

EVANGELICAL COOPERATION

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Introduction

My visits to national evangelical fellowships around the world are somewhat akin to strolling across the stage during an orchestra's tuning up period. An orchestra, with its essential unity and multiple parts, is certainly an apt metaphor for the global evangelical community. The tuning up process, with each player preoccupied with his own instrument and concerned primarily to perfect his own role, epitomizes the less attractive side of the evangelical world today. There is, nevertheless, in the midst of this dissonance, the promise of beautiful music to come.

In this talk, I do not pretend to discuss all aspects of evangelical cooperation. I only wish to highlight some of the observations I've made and some of the conclusions I've reached during the past couple of years.

Evangelicals in the Modern World

Cooperation, of course, is not an exclusively evangelical phenomenon. Some would say it is hardly an evangelical concern at all! We see all kinds of cooperative efforts in the world around us: parent-teacher associations, labor unions, political parties, etc. Cooperation at regional and in international levels is not uncommon, either.

During the decade I served in the Middle East, Arab nations believed they were totally at the mercy of a few giant oil companies backed by the governments of the industrialized world. Only recently have they discovered the power of the cooperative apparatus – OPEC – they put together a few years back. Now they know that, when acting in concert, they have the leverage to bring even the mightiest nations to heel.

One hundred years ago, planet earth still seemed very large to its inhabitants. Countries and continents were widely separated. Travel was leisurely, communication sporadic. The population of the world was about one-fourth of what it is today. All this has changed. For the first time in history, humankind is truly one. People sense that they

share a common ecological destiny. They speak of a “global village.”

This is not mere sentiment. Modern technology has revolutionized our globe. For the first time ever, through telecommunication and mass media, all people are in touch with each other. This fact, combined with the population explosion and a new awareness of the limits of shared planetary resources, has created an era of high-pressure social change and an unprecedented degree of global interdependence.

In such a turbulent but interdependent world, the only units capable of functioning effectively are those which, by virtue of consciously cultivating interlocking resources, achieve sufficient *size* to withstand contemporary pressures, and sufficient *flexibility* to adapt to rapid social change. Small units, in so far as they attempt to operate in relative isolation, are simply bypassed. They may exist, and even function to their own satisfaction, but are relatively ineffective and frequently irrelevant.

Pressures on evangelical communities worldwide are intensifying. The day is approaching when the major forces of the modern world – nation states, multinational corporations, international political and religious movements – will, with few exceptions, be anti-Christian. Evangelicals will also find ourselves pressured by the major religious conglomerates headquartered at Geneva, Rome and elsewhere.

Evangelicals, of course, will say that we find our strength in the Lord. “The weapons we wield are not merely human, but divinely potent to demolish strongholds,” the apostle Paul affirmed. Yet we are not wield these weapons in uncoordinated fashion. Unless we learn to function as a body – communicating with each other, dividing our labor, combining our resources, acting in unity (or at least in harmony) – our hope of being effective in the modern world will prove delusory.

Let’s be realistic. The truth is, evangelical cooperation, much less real teamwork, is still embryonic among us. “Christ’s team” is not really functioning as a team. Why is this?

Obstacles to Evangelical Cooperation

Numerous reasons are proffered for this state of affairs. Not all are of equal merit. They range from just plain inertia to lack of time, from disparate location of headquarters offices to differences in ministry emphases, from sheer prejudice to personality conflicts, from lack of finances to doctrinal incompatibility.

Of these, doctrine is of special concern to evangelicals because teamwork presupposes a measure of unity, and for evangelicals unity must be biblically based. Henri Blocher underscores this in his paper, *The Nature of Biblical Unity*, circulated prior to the Lausanne Congress. “The possibilities of expressing Christian unity,” he says, “are proportional to the doctrinal agreement reached.” Most evangelicals would agree.

Blocher goes on to aver, “Where men of God, academically qualified and professing obedience to the Scriptures, find themselves numbered on both sides of a doctrinal issue, we may conclude that the object of the debate does not belong to the vital heart of Christianity.” With this, not all evangelicals would agree.

My own judgment is that, given the tremendous variety of evangelical experience, and the complex historical development of our ecclesiastical traditions, there can be no effective teamwork within the body of Christ without a willingness to make the distinction between essential and secondary doctrines.

In this connection, let me say parenthetically that I expect WEF’s International Theological Commission, drawn from six continents and reflecting the major evangelical traditions, to play a major role in helping the global evangelical community maintain its integrity in the years ahead.

The most obvious and useful implication of all this is that there are several levels of legitimate cooperation. Some evangelicals assume an either/or posture on every debatable question – as if God never made a rainbow! In the place of an either/or approach Arthur Glasser suggests five options for evangelicals to consider when deciding on relationships with others. In descending order of intensity, these are:

1. total identification
2. active cooperation
3. brotherly fellowship
4. occasional dialogue
5. clear-cut separation

Such a scale encourages flexibility in acquiring first hand experience with groups unfamiliar to us. It also provides a rationale for maintaining a variety of relationships short of clear-cut separation.

Doctrine is not the only factor determining at what level we relate to others. Variant customs, mores and methodologies often prove decisive. Less excusable are the pride and prejudice born of ignorance.

Broadening Our Horizons

The most urgent need that has impressed itself upon me these past two years as I have traveled to most parts of the world is the need for “conservative evangelicals,” with whom I identify, and especially our leaders, broaden our understanding of the real global evangelical constituency in today’s world.

As a result of the modern missionary movement, led in large measure by evangelicals, a truly global evangelical community has emerged. It numbers at least 75 million people, perhaps one hundred million, on all six continents. These “born again” believers cut across all denominational lines, including Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

It is apparent that in the providence of God, evangelicals are a significant minority in the modern world. Or, to return to language I was employing a moment ago, Christ has a team on earth today, millions strong and endowed with able, Spirit-filled leaders. If Christ’s team can come to understand itself as a team, and learn to function as a team, then surely it has the potential to become the greatest force for good in the 20th century.

But will this happen automatically? Hardly! Let me speak plainly. The willingness of many conservative evangelical leaders to reach out this larger evangelical family – whether to Pentecostals in Germany, Presbyterians in Thailand, or Anglicans in Kenya, to instance just a few – and for whatever reasons, remains one of the most complicating factors in evangelical cooperation today.

Because of this reluctance, many of the national evangelical fellowships around the world, with which most of us here would tend to identify, are not really representative of the evangelical communities in their countries.

This has serious consequences on the mission field, as we experienced recently with PACLA, the Pan Africa Christian Leadership Assembly. For similar reasons, in other parts of the world evangelical cooperation is hindered because of the unhealthy appearance of competition between the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship.

This confusion on the part of grass-roots evangelicals stems directly from the fact that the Lausanne Committee is perceived almost everywhere as being more representative of the true evangelical constituency that WEF is.

A Question of Will

Even when we have settled to our own satisfaction who we can cooperate with, our actual level of cooperation is

generally low. Why so? Surely this is a question of will, of conviction, of motivation and, in the final analysis, of vision.

We know, for example, that the body of Christ does not consist of one member but of many (I Corinthians 12:14). We know that God arranges each member in the body as he chooses (verse 18). We know that Christ is the head of the body and that each member is related directly to him. And we know that the members of the body all have different functions (Romans 12:4).

From this we infer, organizationally and denominationally, that we are essentially “on our own.” We assume that if each of us does “his own thing,” looking to the Lord for direction, then somehow the purposes of God will prevail, the cause of Christ triumph, and the Great Commission be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, this overlooks the equally Pauline insistence that as members of the body we are related not only to Christ but to each other! We are “individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

Consider some of the implications of this oversight. In the first place, “the manifestation of the Spirit” has been given to each member not, primarily, for its own personal edification or the fulfillment of the agency’s mission alone, but “for the common good” (I Corinthians 12:26).

Naturally we apply this teaching within our own societies. Some missions succeed better than others in this. Ways and means are developed to enable members to express their care and concern for each other. But bear in mind that Paul is not writing to just one party in the church at Corinth, but to the whole church as a unit, a team – and beyond Corinth to “all men everywhere who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – both their Lord and ours” (I Corinthians 1:2).

If we apply this today to the larger evangelical movement of which each of our agencies is only a part, we must admit forthrightly that only a minimum effort is being made to coordinate gifts and ministries for the common good.

On the contrary, so preoccupied are we with our own affairs – that is, the affairs of our mission or denomination – that were Paul on the scene today he would be compelled to say of us, as he did of certain groups in his own day, “they look after their own interests, not [the larger interests] of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:20). I am amazed at the way some of our best-known evangelical leaders today interpret cooperation to mean, “Let’s all join together to help my organization accomplish its goals.”

Not only are we self-centered; we often see ourselves as self-sufficient. These may well be the two great evangelical sins. Self-sufficiency is a consequence of our failure to embrace the full implications of membership in the body of Christ. And perhaps, as far as Americans are concerned, it is also an unacknowledged reliance on our membership in the world's most affluent secular society.

The New Testament, however, expresses a contrary drive. "if the whole body were an eye," Paul asks, "where would be the hearing?" (I Corinthians 12:17).

Within evangelicalism today there is but meager effort on the part of denominations or societies to express their biblically compelling need for one another. Evangelical leaders continue to look upon cooperative ventures as a waste of time. When we do come together it is, more often than not, an expression of convenience – a low-keyed feeling that *perhaps* there are a few worthwhile ideas to be exchanged, *perhaps* a small scale, low budget program worth supporting.

Considerations for the Future

At this point our African brothers may have something to teach us. They have learned that evangelical cooperation is an evolutionary process, a development by stages. They have identified four distinct stages. They say that:

1. Coming together is a beginning
- 2 Staying together in progress
3. Thinking together is real unity
4. Working together is success

My experience confirms the astuteness of this little outline. Not only are the four stages distinct, they are progressive. Each leads to the next. Further, each stage requires a specific quantum of input of time and energy and, usually, money.

One common mistake I observe being made is that of trying to move directly from the first stage to the fourth. Attempting to bypass the second and third stages – staying together and thinking together – makes our cooperative efforts less effective than they might be.

It is relatively easy to bring evangelicals together on an ad hoc basis. And a fair amount of useful work can be accomplished thereby. Unfortunately many evangelical leaders today believe an ad hoc approach is virtually the only worthwhile avenue to cooperation. They feel it is unnecessary to bother with more formal structural approaches.

This is understandable. Yet wars are not won by "minute men." They are won by established forces acting

jointly to achieve strategic objectives. As Carl Henry has pointed out, “institutions are indispensable to any movement’s durability; and it is a mark of maturity when evangelicals realize that institutions must be properly nurtured and cultivated, and their goals persistently deepened.”

In order for evangelical agencies to act together strategically over the long term, they must become aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and they must learn to trust each other. This requires not only coming together, but *staying* together. And this in turn requires some kind of organizational framework, however simple.

Morgan Derham, vice president of the European Evangelical Alliance, is fond of pointing out that “communication flows as you pump it; and cooperation flourishes as you cultivate it.”

Evangelicals, fearful lest umbrella organizations such as IFMA and EFMA and WEF evolve into Geneva- or Vatican-like bureaucracies, want to maintain such bodies at a minimal level. This automatically ensures that stages 3 and 4 of the African outline – thinking together and working together – never develop their full potential. Thinking together leads directly to stage 4, working together, which is success.

At the local level, these activities are comparatively inexpensive. At their simplest level they can be carried out for the price of a cup of coffee. At the regional and international levels, however, such activity is costly. But if evangelicals are to function as a global team – and the historical moment cries out for us to do so – we must be willing to pay the price.

I live in a medium-size city and belong to a medium-size church. Yet our congregation, one of a dozen evangelical churches in our city, has an operating budget ten times greater than either IFMA or EFMA. Is this not incongruous?

Practical Suggestions

At this point I wish to make two concrete proposals to you who are related to EFMA and IFMA Boards of Directors. The first is that you take positive steps to help develop and support cooperative evangelical facilities in the countries in which you are working. I am convinced that strong national evangelical associations provide the only viable basis for more comprehensive continental and global cooperation.

If this be so, we are in trouble. A few of our existing national evangelical alliances are strong. But many are no-

ticeably weak. They lack full time executive secretaries; they have inadequate offices and budgets.

Surely this is one of the most strategic challenges IFMA and EFMA face today. It is not enough to evangelize. We have a responsibility to conserve the fruit of our evangelism. And that cannot be done by planting churches that live and work in relative isolation from the rest of the body of Christ.

Leaders associated with the World Council of Churches are allocating increasingly large sums of money to develop and support WCC-related national councils in places as distant as Korea, Kenya and the Caribbean. Before his untimely death Byang Kato, then the general secretary of AEAM (Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar), reminded us repeatedly that strong national evangelical fellow-ships can save African churches from an enforced ecumenism.

I realize and appreciate the fact that IFMA/EFMA Boards were instrumental in establishing AEAM and still support its Nairobi office. But in today's situation, the mere fact of support is not the key factor. The *scale* of support is likely to prove decisive in the equation. The annual budget for the WCC-supported All Africa Conference of Churches, exceeds one million dollars. Compare that with AEAM's current budget of \$50,000.

Milton Baker of the Conservative Baptists has protested, "It is tragic that so little effort and funds have been applied to the development of viable, productive national evangelical fellowship. Too often it is only the threat of some negative force that causes evangelicals to finally 'find' the funds that could have been used more profitably had they been designated sooner." Baker proposed that EFMA/IFMA agencies consider giving at least one half of one percent of their incomes to develop national fellowships worldwide. That was three years ago. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this proposal has not been implemented by any IFMA or EFMA Board – though it seems modest enough.

I mentioned two suggestions. The second is that EFMA/IFMA missions cooperate with WEF in developing stronger relations with emerging Third World missions. This is one of the chief purposes of WEF's International Commission on Missions. Professor George Peters, after making inquiries at a number of Third World mission offices in Asia, says that the movement may abort. That would be tragic indeed, since the emergence of Third World missions has been one of the most gratifying phenomena of the past 25 years and affords great hope for the future.

A crying need exists for genuine partnership in mission. But the two groups – Third World and Western missions – barely know each other. There are but a handful of instances of working relationships between them. If evangelicals do not move unitedly and vigorously in this direction, ecumenical agencies will.

Concluding Remarks

Writing in *Japan Harvest*, Siegfried Buss draws attention to the Japanese *kanji* word for cooperation. Transliterated into English, it is *kyooryoku*. The first part of this two-character word represents the strength of three persons engaged in a joint effort. The second part simply means “strength.” Thus a literal translation would be: the strength derived through the involvement of at least three persons in a common task

Of even greater interest is the fact that the first *kanji* character includes a symbol very much like a cross. In Buss’ words, “Herein lies the secret of meaningful, lasting cooperation. As we rally ‘round the cross, as we join hands and hearts in obedience to His call, we are workers together with Him. There is no greater challenge!”