



Lausanne Style Cooperation (1992)

Tom Houston

I had experience of putting together a Congress in Moscow in October 1990 where we had every denomination and every Republic in the old USSR represented. This was a major experiment in cooperation and exposed me to some of the difficulties that everyone will face.

We worked on the basis of the Lausanne Covenant and the Manila Manifesto which we translated and printed in Russian for all 1150 participants. It was a new experience for almost everyone present, but it happened successfully.

A year later I was responsible for The Budapest Summit on Evangelization in Post Marxist Contexts. We had people present from 57 countries including all eight countries of the old Eastern Bloc, several of the old Soviet Republics and people from Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Vietnam. It was a listening "Summit" with only two Western speakers. It came out with the "Budapest Statement to those working in Eastern Europe and the old USSR." It had wide and helpful circulation.

Finally, in 1992, we called together in Bad Boll, near Stuttgart in Germany 160 people from 36 countries in Europe, East, Central, South and West, for a Consultation on "Evangelizing the New Europe". This produced "The Bad Boll Commitment" which emphasizes the role of the local church in evangelism.

Later that month, I had the opportunity of putting my thoughts together in three lectures at Ruschlikon Seminary on "Evangelizing the New Europe in the wake of Secularization, in The Aftermath of the Resurgence of Nationalism."

In all of these events we have taken as a basis, The Lausanne Covenant. I thought it might help, therefore, if I were to do a talk on Cooperation Lausanne Style as a contribution to your ongoing journey together.

"COOPERATION LAUSANNE STYLE".

The Lausanne Covenant and movement represent a significant development in cooperation between Christians in the last twenty years. The Covenant itself and the way it was drawn up and followed through is an interesting case study on this subject.

1. The Miracle

That the Lausanne Covenant was agreed upon by 2-3,000 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. There are those who say that if we were to attempt it now, it would not be possible. This means that we need to understand how it came to be adopted and what was its significance.

2. The Secret

Humanly speaking, the Covenant was adopted with such wide agreement because it broadened the worldview 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. It is instructive to retrace how this came about. What follows is hindsight. It cannot be detected in the intention of those who were involved. It is, I believe, a retracing of a significant work of the Holy Spirit in our time.

3. The Questions

Someone has said that a theology is a set of answers based on Scripture to the set of questions that any generation is asking. The trouble with some of our theologies is that they are a set of answers taken from Scripture to the set of questions that an earlier generation was 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.

1. 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 disasters, natural and man made.
2. Unity, diversity and cooperation among Christians, raised by the post World War II development of the ecumenical movement in the World Council of Churches.
3. The uniqueness of Christ raised by the advocacy of tolerance of other religions.
4. The validity of missions, raised by the call for a moratorium of Missions recently issued by some third world church leaders.
5. The work of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, raised by the rapid growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.
6. Religious liberty and human rights, raised by heightening awareness through modern media of the infringement of these rights in many parts of the world.
7. 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.

4. The People

Time Magazine said that Lausanne was the most widely representative gathering of its kind until that time. It brought together significant evangelical leaders from 150 countries and from hundreds of different denominations and Para church organizations.

5. The Method

1. Those present were closely involved in the process of drawing up the Covenant. All the Congress papers were sent to participants six months before the Congress and a response to the papers was made almost a condition of attending. The papers and the responses to them were analyzed and from this material 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 there were no surprises and it made agreement easier at the end.
2. The audience and the purpose of the document were clarified. It 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 New Testament. The essential common ground held by evangelical leaders was reaffirmed in contemporary language.
3. 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.
4. The questions being asked were legitimized. Where there was agreement, it was stated. Where there were disagreement they were noted as areas that required more work, rather than reasons for going separate ways.
5. 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.
6. A group was authorized to continue the work begun. The Lausanne Continuation Committee was its first name.

6. The Follow Up

All the papers were published within a short time in a compendium of 1470 pages. "Let The Earth Hear His Voice" Edited by J.D. Douglas. (World Wide Publications) This equipped people to spread the message and the new consensus. One man, now a denominational leader told me that for six months afterwards he worked through material from the Compendium in his pulpit in the South of England.

The Continuation Committee wisely divided their informal oversight of the implementation of the Covenant between four Working Groups.

Since it was a covenant to pray, an **Intercession Working Group** undertook to encourage prayer for world evangelization.

Since it was a covenant to plan, a **Strategy Working Group** was formed to think strategically about World Evangelization and has given to the whole church the strategy that is based on Unreached Peoples that is the basis of most outreach today. Pioneer leadership has also been given in the area of urban evangelism by Dr. Ray Bakke of Northern Baptist Seminary.

Since it was a covenant based on theological agreement which was not yet complete, a **Theology Working Group** was formed to call international consultations to elaborate its different paragraphs and they have done this for The Simple Lifestyle, The Homogeneous Unit Principle, The Gospel and Culture, the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, Muslim Evangelization, The Holy Spirit, and Conversion.

Since it was an international and interdenominational exercise from the beginning a **Communications Working Group** was formed to keep the whole and growing constituency informed about the ongoing status of world evangelization and the issues that were being faced in that work. This has been done by the World Evangelization Magazine, and the Lausanne Occasional Papers.

7. 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.

1. The Covenant has been translated locally into about 30 languages.
2. It has been adopted by hundreds of churches and parachurch agencies as their basis of operation and cooperation.
3. It has led to the formations of national movements as in Australia, Norway and Nigeria. Regional Committees with their own Congresses in North America, Asia and Europe. Sometimes, they have used the name Lausanne sometimes they have not as in The Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA)
4. It has stimulated movements like the Lausanne Committee for Jewish Evangelism (LCJE) and The Chinese Coordinating Committee for world Evangelization (CCCOWE).
5. It has become an essential subject in the curricula of Missiology departments in Seminaries, Theological and Bible Colleges. See "New Directions in Mission and Evangelization" By Scherer and Bevans, (Orbis, 1992).

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.

8. Cooperation

The words in the Covenant that relate to co-operation were a significant help towards its realization. It blessed the "wide diversity of evangelistic 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 in 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 it 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 comity arrangements led to people who were all also from one tribe coming in to a denominational box, the gospel of reconciliation really is affected by our disunity and our ability to affect tribalism is very little.

In the face of that kind of reality, the Covenant's pleas for unity in truth, worship, holiness and mission, though just a few words, helped us towards the co-operation 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 to have separate activities. The world we have to reach is so diverse, 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 me this came when I realized that I could not pray for revival only for our own church. The local church is not our local denominational church. The local church is the aggregate of true believers in any given geographical locale. It is the whole that must be renewed and grow, not just our part, especially at the expense of others. We had to work out a way of giving meaning to this truth. It led to a weekly contact with some at least of my brother pastors to make sure that their struggles and triumphs were regularly shared with our 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. Francis Schaeffer used to talk 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 that we start to have a Christian Vision for the place where 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.

9. The Challenge

Clearly, The Lausanne Covenant gave evangelicals a bigger worldview within which they could work together in the work of evangelization.

Implicit in this case study is the thesis that cooperation requires that people operate from within compatible worldviews and that the obstacles to effective cooperation can arise from a clash of worldviews. If this is so, then the challenge is to be ready, in the cause of cooperation, to compare, reconsider and perhaps amend or expand our worldviews.

Worldviews are not easily modified and the second thesis of this case study is that the elements in the Lausanne Case Study, represent the kind of process necessary for Christians to engage in, if they want to get their act together.

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.

Tom Houston September 29, 1992. To a European Baptist Consultation in Regents Park College, Oxford.

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