

COOPERATION IN EVANGELISM II

Cooperation in Evangelism

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The fingers on the hand were having a rather heated discussion on who was the most important. When the discussion turned into an argument, the thumb decided to intervene. He suggested everyone sit down and each finger be given the opportunity to state why he thought he was the greatest. The thumb would be the judge.

The index finger was called on. He stood up and said, "I'm the most important because I'm the one that points the way. I'm also the most important because when people count they start with me."

The middle finger was called to stand but refused saying, "If all the fingers will stand with me you will see that I'm the most important." When they stood, the middle finger said, "It is clear that I am the greatest as I stand head and shoulders above the rest."

The next finger was called and he said, "I'm the most important because people load me with riches. I have gold, silver, and precious stones put on me. I am, therefore, the most important because people value me the most."

Lastly, the little finger stood, saying, "I'm the greatest because I'm the strongest. When anyone wants to make a point vehemently they bang their fist on the table and I take the full force of the attack. I'm the greatest because I am the strongest."

The thumb then took a tennis ball and said, "Each one of you come and pick this up." Each finger tried, but none succeeded.

Then he said, "Now work together and try to pick up the ball." They each held a different part of the ball and found they could lift it. It wasn't very easy, but they could at least do better than when they each tried to pick up the ball on their own.

The thumb then said, "Now try again and let me help you."

The whole hand, fingers and thumb, all worked together and lifted the ball easily.

There are some things we can do alone, and more we can do when we work together, and still more when we work together and with God.

When the term cooperation is used the emphasis is usually on "co"—together. There is action involved in cooperation, but it is an action undertaken in unity. It is not enough for us to nod assent at the notion of cooperation. What is required is a determination to take the initiatives needed to move ourselves, our congregations, our churches, our groups into cooperative endeavor.

Unity does not mean that we are all the same, as we saw in the example of the hand.

Rather, it means mutuality and interdependence. It means being united in purpose while giving each member freedom to exercise his or her own strengths.

If we look at Paul's letters we see that unity is characterized by the giving of mutual encouragement (Romans 1), by commending one person to another (Colossians 4:7-14), praying for one another (Philippians 1:4), exhorting one another (Philippians 2:14), and encouraging each other not to lose heart (Colossians 3). How well do we encourage each other, commend each other, pray for each other, and encourage each other to keep going?

In Philippians 2:2-4, Paul urges his readers to be "one in spirit and purpose," not to do anything out of "selfish ambition," and asks each to look "not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

During this Congress we have been studying the book of Romans, and we are given a wonderful picture of cooperation in the early church. In Romans, we are invited to glimpse an international fellowship of believers who are working to spread the gospel. This fellowship is made up of women and men, of young and old, of experienced Christians and new Christians, of people representing different countries, different gifts, different opportunities, and different levels of society.

Paul commends these Christian workers to each other: Phoebe, a minister of another church at Cenchrea is to be received in a way that is worthy of the saints. Timothy, Gaius, Erastus, and others working for the gospel with Paul in Ephesus, send encouragement to those working at Rome.

Clearly, unity was not to be confused with uniformity. We hear too of Priscilla and Aquila, in whose home the church meets; Epenetus, the first convert to Christ from Asia; Andronicus and Junia, who had suffered in prison with Paul, and who, he said, were "outstanding among the apostles"; and others, some of whom were members of slave households and some of the imperial household.

What diversity in unity! All were "fellow workers" in the gospel, but their ethnic, educational, social, and religious backgrounds were very different, as were their responsibilities, opportunities, and experiences. Yet they all had a significant role in the spread of the gospel. The range of ministries created diversity, but the workers were bonded by a common purpose.

Paul could have listed many more names from other cities and from other places and ministries, but instead sums them up in the words, "All the churches of Christ send greetings." Is this true of us? Do we send greetings to one another? Does the church in Australia send greetings, encouragement, and support to the church in Zaire? Does the church in India send greetings, encouragement, and support to the church in Finland? Certainly this Congress gives an opportunity for this to be done.

The workers then were as international and, in other ways, as multifaceted as was the task they undertook, and the need for recognition of each other's work, the value of praying one for the other, and the encouraging of each other, was a vital aspect of cooperation in evangelism.

It was a cooperation which recognized different gifts and roles, that recognized the primacy of the task, accepted the inevitability of suffering, and warmly and generously gave encouragement. It was not a superficial cooperation which tolerated and even perpetuated divisions, or that encouraged individualism and needless duplication. Nor was it characterized by competitiveness. Recent research from the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota has shown that too much competition is bad for our health and can bring out the "beast" in us. Cooperation is conducive to good health and brings out the "best" in us.

Cooperation means non-competitive partnership. It requires humility and the

recognition of others, their gifts, and their ministry. Cooperation means genuine partnership between men and women, clergy and laity, young and old, First World and Third World, North and South, church and para-church.

We cannot be partners and co-workers until we recognize our oneness in the Spirit, and until we come in humility asking forgiveness for the divisions we have created, the polarity we have tolerated, the opportunities we have wasted through suspicion and territorialism, the hurts we have administered to one another, and the opportunities we have denied each other. And let us recognize that we have done all these. We allowed personal ambition, rivalry between ministries, dogmatism about nonessentials, denominational distinctiveness, continued paternalism, and corporate individualism to cloud our commission and contaminate our call. But it is not enough to acknowledge it; we must do something about it.

The fact that we are here at this Congress on World Evangelization shows that we share a common vision. We recognize the primacy and urgency of making known Christ's saving work to all people, and it is becoming an increasingly obvious fact that the whole gospel will not be taken to the whole world unless it is taken by the whole church.

No one of us can do it alone. No denomination can do it alone. No mission body can do it alone. No country can do it alone. No gender, age, or race can do it alone. It can, however, be done, if we work in cooperation with God and with each other.

In the nineteenth century, the scientists Marie and Pierre Curie had been experimenting with radioactivity. After years and years of work Pierre was one day discouraged and daunted by the magnitude of the task. Turning to his wife he said, "It can't be done. It can't be done. It will take one hundred years!" To which she replied, "It will be done. Even if it takes one hundred years! We can do no less than work for it while we have breath."

They kept working and they discovered radium.

Let's not be daunted by the magnitude of the task of world evangelization. It can be done no matter how long it takes! And it will be done faster and more efficiently if we, as individuals, local churches, and parachurch organizations, work together.

The October '88 issue of the *Prayer Countdown to Lausanne II in Manila* said,

A new spirit of cooperation pervades Christianity everywhere. International radio broadcasters have banded together to more effectively sound out the gospel message to the world; expatriate Chinese churches around the world have come together under the Christian coordination Center for World Evangelization, and different organizations are working together in a number of countries to bring the whole gospel to their entire nation.

Have you been receiving as I have, these prayer countdowns to Lausanne II saying "four months to go," "three months to go," "two months to go . . . ?" Well, the countdown has ended. Lausanne II is here. We are Lausanne II. The countdown has stopped. Now is the time for the launch!

Today is the time for cooperative action. Cooperation, however, has a cost. It may mean that the church will need a greater openness to the work of parachurch and house churches. It may mean denominational sharing of tasks and personnel; it may mean conservatives and those not so conservative—and the charismatic among them both—listening to and learning from each other; it may mean men recognizing women's calling to ministry and mission; it may mean mission boards working more closely and more

humbly with the national churches they have brought into being. It may mean cooperation between international and multinational organizations. It may mean this and more, and more!

We need to ask for forgiveness for our pride, our self-seeking, our denominational divisiveness, our exclusive structures, and our failure to put first God and his call to world evangelization. But let us remember that when we ask for that forgiveness, we stand forgiven. The past with all its failures is behind us and glorious opportunities lie ahead. We must not, like Marley's ghost in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, drag the chain of the past with us wherever we go. We are the forgiven, cleansed, renewed people of God.

Today we can say, "Lord forgive us." We can also say, "Lord, help us to learn from our mistakes and from this day forward go forth together to take your Good News to the world."

The Lausanne Covenant, paragraphs 6 and 7 read:

We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world. . . . We affirm that the church's visible unity in truth is God's purpose. Evangelism also summons us to unity, because our oneness strengthens our witness, just as our disunity undermines our gospel of reconciliation. . . . We who share the same biblical faith should be closely united in fellowship, work, and witness.

The task of taking the whole gospel to the whole world will only be effective if the whole church catches the vision of working with God and with each other, acknowledging each other and each other's ministries, encouraging each other, praying for each other, strengthening, and supporting each other, so that there will be an ever-growing, dynamic network of God's believing, praying, called, and commissioned witnesses covering the whole world.

It can be done, and we can do no less than work for it while we have breath!