

**A RESPONSE TO MARK NOLL'S  
"COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM: A HISTORICAL SKETCH"**

***FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE  
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Nearly two decades ago I began the privilege of serving at Wheaton College with Professor Mark Noll. Looking over these years I see three cords of continuity emerging from his life and work: (1) humility, (2) original contributions to knowledge and interpretation of church history and (3) a stimulus to think. All three of these strands are present in this brief historical sketch. Mark's humility is evident in his refusal to claim more for his work than is justified by the evidence and also in his care to credit scholars whose work he has used. Second, this is the first written effort that I am aware of that attempts to offer an historical overview of cooperative evangelism with some thoughtful suggestions as to what factors have accelerated and retarded this movement.

In the limited space allotted, I want to present some thoughts that have occurred to me since reading this paper.

The focus of Noll's work is primarily on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This emphasis is important inasmuch as the individualism, among other factors, that emerged in the Reformation eroded the unity that existed within the western wing of Christendom. Noll correctly argues that "the evangelical movement did shake up received traditions of personal piety, church life, and denominational loyalty, but actual mobilization of energies in a fully cooperative sense did not occur frequently." (p. 5)

Noll says that he does not judge the current scene in light of the history. On the other hand, I wish he had explained some trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. To be sure we do not have the long perspective that helps us understand the two previous centuries. Nevertheless, a cursory glance at the history of the last century reveals a purposive effort toward cooperative evangelism.

In the early twentieth century John Mott and other leaders in the YMCA movement did a splendid job of encouraging cooperative work among Europeans. And presently a graduate of Wheaton College's M.A. program, Matt Miller, is writing a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota that will show that prior to 1917 the YMCA was interacting with the Russian Orthodox Church to reach Russian students and young people for Christ.

If World War I and the ascendance of Communism brought these particular efforts down, the First World War caused substantial efforts of cooperative evangelism within the ranks of military chaplains. An example is the work of Oswald Chambers who died in Egypt working as a YMCA chaplain among British troops.<sup>1</sup>

World War II, even more than World War I, brought unprecedented cooperative efforts. My research on World War II chaplains reveals a strong spirit of cooperative evangelism. Countless chaplains agreed that the pain and chaos of war brought unity among the denominations that never could have happened in a time of peace. The major opponents of cooperative evangelistic efforts, by the way, were the chaplains of a more universalistic persuasion who saw evangelism as unnecessary.

We need a book on the Chaplaincy in World War II. Such a work would show that chaplains like J. Edwin Orr did as much non-sectarian evangelistic work as D. L. Moody did

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gertrude Chambers, Oswald Chambers: His Life and Work (1933) and David McCasland, Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God (1993).

during the Civil War. It would also be shown that the cooperative efforts of Roman Catholics and Protestants during World War II set the stage for cooperative work among these same two groups in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>2</sup>

Among the chaplains with whom I have talked or those whose memoirs I have read, it is obvious that most saw sectarian differences as insignificant in the face of an enemy that brought a continuous stream of death and destruction. Even Christian leaders who were not military chaplains saw the war as an opportunity to unite Christian traditions in the battle to save souls. The cooperative efforts of Anglican C.S. Lewis with low church evangelist Stephen Olford serve as one example.<sup>3</sup>

If Billy Graham has built his evangelistic ministry, in part, on the work of union evangelists like Mordecai Ham and Billy Sunday, he found support for his ecumenical approach among many British and American clergy and laity because of their wartime experiences.

The pain and disequilibrium of war is one major factor in fostering cooperative evangelism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but equally important have been the Charismatic Renewal and Third Wave movements of the Holy Spirit. Young women and men in North America and the United Kingdom who have ignored the cessationist teachings of dispensationalism and the neoReformed movement, have been joining hands, hearts, and traditions in a worldwide work of evangelism. YWAM (Youth With A Mission), founded and directed by Loren Cunningham, has always made valiant efforts to ignore denominational distinctives despite the fact that it had its origin in the Assemblies of God. George Verwer, the founder of OM (Operation Mobilization),

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence of cooperative evangelism can be found in Everett Penrod, These Live On (1990), J. Edwin Orr, I Saw No Tears (1948), Donald F. Crosby, S.J., Battlefield Chaplains: Catholic Priests in World War II (1994), and William J. Leonard, S.J., The Letter Carrier: The Autobiography of William J. Leonard, S.J. (1993)

regardless of his sectarian base in the Brethren movement, has been increasingly open to the gifts of the Spirit and a genuinely nonsectarian approach to evangelism. Indeed, my wife Mary and I worked in India one summer with an OM team. We were struck by the openness to the healing gifts of the Spirit and the genuine cooperation with several different denominations.

No period since the first two hundred years of the church's life has been as marked by openness to all of the gifts of the Spirit set forth in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And no era since the time of the early church has experienced so many signs and wonders of God's mighty works.

Through Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Renewal and the Third Wave, an increasing number of men, women and youth have been praying – without regard for denominational and traditional lines – in the spirit of Peter and John in Acts 4. Seeing the Book of Acts as prescriptive rather than merely historically descriptive, these evangelistic and ecumenistic saints cry out in their prayer meetings like Peter and John of old: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” Acts 4: 31 tells us that “after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” We know the rest of their story.

Where my wife and I have been in India, Mexico, and some places in the USA, we have seen striking evidence of signs and wonders that bring glory to God and enhance evangelistic efforts. And where these outpourings of God's grace are apparent, there is concomitant disregard

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<sup>3</sup> See Lyle Dorsett's interview with Stephen Olford (1983) in the Marion E. Wade Center oral history collection, Wheaton College.

for sectarian divisions and celebration of cooperative evangelism. I might add that many of my former students who are ministering around the world are finding similar phenomena.

Dual factors, then, of pain and praise – the pain of war and the praise-filled Pentecostal and charismatic movements, have certainly played a part in the world-wide cooperative evangelistic efforts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. If I may add one more “P” to the alliterative thesis of pain and praise, it is persecution. Several years ago, Father Michael Scanlan, the President of the Franciscan University at Steubenville, Ohio, told me of his confidence that the Holy Spirit is going to unite the church before Jesus returns. He shared with me a prophetic insight that he believes the Holy Spirit gave him a few years ago. A Harvard-trained lawyer, as well as an ordained Franciscan priest, he was asked to bail some nuns and priests out of jail in West Virginia. They were incarcerated for peacefully picketing an abortion clinic. When Scanlan and a companion arrived at the jail, the sheriff took them to the school gymnasium because the jail could not hold the large number of demonstrators. When Scanlan stepped into the makeshift jail, he was astounded to see Catholic nuns and priests holding hands with Protestant evangelicals. Together they were singing praises to the Lord Jesus Christ. At that moment Father Scanlan said he sensed the church will be united through persecution.

In conclusion, I found Noll’s paper quite instructive. While I would have welcomed his thoughts on the nonwestern church and Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, I do thank him for causing me to think about the roles of persecution, pain and openness to the Spirit in earlier cooperative ventures.