

A RESPONSE TO MARK CHAN’S “A THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION.”

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***BY GEORGE G. HUNTER III, ESJ SCHOOL OF WORLD MISSION AND EVANGELISM
ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY***

Mark Chan’s “Theology of Collaborative Evangelization” undoubtedly advances our quest for an era of more cooperative, more effective, evangelism, although I do not understand some of the paper’s key terms and assertions. For instance, I do not know what a (p.1) “theological horizon” is, nor (p. 2) “the nexus of redemptive accomplishments.” Also, I did not know that (p. 2) “Eschatology is . . . **the** hermeneutical key to unlock the significance of Jesus in the Gospels.” I have some doubts about any single key to understanding any part of the biblical canon, especially the Gospels.

There are, however, many themes with which I deeply resonate—including Mr. Chan’s identification of Kingdom of God, Trinity, the Gospel, the Church, and the Holy Spirit as indispensable in reflecting, theologically, upon collaborative evangelism. I would want to add a theological understanding of “human nature” to the grid of indispensable themes, but Wheaton’s taskmasters rigorously police the length of these papers, and therefore the number of themes a paper can cover! I will limit my response to taking issue at two points, and by probing the writer at three points.

Issues

1) Mr. Chan asserts (p. 1) that, in evangelism, “methodological considerations . . . must be subservient” to theology. That is perilously close to contending that those of us who practice,

and strategize for, evangelization are dependent upon the theologians to tell us what we can do. In historical fact, however, Christians with the “apostolic impulse” have seldom waited, for very long, for clearance from the theologians! If John Wesley, to cite one case, had waited for eighteenth century theologians to give clearance for field preaching, or class meetings, or lay ministries, or for starting an apostolic order, he would still be waiting! While some theologians would like for all practitioners to be subservient to their directives (and not a few seminaries are organized on that premise!), Mr. Chan’s thesis is better served if he calls the theologians to join the rest of us, as peers, in “collaboration.”

2) More consistently than I think is warranted, Mr. Chan confines his understanding of “mission” and “evangelism” to the directives of a theologian, William Abraham, who (in Mr. Chan’s summary) defines “missions” as referring to “the broader framework of all that the Church does to fulfill God’s Kingdom agenda,” while evangelism “may be more narrowly defined as that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.” While Abraham’s definitions fit his project, and may have some wider usefulness, those terms are, after all, the most important terms in our field, and I have no reasons to adopt Abraham’s definitions as normative. If Abraham’s definition of “missions” is normative, for instance, we are perilously close to the Liberal (mis)understanding that “everything we do is Mission!” Likewise, the ministry of evangelism plays a much larger role in communicating the gospel and reaching people than the one role of mere mid-wife to Christian initiation.

In our School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury, we have reflected upon the meanings of terms like “mission,” “evangelization,” “ministry,” and “evangelism” from extensive historical experience and from many sources. We now (usually) function out of the

following (approximate) consensus: “Mission” is usually understood as engaging in cross-cultural service with a People, and it necessarily includes “Evangelization” as the communication of the Gospel in many culturally-relevant forms. “Ministry” is usually understood as intra-cultural service with people of “our culture,” and it necessarily included “Evangelism” as the communication of the Gospel to “people like us.”

We believe that “culture” is such a towering variable in the gospel’s communication that it must feature prominently in our essential understanding of the several Great Commission tasks. In other words, communicating and relating with people of a very different land, tongue, and culture, who have little prior familiarity with Christianity, is an astonishingly complex challenge; everyone who has ever tried it knows that it is significantly different from “natural” ministry and evangelism with one’s own cultural peers. So definitions that do not take culture seriously should not be taken too seriously.¹

Probes

Mark Chan’s paper alludes to two possibilities that scream for elaboration, and in one statement of fact that needs to be questioned:

1) Unusual for a Protestant theologian, Mr. Chan perceives (p. 7) that an understanding of Church and Kingdom should include the Reality that the Apostles’ Creed refers to as “the communion of the saints.” Presumably, this reality includes the affirmation that we “stand on the shoulders” of our predecessors, but presumably it refers to more. But what? Protestant Christians have consistently refrained from anything like “prayers to the saints;” nor have we

¹ In practice of course, the lines are somewhat fuzzy. Increasingly, ministry within a church's general culture must cope, and adapt, in different sub-cultures. Furthermore, we now know that ministry's effectiveness even in one's own subculture depends upon informed knowledge of the people's symbols, heroes, rituals, music, beliefs, values, etc.

venerated their relics or burial places. It would be wonderful to be in the company, experientially, of Patrick, Aidan, Latimer, Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Finney and many others. We could use them in our corner! But what would it mean, experientially and theologically?

2) Unusual for a Protestant Evangelical theologian, Mr. Chan identifies (p. 9) the Kingdom as the Spirit identifying with poor, oppressed, marginalized, and sick people, working in the world for justice and shalom. He also perceives that our involvements in God's causes "are expressions of the Evangel," and will "pave the way for the commending of the Gospel;" likewise, he sees that our involvement in social causes is critical to our "credibility." In the USA, however, Protestant Evangelical Christianity is widely perceived as "the Reactionary Wing of the Republican Party at prayer!" Mr. Chan may be calling for a bigger "paradigm shift" than he knows! How can we pull that off?

3) Mr. Chan is confident (p. 8) that Christians are so "scattered" and "enmeshed within society" that there is "greater contact with unbelievers." I wish this were the case. In the USA, at least, increasing numbers of Christians are buying homes near their church and establishing de facto Christian ghettos, and sending their kids to "Christians schools," and then to Christian colleges; their church, complete with seven-day-a-week programming and a fitness center, becomes the center of their social life. They shop from the "Christian Yellow Pages." At work, they go to lunch with other Christians; for vacation, they take their Jamaican cruise in the company of other Christians, only. Eventually they will move to a Christian retirement home, then to a Christian nursing home. Our people are "circling the wagons" like never before.

As a result of the cumulative effect of many such steps of withdrawal from the world, virtually every name on the typical serious Christian's dance card is a Christian's name. Most

serious Christians do not even know many pre-Christian people well enough to engage in evangelical conversation and invitation. The people who are called to be in the world, but not of it, are in the world less and less. Christianity's detachment from the world has NOT "just happened;" it is an intentional strategy for the safety and security of the saints. So, as a recent example, Jerry Falwell now plans to build a 4300-acre "Liberty Village" that will serve people "from birth to antiquity;" Liberty Village will be a complete community – with schools, apartments, shops, a golf course, and all essential services – "that no one will ever have to leave." If the traffic of American Christians, today, is predominantly in this direction, then cooperative evangelism may have no more serious challenge than this one.