Sex and Vulnerability:

Casual Mission v. Covenant Marriage

by

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ABSTRACT

Technological and cultural changes are combining to change the way local congregations, in both the Global North and South, involve themselves in mission. These changes offer both opportunities and challenges to advocates of vulnerable mission. The narrative of Scripture offers us the covenantal model to help us recognize and transform the power inequalities inherent in this emerging mode of missional partnership. By thinking and acting covenantally across five dimensions of partnership (Resources, Language, Security, Accountability, and Personnel) both congregations and mission societies will be better equipped to surmount challenges and seize opportunities to move mission engagement in the direction of mutual, covenantal vulnerability.

1. "WHAT'S HAPPENING TO MY MISSIONARY MODEL?"

I still remember my shock when I saw my first real, live "tourist" in the small Cambodian town where we lived. A taxi was taking a foreign couple from the capital city down to the Gulf of Thailand, and had stopped at a roadside stall for lunch. "Tourists? Here? Wow – that's crazy...and kind of unnerving!" I thought, while avoiding them. Not long after, though, teams of foreign motorcyclists or even adventure cyclists started to stop on their way through, some staying overnight. I particularly remember an Australian couple who were bicycling around Cambodia for their holiday and were in town over a Sunday. I happened upon them at a local eatery, and they invited me to sit down and chat. They had gone to a local church and met the pastor, who spoke some English, and had heard about the church-based, micro-savings groups that this pastor was leading. They wanted to help.

Back home, the Australian man was a successful venture capitalist who provided seed money to business start-ups and consultancy services to entrepreneurs bent on building the future before their competitors beat them to it. This was a world of fast action and adrenaline rushes, and a world away from where we sat in a dirt floored eatery with more flies than customers.

The husband told me they were going to be in the country for only a few more days, and he wanted to work with this local church to "seed" a micro-credit venture that was scales of magnitude larger than the micro-savings initiative the church was leading presently. He wanted to "do it right" and asked if I had any forms he could review with the local pastor and use to establish his scheme. I tried to explain that such a complicated venture required accounting skills far beyond the current capacity of the local church (which was employing micro-savings, very different from the micro-credit he proposed), and more importantly that developing a trusting relationship, based on listening and learning from what the local church was already doing successfully, would most likely yield better results in the long-run. But I failed; the gulf of understanding between us was simply too big to span in one conversation. In the end, I believe that they went ahead and gave some money to the pastor, but no ongoing credit scheme ever developed that I could see.

Coming from the world of venture capital, the venture capitalist and his wife can be forgiven for not understanding the limits imposed upon them. The few days this couple spent in Cambodia was simply too short to undertake such a large work. But they were hardly the first, and certainly not the last, to be mistaken.

When my family and I moved to rural Cambodia in 2002 to work with local pastors, we were virtually cut off from the outside world. But that isolation did not last. Within a few years, two dirt-floor shops had opened up with computers and internet service, and soon after that a few wealthier pastors and Christian leaders acquired smart phones. Short-term teams from places like Canada and Finland began to appear seemingly out of nowhere. By the time I left that beautiful land in 2011, things had changed dramatically: by then, it was not unusual for a single local Christian leader to simultaneously have relationships, funding, and ongoing projects through partnership with local Christians in places like Korea, Northern Europe, North America, Singapore and Australia.[1] What was going on, I wondered? I was curious but also, in some ways, in denial about this new world springing up around me. It was not a world which I instinctively welcomed, because it was out of my control. Was something conspiring to wreak havoc on my missionary model?

We will start this essay by unpacking what this "something" is, and the ways in which it is changing the practice of cross-cultural mission. We will then sketch the likely impact of these changes upon the twin aims of vulnerable mission, namely engaging in mission using both local languages and local resources. Then, before we proceed further, we will take a moment to lay a mutual understanding of biblical "knowing" that will, in turn, better enable us to understand the *covenant* motif. We do this because, through the remainder of the essay, we suggest that various aspects of biblical *covenant* can help Christian communities think and act in new and more *vulnerable* ways as they look to the future. But let's not get ahead of ourselves: before peering into the future of mission, we would be wise to first examine into the past.

2. THE FUTURE OF MISSION PARTNERSHIP

Most missiologists agree that since the time of William Carey at the beginning of the 19th century, much of the missionary endeavour from the Protestant church in the West has been characterized by a binary partnership between local churches on the one hand, and the "voluntary structure of the mission society" on the other.[2] While this

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[1] Managing so many and such diverse, cross-cultural relationships, even while lacking authority over their foreign partners, is no easy feat and testifies to the management skill and relational acumen of these pastors, who are comparatively uneducated and poor.

[2] Jorgensen, "The Church Going Glocal," 14. See also Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions*, 13. There is considerable variation in terms and definitions for what Kund names as a "mission society" – Christians collectively engaged in God's work in structures other than the local church. Winter labels his "mission society" structure as a "sodal" agency, borrowing an anthropological term. Many in North America call

partnership continues to dominate the missionary enterprise in the West and indeed much of the world, change is afoot. Global trends such as the rise of the internet and inexpensive global communications, entrenchment of English as the global trade language, and quickening majority-world economic growth are merging together and shrinking the world. These trends, in turn, coincide with the global rise of postmodern culture, which is spreading through the jet stream of globalization and is increasingly manifest in globally-oriented urban centres. This culture shift is characterized by a distrust of authority, including religious authority, and emphasis on *community* and *relationship*.[3] As attitudes to external religious authorities change, people's involvement with and giving towards mission changes and tends to become more *local* and/or more *community* oriented.[4]

Today, these technological and cultural changes are chipping away at the centrality of the second structure - the mission society. Just as electricity and the steam engine helped to unleash a new wave of missions activity more than a century ago, so today new global realities are once again breaking down old barriers and old roles in the church's global mission. What I observed happening in Cambodia was not an isolated event but a local manifestation of a global trend.

Historically, according to Robert Wuthnow, northern congregations raised up people and funds and handed them over to "trusted denominational or independent agencies" to control, steward and administer these.[5] Today, however, "congregations increasingly rely on personal contacts as they initiate transcultural missionary activities."[6] The *intermediary* or *gatekeeper*[7] - traditionally a role occupied by mission societies - is no longer central to many cross-cultural, missional engagements. These

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this the "parachurch" structure. Klaus Fiedler differentiated between "mission societies," "parachurch organizations," and "specialized Christian service organizations" *(see Fiedler, 1994, p. 394 and the accompanying endnote)*. For our purposes, we are interested in the *intermediary* role that these entities play between local churches, regardless of what term one assigns them. There is also some disagreement over the biblical and theological grounding for, and role of, the mission society structure within the life & work of the universal and local church. While I acknowledge the existence of this structure, I do not make an argument for or against its existence or the contours of its role – such a discussion is outside the purpose of this paper.

[3] Scheitle, *Beyond the Congregation: The World of Christian Nonproits*.

[4] In the "glocal" and digital age, one should not assume that *local* and *community* are necessarily geographically based terms.

[5] *Boundless Faith*, 142.

[6] Ibid., 153.

[7] A *gatekeeper* essentially manages the major aspects of the cross-cultural relationship - funds, communications, project plans, and personnel. These are channelled through the gatekeeper as they flow between partners. For instance, a *gatekeeper* organization may be a mission society which receives funds from an English congregation and then channels those into project which is implemented though a local NGO started by a congregation in Uganda. The Ugandan NGO, in turn, may send reports back to the mission society, who in turn uses these reports in its communication with the English congregation.

intermediaries were once vital, Bruce Camp reports, in "interpret[ing] the world to churches. Their expertise was required to send people to the field, keep them there, and ensure their effectiveness. As we look to the future, these roles diminish in importance given technological advances."[8] Increasingly, churches rely on technology, not intermediary agencies, to help them interpret the world: Facebook updates, emailed pictures and internet calling on smart phones, and even web-based translation services. Increasingly, these technologies, coupled with changes brought on the wings of globalization, are making cross-cultural engagement in mission[9] possible without the presence of any full-time, professional "missionaries." In fact, a singular feature of many of these partnerships is the absence of traditional "professionals," be they either missionaries or locals employed by international Christian agencies.

In this essay I use the term *local-to-local* to describe these direct, missional partnerships between local entities in the global North and South. A "local" group may be a Christian family, a congregation or parish, a diocese, a small NGO or association, or even a Sunday School class in a large church, but in each case they are partnering with an equally local fellowship of Christians from another part of the world for purposes of mission.

Having now briefly examined the past in order to understand the present changes in mission, we are now ready to extrapolate a bit into the future, specifically looking into how the present changes will shape the future of vulnerable mission.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF VULNERABLE MISSION

In many ways, these changes to the practice of mission are a clear challenge to those of us who advocate for vulnerable mission. If the twin pillars of practicing mission in a vulnerable way are doing so in the local language and using local resources, than these pillars are pretty cracked and weak in much of the local-to-local missions movement.

Let's start with the "local resources" pillar. In his survey of American congregations engaged in mission, Robert Wuthrow cites their desire to save money vis-à-vis giving to an organizational hierarchy as one of the three main motivations for

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[8] Camp, "Local Church Involvement in Outreach," 242.
[9] From the perspective of one local partner, the mission itself is cross-cultural, while for the other partner that same mission may be towards their local community. Thus it is only the partnership itself, rather than the mission "field," that is cross-cultural.

local-to-local mission.[10] So clearly money – specifically the money of North American congregations - must be a big part of these relationships. Whatever else this says, it is unlikely that most American congregations are relying on the local resources of the partner church in the Global South in mission.

Next we look at the "local languages" pillar. I think it is fair to say that relatively few non-professionals engaged in mission are going to learn new languages, particularly those from churches in notoriously mono-lingual UK and North America![11] Rather, it is the spread of English as a second language on the wings of globalization that facilitates these relationships. In Uganda for instance, English is the language of the national education system, and any pastor who has completed primary education has at least some faculty with the language. Cambodia, on the other hand, was a former French colony which now uses Khmer as the language of instruction in public schools. Nonetheless, any enterprising Cambodian youth who hopes to "get ahead" in life, or even to access the internet and Facebook on their smart phone, either knows or is learning English (or, to a lesser extent, Korean or Chinese).

Given that the central pillars of vulnerable mission are anything but central in much of the local-to-local mission movement, there is certainly plenty of reason to be pessimistic about these developments. That was certainly my first assessment and, to some degree, that is still how I feel. But I have to say that at least part of why I feel that way is because I am a *professional*. I work for a mission society, albeit a somewhat non-traditional one. In other words, I am one of the "gatekeepers" whose central role and whose (let's be honest) power is being eroded by these changes. I represent those who stand to lose the most - and there is a lot to lose.

After all, some of today's Northern mission societies have become large, powerful players in mission and development, particularly when compared to the relative power of a typical local church in either the global North or South. World Vision, for example, has higher revenues than the Gross Domestic Product (i.e. cumulative national economic output, not simply government revenues) of 32 sovereign nation-states.[12] In this position mission societies can set the agenda, pay for their agenda with funds from the churches in the North, and implement their agenda though churches in the South. In

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[10] Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*, 144–145.

[11] If one accepts the (ethnocentric and/or realistic) assumption that "mission" takes place in the neighbourhood of the southern partner. There is, of course, much more to be said about language issues, but for our purposes we must leave it here.

[12] [*World Vision International Accountability Report 2010*; "GDP 2010 (current US$) | Data | Table."]

such cases, local Christian groups in both the Global North and the South are, at best, very junior partners.

But if we – the gatekeepers, the professionals – are to remain true to spirit of vulnerable mission, than we must remain cautiously open to these changes even if it means that we lose control and power.[13] After all, vulnerability and control are mutually incompatible. Vulnerability requires our own dis-empowerment. Vulnerable mission further requires us to take into account perspectives other than our own.

Perhaps not surprisingly the perspectives on local-to-local partnerships, of both local partners *inside* the partnerships, are often different than those of the mission society professionals who are *outside observers* of these partnerships. While the professionals tend towards pessimism, local partners themselves are rather more positive on these developments. My research is only just beginning, but every Ugandan I have interviewed has given positive feedback on the overall results and prospects of local-to-local mission engagement in Uganda.[14] The American side of the local-to-local engagement seems to share the optimism of their Ugandan counterparts. David Livermore's dissertation examines the reportage of American pastors who teach and train Christians overseas, and he finds that their experience and interpretations are largely positive.[15] Even though Livermore's research points to some very problematic assumptions that colour their reportage, he nonetheless maintains "great hope" that these engagements can become more productive for churches on both sides.[16] So while we mission professionals may feel (somewhat selfishly) our own control ebbing away, and fear (less selfishly) that much wisdom is being lost in the process, I would submit that we would do well to maintain Livermore's essentially positive outlook.

With that in mind, the remainder of this essay is dedicated to exploring ways in which *covenant* thinking and action can move local-to-local mission engagements in the

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[13] I say "cautiously open" because the traditional mission society professional was/is not only a gatekeeper, but also a bridge-builder. The erosion of the gatekeeper role does not equate to a loss of power (the power merely shifts), but the loss of the bridge builder role is more problematic – the cultural, historical, and professional knowledge does not merely shift, but is often lost. For more on how mission societies and mission professionals can continue being *bridge-builders*, even while their gatekeeper roles are eroded, see my essay entitled *"Mission, Partnership and Power: Perspectives from the Past, Features of the Future, and the Challenge of Covenant Communion"* accessible on the web at *http://www.missionalmusings.com/papers-essays-and-the-like/*

[14] I have interviewed only five Cambodian Christians at this point, who have each expressed their overall positivity to the development of the local-to-local mission mode, to varying degrees. All five were employed by mission society structures, with two additionally serving as pastors of local congregations. Anecdotally, I have found much the same feedback from both Ugandan and Cambodian Christians.

[15] Livermore, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Experiences of Stateside Church Leaders Who Train Cross-culturally."

[16] David Livermore, "American or American't? A Critical Analysis of Western Training to the World," 463.

direction of vulnerability. In order to do so, though, it will be helpful to read on with a common epistemic foundation, with a common view of how the Hebrews and the scriptures understood *knowing*.

4. "KNOWING" IN THE BIBLICAL SENSE: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

For whatever reason, the phrase "'to know' in the biblical sense" has entered into the English language as a euphemism for sex. People who know (pardon the pun) almost nothing else in the Old Testament know that "to know" someone means to have sex with that person. This popular understanding comes from Genesis 4:1: "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain..." (KJV). This understanding, while not incorrect, is incomplete. To know someone in the Bible is not simply about sex, but it is about how sex reflects the personal and intimate nature of knowing . To truly know something is a deeply personal experience that changes us. We understand and agree with that on at least some level: to know God – to *really* know God – is not to memorize a list of God's characteristics, but it is to be changed by that knowledge, to come into a relationship with God. It is to *be* different than before.

The same is true for how we know other people, and this is where sex comes in. The intimacy and union of sex – particularly within the covenant of marriage – is a picture of how the "knower" and the "known" are both intimately changed, how they undergo a deep union (becoming "one flesh") through the process of knowing each other. As the Hebrews understood it , *knowing* was not an objective, de-personalized and dispassionate exercise. [17] Knowing was a deeply personal and therefore *vulnerable* activity, best represented by the intimacy of sex in the covenant of marriage.

As we move forward in this essay, we will repeatedly return to the motifs of *covenant* and *marriage* as a guide for our thinking about local-to-local partnership in mission. As with any metaphor, this one can be pushed too far. My hope is to avoid doing so here, while opening up the metaphor (indeed, much more than a metaphor) for fruitful inquiry. Going forward, then, we approach our discussion of *covenant* with an un-

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[17] Parker Palmer observes that "primitive Christianity revolves around personal, not propositional, truth...." (see Palmer, 1993, pg 47). Palmer argues that all knowledge is both personal and yet at the same time objective, based on the "radical objectivity of the person". He writes that "to say that truth is personal is not to confine truth to private, subjective terms. To encounter the other as a person is to encounter the most objective, irreducible reality in the universe—a person, who, unlike a thing, actively resists our most determined efforts to diminish him or her to our limited, self-serving images"(Palmer, pg 56).

derstanding of the personal, unifying nature of "knowing" – in the fullness of the biblical sense.

5. MARRIAGE AND MISSION: AN INTRODUCTION TO COVENANT PARTNERSHIP

A covenant can be simply defined as a solemn or binding agreement. In both secular and biblical literature, a covenant is entered into when two parties have a common interest or problem which requires the parties to come together in agreement despite some distance in the relationship – be that relational or familial estrangement, differing ethnicities or citizenships, or simply unfamiliarity to each other.[18] While various types of covenants were common in the Ancient Near-East (ANE), the Hebrew covenantal concept was unique in that it invited their God, YHWH, to be an actual *party to* the treaty covenant, rather than merely serve as a *witness of* the covenant terms.[19] In this covenant, God stands as one party in the covenant partnership and His chosen people are collectively the other party. Today, then, when we think in terms of covenantal relationships between partnering congregations, we are talking about a unity that *already exists*, rather than about establishing a new relationship where there was none before. Theologically speaking, it is simply a re-affirmation[20] of reality – that these two congregations are *already* in covenant with each other, as branches that God has grafted into the tree of His covenant people, Israel (Rom. 11:13-18). As J. Andrew Kirk writes, "partnership is not so much what the Church does as what it is. Churches (theologically) belong to one another, for God has called each 'into the fellowship (koinonia) of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (l Cor. l:9)."[21] Thus when we think about linking covenant and partnership, we are not advocating that churches should sign formal "covenants" with each other, but rather than they think and act towards each other as they would to a covenant partner, as Jesus acts towards His Church or as the husband is to act towards his wife.

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[18] Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, 88:1.

[19] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 371–386.

[20] In the biblical literature, covenantal re-affirmation could take place for negative reasons (a covenant renewal because of the unfaithfulness of the covenant people, e.g. Ex 32-34 and Jer 31:31) or for positive reasons (as a restatement of Israel's or YHWH's commitment to uphold their covenant stipulations, e.g. Josh. 23-24 and Ez 16:60-62, respectively).

[21] Kirk, *What Is Mission? : Theological Explorations*, 187.

The English word "covenant" is a translation of the Hebrew *berit,* which is used in the scriptures to denote fellowship or relational closeness.[22] The Hebrews were unique in the ANE in that their national *berit* with their God (that is, their covenant with YHWH) was seen to legitimize God Himself, rather than to simply convey divine legitimacy upon the state.[23] Covenant did this in that it was a vehicle for divine purposes, establishing God's order and enabling His mission in the world, rather than simply reinforcing or legitimizing the pre-existing privilege of the Hebrew elite and powerful. Reflecting this, the biblical prophets repeatedly used covenant language and concepts to profoundly criticize and de-legitimize the Hebrew establishment.[24]

Today, in the missions establishment, there is much talk linking two common – perhaps so common as to be overused and even abused – words: kingdom and partnership.[25] Now using these words, both separately and together, is well and good; after all, partnership is a thoroughly biblical concept, and kingdom (as in the Kingdom of God) is thoroughly biblical as both a word and as a concept. However, linking kingdom and partnership and then limiting our thinking and theological reflection to the intersection of those two words, misses out on other motifs the Bible has to offer that can speak into these same issues. More specifically, it risks overlooking *covenant*, both as a fundamental approach to partnership and as a fundamental building block of the kingdom.[26] But is covenant relevant to partnership today? After all, the primary, and most missional covenants in the biblical literature[27] are built upon an expressly unequal,

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[22] Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, 88:91. While wide agreement exists, this view is not universally accepted. According to Huhn (*Kinship by Covenant*, 2.) Perlitt and Kutsch do not see a relational component in *berit*, but rather view its use as a signal of the acceptance or imposition of obligations on the other party.

[23] Nicholson, *God and His People*, 200–201.

[24] Notable examples include the prophets Isaiah (e.g. 42:18-43:1), Jeremiah (e.g. 22:8-15), Ezekiel (e.g. 16:58-63), Hosea (e.g. 8:1-5), Amos (e.g. 3:1-10), Micah (e.g. 6:1-8), and Malachi (e.g. 2:10-17). Scholars disagree as to what extent some prophets, who do not use the term *berit,* use covenant concepts in their critiques of Hebrew society. Following Wellhausen, earlier scholarship tended to see the concept of covenant as emerging in prophetic literature only after the Deuteronomist, while more recently scholars have tended to find elements of covenant thinking from an earlier date.

[25] A simple internet search yielded approximately 60 times more results for "Kingdom Partnership" than for "Covenant Partnership."

[26] Phillip Butler's very well-received (and otherwise excellent) book, *Well connected : releasing power and restoring hope through kingdom partnerships,* seems to me to be an example of this. The language of *kingdom* is replete throughout, but his use of covenant is wholly confined to a small description of one particular type of partnership, in which "a couple of people are involved; they…pray and work together; and the project is taking place in their own neighborhood or community." I would argue that the biblical record uses covenant as a tool for partnership between many, not few; and across great cultural, geographic, and power distances, not simply in one's own neighborhood. See Butler, *Well Connected*, 252.

[27] Universally recognized, in one form or another, are the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants.

vassal-client model.[28] Can such an unequal partnership be used to inform modern, missional partnerships? Our answer can only be affirmative.

A clue as to why we can answer with a "yes" is found in our everyday, first impressions when we think about the word covenant: for most of us, concepts such as *inequality* or *power* do not generally come to mind. Instead, we tend to conceive of covenant in more intimate, relational terms, and are more likely to reserve words like *authority* and *power* when we are describing kingdom. Why is that? It's a good question, particularly in light of the fact that the central covenants in scripture, those between God and Man, involve vast inequalities in the balance of power and authority.

Our modern impressions of the word "covenant" point back to the central innovation of the covenant tradition of the ancient Hebrews. Rather than covenant serving to enshrine an unequal relationship, Berman argues that it is precisely the unique, Hebrew model of covenant that allowed them to decisively break with the hierarchical social structures of their neighbours and establish a radically new, egalitarian social model: "The equality of the Israelite polity stems from their collective covenantal relationship with God…. The Israelites are 'equalized', as it were, in their status before God as members of a covenantal community…."[29]

Similarly, Hahn reminds us, it is under the New Covenant that Christians become kin, or family.[30] Under the covenant our vertical relationship to the Father transforms us, horizontally, into sisters and brothers. The covenant law then provides us with accountability to each other as sisters and brothers.[31] A keen awareness of covenantal kinship and obligation transforms the use of power from one of *power-over* towards one of equal exchange and mutuality, based on covenantal trust and love.

The Apostle Paul, even while acknowledging inequality in authority and power within the covenant partnership of marriage, reflects this re-orientation of power when he instructs the "head" to love his wife "as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her...."[32] The way in which Jesus re-directs power is illustrated beautifully at the start of the New Covenant meal, when Jesus, "knowing that the Father had given all

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[28] Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*; Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*.

[29] Berman, *Created Equal How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, 168.

[30] Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*. It can be argued (e.g. see *Vogel, 1979*) that the oldest and most universal biblical covenant, the Noahic, first established the essential mutuality and equality of mankind. The mutuality and equality most clearly expressed under the New Covenant is thus a re-affirmation of the earlier fraternal order established under the Noahic covenant.

[31] Today under the New Covenant, it is the moral law initiated under the covenant (particularly the Sinaitic Covenant), rather than the juridical aspects of the covenant, that provides us with accountability as brothers and sisters.

things into his hands,"[33] chooses to humbly wash the feet of his disciples. It is in examining and critiquing *power over* that covenant holds promise for informing local-to-local partnerships. After all, God himself became a human in Christ and chooses to partner with humans in His ongoing mission. Thus in both the Christ event and in the sending of the Holy Spirit, power is redefined away from *power-over* towards "the freedom to let go of all that hinders a life of sacrificial love."[34]

Thus the concept of covenant – particularly in the context of local-to-local partnership - is both equalizing and familializing in ways that the idea of kingdom is not. Rather than struggling with or even dancing around questions of power *inside* of partnership, thinking and acting covenantally can help churches release kingdom power *through* partnership.

But in what specific ways might covenant help guide our thinking and action in mission? In the remainder of this essay we briefly investigate five different facets of power inside of mission partnership: resources, language, faithfulness/security, accountability, and people. At each stop, we ask how the Biblical motif of covenant can shape the thinking and inform actions of local-to-local partnerships in the direction of vulnerable mission.

5.1 Premarital Projects: Resources in Partnerships

Gift-giving is an essential part of covenant ceremony, a symbol of how each partner – particularly within the marriage covenant – actually "gives" themselves to the other in mutuality.[35] One such example is the gift-giving of the Hebrews to God, and then of God back to the Levites, as an expression of the covenant of salt in Numbers 18:19.

When it comes to the exchanging of gifts today, Northern Christians are often outdone by the gift-giving cultures of churches in the Majority World. I once showed up for a meal at Korean friend's house (unthinkingly) without a gift, only to leave with a gift when I admired my friend's potted plant a little too overtly. In Africa, Mary Oduyoye notes that a marriage is a traditional covenant agreement, one in which each family exchanges gifts with the other.[36] Whereas northern gift-givers are likely to de-value their gift by saying "It's really not much" or "I bought you a little something,"

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[32] Ephesians 5:25, New International Version.

[33] *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Jn 13:3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

[34] Kirk, *What Is Mission? : Theological Explorations*, 196.

[35] Elazar, *Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel*, 66.

[36] Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 27.

Cambodians are likely to talk *up* the value of their gift, because the expense and sacrifice of their gift is a direct reflection of the value they place on the recipient of their gift. A valuable gift, in other words, reflects the high value they place on the friendship and the friend.

In thinking about gifts and mission, Anthony Gittins challenges us that gift-exchange is "a rich and relevant metaphor that could translate essentials of Christianity into every culture"[37] In the context of local-to-local mission, any assistance given by one partner to another becomes a part of gift-giving, a *mutual exchange* as an expression of the value they place on their covenant partner. Premature giving (or "doing" of projects) in a local-to-local partnership, then, is like premarital sex before the covenant of marriage. Just as partners who co-habitate before marriage are more likely to divorce,[38] so church partners who succumb to the temptation to engage in heavy financial foreplay are doing longer-term harm to themselves and their partner. Only within a pre-existing covenant relationship can the gift of financial consummation be safely exercised, whereas yielding to temptation reaps only a loss of intimacy.

Like sex, giving must be reciprocal. Both partners give, and both receive, lest sexuality shift from "the medium of gift to the medium of appropriation."[39] The mutuality of gift exchange puts local church partners on a more equal exchange, allowing the northern partner – usually entering the partnership with a "giving" mentality – to experience the transformative effect of receiving. There are many gifts with which the southern church can bless the North, perhaps principally a deeper understanding of kinship, communion and mutuality – covenantal values which often take a back seat to the individualism of northern cultures.[40] Seeing one's own cultural values reflected back to oneself through interaction with Christians of another culture is a gift of truly transformative value, a gift that money cannot buy. Churches cannot receive such a gift, however, outside of a covenantal relationship in which each partner is fundamentally open to being changed through their biblical "knowing" of the other.

Lastly, giving inside of a covenant relationship is just that - a gift. This is not equivalent to a project requiring a *proposal* and a *report.* Imagine if, in a marriage, the

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[37] Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins*, 115.

[38] Meg Jay, "The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage"; McVeigh, *Brief History of Social Problems.*

[39] Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 175.

[40] It is perhaps not entirely surprising that there is no adequate European-language translation for the covenantal, Hebrew word *chesed,* or *hesed* (חֶסֶד): "Love, friendship, brotherliness, loyalty, are all inherent in the concept of *hesed.* It is possible to do justice to the different shades of meaning only when *hesed* is understood as conduct in accordance with a mutual relationship of rights and duties." (Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 50.

wage-earning spouse required a proposal and a report before giving next months' grocery money to their marriage partner! This is *not* to say that spouses do not, in a healthy marriage, keep track of their finances and have ongoing discussions about budgets and spending. Nevertheless, large projects and sums that require formalized agreements are not, in fact, a gift. Particularly if they cannot be meaningfully reciprocated, they are simply inappropriate. Such a project may be more suited to professional agencies than to local fellowships whose mutuality must not be violated.

5.2 Verbal Abuse, in Writing? Language in Partnership

At the end of a book purported as a guide for the "nuts and bolts" of cross-cultural parish partnerships, the author lays out a meticulously detailed, densely written, legally structured "covenant" that covers seven pages of single-spaced (English) text.[41] Bringing such a "covenant" to a southern church partner is in stark contrast to both the ancient biblical and current majority-world practice of entering into covenant agreements. Covenants in scripture were overwhelmingly oral, something natural and comfortable in the oral cultures around the world today.

But northern peoples are people of the written word, and as such they can easily forget that covenantal brotherhood is a far superior arrangement than anything based on a written contract. After all, the Old Covenant was literally written in stone (twice!) but in the end it was insufficient to save Israel as a united kingdom. Knowing the inadequacy of the Old, the prophet Jeremiah foresaw a time when YHWH would build a new covenant, a covenant in which YHWH declared "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."[42]

YHWH himself may write on hearts, but Northerners prefer things to be written on paper. Given that they come from cultures immersed in legal minutia and lawsuits, this is perhaps understandable.

Even well-established churches and organizations often demure from overt commitments beyond one year or one more visit. – a consequence of culture where any slight, perceived breach of legal language can result in a lawsuit. Thus their very cautious, guarded language *protects* them.[43] But that same language only *exposes* their southern partners who, while possessing neither the means nor the desire to sue, take such language at face value and wonder why their counterpart communicates to them

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[41] O'Connor, *Bridges of Faith*.

[42] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Je 31:33). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

with so little commitment and trust. Feeling a lack of *security,* they react with guardedness and distrust in equal measure. Their insecurity – not knowing the level of their partner's commitment - can inhibit their planning, stewardship, and even their testimony. This is simply too high a price to pay for a "gift"; done poorly, it exacts a heavy toll on a partners' witness, dignity, trust in God, and God-given responsibility to sacrificially give of themselves to demonstrate God's love to their neighbour.

When it comes to our cultural orientation to language, the church in the North would do well to remember that inadvertent verbal abuse can happen through the written word, and that the oral cultures in the South are, in many ways, closer to Jesus' instructions that "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."[44]

5.3 Forsaking All Others, Keeping Only Unto Her: Faithfulness in Partnership

I recently attended a mission conference in the USA, graciously hosted by a very large and influential church. At various points around their extensive campus, posters advertised planned mission trips for the coming year, as well as trips that had taken place the previous year. I saw little if any overlap between past and planned trips. While almost every corner of the globe was going to see visitors from this congregation, there was no discernible continuity in their short-term missions engagements. In the absence of long-term, relational continuity, there is every reason to fear that Northern Christians have fallen into a form of "religiously themed tourism."[45] Stated in terms of the marriage covenant, simply doing a series of projects and short-term engagements in various places is little more than a series of one-night stands (though, regrettably, without any residual sense of regret).

The pagan peoples of the ANE entered into relationships with many deities to suit their every need and desire, playing various gods against each other in power matches and tossing their allegiance to whichever god was benefiting them the most at the moment. Such god-man relationships were self-centred, short-term, and highly polygamous.

Contrast that with the Hebrew and Christian Covenants. The covenant treaties formed the bedrock of Hebrew monotheism, and in the incarnation and the indwelling

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[43] A fitting colloquialism for such language is "legalese."

[44] Matthew 5:37, THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Spirit God eternally binds himself to man. John Calvin, using covenant terminology, describes it this way:

> "What likeness is there between God and men? Yet, as if he descended from his heavenly glory, he bound to himself the seed of Abraham, that he might also mutually bind himself. Therefore God's election was like the joining of a mutual bond, so that he did not will to be separate from the people"[46].

There is great faithfulness – and thus great security - in a covenant relationship, and the marriage covenant is a human expression of this profound faithfulness and security.

With that understanding, any western partner who engages in mission as a series of short projects, teachings, or other engagements with different "partners" is really engaged in little more than a series of one night stands outside of the covenant of marriage and against God's stubborn insistence to limit himself to mission through His covenant bride.

5.4 So Help Us God: Accountability in Partnership

The flip side of security is accountability. The tension between these two sides of the covenant coin has been reflected in the scholarly debate around covenant security and covenant obedience, with questions like "Are the covenants of Abraham and Israel with God unconditional and unilateral (i.e. the covenants are secure acts of grace)? Or are God's promises conditional upon Abraham's and Israel's obedience to the covenant terms (i.e. the covenants are conditional upon obedience, acts of law)?" Walter Brueggemann and N.T. Wright dismiss this polarity as failing to capture the profundity of the covenant union, with Brueggemann declaring that "our relationship to the God of the gospel [is], at the same time, profoundly unconditional and massively conditional."[47]

The unconditional "grace" side of the covenant is expressed in the very character of God, in the refusal of the wounded lover to abandon His covenant people despite their infidelity. The conditional "law" side of the covenant is expressed in the covenant formulary itself, which concludes with a stipulation of curses (and sometimes blessings) to punish infidelity or bless fidelity.[48]

Because the main audience for this essay is scholars and Christians from the Global North, I will dwell on the accountability for the stronger party inherent in covenant relationship. It is abundantly clear that the weaker party is accountable to the stronger (such as Israel's accountability to YHWH), but here I want us to dwell on the

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[45] Ross, "Beyond Religious Tourism: Twinning as a Missionary Method," 1.

[46] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 181.

[47] Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self*, 36; Also Wright, *The Mission of God*.

inverse of that – how the stronger partner renders account to the weaker partner. In scripture this is true of both person-to-person covenants and the God-to-man covenants. Two quick examples of the former are the actions of David towards Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9) and of Abimelech towards Isaac (Genesis 26).

It is interesting when a stronger man enters into accountability with a weaker one, but what I find astonishing is how *YHWH* freely submits to accountability through covenant. After God entered into Covenant with Abram, Abram asks God for a sign to guarantee that He will in fact do all that He has covenanted to do for Abram (Genesis 15:8). That is a bold request requiring considerable courage, given the relative bargaining positions of God and Abram, and after God starts His dialogue with Abram with the words "Do not fear, Abram" (Genesis 15:1)!

But God doesn't just meet Abram's request halfway – He fully obliges Abraham. He does so in the rituals of "cutting" or signing a covenant with Abraham. Appropriating a common ANE practice, YHWH passes between the halves of cut animals, thus saying to Abraham "As these animals have been slaughtered, so may it be done to me if I do not fulfil the commitments I have made." Then he took an oath before Abraham, swearing by the highest authority, the greatest witness that He could – Himself – that He would fulfil His promises to Abram. Whereas other ANE cultures regularly swore by other deities, YHWH swore by himself.

Thus the whole ceremony was intended to convey to Abraham "Listen, I am spelling out as clearly as I possibly can what I am going to do, telling you the exact extent of the land you will possess, the exact peoples whom you will dispossess, even the 400 years of captivity your offspring will spend in Egypt. I pledge by the most powerful rituals you understand that I will do all I have promised. I swear by the highest authority that I will be true to our covenant agreement. Rest assured – I am holding myself accountable to our agreement."

Astonishingly, God does not ask Abraham to requite His unilateral declaration of accountability, and Abraham does follow the normal custom and walk between the halved sacrificial animals as well. Te point here is not that Abraham is not accountable to God – far from it! – but that God, the stronger partner, appropriated the medium of covenant to hold himself accountable to Abraham, the weaker partner.

This is not the usual pattern we see around us. Anyone who has been around mission partnerships has an experiential knowledge of how accountability generally

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[48] Foster, "The Missiology of Old Testament Covenant."

works: the weaker partner (who often receives training or projects or funds) accounts for their use of funds or resources or implementation of trainings to the stronger partner (usually the northern church/partner). Covenant accountability offers us a clear alternative for how the balance of accountability *could* work between parties of unequal power and authority.

5.5 So, Whose Family this Christmas? Sharing People (and Food) in Partnership

Imagine, for a moment, a young family which ends up visiting only the mum's side of the family every Christmas holiday. The reason for that is simply because her parents have a more exotic yard and more interesting neighbours. "That's inexcusably bad behaviour!" we would rightly say.

What, then, should we say to the fact that northern church members of every stripe regularly visit their southern partners (and their partners yards and neighbours), without ever receiving reciprocal visitors in their own homes? If we use the story as an analogy of local-to-local missions, it seems to me that many mission endeavours are just as one-sided as the young family above. A more *reciprocal* alternative could involve Northern congregations inviting God to work among them by receiving a "gift" of a missionary(s)-in-residence from their partner overseas, opening up their homes and lives in order to know and be known. In exchange, northern Christian communities can communicate their value and esteem for their mission partners by giving a valuable "gift": a long-term missionary, gifted as a part of the covenantal bond between local fellowships.

An integral part of solidifying this bond among the Hebrews and other peoples of the ANE was the sharing of a meal together, as a part of ceremonializing the covenant making – so much so that "one way to forbid establishing covenantal relationship was to forbid eating together"![49] This is the *centripetal* aspect of Covenant, in which we are drawn *into* fellowship with each other and our covenant Lord. In many cultures around the world, sharing a meal together communicates a "fellowship of belonging," a recognition of community.[50] This is certainly true in Cambodia. Of all the terrible atrocities and brutalities suffered under the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians have repeatedly told me that one of the most humiliating aspects of life under the regime was how they were forced to eat together with complete strangers, sharing rice together from the same pot. Mary Oduyoye relates that in Africa "to eat

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[49] Elazar, *Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel*, 66.
[50] Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 120.

from the same dish is to enter into vital relationship with the other, hence, for me, the pathos and tragedy... of the Last Supper; 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping his bread in the same dish with me' (Mk. 14:20)."[51]

Around the table of the Last Supper, Jesus and his friends entered into a New Covenant relationship. Memorialized in the Eucharist, Christian fellowships today celebrate together their mutual covenant with God through Christ, and through that vertical relationship, in turn, they celebrate their covenant brotherhood and sisterhood.[52]

The covenant meal reminds us of this kinship, as well the importance of cadence, history, and indeed of ceremony itself - things perhaps neglected in the instantaneous and pragmatic cultures of the West. Hahn identifies a standard covenant formulary in the biblical literature, starting with a "preamble" that then moves on to a "historical prologue."[53] The preamble is not mere formality, but rather it is a voluntary self-disclosure of the basic nature of each covenant partner to the other, as well as a disclosure of the nature of their shared connections with the other. The second part of the covenant formulary, the "historical prologue," involves a recitation of all that God has done to bring both parties into this partnership, sharing God's leading and directing with one another, akin to the accounting of God's mighty works in bringing His people from slavery into the Promised Land as told at the covenant ceremonies of Sinai and Moab.[54] Among mission partners, such a recitation is best done over a meal, a meal which is itself, perhaps, best centred on the Eucharist memorial meal of Jesus and his friends.

The covenant celebration around an extended meal(s) is a valuable reminder and a challenge to the church in the West to slow down…to disclose ourselves before asking of others… to share with each other God's leading and goodness… to share a meal… and to acknowledge that Jesus has made us to be One Body, covenant brothers and sisters.

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[51] Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 28.

[52] The inextricability of the two relationships, vertical and horizontal, under the New Covenant is clearly shown in Paul's letter reprimanding the Corinthians (see I Cor. 11:18-34) for their each-for-his-own celebration of the Passover/Eucharist meal. Given the context, Paul's warning of judgement if they do not "judge the *body*" correctly could be referring to the *body* of Christ Jesus (the vertical relationship), or the *body* of Christ, the Church (the horizontal relationship). Perhaps Paul left it ambiguous so as to purposefully include *both* within His reference to the *body*.

[53] Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 49. His six categories are: Preamble, Historical Prologue, Covenant Stipulations, Documentary Clauses, Invocation of Witnesses, and Dual Sanctions.

[54] See Exodus 19:4 & Deuteronomy 5:2-6 for the historical introduction to the Sinaic/Horab covenant-making ceremony, and likewise see Deuteronomy 29:1-8 for the Moab covenant re-affirmation ceremony.

6. CONCLUSION

The task of reaching the unreached with the blessing of Abraham and the commandments of Jesus is reflected in the *centrifugal* aspect of covenant. Christopher H.J. Wright points out that redemptive history starts in Genesis chapter twelve with God's centrifugal command to Abraham to "Go."[55] Starting with Abraham, God repeatedly uses the covenant motif as a vehicle to carry forth His promise of blessing all the kinships of the earth.[56] Jesus' instructions to "Go and make disciples" in the last chapter of the gospel of Matthew continues the pattern: Wright and Vogels[57] argue that the Great Commission itself is best understood as a covenantal proclamation.[58] As we continue the work of the Great Commission, we would do well to remember that covenantal relationships are purposed by God to reach every last kinship group on earth with the blessing He initiated through Abraham.

The God above history has shown Himself to be resolutely patient, strategically content to bond Himself to His covenant bride and work though her until the fullness of time has arrived, and the wedding feast is celebrated. We would do well to show such resolute patience in our own partnerships, celebrating a feast with our covenant brothers and sisters, celebrating together all that God has done to enable His people to purposefully bridge cultures and borders in furtherance of the *Missio Dei.*

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[55] Wright, *The Mission of God*.

[56] McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*.

[57] Wright, *The Mission of God*; Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*.

[58] The Great Comission matches up with a classic (though condensed) covenantal declaration formula: Preable + Historical Prologue = "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Covenant Stipulations = "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them...." Invocation of Witnesses + Blessings/Curses: "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

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