



## Lausanne Occasional Paper 1

### The Pasadena Consultation - Homogeneous Unit Principle

The Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) are historically important documents that have emerged from global consultations involving widely recognized evangelical leaders. The LOPs have been placed in the Lausanne Website to make more accessible and understandable the historical context and development of the various aspects of world evangelization.

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#### Contents

- 1. Introduction: The Setting
- 2. Definition of Terms
- 3. The Homogeneous Unit Principle and Evangelism
- 4. The Riches of Cultural Diversity
- 5. The Church, the Churches and the Homogeneous Unit Principle
- 6. Culture, Evil and the Process of Change
- 7. The Lordship of Christ and Repentance
- 8. Conclusion: Our Eschatological Hope
- Bibliography
- Participants
- Consultants

#### 1. Introduction: The Setting

A discussion of the "homogeneous unit principle" of Church Growth theory was held under the auspices of the Lausanne Theology and Education Group from May 31 to June 2, 1977, in Pasadena, California. Five faculty members of the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission had prepared advance papers on the methodological, anthropological, historical, ethical, and theological implications of the homogeneous unit principle (HUP). Five discussants had prepared papers in response to these. The ten of us then debated the issues raised, with the help of about 25 consultants. We are grateful to Fuller Seminary for their generous hospitality.

This consultation was the first to be held under Lausanne's sponsorship since the International Congress on World Evangelization took place in July 1974. We desire to express our heartfelt thanks to God that the so called "spirit of Lausanne" has characterized our conversation, in that we have been able to discuss controversial issues face-to-face with openness, honesty, and love.

We have found ourselves to be entirely united in our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme authority of the Bible, and the task of worldwide evangelization. We have not polarized into two groups who are respectively "for" and "against" the HUP or HU churches. Our discussion has been much more subtle than that. We have striven to listen to each other and to understand not only each other's arguments but the concerns which lie behind the arguments. And we bear witness to the help which God has given us.

Now we desire to make public both the substantial areas of agreement which we have discovered and the points of tension and disagreement which still remain. We earnestly hope that the former will contribute to the spread of the gospel, and that the latter will stimulate us all to further study and discussion.

#### 2. Definition of Terms

Dr. Donald McGavran's definition of a HU is "a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common." Used in this way, the term is broad and elastic. To be more precise, the common bond may be geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational, or economic, or a combination of several of these and other factors. Whether or not members of the group can readily articulate it, the common characteristic makes them feel at home with each other and aware of their identity as "we" in distinction to "they."

We are agreed that everybody belongs to at least one such homogeneous unit. This is an observable fact which all of us recognize. Not all of us, however, consider that it is the best term to use. Some of us prefer "subculture," while others of us would like to explore further the biblical concept of *ethnos* (usually translated "nation" or "people") as enjoying a "solidarity in covenant" by creation, although in rebellion against its Creator. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this statement we shall retain the more familiar expression "homogeneous unit."

#### 3. The Homogeneous Unit Principle and Evangelism

What we have been specially concerned to discuss is the relation of HUs to the evangelistic task laid upon the Church by the Great Commission of our Lord, and the propriety of using them as a means to world evangelization. Dr. McGavran's well-known statement is that people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers." That is, the barriers to the acceptance of the gospel are often more sociological than theological; people reject the gospel not because they think it is false but because it strikes them as alien. They imagine that in order to become Christians they must renounce their own culture, lose their own identity, and betray their own people.

Therefore, in order to reach them, not only should the evangelist be able to identify with them, and they with the evangelist; not only must the gospel be contextualized in such a way that it communicates with them; but the church into which they are invited must itself belong to their culture sufficiently for them to feel at home in it. It is when these conditions are fulfilled that men and women are won to Jesus Christ, and subsequently that churches grow.

#### 4. The Riches of Cultural Diversity

The arguments advanced to support the concept of the importance of culture are not only pragmatic ("churches grow fastest that way") but biblical ("God desires it that way"). We leave aside for the moment the question whether the best way to express the diversity of human cultures is to encourage a diversity of homogeneous unit churches. At this point we are unanimous in celebrating the colorful mosaic of the human race that God has created. This rich variety should be preserved, not destroyed, by the gospel. The attempt to impose another culture on people who have their own is cultural imperialism. The attempt to level all cultures into a colorless uniformity is a denial of the Creator and an affront to his creation. The preservation of cultural diversity honors God, respects man, enriches life, and promotes evangelization. Each church, if it is to be truly indigenous, should be rooted in the soil of its local culture.

#### 5. The Church, the Churches and the Homogeneous Unit Principle

We are all agreed that, as there is one God and Father, one Lord Jesus and one Holy Spirit, so he has only one church. The unity of the church is a given fact (Ephesians 4:4-6). At the same time, we have the responsibility to maintain this unity (v. 3), to make it visible, and to grow up into the fullness of unity in Christ

(vv. 13-16).

How then can the unity of the church (to which we are committed) and the diversity of cultures (to which we are also committed) be reconciled with one another? More particularly, how can separate HU churches express the unity of the Body of Christ?

We are all agreed that the dividing wall, which Jesus Christ abolished by his death, was *echthra*, "enmity" or "hostility." All forms of hatred, scorn, and disrespect between Christians of different backgrounds are forbidden, being totally incompatible with Christ's reconciling work. But we must go further than this. The wall dividing Jew from Gentile was not only their active reciprocal hatred; it was also their racial and religious alienation symbolized by "the law of commandments and ordinances." This, too, Jesus abolished, in order to "create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace" (Eph. 2:15).

This did not mean that Jews ceased to be Jews, or Gentiles to be Gentiles. It did mean, however, that their racial differences were no barrier to their fellowship, for through their union with Jesus Christ both groups were now "joint heirs, joint members of the same body and joint partakers of the promise" (Eph. 3:6 literally). The union of Jews and Gentiles in Christ was the "mystery" which was revealed to Paul and which he proclaimed to all (Ephesians 3:3-6, 9, 10). Thus the church as the single new humanity or God's new society is central to the gospel. Our responsibility is both to preach it and to exhibit it before the watching world.

What did this mean in practice in the early church? It seems probable that, although there were mixed Jewish-Gentile congregations, there were also homogeneous Jewish congregations (who still observed Jewish customs) and homogeneous Gentile congregations (who observed no Jewish customs). Nevertheless, Paul clearly taught them that they belonged to each other in Christ, that they must welcome one another as Christ had welcomed them (compare Romans 15:7), and that they must respect one another's consciences, and not offend one another. He publicly rebuked Peter in Antioch for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentile believers, and argued that his action was a denial of the truth of the gospel, that is, of the justification of all believers (whether Jews or Gentiles) by grace through faith (compare Galatians 2:11-16). This incident and teaching should be taken as a warning to all of us of the seriousness of permitting any kind of apartheid in the Christian fellowship. And it should go without saying that no one visiting a church or requesting membership in it should ever be turned away on merely cultural grounds. On the contrary, visitors and members should be welcomed from all cultures.

All of us are agreed that in many situations a homogeneous unit church can be a legitimate and authentic church. Yet we are also agreed that it can never be complete in itself. Indeed, if it remains in isolation, it cannot reflect the universality and diversity of the Body of Christ. Nor can it grow into maturity. Therefore, every HU church must take active steps to broaden its fellowship in order to demonstrate visibly the unity and the variety of Christ's church. This will mean forging with other and different churches creative relationships which express the reality of Christian love, brotherhood, and interdependence.

During our consultation we have shared several possible ways of developing such relationships. They will range from occasional united evangelistic crusades, Christian concerts, conferences, conventions and annual festivals through a variety of voluntary associations and interchurch federations to the regular enjoying of intercultural fellowship. One model of this we have looked at is the large city church (or congregation) with several HU subchurches (or subcongregations) which normally worship separately but sometimes together. On these occasions their common celebration is enriched by the dress, music, and liturgy of different traditions. Another model a multicultural Sunday congregation which divides into mid-week HU house churches, while a third and more radical way is to work towards integration, although without cultural assimilation.

In our commitment to evangelism, we all understand the reasons why homogeneous unit churches usually grow faster than heterogeneous or multicultural ones. Some of us, however, do not agree that the rapidity with which churches grow is the only or even always the most important Christian priority. We know that an alien culture is a barrier to faith. But we also know that segregation and strife in the church are barriers to faith. If, then, we have to choose between apparent acquiescence in segregation for the sake of numerical church growth and the struggle for reconciliation at the expense of numerical church growth, we find ourselves in a painful dilemma. Some of us have had personal experience of the evils of tribalism in Africa, racism in America, caste in India, and economic injustice in Latin America and elsewhere, and all of us are opposed to these things. In such situations none of us could with a good conscience continue to develop HU churches which seem to ignore the social problems and even tolerate them in the church, while some of us believe that the development of HU churches can often contribute to their solution.

We recognize that both positions can be defended in terms of obedience—obedience to Christ's commission to evangelize on the one hand, and obedience to the commands to live in love and justice on the other. The synthesis between these two still eludes us, although we all accept our Lord's own words that it is through the brotherly love and unity of Christians that the world will come to believe in him (John 13:35; 17:21, 23).

## 6. Culture, Evil and the Process of Change

We have tried to consider carefully what our attitude to peoples' different cultures should be. At Lausanne we affirmed that "culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic." We do not forget the Scripture which declares that "the whole world is in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

So some of us are more positive and others more negative towards culture. In our discussions, however, we have concentrated particularly on the negative or demonic elements in human culture. We recognize that in all human groupings there is a latent tendency either to claim from their members too high a loyalty (and so become idolatrous), or to shun outsiders (and so become self-centered).

Further, in some groups the common trait of homogeneity which binds them together is itself evil. This might, for example, be cannibalism, racism or (if we may cite opposite ends of the social scale) crime and prostitution in the slums or oppressive wealth in the suburbs. In such cases, what constitutes the homogeneous unit must be opposed rather than affirmed. The church should not be planted in it without making its opposition plain, nor without seeking to overcome the evil principle and/or uncover and change its underlying causes. The church should never avoid this prophetic and social ministry. Belonging to Jesus Christ involves enmity with the world.

We have found considerable help in the concept of change. To acknowledge the fact of HUs is not to acquiesce in the characteristics they possess which are displeasing to Christ. The Christian attitude to HUs is often called the "realist attitude," because it realistically accepts that HUs exist and will always exist. We would prefer, however, to call this an attitude of "dynamic realism" because we wish also to affirm that HUs can change and must always change. For Christ the Lord gives to his people new standards. They also receive a new homogeneity, which transcends all others, for now they find their essential unity in Christ, rather than in culture.

Not that change can be taken for granted, for it does not always happen automatically. It needs to be actively sought, beginning with the first acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, and then steadily growing through a process of continuous reevaluation according to Scripture. When this happens sometimes a HU church replaces its principle of cohesion with another and better one, while at other times it disbands altogether, its members gravitating to other churches.

## 7. The Lordship of Christ and Repentance

In connection with the concept of "people movements" the distinction has been drawn between "discipling" (becoming a Christian and being baptized) and "perfecting" (the process of growth into maturity). We have had a full discussion of the issues which this distinction raises, and in particular whether it involves some kind of "postponement of ethical awareness" in inquirers, and what form or degree of repentance is implicit in conversion and baptism. Here we have thankfully discovered a wide area of agreement.

We agree that to preach the gospel is to proclaim Jesus Christ in the fullness of his person and work; that this is to "preach the Kingdom" which embraces both the total salvation and the total submission implicit in the gracious rule of God; and that it is always wrong to preach Jesus as Saviour without presenting him also as Lord, since it is precisely because he is the supreme Lord exalted to the Father's right hand that he has the authority to bestow salvation and the power to rescue sinners from sin, fear, evil, the thralldom of spirits, and death. We agree that in what has been called "lordship evangelism" we must not isolate from one another the separate parts of Christ's commission namely to "make disciples," to "baptize," and to "teach;" that the Christian nurture of converts is indispensable because Christian growth is not automatic; and that daily repentance and daily obedience are necessary parts of Christian discipleship. We agree that the call to repentance must always be faithfully sounded; that there can be no repentance without ethical content; and that the precise ethical issues will vary according to each situation and HU. We also agree that the evangelist must pay attention to a community's or individual's sense of guilt, although, because this is not always a reliable guide, he must also draw attention to sins which the Bible clearly condemns; and that no evangelist has the right to conceal either

the offense (*skandalon*) of the gospel which is Jesus Christ and his cross, or any ethical implication of the gospel which is relevant to the particular situation in which he is preaching it.

At the same time, we recognize the dangers to which any unbalance in these matters would expose us. If we underemphasize repentance, we offer sinners what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," but if we overemphasize it we may be preaching the law rather than the gospel, a code rather than Christ, and salvation by works rather than by grace through faith. Secondly, if we do nothing to identify what is meant by "sin," we are asking for repentance in a vacuum, which is an impossibility, whereas if we become too specific in naming sins, we either try to do the Holy Spirit's convicting work for him or we may forget the complex cultural factors (e.g., in the case of polygamy) which should make us tentative in our teaching rather than dogmatic. Thirdly, it is possible to imply that conversion involves no radical change, while it is equally possible to expect too much of inquirers and new converts. Perfection is indeed the goal to be set before them, but we must not require maturity of understanding or behavior from a newborn babe in Christ.

### 8. Conclusion: Our Eschatological Hope

The vision of the end which God has given us in Scripture contains several references to the nations. We are allowed to glimpse "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" standing before God's throne and celebrating his salvation (Rev. 7:9, 10). We also see the new Jerusalem which will be enriched by the "glory and honor of the nations" and whose tree of life will be "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 21:26; 22:2). These biblical phrases seem to us to warrant the conviction that heaven will be adorned by the best products of God-given human creativity, that heavenly fellowship will be harmonious and heterogeneous, and that the diversity of languages and cultures will not inhibit but rather ennoble the fellowship of the redeemed.

Now the church is an eschatological community. Already it is the new society of the new age. Already it has tasted the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:5). Already it has received the great promise for the end-time the Holy Spirit himself (Acts 2:17). Therefore it is called to anticipate on earth the life of heaven, and thus to develop both cultural richness and heterogeneous fellowship.

In particular, we should seek to express and experience these things at the Lord's Supper, which God intends to be a foretaste of the Messianic banquet in his Kingdom, which Jesus has promised to grace with his presence, and from which he sends us back into the world as his servants and his witnesses.

### Bibliography

A small selection of books on church growth is detailed below. Those by Dr. McGavran and Dr. Wagner advocate the homogeneous unit principle; the others raise questions about it.

1970 *Understanding Church Growth*, by Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)

1973 *The Challenge of Church Growth*, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies)

1974 *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*, by Orlando E. Costas (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House)

1976 *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, edited by Harvie M. Conn (Nutly, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.)

1978 *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimension of Church Growth in America*, by C. Peter Wagner (Atlanta: John Knox Press)

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**Web Editor's Note: The positions indicated for the participants, moderator, and consultants remain those as of June 1977 when the consultation met.**

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