

Sussex Gospel Partnership

The problem with ecumenical associations

The Sussex Gospel Partnership is a fairly recent development in the last few years which combines quite disparate churches in the old Sussex area (i.e. East and West Sussex) into a formal union. Regarding its mission it says that it is,

A Partnership of Bible-centred churches in Sussex working together to train leaders, strengthen and plant churches, and advance the gospel. Inspired by the various Gospel Partnerships that have been formed around the country, a group of Anglican and Free Church leaders from across Sussex began to meet in the Spring of 2006 to discuss the value of doing something similar in our locality. Motivated by a vision of Bible-centred churches working together to train leaders, strengthen and plant churches, and advance the gospel, the result is the formation of THE SUSSEX GOSPEL PARTNERSHIP. Not simply a fellowship of people who enjoy each other's company, but a Partnership of churches who believe it is better, and more effective, to work together.

[About Us](#) - The Sussex Gospel Partnership¹

The partner churches are, so far:

- All Saints, Crowborough
- All Saints, Danehill
- All Saints, Eastbourne
- All Saints, Lindfield
- All Souls, Eastbourne
- Arundel Baptist Church; Baptist
- Bishop Hannington Church; Anglican church in Hangleton, Hove. Doctrinal basis varies depending upon the resident vicar. Has many Charismatics in the congregation.
- Bolney Village Chapel; Originally a Countess of Huntington Connection (Calvinistic Methodist) church.
- Calvary Evangelical Church; FIEC
- Chailey Free Church; FIEC. Has women preachers.
- Christ Church, Brighton; Anglican church without a church building. Currently meets in the Circus Circus Pub in Preston Circus, Brighton.
- Christ Church, Haywards Heath; FIEC
- Christ Church, Horam;
- Emmanuel, Hastings; Anglican
- Holy Cross, Hove;
- Holy Trinity, Eastbourne
- Holy Trinity, Eridge
- Hurstpierpoint Evangelical Church; FIEC
- New Life Church, Moulsecoomb; Independent
- Park Hill Evangelical Church; FIEC
- Peacehaven Evangelical Free Church; FIEC
- Rudgwick Chapel

- St Albans, Frant
- St Bartholomew's, Maresfield
- St John's, Felbridge
- St John's, Polegate
- St Margaret's, Angmering
- St Margaret's Community Church, Angmering
- St Mark's, Little Common
- St Mary's with Emmanuel, Hailsham
- St Mary's, Westham
- St Mary Magdalene, South Bersted
- St Matthew's, St Leonard's-on-Sea
- Three Bridges Free Church, Crawley; FIEC

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is simply to make a brief evaluation of yet another ecumenical attempt at empire building in the modern church. Thankfully, we stand apart from all such pointless and unbiblical exercises, but we have many friends who are dragged into such ventures against their wills by their pastors. Some have expressed concern to us seeking our views and we have many friends who are already in this partnership through their church. I will try to make brief but pertinent points. [I will not develop detailed exegesis or use multiple textual support here for the purpose of simplicity and brevity. The principles covered in my arguments can be seen developed in my website articles.]

No admixture allowed

A basic principle of Christian living is that we do not make partnerships with compromised works.

Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?

[Amos 3:3](#)

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them And walk among *them*. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.' Therefore 'Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'

[2 Cor 6:14–17](#)

Purity of constitution has been an essential component of God's temple from the time of the Tabernacle onwards. The elements used in the Tabernacle, for instance, could not be copied, mixed or placed on unsanctified objects. We see this exemplified in the holy oil and spices used in the Tabernacle services:

"And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. **It shall not be poured on man's flesh**; nor shall you make *any other* like it, according to its composition. It *is* holy, *and* it shall be holy to you. Whoever

compounds *any* like it, or **whoever puts *any* of it on an outsider**, shall be cut off from his people.' " And the LORD said to Moses: "Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with *these* sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, *and* holy. And you shall beat *some* of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But *as for* the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes *any* like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people."

[Ex 30:31–38](#)

It is a divine principle that you do not take what God has sanctified and put it on something foreign, or mix it with something outside its intended use. What is typified in the Tabernacle (the shadow of the real) is realised in God's people; his true temple. Ecumenism is abhorrent to God because it is mixing up the genuine with the compromised or the apostate. God hates such compromise.

Now this association in Sussex (where I am based) is but one of many such initiatives which all seek to unite things which differ. The purpose behind this is due to the fact that the churches on their own are simply not effective; they are not growing and they are not finding success in evangelism. However, instead of making a proper self-assessment and realising that they are working unbiblically, and then putting that right before God, they run to men for help and support just like Hebrew kings that sought political alliances in the OT.

Seeking partnerships to find success is actually a symptom that something is not right in the church.

The Biblical mandate

God commands that pastors shepherd the sheep. This means that they must care for them sacrificially; even giving their lives for them. This is an onerous task enough for the leaders of the local church; it is a heavy burden but it is very satisfying and it is pleasing to God. To really edify the church is a huge task for pastors and one which is rarely done effectively. How many modern pastors are regularly catechising the sheep to ensure that they develop fully in Biblical doctrine; very few I suspect. Yet this is one major task of pastoring.

There is enough for pastors to do in feeding the sheep and defending them from wolves (something else that is not done effectively today, and yet this is a vital job²) without pastors finding more to do in additional meetings based upon the requirements of an association. It is a sin to get involved with additional pointless works at the cost of not doing your pastoral job properly.

So, the first point is that unless the pastors of these churches are really brilliantly effective at their Biblical job, they should not be taking on additional work.

The problem is that being a leader in an association (especially on the steering committee) fills people with pride and puffs them up. They do it because they enjoy it and feel fulfilled in the peer relationships with other church leaders. It raises them above the humdrum life of local pastoral work. This is a great snare, especially for young men.

The disparity of association

Many of the churches in this partnership are already in a previous association, such as Affinity, Evangelical Alliance or the FIEC. If these were working properly then a new partnership would not be required. If the old ones didn't work, why should a new one? This is just re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic as it slips down.

Then there is a great disparity in the churches in this partnership. How can that work?

The majority are Anglican. In that case, those churches which claim to be evangelical should be having nothing to do with it at all. The Anglican Church is apostate and has been for decades. There can be no association between true evangelicals and such an apostate body.

Now if it is claimed that the churches involved are evangelical because the pastor is evangelical, then that pastor is compromised and hypocritical; such a man can never please God in his ministry. That pastor pledged an allegiance before God and men to the laws of the Anglican synod; if he is denying those laws in practice then he is denying his vows before God and is a hypocrite. God hates hypocrites as he hated the Pharisees.

So, if the church is faithful to the Anglican synod, then evangelical churches should not join with them. If the particular church is not faithful to the synodical laws, then evangelicals should not associate with them since the leader is a hypocrite and totally compromised.

Furthermore, what about the danger of bringing your sheep into fellowship with people who fully embrace wrong doctrine and aberrant practices. This is wicked pastoring and very dangerous for the body. God will make such pastors answer for this damaging behaviour. Instead of warning the sheep about wolves that are prowling around, such pastors have taken the sheep out of the sheepfold and led them into a wolf's den.

But some of the other churches are also apostate. Many of these churches preach a compromised Gospel, such as Arminianism, Amyraldism and near liberalism. Some of the churches have women preachers, and not just the Anglicans. Some of the churches have women counsellors (i.e. acting as elders). One thinks that it is acceptable to meet in a pub in the centre of Brighton's clubland. At least one other church is committed to a seeker sensitive church meeting. At least one is led by deacons; an unbiblical form of government. One church is so confused that it says it is credobaptist but accepts new members who were baptised as babies.

The pastors are similarly disparate. One was trained at Oakhill, another at Cliffe (Methodist), yet another at Spurgeon's. Some are from Anglican stock while others have had no training at all. Such diversity explains the wide differences of doctrinal base in the churches.

So even a brief evaluation of the listed churches from their websites (coupled with personal knowledge) reveals the following. There are churches listed that are:

- Arminian
- Amyraldian (such as Free-Offer)
- Near Liberal.
- Has women preachers or female officers.

- Semi-Charismatic
- Supposedly Calvinistic but are not.
- Anglican
- Seeker-Sensitive
- Baptist (credobaptist)
- Paedobaptist

How can any genuine evangelical, Reformed church commit themselves to such a mixture of errors?

Church Planting

One of the purposes of the partnership is to plant new churches. One immediately has to ask how is this going to work out with such differences within the association. Will such a new church be paedobaptist or credobaptist? Will it have a woman minister or a male? Will it have an Arminian Gospel or a Calvinistic one? Will it be semi-Charismatic or traditional? Will it sing modern choruses or hymns? Will it be Seeker-Sensitive or Biblically based?

Such a project is doomed to disaster; it cannot work because it is utterly compromised.

Conclusion

All that we have seen so far demands that the Biblical believer avoids such a mess as being compromised and ecumenical. Like all ecumenical associations, it demands a compromised Gospel and dumbed down doctrine as a base. For fellowship in the partnership everyone has to ignore their own doctrinal distinctives and support a compromised position.

However, the chief problem in the formal association is that none of this strategy is Biblical in the slightest in its foundation; how can genuine Bible-believing people get involved with it?

God has sovereignly ordained a specific body to represent him upon the earth. Globally that body is the body of Christ, the invisible church on earth; a part of the greater invisible body in heaven. It comprises all Christians. However, that larger, global, invisible body is represented in localities, in a visible body, which are also called churches. Thus we have the church in Corinth or in Rome mentioned in Scripture and well as the body of Christ on earth.

Now these local churches are given specific commands regarding their structure, and there are also apostolic precedents which ought to be followed.

The first is that they are small

this is why in every case in the NT the local church meets in a house. There is no church meeting in the NT which is not in a house (the Hall of Tyrannus was not used as a church meeting but for evangelistic debates). Now if your church meets in a dedicated building that is for you to defend, but my chief point here is that the church is small not large. This is God's strategy—so there is no advantage in seeking to develop a formal body of believers that is very large (i.e. a fellowship of multiple churches).

A development of this principle of smallness is that the church grows and has influence spiritually and invisibly rather than by obvious presence and large numbers. To affect an area, the way of man is to gather force of numbers in alliances and dominate a situation by this sizeable presence. This is not the way the Lord works in the church.

Note that Jesus compared the church to salt ([Matt 5:13](#)). The point of this symbol is that salt particles are small and when placed upon food they disappear from sight completely. They are not visible in the meal, However, salt has a power through its strong taste and the small salt particles can completely dominate the meal, though invisible. Such is the church. The early church meetings were invisible to the Roman imperial system, meeting unknown in houses or in woods and surviving persecution thereby. But these small meetings eventually came to dominate the Roman Empire, though they never had any combined institutions. There were no alliances of churches into corporate bodies; there were no official partnerships; they just preached the Gospel in their invisible way under the radar of the imperial system.

Secondly, the church is a family

This is why it is small. It is 'the household of God' ([Eph 2:19](#); [Gal 6:10](#)), and the word 'household' means 'family'. It is the place where God is our Father and we are his children. Like human families, the people in the church are interdependent; they all have a function and all work together in a God-given harmony. This is why we see the phrase 'one-another' over 60 times in the NT.

Thirdly, the church is a place of edification.

Over and over Paul uses this word in [1 Corinthians 14](#) alone. The church is a place of mutual edification, where people share in ministry.

Fourthly, the church is an organism and not an organisation.

It is not run like an organisation but like an organism. It is a place where everybody is submissive to everybody else ([1 Pt 5:5](#)). It does not have a hierarchical leadership that is top down. It does not require administrators and secretaries, it needs no office workers, general manager or anything else. It only requires a few deacons to deal with practical matters, which largely relate to dealing with the finances and giving them to the poor and needy.

The leadership of the church is in the hands of elders, and these lead largely by example, like a father (under God) in a family.

They deal with the teaching, counselling and admonition of the church as well as nurturing new ministry. In fact their chief task is to so equip the saints that everyone learns what their gift is and uses it. There are only elders as the spiritual leaders of the church; there are no other officers. The elders are a team of equal pastor-teachers, each having the ability to teach and counsel. There is no Biblical evidence for a senior pastor and Jesus demands that we do not give leaders special names of respect. In fact, Jesus demanded that church leaders must be servants.

Therefore, churches which have multiple leadership types are unbiblical. Formal titles such as minister, senior pastor, associate pastor, vicar, moderator and so on are unbiblical. Functions such as administrator, general manager, secretary, worship leader, and various ministry titles are all unbiblical. According to [1 Corinthians 12](#) everybody is a minister.

All this means that there are no officers of leadership above that of elder. There are no structural bodies above that of local church. There are no formal gatherings or partnerships where churches

join together in a formal body. Neither are there denominations where churches are united in one corporate national body.

Church—a body called out

The word *ekklesia* means ‘a body called out’. The whole point of the local church is that it is a small body of people called out of the mass of the population by God’s drawing power. The attempt to re-gather those called out churches into a bigger body is totally contrary to God’s purposes.

This body called out by God is given all the power and resources it needs to fully achieve God’s mission on earth. If the church simply obeys God’s word and trusts God for resources it will be successful (though not necessarily in man’s eyes). Thus the chief means of evangelism in Scripture is the personal witnessing of individuals to their neighbours (i.e. everyone they meet). There are no Gospel meetings, no dragging people into churches, no special events—in other words, none of the things which this association plans to do. The church needs no special methodology, no special planning, no special associations no regional bodies, no special Gospel events, no dramas, no musicals, no seeker-sensitive dumbed-down meetings; it just needs believers to witness to Christ. Apart from this there is also the special ministry of evangelists who proclaim the Gospel.

But what of Acts 15?

The synod of Acts 15 only occurred once in the history covered by Acts. This shows that such a synod is unusual and not the norm. Where there is an issue of controversy that affects the churches in a region, it may occasionally be necessary for them to come together to discuss the matter. This discussion was not at a leadership level but involved all the people as the text makes clear. James only summed up the situation that seemed good to all present. It was a consensus decision. When that problem was resolved, there was no need for another synod for many years. When it was complete, the individual churches returned to where they came from unchanged in any way, meeting as independent bodies.

The synod of Jerusalem gives us no foundation for the idea of ecumenical associations.

What about the partnership mentioned in Philippians?

The word fellowship (*koinonia*) appears in [Phil 1:5, 4:15](#), which is translated as ‘partnership’ in some versions. This has nothing at all to do with forming a formal association of churches. Paul is referring to the sharing of money for his needs provided by the Philippian church.

Those who use these verses to support this association are desperately clutching at straws and reveal their spiritual ignorance.

There is no support for ecumenical bodies of any kind. God is building his church and this is by a proliferation of local *ekklesias*, not an over-arching regional denomination formed by man, based upon compromised principles. Churches join such bodies at their own risk and to their own damage.

Why do I say ‘damage’? It is because when you enter into a formal alliance you are making a covenant with that institution that ties you spiritually by your commitment. Your church is then affected by the spiritual status of the whole compromised union. If you covenant to join with

apostate or compromised bodies, then you too become compromised. At this point further spiritual progress is impossible, you are formally joined to something apostate.

The apostle makes this clear,

Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'

[1 Cor 15:33](#)

The word 'habits' primarily means abode, dwelling place, and then by extension, custom or morals. Associating with evil company corrupts your dwelling place.

He also said,

Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

[2 Tim 2:19](#)

We do not join with something iniquitous. Is a false Gospel not iniquitous? Is unbiblical church leadership not iniquitous?

Your glorying *is* not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven ... But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is ... an idolater ... not even to eat with such a person.

[1 Cor 5:6-11](#)

Therefore 'Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'

[2 Cor 6:17](#)

To this we can add the words of other men of God,

He who walks with wise *men* will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed.

[Prov 13:20](#)

Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.

[Rev 18:4](#)

To make a formal alliance with a body which has within its members a false Gospel, a denial of Scripture, false theology, unbiblical leadership, unbiblical sacraments, and unbiblical ways of gathering together, means that you become apostate with them.

The true church cannot make alliances with compromised organisations. Does not the whole history of Israel show that such syncretism ruins spiritual life? The Jews did not always become outright rebels but simply adopted the practices of the heathen to worship Yahweh through spiritual alliances. The chief sin of Israel was syncretism; making spiritual alliances with apostate bodies. God called this adultery ([Jer 3:8](#); [Ezek 23:37](#)) and condemned it out of hand. This is a sharp lesson for us to retain our independence and meet simply as God commands us in the apostolic writings.

Joining ecumenical alliances with compromised bodies is not just inadvisable, it is a sin.

ADDENDUM: this condemnation of formal, ecumenical organisations does not inhibit local true churches having fellowship together. That is absolutely normal. Indeed, such churches should support one another in prayer and practical issues, as the Greek churches sent money for food to

the Judaeen churches experiencing famine. What is to be condemned is a formal alliance with an overarching institution that comprises apostate or compromised churches.

Footnotes

1 [About Us - The Sussex Gospel Partnership](#) 29 January 2012 (saved locally as [MAFF](#) and [MHTML](#) archives)

2 A key part of pastoral work is pointing out wolves to the sheep so that they avoid them. This task is rarely done these days for fear of appearing intolerant. By this omission, the sheep read the books of wolves, listen to the CDs of wolves and imbibe the teaching of wolves. The result is damaged sheep. The pastor thus sins by omission.