

COOPERATION IN EVANGELISM I

Cooperation in Evangelism

Bill O'Brien

God revealed himself as one in community: the Trinity. God created humankind in his image: in community. We were assigned as stewards of all the components of the household. In Genesis 12, God established his covenant with Abram through whom all peoples would be blessed. In the new covenant the disciples were an instrument through which all peoples would be served and blessed. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul indicates we are all God's fellow workers. We are laborers together with God in a common cause for God's own mission.

Peter reminds us we are the people of God, a royal priesthood.

Cooperation

From the Edenic Fall to the present time, human nature has worked against cooperation. Left to ourselves, we isolate, insulate, exclude, and put "self" in first place. From the Lausanne Congress in 1974 have come many efforts in cooperation, and many good models exist. One contribution made subsequent to the Congress was the little book, *Cooperating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Parachurch Relations*. It outlines obstacles, or barriers, to cooperation. It is helpful to identify things which work against such efforts and become traps. In the Bible, there are clear principles which enable us to deal with those barriers under the lordship of Christ. That lordship provides the guidelines for cooperation and its parameters.

Setting the Scene

An episode in the ministry of Jesus illustrates some needed lessons. One account of the story is in Luke 5. Inherent in the story is a consuming confidence in the person of Jesus—a confidence that evoked cooperation.

Beyond the facts of the story, it is likely that the four men who carried the paralytic to Jesus were not totally like-minded on other things. What if those other differences had taken precedence over their common cause—bringing the paralytic to Jesus—and their common hope in Jesus?

Let us suppose these men represented some very normal first-century attitudes:

Simon

The first attitude represented might have been in a man named Simon, a Zealot. Old Testament history provided strong models for Simon: Simeon, Levi, Phineas, and Elijah. He was an agent of God's wrath and judgment against all forms of apostasy. He took seriously what it meant to be a chosen people:

We are a special people, a chosen race. If not, why would God have chosen us? At one time I was willing to kill Gentiles, even a fellow Jew, out of my zeal for the Law. But at some point, pride in my race and nation took precedence over my worship of the one true God. I felt superior, but I disguised that attitude with religious jargon. Racial and national pride kept me from seeing others the way the Nazarene Rabbi saw them.

I still believe in *our people* and *our land*. But, something troubles me deeply about what it has done to me, especially when I am in his presence. But what is happening now is the most important thing for the moment. I've got to pick up my corner of the mat and help get this man to Jesus.

Zadok

And perhaps there was Zadok, a Sadducee. His tradition descended from Aaron, but took the form of a Sadducean party after the Maccabean rebellion. His party felt they must hold the line against the more accommodating Pharisees:

I've given my life to the service of the temple in the tradition of our fathers. Even my name calls up memories of Solomon's priest. These wretched Pharisees have been willing to include writings other than the Law. There is an insidious and undermining para-temple movement emerging. Should this continue, not only our rituals but our base of support will be seriously endangered.

There was a day when my temple calling would have never allowed me to do what I'm doing today. I first heard this Galilean Rabbi in the temple—intriguing. But, he spoke in various synagogues and even in the households of publicans and sinners—troubling!

My uncle raised me after my father died. One day, out by the well, he talked to me about the troubling things this Rabbi was saying and doing. Now, my uncle lies here helplessly paralyzed. What if Jesus really could do something about it? If he can, then maybe God will forgive me for associating with the Pharisee Lazarus in this "endeavor."

Lazarus

The third man was Lazarus, one of the Pharisees whom Zadok used to despise:

I have been doubly cursed among my people. Earlier, as a scribe, I was the target of attack by the temple priests. When this man Jesus came into our family, life took another turn. Even my own Pharisee group turned on me. But through him my perspective of all creation gradually changed.

My two sisters came alive as a result of him. Many of their friends experienced the same thing. I am accused of having gone soft, transgressing both the Law and tradition as it relates to our Hebrew women.

I believe that Jesus is the Way and he is Life! He is also Truth—the kind of truth that set me and my sisters free. Yet, it still feels cold and lonely in my religious community which has not experienced that freedom.

John Mark

The fourth member of the team was a lad who had been coaxed into helping. He was only fourteen but was strong and athletic. He was obviously a child of privilege, from a family of wealth. He was on his way home from tutorials when he paused to see what the commotion was about. It centered around three men and a paralytic on a mat. Upon hearing of their proposed mission to get the man to Jesus, young John Mark's curiosity took over:

From earliest memory I have instinctively known that to be rich is a sign of God's favor. The physical and intellectual advantages that money buys guarantee one's place in society. God can trust us to run things on his behalf! Obviously this poor man on the mat is not blessed; he is probably the victim of sin. I wouldn't even be seen with this group except I want to see Jesus up close. I have heard the stories about him; now is my chance. Uncle Barnabas is coming from Cyprus today. Wait till he hears about this!

Paralyzed. Who was paralyzed in the story? The man on the mat or the four others by their attitudes? What is the real miracle in the story—that the man was healed or that the four overcame their attitudes and cooperated to take him to Jesus?

The group picked up the man on the mat and carried him to the house where Jesus was. True to reality and the experience of every generation, the environment produced factors beyond their control. Seemingly, there was no way to get where they wanted to go. At best, this house was a limited-access situation—at worst, a “closed country.” Whether their faith produced determination or their determination fueled their faith, we do not know. However, we do know their faith and determination would have been to no avail had the four not cooperated to reach their objective.

Modern Echoes

To be redeemed and a part of the body of Christ does not automatically deliver one from conflicting attitudes. In fact, the greatest barrier to the spread of the gospel today lies within the church. Apathy, competition, and outright sin and disobedience prevent a shared stewardship of the gospel that would reflect the unity Jesus prayed would characterize his body.

Racial and National Superiority

Our generation is one of rising nationalism coupled with strong ethnic consciousness. A healthy “selfhood” enriches the diversity God has created. Rightfully, churches reflect our ethnic and cultural diversity.

However, when prompted by haughtiness, signs of racial or national superiority will negatively affect the church. The potential for cooperation is jeopardized. Outside the church, many have never taken Christ seriously because of the way Christians view other Christians. Ralph Winter reminds us in his message, “The Future of the Church: The Essential Components of World Evangelization,” that even after the Resurrection the agenda of the disciples was still different from that of Jesus:

In Acts 1:6 (TLB), their own agenda surfaces, “Lord, are you going to free Israel [from Rome] now and restore us as an independent nation?” Jesus, in his reply in Acts 1:8, sidestepped their patriotic concern, their nationalism, their basically self-directed thinking by simply restating once more God's unchanging and decisively larger concern for all other human societies.

Winter reminds us that God's Spirit not only gives us a new and different power, but also a new and different perspective.

There are modern zealots exclaiming, “My people, my land.” Even in this room, thousands gather under the lordship of Christ. We look different, we talk differently. And down deep, the tendency is to differentiate between us for many reasons, even as we wear the label “Christian.”

“I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God . . .”

Ecclesial Superiority

The names of the actors have changed, but the first-century drama is still playing. “Sadducees versus Pharisees” are present in interchurch, intrachurch, and parachurch rivalries. From bases of tradition, doctrine, or praxis, the competition has escalated until today there are more than twenty-two thousand denominations and twenty thousand parachurch entities in the world. The validity of one is questioned by the other, resulting in competition and conflict. Within many of these rage clergy-laity battles that drain spiritual energy. They fail to capitalize on the availability of gifts and commitment that could become the salt penetrating a lost world.

Modern Zadoks are exclaiming, “My church, my tradition, my movement.” Even in this room, there may be the tendency to discriminate from a competitive or superior stance.

“I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God . . .”

Gender Superiority

A confusing principle among believers today is the role of gender in the mission and purpose of our Lord. There is no consistent parallel from culture. Even within Scripture, there are examples and principles which mean different things to different people. How can we arrive at a common understanding of cooperation under the lordship of Christ as it relates to gender?

Jesus' own example is our surest foundation. Within a culture and tradition that segregated and differentiated on the basis of sex, Jesus dealt justly both in relationships and in ministry. When he ascended to the Father and the Spirit of truth came, the giving of spiritual gifts bore no gender distinction. The conflict comes in the interpretation of the application of those gifts. If the sovereign Spirit distributes those gifts according to the will of the Father, we must be careful as to how we differentiate to whom the gift is given and how it is applied. If the lost of the world are to hear the gospel in the next ten years, we must see greater male-female partnering in the shared task.

If the truth has set us free, why does it feel so cold and lonely in the church for so many? Even in this room, there may be the tendency for some to say, “My gender, my role.”

“I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God . . .”

Economic Superiority

Throughout the past twenty centuries, the corporate bodies of Christ have been rarely viewed apart from a national, geopolitical, and economic context. Often the churches began to look like the environment in which they existed. We live with a growing gap between the rich church and the poor church. The illusions of superiority are assumed by the ecclesial “haves,” and because they have so much they begin to assume God is the one blessing them. The mixture of feelings evoked within those who “have not” range from envy, to hostility, to an inverted pride for not being like the

“ecclesial colonialist.”

Those who claim some relationship to Christianity worldwide receive 62 percent of the global income. But only about one-tenth of 1 percent goes to evangelize the unreached billions. If the world is ever going to take the church seriously, it must see the church act dramatically and drastically at the point of the distribution of its resources. We must find new common ground for the integration of our corporate giftedness and corporate calling.

“I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God . . .”

Believers around the world today should join hands and hearts—without regard to race, gender, or economic status. Out of our love for Christ, we must pour out our resources—material, physical, and spiritual—to the end that all persons may hear of the Christ who brings us together and restores our relationship with the Father.

We are standing at the four corners of the “global mat.” Who is the paralytic lying on the mat—the world, or the church? Perhaps time for confession and forgiveness is what we need most. Then *together* we can pick up our share of the load.

Lord, by our renewed faith may you touch and transform a paralyzed, lost, and dying world!

VIDEO PRESENTATION

Cooperation: No Time To Hold Back!

Producer: Christine Rylko

Writer: Phill Butler

Narrator: When the task is hardest, when the forces are most united against Christianity, when talking about Christ is illegal, when money is scarce, when time is short, *then* certain words are heard over and over: unity, cooperation, and collaboration.

Christian leaders, some working in places where it is illegal for Christians to witness, and who must keep their identity secret to protect their ministry, report from their personal experiences.

Tim Lewis: No organization, no matter how much power or money a particular denomination or church might have, has enough organizational clout, muscle, or resources to finish the job of world evangelization, or to penetrate the unreached people groups at any time in the near future by themselves.

Dave Adams: I would like to encourage the leadership of ministries to assess for themselves what they are wanting to do. What has God called them into existence to accomplish? What can they contribute to the partnership? And in that process of self-awareness, what role will they play in the cooperation?

Narrator: A few years ago, several Christian ministries in a closed country agreed to coordinate their outreach for a more strategic presentation of Christ. People who responded to radio broadcasts were followed up by another agency’s Bible correspondence courses. A different agency provided personal follow-up. Another provided Christian literature. Christian nationals within the country visited them regularly. Each ministry contributed in its most effective way. The result: Souls were won to Christ!

Another dramatic partnership example started fifteen years ago. A group of Christian agencies, working separately in a closed country, were seeing about eight hundred to a thousand inquiries a year about Christ.

They decided to come together in a formal partnership. Within three years, the inquiries about Christ had gone up to seven to eight hundred thousand a year!

Some people aren’t surprised by ministry partnership success.

Pablo Carillo: The concept of unity itself has some sort of power that is conveyed to the people they’re trying to reach.

Phill Butler: At the highest level, partnership is doing God’s work God’s way. He suggests to us that his own message is more credible as his people dwell in unity.