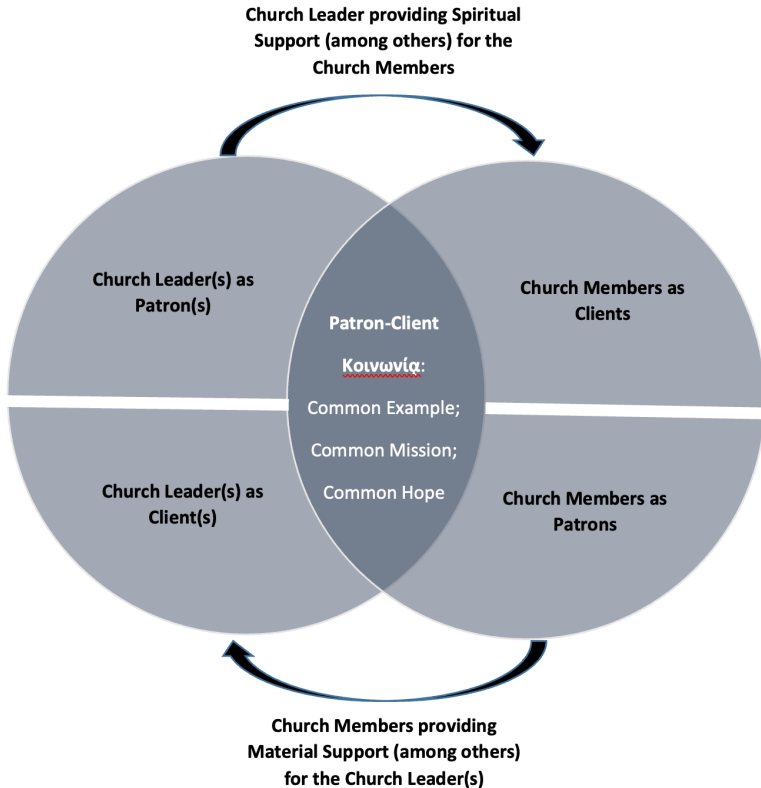
<sup>20</sup> Heinz Geisen, “Eschatology in Philippians,” *Paul and His Theology* (2008): 272.

<sup>21</sup> Geisen, “Eschatology in Philippians,” 272.

<sup>22</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and A New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 24.

<sup>23</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdsman, 1974).

The ultimate example of humility and selflessness is Jesus Christ. His sacrificial love and self-giving commitment to the Father's will serve as the foundation for any partnership. Therefore, everyone in the church—both leaders and members—should imitate Christ as the common example by selflessly serving others, just as Jesus gave His life for humanity's salvation.



The partnership between Paul and the Philippians involved both material and spiritual aspects. The Philippians supported Paul materially, allowing him to focus on his ministry. In return, Paul provided spiritual guidance and teachings to them. In this relationship, church members must consider how they can support their leaders and vice versa. The partnership should be mutually beneficial, with both parties benefiting from their relationship.

Thus, as a church, we need to determine how we can actively support

one another. Furthermore, the Philippians actively participated in the common mission of spreading the gospel. Their partnership with Paul extended beyond financial support to their lives and preaching. Similarly, the church needs to actively engage in its mission, not only through material contributions but also through personal involvement, evangelism, and discipleship.

Finally, the partnership between Paul and the Philippians was driven by the common hope of the eternal. They endured suffering together, knowing that their sacrifices had a heavenly reward. The church must recognize and focus on the bigger picture—the eternal reward of the partnership. We are to be reminded that our sacrifices are not in vain but contribute to God’s kingdom.

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