

“THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM”

***FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE
“TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION”***

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“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

John 17: 20-21 NIV

These words of Christ as he prayed on the night of his betrayal are clear. No one who stands close to the cross of Christ can fail to share His passion for lost people. Nor can any such person fail to share His passion for the unity of all Christians. That unity will make His sacrifice credible. Only a distant disciple can live comfortably with feeble passion for world evangelization and Christian unity. The passions for evangelism and Christian unity are irrevocably wed. Why, then, are these Christ-like passions so often enfeebled? The answer is simple: they evidence a distant walk with Jesus Christ.

While simple, the answer is more complex. From the first days of the church divisions have occurred. Conflicts over theology, order, method, and personality have eroded passionate concerns for unity and evangelism.

In response to the visible brokenness and lagging evangelization, movements have emerged in the past few centuries among evangelicals. These coalitions have practiced what we have called *Collaborative Evangelism*. While they are properly called “movements” they are drawn from the realm of *spirit*. By this term we do not refer directly to the Holy Spirit, although He is the source of all empowerment. We are rather thinking of an *ethos or sensibility*. Perhaps it is best termed a *habit of the heart*. These movements of spirit by the Holy Spirit have been the solvents whereby the passions for

unity and evangelism have often overcome fractures wrought by Theology, Order, Method, and Personality.

THEOLOGY

That Theology could be a source of the fracture in Christian mission is ironic. A church divided by theologies is as old as the Apostolic church and as pervasive as the air we breathe. Theology is both inevitable and essential. Biblical faith makes truth claims about all things necessary for our salvation. The struggles of the first four centuries did yield the great ecumenical creeds—Apostolic, Nicene, and Chalcedonian. Through theological debate, balloting, and Imperial decree the great central truths of Scripture were affirmed by the Christian world.

But that failed to end division. By the turn of the first millennium the filioque clause had split East from West. In the Sixteenth Century the Church the magisterial qualities of the great confessions of the Reformation Churches emerged. The Augsburg, Heidelberg, Second Helvetic, Westminster, and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England confessions united the churches under their banners. Yet these confessions further divided the church-at-large. Ironically, the very precision of their language seemed to show little concern for unity and evangelism. Neither the hardened orthodoxies of the Calvinist Turretin nor the Lutheran Quenstedt advanced united evangelization.

The numerous confessions since then have become a grocery shelf of Heinz 57 varieties of theological soup. So much for Christ's prayer for Christian unity! Theology in too many instances has remained unresponsive to Christ's Gethsemane prayers.

The Puritan and Pietistic reaction to these high orthodoxies did produce new movements toward unity and evangelism. The Protestant Evangelical Awakening in the seventeenth and eighteenth century represented a real answer to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane. The study of Scripture and heart renewal set off a great movement toward unity and evangelism. Lutheran Francke, the Anglican Society for the Propagation of Christian¹ Gospel, and American Puritan Cotton Mather proposed to join together in world evangelization in anticipation of the Second Coming. Theology was subordinated to mission. Here was perhaps the greatest flowering of the *Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism*.²

But the subordination of theology to mission has born mixed fruit. The Puritanism of William Ames and Richard Baxter slipped into the Unitarianism of Isaac Watts and John Milton. The Pietism of Spener and Francke all too quickly morphed into the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. From Karl Barth to Stanley Hauerwas the chant has been: "Pietism is the kindergarten of liberalism". Chesterton's words are chilling: "The inner light too often leads into outer darkness."

But theology rising out of a Biblical passion for collaborative evangelism can be of the highest quality. In the last quarter century the Lausanne Covenant arose out of the attempt to express a common faith as a basis for world evangelization. These strong theological convictions show no sign of lapsing into subjectivism.

¹ Earnest Benz, *Pietist and Puritan Sources of Early Protestant World Missions*. **Church History**, 1954, pp. 28-55. This paper explores what has to be one of the best models for collaborative evangelization. A strong expectation of an imminent outpouring of the Holy Spirit preceding the Second Coming seems to have often been a common emphasis in Evangelical awakenings and revivals.

² W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*. **Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1992**, 370 pp. This book is probably the best discussion of the whole eighteenth century movement. It tends to balance what some have felt as an overemphasis on Anglo-American Reformed Evangelicalism.

In the early church a large number of Gentiles were converted at Antioch. They had no inclination to become proselytes first. They remained uncircumcised and ignored the clear commands for ritual and dietary cleanliness of the Old Testament. The alarm spread through the Mother church in Jerusalem. The Torah was God-given and the law was meant to be a wall separating Israel from the idolatries and immoralities of the Gentile world. Now the Gentiles were being welcomed. Acts Fifteen describes the battle royal at the Jerusalem Council. Paul, Barnabas, and Peter acted as advocates for the Gentiles. Peter argued that the evidence of the Holy Spirit in these Gentiles was clear. James summed up the conclusion by referring to the Scriptural promise of Gentile inclusion. He rendered the council's judgment that these Gentiles should be freely accepted, but set a clear line in the sand with regard to Monotheism (salvation through Christ alone) and ordered sexuality (abstention from fornication). A clear distinction was made between what was central and what was peripheral. The clear evidence of the Spirit's presence among the Gentiles and the Old Testament prophecies regarding Gentile inclusion granted the Gentiles both inclusion and freedom. Thus was Christianity transformed from a Jewish sect to a worldwide faith.

Acts Fifteen is a model for today and tomorrow. There are always those who will not or cannot join in collaborative evangelism for theological reasons. Where to draw the line will always be difficult: one believer's catholicity is another's sectarianism. Yet this mission is commanded. Where the spirit is of the Holy Spirit such united evangelism is not only possible but inevitable.

I well remember Billy Graham's first Crusade in Minneapolis. My pastor was Gustaf F. Johnson, the greatest of all the Swedish-American evangelists and preachers.

The young Billy Graham troubled him. Graham allowed “liberals” to serve on committees. He employed Madison Avenue marketing and publicity techniques. One night Johnson went to the Crusade. That following Sunday he sheepishly reported that he heard the music, listened to the preaching, and saw the masses of people responding to the Gospel. He simply declared, “I wept and worshipped God.” He followed the model of Acts Fifteen.

Without basic truth claims based on Biblical authority, evangelization has no real purpose. Theology dissolves into nothing more than therapeutic mythology. But an obsessive orthodoxy can also lose the passion of Christ for unified evangelization. It thus becomes apostate and heretical. When hearts are awakened by the Holy Spirit, people of Biblical Faith will find ways to unite in evangelism.

ORDER

The Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism can no more flourish without Order than it can without Theology. Yet the structures of Order often stifle and subvert the Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism. The passion for unity and evangelism cannot flourish apart from structured and ordered communities. To describe the church as an organism rather than an organization is a false antinomy. Every organism organizes itself in order to survive. To fulfill its passion Ardor must be Ordered. Ardor impassions Order, and Order organizes Ardor. The book of Acts is the history of the living body of Christ organizing itself. Structure enables the passion for unity and mission. A century ago Max Weber traced the sociological journey of charismatic movements as they rationalize their ways into bureaucracies. This process is inevitable and in ways desirable, but it

comes at tremendous price. Movements of spirit tend to become stifled by sclerotic obsessions with order. In the end passion fails as institutions succumb to institutionalism.

Yet the passion for unity and evangelism still thrive. Awakened leadership has sought to reach across confessional and organizational divisions to provide unified witness to lost men and women. These were not heavily institutional but were often well organized. John Newton in eighteenth Century England organized his Eclectic Society, which included both Church of England and Dissenters.³ Great evangelists like Whitefield utilized them. So have Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham who are now household icons of Western Evangelicalism. Today there are younger leaders who have been used to lead collaborative efforts in many places. Greg Laurie, Mark Anderson, Franklin Graham, and Reinhard Bonnke are a few names that come to mind. Much is happening throughout the world through these gifted evangelists. But even more dramatic things are happening in the non-western world where mission organizations, often under severe state restriction, have drawn together in collaborative mission to evangelize, disciple, and empower indigenous leadership.

There are those who believe that these collaborative efforts do violence to the New Testament doctrine of the Church. The evangelical movement as a whole has forfeited a unified ecclesiology. It did so on the precedent of Acts 15 because it was clearly obvious that there are believers in virtually every church body regardless of confession or polity. Some who have seen in the book of Acts a clearly synodical structure have raised issues. Douglas Horton of Westminster Seminary has recently done

³ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and The English Evangelical Awakening Between the Conversion of Wesley and Wilburforce*. **Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996**, pp. 312-15.

so.⁴ Evangelicalism cannot function as a church. It has no membership, no ordered ministry for Word and Sacrament. These concerns are valid, but they can in no way justify apathy toward the Gethsemane prayers of Jesus Christ.

One positive way to understand the frustrating tensions between Order and Ardor is the metaphor of the river. As rain and snow fall upon the mountains, the gathered streams move relentless toward the sea. As they gather they begin to carve streams, canyons, and valleys. The banks of the rivers assist the flow of water in its journey toward the sea. From time to time, however, the banks are undermined and collapse, blocking the river. In which case the river overflows its banks and floods vast areas in a seemingly chaotic fashion. Soon, however, new channels are carved until they too are undermined. But the streams soon converge in a mighty river as it empties into the sea.

So it is with the movement of God's Spirit through the centuries. It is not the human spirit or even the spirit of a movement that changes history. The Ardor of the Holy Spirit gathers the waters into rivulets of grace. The same Spirit Orders the flow of waters by allowing them to carve banks and channels. When undermined banks collapse and block the movement of the Spirit, the waters overflow carving new channels. This is the process by which the Spirit gathers Christ's chosen from the nations and discharges them into the sea of His mercy.

Human Ardor and human Order wax and wane in the passage of time. It is necessary, then, to see the provisional nature of all human structures. We must celebrate the progress of the river and the channels through which it flows, no matter where it may be found. We must even celebrate the chaos when the movement of the Spirit is too great

⁴ Michael S. Horton, *Is Evangelicalism Reformed or Wesleyan? Reopening the Marsden-Dayton*

for its channels to contain. Such Collaborative Evangelism recognizes that both passion and organization are essential, Order must always serve Ardor, and not the reverse.

METHOD

The mission of the Church is both enabled and imprisoned by human methodology. The Gospel comes inevitably through human instrumentality. Language, writing, communication, compassion, witness, preaching and singing are all methods by which the Gospel is spread. As such they are tools.

From the Apostolic days the disciples continued to meet every day in the courts of temple, sharing common goods, eating together with the singing of hymns, “the Lord adding daily to their number.”⁵ The use of catechetical methods in the post-apostolic church, the mission work of the Roman church in evangelizing Europe, and the use of Bible Societies in the sending of missionaries in the Protestant Evangelical Awakening utilized human methodology. In America’s Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards uses Newtonian ideas to develop a psychology of effective preaching. The use of mass evangelism and altar calls point to a clear use of method and strategy.

All missionary strategies utilize methodologies and tools. The Billy Graham organization has done the most thorough work in using new means and methods. Its effectiveness has been obviously related to its capacity to unite different denominations and churches. The understanding of mass media marketing has been one of its

Debate. The Christian Scholar’s Review, 2001 Volume xxx1, Number 2 pp. 131 ff.

⁵ Acts 2: 42: 47

outstanding features. Its organizational skills in gathering, training, and gaining support are in many ways unparalleled. The use of film and television has been extensive.⁶

On a global scale the Lausanne movement, DAWN ministries, and the ministry of INTERDEV have carefully used the knowledge of organizational behavior to do effective evangelization.

Yet method can stifle the Spirit of Evangelization. So strong an emphasis was placed on Method by Charles Finney that at times the work of evangelization could be assured simply by the use of right methods. In many ways it was the “New Measures” as much as the “new theology” that created so much division in the nineteenth century American religious milieu. New School and Old School controversies between strict and modified Calvinist perspectives were also about method. The utilization of mass psychology, emotional preaching, and simplified conversion experiences served to alienate much of Protestant leadership. The same methods could be used to convert masses to the cults. The altar call could become as mechanical and meaningless as mass baptism and catechesis. The reaction to evangelism is sometimes as much a rejection of mechanical evangelization techniques as it is repugnance toward mass, manipulative emotionalism.

Jacques Ellul has argued that tools are extensions of human organs. Technology and the social sciences can often unwittingly produce perverse results. Preaching can be manipulative rhetoric as in the story of *Elmer Gantry*. Group process can become

⁶ Robert O. Ferm, *Co-operative Evangelism*. **Grand Rapid: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.** This is a significant book in that it is a strong defense Biblically and historically of Graham’s co-operative spirit and utilization of new methods.

brainwashing as in the mass suicide of *Jim Jones in Guyana*, and music can become as seductive as the siren melody of Andrew Lloyd's Weber's *Music of the Night*.

Reactions, of course, take many forms. Some responses to these excesses have been merely bitter and reactionary. They have seldom contributed to the missionary task of the church. Other more Biblical reactions have been the spontaneous awakenings that seem to defy all the rules of communication and proclamation. A closer analysis will clearly show, however, that even these "revivals" had methods, group process, and styles of proclamation, —even where these methods were largely unconscious. Authentic evangelism is energized by the Spirit where its methods transcend mere cleverness.⁷

PERSONALITY

The Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism is also both enabled and inhibited by human personality. God works through human personality. Throughout Biblical and Christian history we see effective evangelization led by strong personalities. From Peter and Paul, to St Patrick, St. Ansgar, Wesley, Edwards, Francke, Finney, Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham—God has chosen to do mighty things.

In other cases the strength of human personality has inhibited the true praxis of collaborative evangelism. The conflicts between Paul and other leaders such as Peter and Barnabas were fortunately resolved—mostly by geography. But again and again conflicts of Personality more than tensions over **Theology, Order, and Method** have fractured collaborative efforts. In the current setting, the entrepreneurial spirit of many pastors of large, growing churches seems to inhibit the collaborative spirit. Such a pastor

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: the Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 137 pp. The book is an excellent discussion of issues of integrity in ministry and serves as a balance to much formulaic approaches to evangelism and ministry.

participates with others only when he or she is in charge. Here human pride and contempt for others corrupts clearly valuable gifts of the Holy Spirit. While strongly affirming Biblical authority, these leaders ignore Samuel's rebuke of King Saul for his arrogance and disobedience.⁸

The pastoral leaders of smaller churches and agencies, however, also fall short of co-operative endeavor. Threatened by the presence of more powerful leaders, they are also inclined to separate themselves into isolated enclaves where they need not suffer by comparison. The leaders of both large and small organizations are endangered. The first is by the peril of charisma; the latter by the peril of its absence. Both are the children of pride and ubris. The symptom of both is apathy toward united mission. This enfeeblement probably more to stifle any collaborative efforts than anything else. Where unified passion for reaching the lost flourishes, the *Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism* will predominate. Where personal destinies are pursued, there is little power to overcome the splintering tendencies that so often characterize evangelical endeavors. When an over-riding passion for mission wanes, church leadership simply reverts to the childish game of *King of the Hill*.

In 1995 evangelical leaders from across America gathered at Lisle, Illinois to explore the common task of evangelism. I was privileged to be a part of a smaller meeting where a group of evangelical leaders were pondering strategies. When Chair Paul Cedar had to absent himself, the meeting turned into an exchange of powerful personalities diagnosing and prescribing the solutions to the task of evangelization the spirit of the meeting began to resemble a circle of rival bull elk pawing the ground and

⁸ I Samuel 15: 16-27

snorting steam over leadership of the herd. I ruefully confess to having been one of the lesser bulls.

It was an ungodly moment until Campus Crusade's Bill Bright spoke. He would do anything in order to facilitate the common mission. He simply said, "I am available for any task even it is to simply carry someone else's briefcase." There followed an embarrassed and repentant silence. It was not unlike the Savior's washing of Peter's feet at the Last Supper. The ethos changed. This moment of Divine may well have been one of the important sparks kindling the fire of Mission America and a new birth of the Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism. Only through the subordination of self-interest can human personality be utilized to enable it.

SUMMATION

Caution is needed lest the passion for *Collaborative Evangelism* become so consumed with activity for unity and evangelism that godly concerns for other aspects of Christian mission can be ignored. God has called his church to theological reflection, the training for discipleship and Christian formation, the development of mature communities, and the growth of effective organization. Concerns for the poor and the cry for social justice cannot simply be swept aside in the interest of evangelistic crusades. There is much motivation for evangelism that is personal and local and not necessarily collaborative. In marginalizing these concerns, the passion for collaborative evangelism can be self-defeating and sectarian.

But the Spirit of God is the true author of the *Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism*. That same Spirit hovered over Jesus as He wept over Jerusalem.⁹ His desire to gather

⁹ Matthew 23: 37

that city as a mother hen gathers her chicks was a passion to redeem all mankind. In the unity of His followers His prayers would be answered. Those who stand close to His cross will share together his tears. His were not crocodile tears. Neither are the tears of His true followers. These very tears will be the *Spirit of Collaborative Evangelism*.

*O heart of Christ, once broken for us,
'Tis there we find we find our strength and rest;
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting!
Equip your Church to spread the light.*

Bessie Porter Head¹⁰

¹⁰ Bessie Porter Head, O Breathe of Life. Chicago: Covenant Publications, **The Covenant Hymnal**, 1996, p 599.