



The Story of the Lausanne Covenant: Case Study in Cooperation

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The Lausanne Covenant has been a significant development in cooperation between Christians. The way it was drawn up in 1974 and followed through is a case study on cooperation.

THE MIRACLE

That the Lausanne Covenant was agreed upon by 2,300 people from 150 nations from all branches of the Christian church in the space of ten days is one of the miracles of contemporary church history. Some say that if we attempted it now, it would not be possible. So we need to understand how it came to be adopted at the time and afterwards.

THE SECRET

Humanly speaking, the Covenant was adopted with such wide agreement because it broadened the world view of evangelicals in such a way as to put together in one document an acceptable statement about matters that had been increasingly in tension both in the experience of individuals and in relationships between groups. How this came about was a significant work of the Holy Spirit in our time.

THE QUESTIONS

Someone has said that a theology is a set of answers based on the Scripture to the set of questions that any generation is asking. At Lausanne, the Christians faced their current questions and found answers in Scripture that provided new impetus towards the evangelization of the world. The coming together of different Christians from so many cultures made it possible for us to widen our concerns to include the burning questions of the day.

- The relationship of evangelism and social concern, raised by the rapid growth in awareness of poverty and injustice in the world and the effects of (natural and human-made) disasters.
- Unity, diversity and cooperation among Christians, raised by the post World War II development of the ecumenical movement in the World Council of Churches.
- The uniqueness of Christ, raised by the advocacy of tolerance of other religions.
- The validity of missions, raised by the call for a moratorium of missions that had been issued by some Two-Thirds World church leaders.
- The work of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, raised by the rapid growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.
- Religious liberty and human rights, raised by heightening awareness through modern media of the infringement of these rights in many parts of the world.
- The relationship of the Gospel to culture, raised by its spread into many cultures and the self consciousness of these cultures in the post imperial independence movements.

THE METHOD

- Those present were closely involved in the process of drawing up the Covenant. The Congress papers were sent to participants months before the Congress and response to the papers was made almost as a condition of attending. The papers and the responses to them were analyzed and from this the first draft of the Covenant was produced near the beginning of the Congress. Participants were asked individually and in groups to comment in writing on this and one other draft before the final document was produced. This meant that there were no surprises and it made agreement easier at the end.
- The document was for evangelical leaders as individuals and it was to be a covenant to pray, plan and work together for the evangelization of the whole world. This gave the happy combination of belief and practice that is found in the Bible.
- The common ground held by evangelical leaders was reaffirmed in contemporary language.
- The raw material for the discussion was not only Scripture, it was experience as represented in the scores of workshops and seminars given by practitioners on every conceivable aspect of evangelism.
- The questions being asked were legitimized. Where there was agreement, it was stated. Where there were disagreements they were noted as areas that required more work, rather than reasons for going separate ways.
- Commitment was asked for. It was a commitment to world evangelization on the basis of the beliefs and practices spoken of in the Covenant. This commitment was private and has never been published. Some took months to send in their commitment because they had to adjust things in their lives before they could conscientiously sign it.
- A group was authorized to continue the work begun. The Lausanne Continuation Committee was its first name.

OWNERSHIP

The Committee has never regarded itself as the Custodian of the Covenant. This was given freely to the world and allowed to make its own way.

- The Covenant has been translated locally into more than 20 languages.
- It has been adopted by hundreds of churches and parachurch agencies as their basis of operations and cooperation.
- It has led to formations of a number of national and regional movements in Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, North America and Latin America. It has stimulated movements such as the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE) and the Chinese Coordinating Committee for World Evangelization (CCCOWE).
- It has been the basis for international consultations on more than 30 subjects, many of whose findings are published in Lausanne Occasional Papers.

All of this has meant that people worked at its concepts and made them their own locally. The Covenant has become a catalyst for many cooperative movements, mostly ad hoc and short term and non-competitive with others.

COOPERATION

The words in the Covenant that relate to cooperation were a significant help towards its realization. It blessed the "wide diversity of evangelical approaches". It admitted that we have some "Ecclesiastical Ghettos" that we need to get out of. It spoke about churches sometimes being in bondage to culture, rather than to Scripture.

It admitted that "Visible unity is God's purpose", but was quick to say that many of the forms of organizational unity do not necessarily forward evangelism. Individualism is called sinful and duplication is called needless. These were new words for some in an evangelical document.

Maybe the most daring statement was that our disunity undermines our gospel of reconciliation. Time is proving this to be true. It is becoming apparent that the way we do evangelism actually sows the need for reconciliation later instead of planting the means of reconciliation earlier. To evangelize is to help a person to receive and follow Jesus Christ. On the other hand to proselytize is to say: "Join us!". On this definition there is a fairly strong element of proselytizing in a lot of our evangelism. It is not unnatural. Fellowship is vital for Christian growth. The local church is a reality and a necessity. Yet it tends to become a box it is hard to get out of to relate to others who are not in our box.

In some countries, where community arrangements led to people who were all also from one tribe coming into a denominational box, the gospel of reconciliation has reduced our ability to combat tribalism.

In the face of that kind of reality, the Covenant's pleas for unity in truth, holiness and mission, though just a few words, helped us towards the cooperation we need.

Cooperation can be at different levels and based on different criteria, depending on the objective. There are some places where we are better off to have separate activities. The world we have to reach is so diverse that it needs the distinctiveness of all of us to reach it.

There are areas where we need at least to know what others are doing as we do our thing. For one local church this came when it realized that it could not pray for revival only for itself. The local church is not our local denominational church. The local church is the aggregate of true believers in any given place. It is the whole that must be renewed and grow, not just our part, especially at the expense of others. They had to work out a way of giving meaning to this truth. It led to a weekly contact with some brother pastors to make sure that their struggles and triumphs were regularly shared with its people in the weekly prayer bulletin. Now that was not cooperation but it did lead to the kind of strategic planning that the Covenant calls for and it reduced duplication.

Then there are areas where we need to have joint activity where we need each other to pursue common goals. The late Francis Schaeffer talked about it being possible to be co-belligerents even if we could not be allies.

The unrecognized genius of the Lausanne Covenant is that it makes cooperation essential. If it is all accepted and followed, it makes it inevitable that we start to have a Christian Vision for the place we live. That vision will include belonging to a church that is winning people to Christ and growing in numbers, character, understanding of the truth, internal and external relationships, and our impact on the community. We will be supportive of those who are trying to clean up and run well the political units to which we belong. We will be active in caring about the relief and development of the poor in our neighborhood and we will be contributing money and people for evangelistic and social purposes in other countries that are not yet reached by the gospel.

Now if that is the vision, we cannot do it on our own. We need to cooperate with all other Christians in the place. If however our vision is more limited and we are only looking for converts and new members for our church, of course we don't need others. We can probably manage better without them.

THE CHALLENGE

Clearly, the Lausanne Covenant gave evangelicals a bigger worldview within which they could work together in the work of evangelization. Cooperation requires that people operate from within compatible worldviews and that the obstacles to effective cooperation can arise from a clash of worldviews. The challenge is to be ready, in the cause of cooperation, to compare, reconsider and perhaps amend or expand our worldviews. If our mission is to mobilize the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world, then surely such a radical approach is justified.

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