

A Practical Exploration of a Revolutionary Partnership

Tim Reddish

Partnership with God is hands-on, but where do we start? Here is a constructive proposal.

“Partnering with God” is built upon the foundation of God being *relational*. What that means on a theological and philosophical level has been explored by others in this book. Briefly, authentic partnership is—of necessity—based on *qualified* divine attributes concerning God’s relationship to time, knowledge, and power. Christians traditionally assume God is absolutely omnipotent, purely “outside” of time and, consequently, knows everything in minute detail. This perspective can lead to the belief in a future that is solely determined (directly or indirectly) by God. Since even *our* future is already fixed and known to God in this scenario, I suggest this conviction can inadvertently lead to a form of Christian fatalism—an “it is what it is” (or an “it will be what it will be”) mentality. This can also result in apathy or lethargy (why bother?) and even in passivity or paralysis as Christians wait for God to do something, including to explicitly “guide” us. This understanding of God and his relationship with creation does not, I submit, form the basis of a meaningful partnership with the Divine. It’s too one-sided. God has all the power and knowledge; we are subservient servants.

Taking divine partnership seriously, however, results in a different—and a more dynamic—way of living our calling. If God is engaged with time, then history is *real*; it is a genuine reciprocal journey of mutual discovery for both ourselves *and* God. Moreover, human beings have huge value to God, so much so that God elicits our input into history. Consequently, instead of being simply servants, we become partners. Of course, partnership with God does *not* mean a partnership of equals, God is always the Senior Partner! But by divine choice, God takes the notion of divine delegation seriously. That means without our contributing, things will not get done that ought to get done—and that brings genuine sorrow to our trinitarian God. We creatures therefore have a vital role in history; it is a weighty responsibility and, I suggest, the church has not always appreciated this fact because of distorted views of God’s nature and divine action—as illustrated above. That said, here I want to focus on some of the positive, practical implications of authentic partnership with God, characterized in terms of “*Eight Rs*,” that apply to both individuals and the church.

Responsibility – This means taking our divine calling seriously. We are made in the image of God and hence we have a divine purpose. That purpose is first to care responsibly for creation as God’s agents, as co-gardeners and as co-shepherds. We are also called to lead with integrity on God’s behalf as authorized regents. After all, the Old Testament prophets’ condemnation of Israel’s leadership was for their failure to shepherd their people with justice and compassion. In addition, Jesus’ Great Commission calls us to be God’s ambassadors, proclaiming and living out the upside-down values of God’s reign as portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount. Taken all-together, we need to humbly and responsibly own our calling as divine image-bearers to God’s world.

Relationship – Partnership with God also means being in relationship with all humankind—for we are *all* made in God’s image—but especially with those who take the above divine calling seriously. We are therefore to be active members of a praying, loving, and serving community. The early church in Acts was known for their mutual devotion, radical lifestyle, social justice, and commitment to God. This echoes the restorative principle of Jubilee from Isaiah that Luke uses to define the ministry of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth. This is, without doubt, a high and challenging calling, one that can only be partially¹ realized in continual partnership with the Spirit and through persistent prayer. Prayer—too complex a topic to consider here²—is more potent than we are inclined to think. For it is through prayer that we deliberately engage with an active and present God.

Reflection – We need not continually reinvent the wheel. Instead, we are to learn from others through soul-searching reflection. This entails studying and valuing the Scriptures, for through them our faith community believes God has spoken. When God speaks, things happen! It also means learning from history. For God’s Spirit continues to inspire the faithful in every generation; we recognize this in the reformers—both historical and contemporary. This requires us to become thoughtful, amateur theologians who reflect on the writings of various scholars. And we can also be encouraged by accounts of God’s presence and actions as experienced by witnesses in all ages and places. Sometimes we need to rediscover the buried treasures of history’s wisdom; not everything needs to be novel. Upon reflection and via contemplation, we can—through partnering with God and with others—discern what divine words we need to hear and proclaim today.

Risk-taking – Things that should happen will not happen unless we act boldly, and this calls for courage. Partnering with God is, then, a call to experiment. I suggest that sometimes we fail to act out of fear of failure, or because we are anxious of public humiliation. If the outcome only depended on ourselves, we might have legitimate grounds for such apprehension; but isn’t that underestimating our partnership with God and with others? Regardless, not all experiments will result in the outcome we originally envisaged. “Failure” is possible. Nevertheless, there is always the potential to learn something new and worthwhile along the way. Taking risks, however, does *not* mean being reckless and then expecting God to bail us out. That is why risk-taking requires wisdom and discernment—along with courage. I therefore believe risks can be worth taking, and without risk-taking we will never have the opportunity to learn something new.

Redundancy - Activities happen for a certain time and place. I suggest we can be too focused on legacy and reputation—and that may be an unhealthy factor in our reluctance to take risks. Letting go of legacy (particularly an egotistical one) and crippling traditions can be liberating. By redefining “success” we can appreciate the merits of obsolescence rather than permanency. Not everything needs to last forever; we are promised the universal church will, but that doesn’t apply to every individual congregation or even every denomination. Our journey is primarily one of faithfulness, partnering with

¹ “Partially” is because this can never be complete before the eschaton.

² See also Reddish, “What has Prayer Got to Do with It?” in *Uncontrolling Love*, (SacraSage, 2017), 185.

a promise-keeping God who is steadfast and trustworthy. In light of the biblical metaphor of “new wine and old wineskins,” we can be assured God’s Spirit will always find a new way.

Relaxation – Resting in God’s steadfastness leads to peace, instead of fear or paralysis. This relaxation is founded on our confidence of God’s good character. In the process, we acknowledge our finiteness and hence our dependency on the Trinity. Relaxing is not the same as being passive—it is both a vibrant, trusting faith and faith in action. Moreover, whatever risks we have taken in humble partnership with God—whether we deem the outcomes to be successful or not—are to be considered as “harvest” because God was *also* at work. (Recall too that in the Parable of the Sower, there were various degrees of harvest productivity.) In our results-orientated culture, let us take this message to heart. God is always working behind the scenes to bring good out of evil, yet the Senior Partner invites our help because it is needed. If God delegates power and authority, as the Bible indicates, then our cooperation is necessary. God evidently trusts his partners.

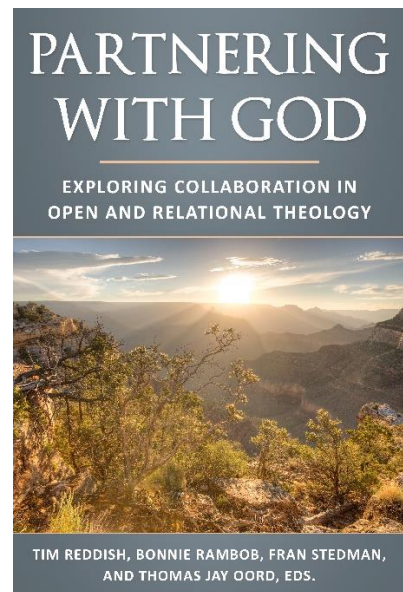
Re-evaluation and Renewal - If the journey itself is important, and not merely the destination, then we need to start the cycle again (i.e., return to **Responsibility**) and review both the progress and the partnership. This provides us with a further basis for the persistent Christian hope.

These suggested “Eight Rs” are presented as a constructive way to implement the notion of “partnering with God.” They are intended to be practical and pastoral, yet without being too prescriptive. Note, the list is not exhaustive. Nor is this catalogue to be seen as a fixed sequence or as a repetitive, circular/spiral loop. Certain “R’s” can happen in parallel, and some may be in tension with others. This list simply serves as a starting point for an on-going conversation within a church—or for an individual—as we grapple together with the radical and revolutionary idea of an authentic, meaningful partnership with God.

Questions: *What did you think of this practical proposal? What “R’s” resonated with you? What others elements would you add to the list?*

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