

**RESPONSE TO PAUL E. LARSEN'S
"THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM"**

*FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE
"TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION"*

October 4-5, 2002

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Jesus was quite clear on this matter of a unified Church and mission. The John 17 passage discussed by Paul E. Larsen in his fine paper cannot be ignored. Jesus wished us to be "one," in order that the world may know and believe in the Son of God. So insistent was Jesus in this doctrine, he parallels such unity to the "oneness" of the Father and Son. Such a correlation provides an inescapable conclusion. The Church is to be "one" institution conquering all barriers that could easily divide it, for the purpose of gospel mission. That he expresses this teaching as petitionary prayer to the Father adds even more weight to its importance. This is of vital and eternal importance to the Father and the Son.

Dr. Larsen suggests that four elements make it difficult for Jesus' prayer to be answered. Theology, order, methods, and personality all create complexity and difficulty when it comes to unity in either local or global settings. I found little to argue with in Paul's examination. I would however wish to expand on one of his points.

I prefer to examine the problem in the light of spiritual theology. By this I mean that the difficulty the Church has finding and maintaining unity has more to do with the godliness factor than anything else. Dr. Larsen's final element of "personality" strikes a cord here. I believe that most often our unity problem is more "personal" than theological. Evagrius of Pontus, one of the

desert fathers, wrote on the area of the “eight deadly thoughts,” later to become the 7 deadly sins of the Roman church. Evagrius argued that the temptation to vain glory was a deadly and serious affliction¹. Vain glory to Evagrius is the movement away from God centeredness back toward the self. It is not the denial of God as much as the use of God for one’s own advancement. When afflicted by vain glory one moves from “God and me” to “Me and god”. Closely linked with envy, a symptom of vain glory, this demon rears its head whenever someone else or someone else’s book or sermon or organization or strategic plan, or grant proposal, receives more attention than mine. Like Simon Magnus (Acts 8) one tempted by vain glory sees the potential personal profit of association with Christ and his ways, less for God’s glory than one’s own.

Thus, vain glory quickly moves toward an insidious idolatry. I learned many years ago that idolatry expresses itself as “my” or “our” all too easily. My home, my family, our church, our nation, our baseball team. It is a subtle slide from proper appreciation and gratitude for these gifts to self-absorption in and with them. This summer while speaking at a family conference, I met a woman who had brought her extended family to the conference. In fact, the whole family, 20 or more of them, vacationed together each year at this event. On the surface, this was a wonderful tradition. But the more I spoke to her, the more I realized this woman was more than devoted to her family, she was devoted to them to the exclusion of all others. Every conversation was about her family or some member of it. Every statement had her family as the subject.

Christian leaders are no less tempted by this affliction. Not long ago, I heard a leader speak of wonderful achievements through the relief organization he directs. Instead of speaking

¹ Evagrius, *Praktikos*

of these accomplishments as God's work through them, he used the "my and our" terminology exclusively. No wonder this leader and thus his organization have little involvement with other Christian organizations on any front, unless his organization directs the effort. When "my way" becomes "the way" collaboration is impossible, and quite often not even considered.

My experience in Christian leadership has seen this tendency undermine attempts at unity time and time again. Collaborative efforts require participants to value other ideas and organizations at least as important as their own, and if we read the apostle Paul correctly, even more important than their own (Phil. 2:3,4). Apart from the Spirit of the indwelling Christ, this is impossible. How sad it is when Christian leaders who must have character to match and exceed their charisma, are victims of vain glory and idolatry. John R. Mott suggested that this lack of collaborative effort was the reason for small evangelistic harvest in many parts of the Church enterprise:

If some of us have come from fields in which there are individuals, groups, or large numbers who are unbelieving, may it not be that one, possibly the principal cause, is the lack of unity among his professed followers. Whenever I visit a field and find widespread unbelief and a dearth of evangelistic effort and fruits, I raise the question whether the secret does not lie right here- the Christian workers through envy, jealousy, self-seeking, profitless controversy, or lack of real sacrifice have failed to present a united front.²

Vain glory lies at the heart of much if not most failed attempts at collaboration. But imagine the success that awaits groups that share resources to advance the mission of Christ. Steven Covey writes of the synergy that occurs when multiple persons or organizations bring their gifts and resources together to achieve a goal.³ His premise is that true collaboration results in far better results than individual efforts. The synergy principle suggests that 1+1 does not equal 2, but 10. My experience with this practice is that it always starts with difficulty, as each

² John R. Mott, The Larger Evangelism, p. 13,14.

member brings preconceived ideas and solutions to the project. It is hard to set aside one's best thinking and hear the ideas of others. In fact, the pain of this process reminds one of breaking free of an addiction. Yet, when this is done, with prayer and patience, usually a far better solution occurs that brings about better than expected results.

The unity principle of Jesus is especially hard to grasp in western and primarily American society because of the value given to individualism. Tracing the roots of individualism from the Apostle Paul to Adam Smith, Dyrness argues that the "new Adam" is a John Wayne archetype shaping the world with saged wisdom and herculean strength.⁴ Under such a premise, the hero rises, and while the American hero works with others, primarily it is that others work with him. It is his genius, courage and strength that shapes a better world. But just as important, his efforts achieve "his" ends. Adam Smith argued that the common good is realized as each individual pursues his or her best ends.⁵ Again, vain glory rears its head. Until this myth is proved false under the piercing power and truth of Scripture, western believers will always prefer the solitary to the corporate, the individual over the institution.

It is interesting that some of the best of recent management literature argues against American individualism. Warren Bennis following Covey's lead with his synergy idea, proposes that great advances have always been because of great teams not great leaders. He traces the story of great achievements like the Manhattan Project, Apple Computers and Disney not to great leaders, but to great groups of leaders. When we realize that none of us is as smart as all of us, we begin to put a dent in the individualism myth, and open the door to collaboration.⁶

³ Steven Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon and Schuster, 1989, pp. 261-285.

⁴ William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?*, Eerdmans, 1989, pp. 83-96.

⁵ Ibid, p. 83.

⁶ Warren Bennis, *Organizing Genius*, Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1997.

Another element, closely aligned with the problem of vain glory, is the issue of funding. This is even more complicated, for it effects the perceived viability of many denominations, local churches and mission organizations. If my project is subsumed with your project to create a truly better project, then how do “I” get funding, since we are no longer an “I”, but a larger and fuzzier “we”? Coalitions like Mission America and Operation Starting Line (OSL) comprised of many organizations synergistically pursuing a mutual objective face this hurdle every year. For instance, the organization I lead, the Billy Graham Center is a part of the OSL coalition. We are one of nearly 15 partnering groups devoted to evangelizing and discipling the incarcerated community of America. We provide human and financial resources for the project. But because we are one of fifteen agencies in the project and because we are not the major partner, we find our appeals for funding to donors and foundations less fruitful. We cannot claim we are OSL, nor even its major player. It is a temptation to do so. It is tempting to claim 18,000 decisions for Christ through the Billy Graham Center in 2001. But in reality 15 organizations working together saw this remarkable result. It is quite easy to overplay our part in OSL, thus devaluing the coalition, negating the beauty of John 17 portrayed for the sake of mammon. While it is true that some foundations are now encouraging collaborative ventures, individual donors (which comprise 90% of most fundraising) are less supportive.

It is only as we move from management thinking to higher spiritual thinking that we have much chance of conquering the funding problem in collaboration. If there is in reality only one Church and more importantly only one head of the one church (Colossians 1:18), then it is trust and prayer in Him that balances our financial statements. At Amsterdam 2000, I witnessed this principle in practice. Paul Eshelman, the global leader of the Jesus Film Project, invited his key donors to Amsterdam, where he exposed them to a strategic thinking forum, comprised of scores

of organizations with big dreams and vision. Paul actually encouraged his donors to listen to other organizations and their dreams and support them financially as God directed. It was an amazing example of the whole Body being valued by Paul Eshleman over his own organization. May such examples and stories of Spirit filled leaders echo throughout the Church in our era.