

## SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

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# Participation

#2. Are we finding ways to engage life together through denominational, conference, and local events, service, and fellowship?

## 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, NIV

And now brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

And here's my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according

to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

Hello, mission friends. In this passage of Scripture, Paul is encouraging the church of Corinth to get back on track in their giving for the Jerusalem church.

My name is Derrick Boggs, and I serve as the senior pastor of the second-oldest, still-in-existence Covenant church in the small town of Princeton, Illinois. As I like to tell everyone, we are a 152-year-old church plant! Our small town is a charming island surrounded by an ocean of corn and soybean fields. At times, it feels like we are a tiny bit of tranquility in a topsy-turvy world. Of course, that is just a delusion, but it is a delusion many folks gladly embrace—not just in our own town, but in other more sheltered, isolated, or privileged communities of the world. There's something in us that longs to shut out the messiness of the world and its problems and be around people with whom we already have a lot in common—socially, racially, politically, educationally, and even recreationally.

Unfortunately, this is a reality in many churches, as well. Through the years, in every local church to which I have belonged or helped lead, I have run into some version of this: "I don't feel comfortable with those people coming to our church." The truth is that many of us feel more comfortable in churches that mirror the segregated nature of our society. We just need to be honest about that. However, the Scriptures make clear that God has no interest in accommodating our desire for a sequestered life. Instead, God calls us into the adventure of life in God's kingdom which draws us into fellowship with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds.

One of the exciting things on this kingdom journey is that God calls us into an ongoing lifestyle of participation



on a number of levels. In this series, we're talking about the sixfold test of our denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church. The sixfold test is a model for growing multiethnic ministry across a number of dimensions as we become a multiethnic mosaic of churches. Each of the six dimensions begins with the letter P. Today, we will look at the second P—participation—and how we can be part of each other's lives across the boundaries that often splinter our society. The participation dimension asks this question: Are we finding ways to engage life together through denominational, conference, and local events, service, and fellowship?

Before we answer that question, let's see biblically why this idea of participation is so close to God's heart.

Before we are called into life together, we are called by God as people of all ages, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds to participate in God's life as we live in Christ. This is salvation: The divine intervention of the Trinity in human lives, which frees us from self-centered identities and brings us into life lived with God. Salvation is not a transaction. It's not about praying a prayer and getting a certificate. It's not about jumping through religious hoops of baptism, confirmation, and church membership so we can say, "I'm in." Salvation is being joined to God's life by faith in his Son as the Holy Spirit draws us ever deeper into the reality of who God is and what he wants for us in this world. Salvation should be seen as participation with God as we live in Christ. In fact, over 100 times in Paul's letters, he describes the life of faith as being "in Christ" or "in him in whom..." thereby emphasizing that we are living a life that is constantly participating in Christ's own life—the One who has risen from the dead and is Lord.

In some mysterious way, we who follow Christ are included in the person and work of Christ on the cross and at the empty tomb and in his ongoing life with God. Romans 6:11 says, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." That is our realm of living. That is where we live and move and have our being and participate in God's divine will. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ" (rooted in and participating in his life), "the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" New life is possible only as we are drawn into participation with the sufferings, resurrection, and ongoing life of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In Colossians 3:3, Paul puts it like this, "For

you died" (that old identity rooted in all kinds of wrong things) "and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." We live in him. Salvation is participation in Christ. We don't have to fully understand it; we just have to accept it, receive it, and live out of this new identity in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Paul is asking for practical help from the church at Corinth, but he does so based upon the prior and foundational reality of the church's new life in Christ. The key to this passage is found in verse 9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

Our participation in the life of the broader church is rooted first in our participation in the generosity of God toward us, his people. We find this concept of generosity in Paul's use of the word "grace." "Grace" is an important word in this passage; it describes the generosity of our Lord Jesus, who comes to us willingly, who gives himself freely, and who withholds nothing—including his very life—so that we might be redeemed from sin, reconciled to God, and become part of his purpose for the world. Grace is also a huge part of our calling to live out and participate in God's generosity. It's a big word in the New Testament—bigger than a tidy definition, like "God's unmerited favor toward us." It is that, but also much more. Grace is the generosity of God in Christ calling us to share and participate in ongoing life with him.

Paul describes the incarnation—the indwelling of God in the flesh—as an act of grace and an act of generosity by Jesus. Christ was rich—rich in position, rich in power, rich in joyful communion within the Trinity, and rich in ownership of all things. "Yet for your sakes," Paul proclaims, "he became poor." He left it all behind. He didn't hold on to position, status, or divine prerogatives. Therefore, the model of following Jesus is not upward mobility; it's not the American dream. It is downward mobility; it is a willingness to lay aside any privileges and benefits that have come to us for the sake of loving the least of these. Jesus showed and modeled that kind of extravagance and reckless generosity. Paul says that Jesus did this "so that you through his poverty might become rich." For our sakes he became poor; he left it all behind so that we, through his poverty—being joined to his sacrifice—might become rich.

And this is the mystery of the Christian faith: Through the weakness of God, through the humiliation of Jesus,



we've received everything. We've received forgiveness despite our sin. We've been invited into union with Christ despite our unholiness. We've been adopted as children in God's family despite our failures. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives, enabling us to serve God in all kinds of ways. We've been given status that we didn't have to work for and earn. We are "joint heirs" with Christ (Romans 8:17). We have become heirs of our Father's promises, heirs of a new life, heirs of eternal life, and heirs of all the riches in heaven made available to us. Regardless of our socially stratified position in this world, in Christ we participate in God's boundless generosity to all who belong to him. Just consider that for a moment.

When my wife, Jessica, and I got married, we went through the process that all married couples go through of deciding how to manage our finances. We looked at different options and thought about different approaches. Ultimately, we decided that we would put everything we had into one combined checking account. We decided that everything one of us had belonged to the other. We knew there would be times when one of us might bring home more income than the other, but for us, being one flesh meant granting each other full access to all of the material blessings of the other. In Christ, we have been granted full access to all of the riches and resources of our heavenly Father. However, the Bible also makes clear that these gifts are not to be hoarded. We are called to share the resources of God equally with everyone else who is also in Christ.

God calls churches of all ages, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds to participate in each other's lives as we share our common life in Christ. This can be hard to remember because of how individualistic we are in the West. It's never been only about our personal relationship with Jesus. We have a personal relationship, but we don't have a private relationship. We have a personal relationship, but it isn't an individual relationship. When we are called to believe, we are also called to belong; and there is no difference between the two biblically. Everyone who is in Christ has an equal share in him and in the resources of others who make up his body.

Again, this is hard for us to grapple with because of how much we possess personally in the West (especially in terms of material resources) versus what so many people in the rest of the world have. Yet the Christian in

Central Africa and the person who is in Christ in Guatemala is completely equal with you and me from the rich point of view of what we have in common in Christ. The Scriptures are calling us to greater equality in the body of Christ—where no people throughout the world who are in Christ suffer lack while others in other parts of the world who are in Christ have much more than they need.

In Galatians 3:28, we read: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Much could be said about that verse. It reminds us that we have many companions in Christ and that all of us have equal access to all of the promises and benefits and blessings that come along with being in the body of Christ. Our external differences bring a lot of inequality. For example, your zip code in this country can affect how successful you are in life materially. What nation you were born into determines (for most of us) how far along we will get in life, no matter how hard we work. But in Christ, our external differences and the inequality that comes with them—in terms of power, wealth, and privilege—should not define or determine how we relate to each other.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul calls the church at Corinth to participate in the mutual interdependence that should characterize the body of Christ across geography, across ethnicity, and across circumstance. Paul does this by highlighting how three churches from three different places with three different ethnic makeups share their riches in Christ. And these riches aren't just material; they are also spiritual and communal.

Paul is encouraging the churches in Greece and Macedonia, which are largely Gentile and from varied ethnic backgrounds with some Jews, to support financially and bless the mother church in Jerusalem, which is mostly Jewish. Paul was concerned about the collection of the benevolence offering for the mother church in Jerusalem. New Testament scholar Michael Gorman points out many reasons for this collection. I'm going to share three:

- 1) Paul wanted to express biblical support for the authorities in Jerusalem and to acknowledge that he was submitting to them and cooperating with them in this movement called "The Way."
- 2) Paul wanted to help alleviate the suffering of an impoverished group of believers in Jerusalem



who had experienced much persecution and opposition. This was a way for one part of the body of Christ to build up another that was in distress.

- 3) He wanted to help the Gentile believers tangibly express their spiritual debt to Jewish believers in a practical way. No anti-Semitism is permissible in the New Testament even though some have argued historically that it's there. Paul has high reverence for the Jews and especially for the Jewish church and is now calling the Gentiles who owe so much to them to help support them.

So Paul unpacks the relationship among three churches: the Jerusalem church, the Macedonian church up north of Greece, and the Corinthian church down south in Greece. The Corinthian church had expressed enthusiasm about this giving project during an earlier visit. In fact, it was their initial enthusiasm that fired up the Macedonian churches as Paul and his companions traveled among them. But Corinth got distracted; they started to slack off and lag behind in their giving. Now Paul wants the Corinthian church to complete this important work. Their mutual participation in this labor of generosity is making an invisible, spiritual reality into a practical reality. Their joint union with Christ and their oneness in Christ across ethnic and social differences become clear as they unite their resources for the mutual benefit of each other.

Paul calls the Corinthian church to participation with these other churches in a number of ways. First, he points out in verses 1 and 7 that God has given the Macedonians the “grace of giving.” There’s that word again, “grace.” Grace is God’s gift to us, but it’s used here to describe specific gifts God gives. Here he has given the Macedonian churches the gift of giving. Their generosity is a grace from God that will bless and encourage the whole church. We often think of spiritual gifts as something God gives to me or to you or to another individual. Gifts that come to us from God are not just for the individual. God graces whole churches with gifts and attributes that we are to take and share with other churches and beyond our walls.

This particular church had the grace of giving. What grace has God given your church? Too often, we focus on what we lack. But what has God given your church?

Maybe you’re not doing things like the big church down the road, but has God given you caring hearts? Has God given you compassion for your community? Has God given you financial resources and a desire to give that can bless people beyond your own walls? Has God given you a good facility that could be shared with another church that is looking for a place to worship—maybe a church from another ethnicity? Has God given you people who are willing to invest in or mentor or teach others? What assets has God given you by his grace so that you can bless his broader church?

Second, Paul points out that the amount that is given is not the biggest concern. What matters most is having hearts that are responsive to God and willing to participate in the life of God’s church wherever possible. I love what Paul says about the Macedonian churches. In verses 2 and 3, he says, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” (That’s strange; their overflowing joy in Christ—even while they were right in the middle of their circumstance of extreme poverty—somehow produced generosity.) “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” I’m always touched when I see people in and around my church, who I know have limited means, showing up to serve and wanting desperately to give, even if it’s a little. The hearts of the Christians in Macedonia were longing to participate in what God was doing. And Paul says, in verse 5, “They exceeded our expectations.”

Paul continues, “They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.” God gave the Macedonian churches the gift of generosity that had nothing to do with their circumstances. They were poorer than the Corinthian church, and they had suffered more persecution. But they were overflowing with joy in the Lord, being rooted in his goodness and in his life; and they overflowed with joy at the opportunity to share with others who were in need. It had to do with their yieldedness to God and their sense of vision. These Macedonian churches shared God’s vision that the church is bigger than the four walls, bigger than our denominations, and bigger than our cultural, ethnic, social, and linguistic backgrounds; and they couldn’t wait to participate and be part of it.

Finally, Paul is not above using some gentle comparisons to urge them on in participating in the global



mission. In verse 8, he says, “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.” It’s a “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” kind of thing (which I do not recommend in parenting, but Paul uses it here). It’s like he’s saying, “Here’s what the Macedonians are doing in rough circumstances and poverty. You folks have a pretty wealthy lifestyle down there in Corinth. How can you step up to meet them and help the Jerusalem believers?” I think Paul understands that it is always helpful for us to hear how God is working and moving in other churches and in other places. Hearing about the movements of God’s grace in other churches can create an “iron sharpening iron” moment where we become energized for greater participation in God’s purposes in our own place and in what he’s doing around the world.

I want to tell you a little bit about a partnership that our church formed with a church plant on the South Side of Chicago. It had been on our hearts for some time that maybe we could participate in a church plant—that we could support, assist, and pray for them. I was envisioning a church in a rural context like ours so we could easily understand and help. But then someone in the Central Conference came to me and said, “Hey, we have a church that’s being planted on the South Side of Chicago in Roseland. Would you and a couple of other churches in the Covenant be willing to jump on board?”

After we thought and prayed about that as a church, we said, “Yes, this is perfect. This is even better than what we were thinking because here’s an opportunity for us to participate in what God is doing in a sister church across the lines of race and geography that so often divide our state of Illinois. Those things don’t matter because we are going to work together on God’s kingdom along with this church plant in Roseland.” So for four years, we have partnered with Pastor David Washington and his congregation, and they are now being adopted into the Covenant as a full church in their own right. Our partnership is wonderful because we both had things that the other needed. We had financial resources and stability. We could contribute and be prayerful and be supportive. But they had a vision and a group of passionate people who were outwardly focused as a church in their neighborhood, and we needed to learn from them about how to do that better in our own. As our church shared resources and prayed for them, we learned from

them about having vision and becoming missional.

We had opportunities to visit, share our lives, and learn about each other’s challenges across geographical and racial lines. I was able to go on a Sankofa trip (a journey of racial righteousness) with Pastor Washington, and together we learned so much—or at least I learned a great deal from him. Two other churches were also involved in supporting their ministry. God used each church to spur the others on to generosity and participation in what God was doing—not in a paternalistic way of “Here’s some money,” but so that resources might be shared more equally across the whole church. As 2 Corinthians 8:14 says, “Your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality.”

Participation enriches the church every time we move into it together. Just as God called the Corinthian, Macedonian, and Jerusalem churches to participate together in the one mission of the church, God continues to call each local church—including yours—to participate fully in the lives and needs of other churches, especially across cultural dividing lines, to show the world that we are one church, in him, reconciled both to God and to each other.

God calls people of all ages and backgrounds to participate first in God’s life in Christ. Then he calls us to participate in each other’s lives as we share jointly in our common life in Christ. Finally, God calls us to live out these lofty spiritual realities in practical ways to accomplish God’s purposes. Second Corinthians 8 includes practical instructions, such as, “Titus will be coming to complete the collection. Please follow through as you started before” (vv. 17, 22-24, paraphrased). At some point, our lofty spiritualities must get practical. It’s easy to love the idea of being a multiethnic, multicultural church; and it’s certainly biblical. But at some point, we can’t merely love the idea; we must live into it by taking practical steps to participate in each other’s lives and churches.

Our denomination and conferences provide many opportunities for us to engage life together. Here are some practical examples:

- Partnering with and participating in a cross-cultural church plant. I highly recommend doing that if you’re able.
- Helping to fund pastors or congregation members



from less-resourced churches in economically challenged areas so that their pastors and people can attend denominational events like the Midwinter Conference for pastors or send delegates from their churches to Annual Meetings. Instead of just sending your church delegates, why not sponsor a church that can't afford to participate?

- Funding children from poorer churches to go to Covenant camps or sharing worship spaces. Even more important than sharing financial blessings (as important as those are) is sharing life. Sharing life is finding ways to worship together, share services, share outreach ideas, and get together and pray for each other and for each other's communities.
- Learning to understand each other culturally. In a time when we are being torn apart by extreme forces in our country, when it is easy to talk past each other on all sorts of painful issues and not hear each other, this is probably one of the most important things any of us could do. We have opportunities through Sankofa, Journey to Mosaic, Immigration Immersion, and other opportunities through conferences and the Love Mercy Do Justice mission priority of the denomination to interact cross-culturally.
- Just listening. When we take time to sit and listen and hear each other's stories, histories, and experiences, we can look for ways in which we can bear one another's burdens. Then we can say, "I see you. I hear you. How can I walk with you?"

It's important to look for those serendipitous moments that simply come along when we can be with each other. Second Corinthians 8:4 says the Macedonian churches "urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." The word "sharing" comes from the Greek word *koinania*, which is also translated as "fellowship," "participation," and "contribution." It is being a part of something large and more beautiful than ourselves. The Macedonian churches were urgently looking for this privilege. They wanted it. They had eyes open, and they were asking, "How can we participate? How can we be a part of something large and more beautiful than ourselves? How can we serve the body of Christ in other places?" We, too, can look for this privilege. Just pay attention. Sit at a table with people who don't speak your language. Embrace the awkwardness. Respectfully ask people to share their lived experience in America. Look for opportunities to connect with others.

Every act of learning and sharing and participating in the lives of our churches across the multiethnic mosaic that is the Covenant is an opportunity to invest in the Lord's own body, the church. We are blessing Jesus Christ and his lived out body in this world as we bless each other. And we are putting on display for the world our participation in Christ and with each other as his reconciled community. As we participate in Christ's life and in each other's lives and churches, especially in practical ways, we join with God in advancing his purposes for our world.

Today, God is calling us to leave our islands of privilege and protection from the messier, larger world around us and to participate in the chaotically beautiful kingdom that God is building. Participation means we don't merely cherish precious biblical truths, but we act on them. As we do, we put on display for the whole world the riches of grace, love, and fellowship that we get to share through the generosity of our Lord who became poor so that we might be rich in him and in each other. Blessed be God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and blessed be his kingdom now and forever more. Amen.