

**A RESPONSE TO MARK NOLL’S  
“COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM: A HISTORICAL SKETCH”**

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

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As usual, Mark Noll has given us something to think about. Because we have heard the paper, there is no need for me to spend time summarizing it. Suffice it to say that Noll argues that the principles of cooperative evangelism planted by the first generation of evangelical leaders in the 18<sup>th</sup> century finally bore fruit as actual programs of cooperative evangelism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early on, people like Whitefield and the Wesleys promoted cooperation in their campaigns by preaching the New Birth; but they and others were often frustrated by a number of obstacles, which Noll identifies as individualism, “theological differences, denominational jealousies, ethnic and racial divides, gender discontents, and the seemingly permanent division between Protestants and Catholics.” By the time of D.L. Moody, however, evangelicals overcame these barriers and engaged in cooperative programs for evangelism that impact the world to this day.

In my response, I’d like to concentrate on this question: Why did so many evangelicals opt for cooperation by Moody’s time? Or, put in a different way, given the highly divisive and competitive nature of America’s free-market religious economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on what basis did evangelicals work together?

Noll is correct in pointing to the rise of the voluntary society as a crucial factor in promoting cooperation. Here was a new structure for doing focused ministry, apart from but still

in some ways related to the more traditional denominational forms of the church. Bible, tract, publishing, and missionary societies transformed the flow and texture of American religious life. According to Andrew Walls, the voluntary society was the product of a particular time and place, “the concomitance of certain political, economic, and religious conditions at a certain period of western history and not always present even in all parts of the west.” These conditions included the freedom to associate, a well-developed emphasis on individual consciousness, the existence of wide-spread economic surpluses, and the kind of church organization that tolerated such focused enthusiasm beyond its institutional control (*The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 259). The voluntary societies were pragmatic and purposive undertakings and were usually led by lay people (often women). They drew together passionate but denominationally diverse constituencies around a common cause.

Probably the most significant thing about the voluntary society for our discussion was the willingness of people who joined them to lay aside all other theological and denominational differences for the sake of their group’s mission. According to Walls, while “there never was a theology of the voluntary society,”...“the voluntary society had immense theological implications.” Primary among these was the realization that existing forms of church government and denominational distinctives might be incapable of carrying out all of God’s work in the world. Walls observes that “People had spent themselves for the sake of the purity of these forms, had shed their blood for them, had been on occasion ready to shed the blood of others for them. And then it suddenly became clear that there were things – and not small things, but big things, things like the evangelization of the world – which were beyond the capacities of these splendid systems of gospel truth” (p. 247). Needless to say, the desire to save souls did not *always* lead to cooperation. In the denominational wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evangelism could be highly

competitive. One only has to think of circuit rider Peter Cartwright who tried his best to turn unbelievers into both Christians *and, maybe especially, Methodists*.

What was the source of all this cooperation? It was a particular theology of the New Birth and the practical implications growing out of it. Historians now almost universally see evangelicalism's beginning in the Anglo-American awakenings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These built on the conversionist emphases of the earlier Puritans and Pietists who sought to fulfil the Reformation's promise by promoting the *personal* experience of repentance, faith, and discipleship. As the first evangelical leaders learned, these ideas often threatened ecclesiastical power structures and denominational identities; but they pressed on. By the second and third decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was obvious that American Protestantism had been "evangelicalized" by such conversionist piety, which had produced its own distinctive religious language, hymnody, and understanding of the normative Christian life. It is out of such things that powerful new corporate religious identities are formed. By Moody's time, such evangelical group identity could rival or even replace that of the denominations. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, evangelical religion had become a powerful trans-denominational movement that took on a kind of denominational identity of its own (or so Marsden, Marty, and others have argued).

I would contend that such an evangelical identity is replete with theological content. Conversionist piety assumes a profound but simple theology – that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory; that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross for people's sins and rose from the dead for their justification; that sinners need to respond personally to God in repentance and faith to receive the salvation offered in Jesus; and that out of the personal conversion experience comes holy living and serving others, especially in sharing the good news. Simple as

that. As Whitefield and the Wesleys had put it, the new birth is about experiencing and expressing the love of God through transformed hearts and minds.

Of course, that's not all those evangelicals believed. One could go on and on; conversion theology deals only with the beginning of the Christian life. But what made evangelistic *cooperation* possible was the conviction that doctrinal agreement on most things was secondary to the evangelistic mandate and the conversionist theology on which it was built.

Times have changed. Walls argues that those environmental conditions that gave rise to the voluntary societies no longer exist in the way they did. Certainly the theological base that made most denominations look more or less evangelical by the mid-19th century no longer exists either. Some might say that the luster is off the voluntary societies—what we now call parachurch movements. Ironically, in our time the impetus for cooperative evangelism may have shifted back to powerful, well-networked, and frequently independent local churches that are fiercely missional. But the mega-church model is not the only model available for cooperation. The new computer technology has opened many new doors for collaboration and outreach; and the shifting demographics of world Christianity has created – and mandated – new opportunities for cooperation.

But the question remains, “On what basis will such cooperation take place?” Is the conversionist piety of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the simple gospel theology that gave rise to and supported it sufficient? For a number of decades now, many evangelical leaders have been arguing that evangelical identity ought to be determined by agreement on doctrines that earlier evangelicals would have considered matters of secondary importance. There is no need for me to enumerate them here. Of course, one generation's secondary issue may become another's primary issue. But unless evangelicals can determine the basis on which cooperation will take place, then

the movement that produced a Moody and his friends may become nothing more than a point on the theological spectrum rather than a dynamic and powerful force for renewal and conversion.