

RESPONSE TO PAUL CEDAR'S "CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM"

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

October 4-5, 2002

BY TOM PHILLIPS, VP FOR TRAINING, BILLY GRAHAM EVANGELISTIC ASSN.

Jesus stated, in John 17:21, that unity is critical to explosive evangelism. Even today, there remains a need for a unified approach in evangelism, discipleship and church leadership.

In "Challenges to Collaborative Evangelism," Paul Cedar discussed a five-step collaboration matrix. Through 21 years of ministry in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, working with committees around the world, we have accomplished much for God's Kingdom through unified efforts described in this matrix.

There is, however, a tension to collaboration when people believe their own calling or work is compromised. We must balance collaboration with our personal God-directed goals, ensuring that we obey God's agenda rather than our own.

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM

American independence makes it difficult for churches to collaborate. Add to that autocratic structures of denominations or groups that moved away from evangelistic initiatives, and people fear that collaboration is itself a compromise. Yet courageous leaders have historically banded together to accomplish what could not be done alone.

Unity through the power of the Holy Spirit is exciting. However, if we do not rely on the Holy Spirit, unity will never exist. Conversely, if false unity compromises the truth of the Gospel, then one must be strong enough to pull away. Unity for unity's sake is not a Biblical goal. Unity for the proclamation of the Gospel is.

1. The Challenge of the Failure to Practice Spiritual Unity

Cedar stated leaders are “significantly ignorant concerning the Biblical teaching regarding spiritual unity” or are “simply neglecting or ignoring this important subject.” Perhaps the Holy Spirit’s power is ignored in the midst of achieving goals. Previously successful human methods become the focus, causing people to miss God’s bigger picture.

I know Christian leaders that are neither ignorant of spiritual unity teaching, nor are they neglecting it. Rather, they rely on their flesh to accomplish what may build a mini-kingdom rather than the true Kingdom.

2. The Challenge of a Spirit of Independence/Individualism

While the “independent church movement” could be negative, some churches became independent when governing bodies prevented focus on Biblical goals. Independence may be a necessity in the midst of denominational burden or compromised leadership.

This independence must be applauded. Hopefully they will form other associations or movements together. The danger arises from those that developed religious platforms to isolate themselves completely or encourage pride that results in an ineffective church.

3. The Challenge of Turf/Control

Cedar stated “many seem to have little or no concern for collaborating in evangelism with other churches in their community.” This is true even in Crusade cities. Though thousands of churches support a Crusade, only 10-20% will be thoroughly involved. Churches are thrilled to invite an evangelist to speak, but not to partner with other churches for common goals. Just try scheduling a Mission or Crusade, and see how difficult it is!

Releasing control is fearful for an independent leader, but is non-negotiable in collaboration. Goals must be placed in the hands of others; there is no “mine.” Though the

independent leader could bring a necessary voice, he or she may avoid collaboration for fear of a loss of control.

4. The Challenge of Personal Kingdom Building

Cedar mentioned that the “personal kingdom builder” is often an entrepreneur who thinks larger than life. Leadership teams can remind these entrepreneurs that God’s plan is greater than those plans of the most gifted individual. Ephesians 3:20 states that if we can imagine it, we have not reached the limits of God.

Collaboration often pushes leaders beyond their own vision to the greatest visionary of all, Jesus Christ. Since most do not realize the potential sin of not working together, collaboration can still be a hard sell.

For example, in some Crusade cities, key pastors have said, “Why should I collaborate in an event of 15-30,000 people hearing the Gospel when I have 5-10,000 people in my Sunday services?” That pastor doesn’t recognize the value to the world of a breakdown of denominational walls.

5. The Challenge of Cultural/Racial Divisions

Racism divides our country and is a stumblingblock to the Gospel. Will working together to overcome racism bring spiritual awakening, or will racial reconciliation be a result of spiritual awakening? I believe individual spiritual awakening to the sin of racism (followed by repentance and confession) will lead to corporate reconciliation and advance the Kingdom of God.

Women are an untapped resource. Anne Graham-Lotz, for example, is received throughout the world in her “Just Give Me Jesus” campaigns. I recently returned from a School of Evangelism in Asia where even leaders with a chauvinistic bias asked Mrs. Lotz to speak.

This is a new day for women in various ministry leadership aspects. What God has anointed, we must honor.

The necessary sensitivities to all prejudice—race, gender, religion, economic, etc.—must be addressed by the Church. There is no male nor female, Jew nor Greek in God’s Kingdom, and we must live that way even if our traditions tell us differently.

6. The Challenge of Denominational/Theological Divisions

These are great divides. In Billy Graham Crusades we state that we can work together if...

*You believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and
You believe in the authoritative Word of God, and
You believe in salvation through the unique work of Christ on the cross.*

We focus on those essentials, regardless of specific denominational teaching, to accomplish our evangelistic goal. Churches can then follow up with those who make commitments through the united effort. Can this approach not work in other areas?

7. The Challenge of Reconciliation Issues/Right Relationships

Simply put, broken relationships must be overcome through forgiveness. Have we so forgotten that we entered the Kingdom of God through forgiveness that we find it difficult to forgive others?

Communication and understanding are key. Gathering groups for prayer and to love one another opens the door for reconciliation. We must lead, bringing those at odds together and working with them to reconcile.

8. The Challenge of Immediate vs. Long Term

All our collaborative efforts have long term agendas, including Billy Graham Crusades. After the 1959/60 Crusade in Australia, 50% of those entering the Anglican Church seminary for

the next seven years were Crusade converts. We trust God's Word never returns void, and we plan for long term results through collaboration. Conversion is never the end result; rather it is a birthplace for the Church to follow through and help converts grow.

9. The Challenge of Separationalism

As long as some glory in separationalism, unity will be difficult even if the majority of believers find common spiritual elements that allow collaboration. God promises our unity in Him will result in His world knowing His Son. Could our discord prevent some from salvation?

We must support those led by God to remain in denominations so inclusive they compromise Gospel proclamation. We must also support those who separated themselves and became independent for fear, rightly or wrongly, of being pulled into compromise, though encouraging them to find others with whom they can minister together.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Those who desire to overcome the challenges of spiritual unity are in a fragile position. We must proceed together with the understanding that we will...

*Be quick to forgive one another,
Be quick to confront in love so that communication can flow, and
Be ready to humble ourselves, even when we think we're right, for the greater good.*

Our Lord demands collaboration; it is not an option. The world demands that we unify for the sake of their salvation. Our adversary is faithful to spread his tentacles in these last days to prevent many from entering God's presence. May we all overcome and work together within each circumstance for the sake of His Kingdom.