

“COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM: A HISTORICAL SKETCH”

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A principle of cooperation is present from the earliest accounts of Christian evangelism. Jesus himself, when he mobilized his very first followers to exert “authority over the unclean spirits,” sent “them out two by two” (Mark 6:7, RSV). When the Apostle Paul chastised the Corinthians for their partisanship, he underscored the reality of cooperation as a prime reason for praising God, rather than humans, for the advance of the gospel: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ... So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ... For we are fellow workers for God” (I Cor. 3:5, 7, 9, RSV). This biblical emphasis remained strong in the history of evangelism, since for long centuries after Christianity was legalized under the Roman Emperor Constantine, almost all of the church’s effective evangelism was carried out by teams of monks, nuns, and friars. Whether organized as Benedictines, Augustinians, Franciscans, or Jesuits, these primary agents of evangelism – as well as of Christian education, Christian social service, and Christian biblical study – were organized for their tasks as communities.

In breaking with the Roman Catholic church, Protestants developed new forms of ministry alongside new interpretations of the faith. The Protestant stress on the Christian individual, as both grateful recipient of God’s grace and responsible doer of God’s will, precipitated changes of attitude toward how God’s work should be done in the world.

Martin Luther's focus on the individual was clear from his memorable words to the Emperor Charles V at Worms in 1521: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. ... It is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."¹ That emphasis on individual standing before God would soon be repeated everywhere in the Protestant world, but not until the rise of evangelical movements in the eighteenth century, two centuries after Luther's time, did Protestant concentration on the individual person develop into modern forms of evangelism.

The first great leaders of English-speaking evangelical Protestantism were guided to some extent by earlier practices among English Puritans and German pietists. But each also advanced the stress on the individual that was so characteristic of the evangelical movement and of the eighteenth century as a whole. Thus, the evangelist George Whitefield broke from the traditional organization of Christianity as a parish system to itinerate wherever crowds would gather and to call individual auditors in those crowds to repentance and faith without tarrying for communal approbation. The organizer John Wesley established the Methodist movement primarily through small-group class meetings where the main business was to confess one's own sins and to receive encouragement as an individual to live the Christian life. The philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards bent his great mind to define in a series of learned works just how an individual could know if he or she had really been touched by God's grace.²

¹ "Luther at the Diet of Worms," Luther's Works, Vol. 32: Career of the Reformer II, ed. George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 112.

² See especially Religious Affections (1746).

And the hymn-writer Charles Wesley gave a new prominence to the believer as individual child of God in almost everything he wrote, for example:

*And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me? Who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*³

The evangelical stress on individual repentance and faith—as well as the eighteenth century's clash between the old and the new—created a novel situation for the theory and practice of evangelism. Biblical precedent, ancient church practice, and some kinds of pragmatic assessment all spoke in favor of cooperation in evangelism. But a stress on the individual as “the master of my fate ... the captain of my soul” could undercut cooperation among both evangelists and evangelized.⁴ Likewise, a whole range of other factors (some traditional, some modern) also undercut efforts to cooperate in proclaiming the good news. These other factors included theological differences, denominational jealousies, ethnic and racial divides, gender disconnect, and the seemingly permanent division between Protestants and Catholics. In a word, the emerging evangelical movements of the eighteenth century offered the world a fresh and vigorous reassertion of evangelistic urgency, but also in some of its manifestations threatened the principles and practices of cooperation. The material that follows sketches the fate of cooperation in the earliest evangelical period and then the breakthroughs toward cooperation that occurred in the nineteenth century. It does not judge the current

³ The Works of John Wesley, vol. 7: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 322.

⁴ William Ernest Henley (1849-1903), “Invictus.”

scene in light of that history, except to suggest that contemporary efforts at cooperation in evangelism are following a long and distinguished history.

Beginnings

In the early days of the evangelical movement, cooperation was more an ideal than a practice, though the ideal was still quite important. Most of the well-known evangelists of early evangelicalism did work with partners, but those partnerships tended to be ad hoc. They were entered into as a way of promoting the individual ministries of preachers like Howel Harris, Griffith Jones, Daniel Rowland, John Cennick, John and Charles Wesley, Gilbert Tennent, Aaron Burr Sr., and George Whitefield. To be sure, the first century of modern evangelical history did witness signal instances of cooperation. At the beginning of the period, the New England Puritan Cotton Mather and the leader of German pietism, A. H. Francke of Halle, corresponded amicably about means of spreading the gospel. At the end of the century, John Newton used his parish of St. Mary Woolnoth in London to found an “Eclectic Society” where evangelical ministers from Anglican and dissenting churches met to discuss a wide range of themes in a strictly non-partisan setting.⁵ But such examples were relatively rare. The weight of denominational traditions remained very strong so that cooperation, for instance, between Anglicans and dissenters in Britain took place only sporadically. In the American colonies, Isaac Backus’ efforts to bring together Baptists and paedo-Baptists into the same church lasted for only a few years in the early 1750s; and Backus as a Baptist, though he admired the theology of Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, rarely was able to carry out joint endeavors with the Congregationalists of New England. Theological divisions also

impeded cooperation, as when in the early 1740s George Whitefield the Calvinist broke with the Arminian Wesleys, or again in the 1770s when the same kind of theological break occurred between the Calvinist Augustus M. Toplady and the Wesleys with John Fletcher. 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.

Still, these early years were important for the history of cooperative evangelism because of the attitudes promoted by key leaders. George Whitefield, as the best known of the evangelist-awakeners was most visible. His stance toward cooperation established an important precedent. In the fall of 1740, just as he was starting an epoch-making preaching tour in New England, Whitefield was quizzed by a group of Boston Anglicans who wanted to know if he had really called the New Jersey pastor Gilbert Tennent a “faithful minister of Jesus Christ” (despite his Presbyterian ordination) and whether it was really true that he had administered the Lord’s Supper to a Baptist minister in Savannah. To these queries Whitefield replied with a straightforward defense: “It was best to preach the new birth, and the power of godliness, and not to insist so much on the form: for people would never be brought to one mind as to that; nor did Jesus Christ ever intend it.”⁶ Later in the same conversation he explained why he no longer held that the Anglican church was the only real vehicle for proclaiming God’s will in the world: “I saw regenerate souls among the Baptists, among the Presbyterians, among the Independents, and among the Church [i.e., Anglican] folks, – all children of God, and yet

⁵ See especially Bruce Hindmarsh, John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 312-15.

⁶ George Whitefield’s Journals (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 458.

all born again in a different way of worship: and who can tell which is the most evangelical?"⁷ The next year, when in Scotland Whitefield was pressed to declare himself wholeheartedly for the Associate Presbytery, which had been expelled from the Church of Scotland for its efforts at reforming Scottish church order, he made the same kind of response: "I come only as an occasional preacher, to preach the simple gospel, to all who are willing to hear me, of whatever denomination. ... If I am quite neuter as to [church government] in my preaching, I cannot see how it can hinder or retard any design you may have on foot. My business seems to be to evangelise."⁸ This stance earned Whitefield much opposition. In Scotland, for example, one of his erstwhile friends among the Associate Presbytery published a pamphlet whose title read, in part, A Warning Against Countenancing the Ministrations of Mr. George Whitefield ... wherein [is] shewn that Mr. Whitefield is no minister of Jesus Christ; that his call and coming to Scotland are scandalous; that his practice is disorderly and fertile of disorder; that his whole doctrine is, and his success must be, diabolical.⁹ But in those non-sectarian opinions Whitefield persevered. Although Whitefield himself did not advance far in practical cooperative efforts, these opinions laid a foundation for common labor among those who shared his zeal for spreading the gospel.

The work of John and Charles Wesley was, over time, even more important than Whitefield's in establishing a high standard of cooperative endeavor. Early in their careers the Wesleys had been deeply touched by Moravians who were the era's real ecumenicists. Something of the Moravian desire to work with anyone who professed the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Luke Tyerman, The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield, 2 vols. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1876), 1:505.

best interests of Christ's Kingdom wore off on the Wesleys and many other early Methodists. John Wesley's own early definition of a Methodist, in which he was at pains to deny that Methodism constituted a religious party, was a case in point. As he wrote in 1742, "The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point." Rather, Wesley held that the best definition was experiential and, if possible, expressed in the words of Scripture: "A Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him' [Romans 5:5]; one who 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength' [Luke 10:27 and parallels]. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul."¹⁰

Even when Methodism evolved from a set of parachurch small groups into a formal denomination, much of the early spirit of cooperation remained. American Methodists, for examples, were leaders at enlisting African-Americans into their movement at a time when racial divisions were as strong in Anglo-American society as they have remained. Francis Asbury, key leader of the American Methodists from the 1770s to his death in 1816, cooperated reasonably well with Richard Allen, who eventually founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Asbury for many years traveled with Henry Hosier, an illiterate black evangelist who yet preached with memorable power.

⁹ Ibid., 511.

¹⁰ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist" (1742), in The Works of John Wesley, 14 vols. (London, 1872), 8:340, 341.

Another significant legacy of the early evangelical decades was the production of a common hymnody that drew into spiritual harmony groups otherwise divided by denomination, ethnicity, or doctrine. A memorable testimony to the cooperative power of a shared hymnody was once illustrated by Samuel Davies, a Virginia Presbyterian, to whom the Wesleys had sent copies of their hymnals, and who then put the books to very good use especially among his African-American friends.¹¹ In another instance, the American Methodist hymnals published by Francis Asbury regularly gave pride of place to the great evangelistic hymn of Joseph Hart of London, which includes this stanza:

*Lo' the incarnate God ascending,
Pleads the merit of his blood:
Venture on him, venture freely,
Let no other trust intrude;
None but Jesus,
Can do helpless sinners good.*¹²

That Hart had been minister of a Calvinist chapel and an occasional critic of the Methodists did not stop the widespread use of his hymn, any more than Charles Wesley's very public Arminianism prevented widespread use by Calvinists of hymns like "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" or "O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

In a word, self-conscious cooperative practice was an inadvertent rather than an intentional product of early evangelical history, but the early evangelicals had nonetheless promoted practices and articulated ideals that outlined a cooperative path that later generations would one day pursue.

¹¹ See George William Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia," Virginia Magazine of Biography and History 74 (July 1966): 298.

¹² Francis Asbury, ed., Pocket Hymn-Book, Designed as a Constant Companion for the Pious. Collected from Various Authors, 23rd ed. (Philadelphia, 1800), Hymn 2.

Breakthroughs

Building on the spirit of the cooperation of early evangelical leaders, actual programs for cooperation began to flourish in the nineteenth century. It oversimplifies the past to single out only two aspects of this century's history, but from a complicated, dynamic period it is still possible to highlight the creation of voluntary societies and the activities of D. L. Moody as particularly important for promoting cooperation in evangelism.

Protestant voluntary societies resembled Catholic precedents in the history of monasticism more than either Protestants or Catholics recognized at the time. Organization of special purpose societies for carefully restricted activities began among German Lutherans in the late-seventeenth century and High Church Anglicans in the early eighteenth century. Such societies were used by telling effect by John Wesley and other British awakeners. But they came into their own in nineteenth-century America.

Lay-led voluntary societies, which flourished in Britain and even more in America, became critical for evangelism because they were deliberately established to accomplish tasks of special urgency bearing in upon the consciousness of nineteenth-century believers. The noted missiologists Andrew Walls has called them "one of God's theological jokes" since the societies developed with almost no forethought, they received almost no attention from church leaders and weighty theologians, and they worked their leaven for change in the church almost before they were recognized. Yet from the voluntary societies organized for missionary service Walls can trace matters of immense Christian significance: for example, the relativizing of denominational barriers by people who were actively cooperating to spread the gospel, a door for service and

leadership opened wide to the laity (especially women), and the development of new worlds of knowledge and spiritual concern through the distribution of missionary periodicals.¹³

British evangelicals, drawn from both the established church and dissenting bodies, founded the London Missionary Society in 1795 with the express purpose of promoting evangelization without pausing to solve long-standing denominational differences. This agency was followed soon by the Religious Tract Society (1799) and then the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804). All of these agencies offered well-publicized examples for how rapidly, how effectively, and with what reach lay-led, inter-denominational societies could broadcast the gospel. In America, a few small-scale voluntary societies had been formed before the turn of the nineteenth century, but as self-created vehicles for preaching the Christian message, distributing Christian literature, and bringing scattered Christian exertions together, the voluntary society came into its own only after about 1810. Many of the new societies were formed within denominations, and a few were organized outside the evangelical boundaries, but the most important were founded by inter-denominational teams of evangelicals for evangelical purposes.¹⁴ The best funded and most dynamic societies – the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), the American Bible Society (1816), and the American Education Society (1816), which aimed especially at education for ministerial candidates – were rivaled only by the Methodists in the effectiveness of their national outreach.

¹³ Andrew F. Walls, “Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the Church,” in The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 241-54.

¹⁴ For a reliable study, see Charles I. Foster, Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837 (Chapel Hill, 1960), 275-79.

Critically, alongside activities by Methodists and Baptists, these voluntary societies, which drew from many denominations, were the key agents of both evangelization and civilization in the early history of the United States.

Observers at the time took note of the innovation. Rufus Anderson, an early organizer of the American missions movement, wrote in 1837 that, "The Protestant form of association – free, open, responsible, embracing all classes, both sexes, all ages, the masses of the people – is peculiar to modern times, and almost to our age."¹⁵ Later historians, especially Andrew Walls, have described in more detail "the immense impact on Western Christianity and the transformation of world Christianity which (though its special focus in the missionary society) it [the voluntary association] helped to effect."¹⁶

Voluntary societies sparked evangelistic cooperation even more actively outside of the West than in Britain and the United States. In regions of the world that lacked long-standing denominational traditions, voluntary agencies made it possible for all sorts of believers to pool their interests, resources, and abilities in proclaiming the gospel. To cite only one, yet an important, example, the influential Indian Christian, V. S. Azariah, was drawn to faith and to Christian service through the cooperatives ministries of the YMCA. Even after Azariah became the first Indian-born bishop of the Anglican church, he remained an ecumenical evangelist eager to cooperate with all kinds of other believers in outreach to the unreached peoples of Southern India. For Azariah, cooperation as

¹⁵ Rufus Anderson, "The Time for the World's Conversion Come" (1837-38), as reprinted in To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Grand Rapids, 1967), 65.

¹⁶ Walls, Missionary Movement in Christian History, 241, with more general discussion including treatment of Rufus Anderson, 223-24, 241-43.

modeled by a lay-led mission society became a guide for the cooperative evangelism he sponsored with great effect as a denominational church leader.¹⁷

The labors of D. L. Moody, which were also nurtured by close contact with the YMCA, offered a particularly important stimulus to cooperative evangelism during the last third of the nineteenth century. Compared even with the great public evangelists of previous eras, like Charles Grandison Finney, Moody advanced on several fronts in promoting cooperative activities.¹⁸ First, he exploited his status as a layman to organize committees, start schools, and conduct preaching campaigns with the assistance of any who would help, regardless of denomination. By so doing, he became a – probably even the – key networker of his era’s evangelistic efforts not only in the United States, but also in Canada, the U.K., and many mission fields. Second, Moody enlisted an extraordinarily broad range of his era’s Christian leaders on behalf of his evangelistic efforts. Even when others criticized the theology of his co-laborers (as happened with Henry Drummond) or when Moody wanted to pursue a different course than his collaborators (as happened with Frances Willard), he nonetheless maintained cordial personal relations and kept the door open for later cooperation. Third, Moody intentionally kept his preaching simple and focused it resolutely on the free offer of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. While not himself indifferent to more specific convictions on theological, social, and political issues, he kept open the widest possible scope for

¹⁷ For an outstanding study, see Susan Billington Harper, In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop B. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹⁸ For Moody, I draw especially on James B. Findlay, Jr., Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist, 1837-1899 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); and Lyle W. Dorsett, A Passion for Souls: The Life of D. L. Moody (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997). For comparison, see Keith Hardman, Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987); and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

evangelistic cooperation by not promoting those specific convictions at the expense of his main message. Fourth, Moody encouraged local churches to work together before, during, and after his preaching campaigns. Moody did not develop this kind of cooperation as it would be developed by twentieth-century evangelists, but as detailed studies of San Francisco and of Canadian cities by, respectively, Douglas Anderson and Eric Crouse show, Moody encouraged local church cooperation as a key element for evangelistic success.¹⁹ Fifth and finally, Moody willingly crossed once unapproachable barriers in order to enlist fellow-laborers for the gospel. While not completely consistent on issues of race, he nonetheless tried to integrate his rallies where possible. And while leaving no doubt about his own Protestant convictions, he still had better relations with Roman Catholics than all but a very few of the public Protestants of his era.

By precept, but even more by example, D. L. Moody put feet to the potential of cooperative evangelism that had been intimated by the first evangelicals and then stimulated by the nineteenth century's great expansion of lay-led voluntary societies.

Conclusion

In the history of modern evangelism there have been many impediments to fruitful, God-honoring cooperation. Some of those impediments continue to exist today. Among evangelicals, a particular impediment has grown out of the very strength of personal belief for which evangelicalism is so well known. Sometimes the gospel's compelling power that transforms individuals for Christ makes it difficult for those who have been transformed to submerge individual particularities in cooperative evangelistic

¹⁹ Douglas Firth Anderson, "San Francisco Evangelicalism, Regional Religious Identity, and the Revivalism of D. L. Moody," *Fides et Historia* 15:2 (Spring-Summer 1983): 44-66; and Eric Robert

effort. The history of evangelicalism shows, however, that such individualism does not have to be the norm. It shows that cooperative principles can grow from the heart of evangelical profession and that cooperative practice can become an integral part of the most winsome and effective evangelical proclamation.