

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: May 15, 2011

Partnering With God

by Dan Trygg

“For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.”

1 Corinthians 3:9-10

“...we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith...”

1 Thessalonians 3:2

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. ...Working-together-with-Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain... ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way...”

II Corinthians 5:20; 6:1,4

When someone begins to pay attention to what Christians believe and teach, it does not take long to note that there are many areas of disagreement. We usually agree over the main facts of Bible history, but there are other areas where believers understand things differently. Often, these disagreements can be traced back to poor study methodology, or incomplete and inadequate information. We can easily bring our preconceived ideas to our study, and we tend to find what we *expect* to find. Conversely, we tend to ignore or minimize what does *not* fit our understanding of reality. We may find ourselves *offended* by some things that God did or said, because we do not fully understand the context. Also, because He is infinite, and we are not, our attempts to understand and define Him will always be inadequate. A common problem is that we tend to only grasp a portion of a much broader reality (I Cor. 13:12). Theologians talk about *antinomy* and *paradox*. A *paradox* is when two statements or beliefs are stated together which at first seem to lead to a contradiction, but are said to both be true. Upon further investigation, a paradox generally can be resolved. The apparent conflict is not real, though it may *appear* to be so, at first. An example of paradox would be Jesus' statement that “He who would find his life must lose it; and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). An *antinomy* is defined as two apparently contradictory or conflicting truths which are both affirmed as true at the same time, but how they can be reconciled is *beyond our ability to grasp*. For example, how could Jesus be fully God and fully man at the same time? How can God coexist as three persons, but at same time be a single being? How could God be sovereign, be in control over humanity, but human beings be free choosers, at the same time? How can scripture say that we are predestined, but at the same time be personally responsible for our choices? How can the Bible say that “no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws Him” (Jn. 6:44), and yet offer the invitation that salvation is available to “whoever believes”(Jn. 3:15,16)? These are examples of areas that at least *appear* paradoxical, or are actually antinomies. They are certainly questions that Christians have discussed and debated for centuries.

When we are confronted with an antinomy, we tend to minimize one side and emphasize the other. For example, we emphasize Jesus divinity over His humanity, so that He is no longer really limited to human experience, ...or we minimize His divinity to the point where we see Him as only a fallible man. Or we tend to emphasize God's sovereignty and minimize human responsibility and involvement. Or we emphasize God's oneness at the expense of His complex nature. When we do this, we do damage to the revelation God has given us. It is not our place to *change* or *minimize* parts of God's revealed truth. We are to *embrace* what God has revealed, even if we don't quite grasp it all. As ones who have been entrusted with His word, God requires us to handle it in an accurate and trustworthy manner (I Cor. 4:1,2; II Tim. 2:15).

One of these areas of dispute has to do with how God works in our lives. Is it “all God”? Does He work to the extent that even our willingness or our choice to get involved is all from Him, or do we have some necessary responsibility to take action? Is it *us* working “for” God? Some believe that God responds to us when we take the initiative to step out on His word. Does He work when *we* work? How are we to understand this relationship?

One of the clues that can help us to get a handle on this subject involves a Greek verb, *sunergeō*, and its related noun form, *sunergos*. The verbal form occurs 4 times, and the noun form occurs 13 times in the NT. The word is a compound, from the word for “work” (*ergos*) and the preposition “together-with” (*sun*). The thrust of the word describes a person who is working-together-with someone else, a coworker. In 13 of these passages, Paul uses the word to refer to people working-together (Rom. 16:3,9,21; I Cor. 16:16; II Cor. 1:24; 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Col. 4:7,11; Philem. 1:1,24; III Jn. 1:8). He mentions by name Priscilla, Aquila, Urbanus, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Clement, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Demas, and Luke as a *sunergos*. Many of these

names are very familiar to anyone who has read the NT. Others may be a little surprising, but **the point of the word is that they had partnered with Paul, doing the work *with* him**, in some way. **It usually means that they were working on the same thing at the same time, an actual co-laborer.**

There are three other passages that are of particular interest for our discussion here:

In I Corinthians 3:9, Paul refers to himself and Apollos as “*God’s co-laborers*”. This is significant, because it is implying that God and they *worked together at the same time*. God did not just work “for” them, nor did they just work “for” God. Rather, the word picture implies that *they jointly, cooperatively worked-together on the same project at the same time*.

In I Thessalonians 3:2, the apostle describes Timothy as “our brother and *God’s coworker in the gospel*”. He did not refer to him as “*my coworker*” in this passage, as he does in Romans 16:21. Why? Because Paul was not there in Thessalonica with Timothy. He was in Athens, over 100 miles to the south. To call Timothy a joint-laborer when Paul was not on the scene was nonsensical. It *wasn’t* Timothy and Paul working-together there; it was Timothy and God co-laboring in Thessalonica. **God was working *and* Timothy was working at the same time on the same project. Both were involved. Both were active, putting forth effort to accomplish something.** It was not God alone, nor was it Timothy alone. It was not God “for” Timothy, nor was it Timothy “for” God. No. **They were both involved together at the same time.**

In II Corinthians 6:1, Paul wrote, “But *working-together-with Him*, we appeal to you not to accept the grace of God in vain.” Here, because Paul used the verbal form, the relationship is even *more clear*. They were **actively working together, combining their efforts in a common work**. A couple of verses earlier, in 5:20 he wrote, “We are ambassadors on behalf of Christ, *as though God were appealing through us*. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” You see the same concept: **God working in, with and through them as they worked**. They were co-laboring because both parties were working together at the same time.

Jesus had mentioned something very similar in John 15:26,27, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, *He will bear witness* about Me. ²⁷ *And you also will bear witness...*” Note that **Jesus is saying that there will be a joint work: the Holy Spirit will bear witness, and the apostles would also bear witness at the same time**. The Lord followed up on this in Acts 1:8, when He said, “and you shall take power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses, both in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.” **God never intended to do the work without human involvement, nor did He want people to try to do the work without His empowerment and inner working. His plan was to work *in* and *with* us, as we are willing to actively work *with* Him.** This means that **we are not puppets, either. We have to be conscious, willing, intelligent, active partners with Him.** In a very real way, *we* are His hands, feet, lips and mouths for the Kingdom of God. God is a gentleman, however. **He does not wish to “take us over” or “take control” of us.** NO. That is not how He works. The spirit of prophets are subject to the prophets (I Cor. 14:32). The Spirit of God does not invade, dominate or control people like a demonic spirit attempts to do. **God wants a freely given, cooperative partnership with us. He does not want mindless puppets who unthinkingly do His will; He wants cognizant, mindful, coworkers who will intelligently, cooperatively affirm and act on His leadings.**

Note the order of what Jesus said, “you will take power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”. **Clearly, the initiative is God’s.** This is consistent with Jesus’ own personal approach to walking in the power of His Father. In John 5:19, Jesus commented that “the Son can do nothing from Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.” **Unquestionably, Jesus is saying that He kept on the lookout for what God was desiring to do in the world around Him. When He recognized what the Father was doing, He put aside whatever else might be competing for His attention, and focused on joining along with what God was initiating.** He even *adjusted His approach* to fit with the approach that the Father seemed to be taking.

Another insight into this question comes through **Philippians 2:12,13.** “...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you*, both the desire and the ability-to-do for His good pleasure.” There seems to be a fine interplay, ...a dance, if you will..., between us and God. He will work to bring something to our hearts or attention. Then, if we are willing to join Him, He will also work in us a desire and will to do what He is prompting us to do, as well as the grace and ability to do it. At that point, the ball is in our court. **He is looking for us to choose to put ourselves into the mix, to join Him in the work, to put ourselves into the fray, to take the risk, to get involved. When we do, then we will see what He can and will do through us. He initiates, we respond, we work together as co-laborers. The results are amazing!** When *we* reach out, *God* will touch them through *us*!