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# Changing the World, One Story at a Time: Rediscovering Evangelism after Cape Town 2010

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**KEYWORDS:** *Lausanne Movement; evangelism; unity; self-emptying, transformation, marginalized, community, character, Philippians*

THE FIRST BIBLICAL reflection at the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization began with a call to creativity. In his exposition of Ephesians 1, plenary speaker Ajith Fernando argued that all Christians must use their creative energies to make Christ known to a lost and broken world so that this world might know, through the witness of Christians, God's plan for the fullness of time. The week-long Congress that followed was in some aspects challenging and creative, but not in terms of developing a richer theological understanding of evangelism.

This essay seeks to examine Cape Town 2010's perspective on evangelism through the lens of another Pauline text—the great hymn of Philippians 2:6-11.<sup>1</sup> The theological content of this passage and its implications for ethics, spirituality, and Christian witness offer an alternative view to the highly scripted programme of Lausanne III and its captivity to a very western 'top-down' understanding of the evangelistic task.

By placing our understanding of evangelization within the holistic framework that arises out of Paul's teaching (echoing also the teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

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and example of Jesus himself), we offer our reflections of Lausanne III as constructive criticisms, praying that future developments within the Lausanne Movement will embrace a larger, richer and more poignant vision of the term *world evangelisation*. Such criticisms are made with the belief that one of Lausanne's greatest gifts to the church is the constant reminder that all Christians are called to evangelize—that there is a world in desperate need of the good news of Christ and that, despite all our frailties and limitations, God has chosen to work through the church so that the world might know God's plan for all of creation. If the Lausanne Movement loses this calling—if the voice that reminds evangelical churches around the world that evangelism is the queen of Christian ministries—then Lausanne will have been silenced and its existence as a movement will be still.

### I Evangelism as a Shared Task

The letter of Philippians is set against the backdrop of Paul's imprisonment. He reminds the Philippians that they shared in the gospel 'from the first day until now' (1:5) and shared in 'God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel' (1:7). Paul tells them that his imprisonment 'has actually helped to spread the gospel' (1:12). His situation has enhanced the message and people know why he is a prisoner (1:13). The brothers and sisters have drawn strength from his imprisonment and therefore have a greater confidence in speaking the

word (1:14). Christ is being proclaimed, albeit from a variety of motivations (1:14-18) and Paul encourages the believers to live their lives 'in a manner worthy of the gospel' (1:27), striving 'side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel', even as he asks them to pray for him, that he may speak 'with all boldness' (1:20). The first chapter, then, contains a strong theme about the queen of all Christian ministries—evangelism.

For Paul, this sharing of the gospel is not limited to proclamation, although this is crucial, as there are two additional elements that arise from within the text. First, Paul emphasises the communal nature of evangelism, and second, Paul reminds the Philippians that character and witness go hand in hand. The first emphasis points to the fact that believers share in the work of the gospel through their prayers, unity, steadfastness, suffering, work, giving and so forth. To put this slightly differently,

The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world... The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church is the evangelistic strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, for this to be the case, there is for Paul an explicit require-

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2 Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 15.

ment that the believers live their lives 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27). This entails cessation of arguing, and instead, becoming blameless and innocent 'in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world' (2:14-15). Their gentleness is to be 'known to everyone' (4:5). These two additional factors—sharing and shining—are *essential* dimensions of evangelization. In other words, Paul calls for character, activity, and preaching, the three vital elements of mission today, tomorrow and through all ages.

For Paul, fidelity to the gospel cannot be reduced merely to preaching, for the gospel is much more than a set of truths phrased as Enlightenment propositions. Rather, the gospel is a way of being and becoming, a contextualisation of the life of Jesus in a local community, a story that requisitions all other claims to authority and loyalty, a narrative that changes the course of all human history, directing the past to the future via the Cross. Chapter 2 of Philippians is to be understood against this background.

## II Evangelism and Kenosis

Paul uses the highly eloquent hymn or poem as the main theological framework for the whole epistle. It is a delightfully and skilfully crafted piece of writing and stands in contrast to the more informal remainder of the letter. The hymn is a celebration of the incarnation, crucifixion and ascension of Christ, of Jesus emptying himself and becoming human. René Padilla, a significant and influential leader within the Lausanne movement, once noted that in the Incarnation, 'God contextu-

alized himself'.<sup>3</sup> It is because of this emptying, and subsequent obedience, that God exalts him. This movement within the passage is deeply significant and worthy of examining in more depth. There is a mystery hidden in the move from Christ's pre-existence, through his taking the form of a slave, passing through 'death—even death on a cross' and then being highly exalted.

There are three scenes in this passage. The first is where Christ is pre-existent 'in the form of God' but chooses not to exploit his 'equality with God'. Instead he humbles himself, taking the path of suffering and servanthood. In both of these scenes Jesus is the actor. In the third scene, however, God is the actor and Christ is the one being acted upon, being highly exalted, receiving the name that is above every other name. There are two aspects of this that we shall explore. First, the pivotal theological factor is the voluntary nature of Christ's emptying and obedience, and second, there is movement within the passage that is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament. This movement is both literal in the sense that Jesus descends, becomes incarnate and subsequently—after the cross and resurrection—ascends. There is also symbolic movement in the text, as we shall explore below.

Within this hymn lies an echo of the story of Genesis 2 and 3, and a contrast is drawn between the first humans and Jesus. God commanded Adam in Genesis 2:16-17 that he could eat from any

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3 C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 83.

tree in the garden with the exception of one, 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. The temptation the serpent places before the woman is to eat the fruit of this tree, 'for God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be *like God*, [emphasis added] knowing good and evil' (3:5). The woman saw that the fruit was 'good for food... a delight to the eyes... and was desirable to make one wise' (v. 6 NASB). She ate, and then the man also ate and 'the eyes of both of them were opened' (v. 7).

In this creation narrative we see that first couple acting in a contrary manner to what the story will later tell us of Jesus. Adam and Eve voluntarily chose to grasp—the desire to be like God was not satisfied with being created in the image and likeness of God. They wanted more. Yet in filling themselves up with the fruit and the knowledge of good and evil, there also came a reduction in stature: no longer would mastery over creation happen easily; henceforth it would involve struggle and sweat and work. Adam and Eve's elevation—being created from the dust of the earth—was revoked: now they would return to the earth as dust. And even that earth was now cursed because of their choice.

As a stark contrast, Paul sets up Christ, who already shared in equality with God—that same equality that Adam so desperately wanted—but voluntarily 'emptied himself', taking the form of a slave, and was 'made in the likeness of human beings'. Christ's descent was of his own free submission to the will of God, humbling himself and becoming obedient 'to the point of death'. Consequently, and as a direct result of his obedience, God highly

exalted him.

Elsewhere Paul uses much more explicit language about the first and last Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). However, in Philippians he is deliberately and consciously making this connection in the context of Christian behaviour. The Philippians—and therefore we—ought to have this same mind as Jesus had. We are to model our behaviour on that exemplified by Christ. This point is explicit within the text and it has direct application in evangelization.

Frequently evangelization is perceived as an act of obedience in response to Jesus' words to his disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-19). However, according to Paul (and Jesus himself, as is found elsewhere in the gospels), there is much more to the task of evangelism than obedience. Evangelization has to do with one's entire life, with the life of the church and the ways in which such a community lives so as to show the culture around them who is the one true God.

This was another important point made in Fernando's opening Bible study on Ephesians at Cape Town 2010. He said,

[W]hat if those who are lonely find that Christians are the only ones they can count on as friends? Or what if those who are tired of corruption find that Christians are the only ones who don't resort to corrupt practices?... Evangelism is about our life and our proclamation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ajith Fernando, Bible Exposition 1, Lausanne III, Cape Town, South Africa, 18 October 2010.

In Philippians 2:5 Paul talks about the inward attitude among Christians. The language is full of motivation-connected words: *encouragement; consolation of love; fellowship of the Spirit; affection and compassion; same mind; same love; united in spirit; humility of mind*. Paul is interpreting obedience in the context of motivation: the Philippians are to contextualise Jesus in their lives, unity and witness.

Three concepts are linked in a holistic framework here: first, the Philippians' witness is derived both from their experience of Jesus through the Spirit and from their life in community, which provides them with further motivation; then, Paul argues that this experience should lead to obedience which was perfectly modelled in Christ; and finally, there should therefore be a change in behaviour and attitude leading to authentic witness before the wider—and in the Philippians' case, pagan—community. In the words of a friend, *our witness stems from our first hand discovery of Jesus and not a second hand Story*.

Accepting this motivational praxis of Christian witness allows us to question the places and ways in which Jesus was contextualised at Lausanne III. The personal stories and testimonies shared on the main platform and in some of the multiplexes gave the Congress participants a flavour of God at work around the world and the many-coloured ways in which the Spirit leads God's people to serve and witness for Jesus. Some of these stories led to the sharing of other wonders around the table-groups, in prayer, and in informal conversations. Yet, at the same time, the Congress programme did not allow enough space or time for participants

to work through the challenges that come when Christians strive to 'be of the same mind of Christ', as Paul correctly demands of the church in Philippi.

In other words, while Cape Town 2010 brought together an amazingly diverse group of Christians from all around the globe, its programme did not take full advantage of such diversity to allow time for deep discussion on what unity might look like, how humility and evangelism are practised in different contexts, or what lessons the church in Latin American can learn from the church in Asia. If, according to Philippians (and John 17 and many other texts), unity and evangelism go hand-in-hand, then Lausanne III fell short of making such a call loud and clear to the broad evangelical church and to all God's people.

The movement highlighted within this hymn in Philippians is reflected in various NT passages. It can be a vertical movement: the grain of wheat which must fall into the ground and die before it can bear fruit (Jn. 12:24); in Ephesians (4:8-11), Paul refers to Jesus descending and then ascending 'far above all the heavens', bringing captives in his train; in Mary's Magnificat, the mighty will be made low, the lowly lifted up (Lk. 2:52).

The movement can be horizontal, as when the first will be sent to the back of the queue and the last brought to the front (Matt. 19:30 and 20:16). The movement can apply metaphorically, for example, as Paul identifies with the death and resurrection of Christ personally in Galatians 2:20 (NASB): 'I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live, but not me but Christ lives in me.' In Corinthians Paul writes about wis-

dom and power, yet God 'chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

There are numerous other references which convey a similar sense of literal or metaphorical movement. In all such references there is a close association of movement with the ethical framework of God's reign. Indeed, we can extend this topsy-turvy dimension of the reign of God, and read more about it in Jesus' parables. We can also look at his life from the birth narratives onwards and see it modelled. Always there is this characteristic of the bottom up nature of God's kingdom.

This topsy-turvy motion is God's way of changing the balance of power from below upwards. Such movement suggests, in biblical terms, that those who seek to 'climb the ladder' as the world envisions such climbing will in the end fall. The lies and illusions of power of those at the top have been revealed by the death of one Jewish carpenter. It is not simply that God has a bias towards the poor, the marginalised, the vulnerable, or the weak. Rather, it is that God has chosen to reveal his power through those the world sees as poor and powerless.

The hymn is therefore one example of the 'upside down' reign of God, where issues of power and status are turned on their head, where self-sacrifice is invited and where we discover that the ethics of God's kingdom are at odds with all other systems. This has implications for evangelisation, as we have seen.

### III Hearing Voices from the Margins

This 'bottom up' principle that displays itself so clearly in the biblical texts also points us towards the local, the small, untold narratives of how God is changing the world, one story at a time. At Cape Town 2010 there were various opportunities to hear some of these stories, such as testimonies of Palestinians and Jews coming together under the lordship of Jesus, and of forgiveness and continued service towards 'enemies' in Afghanistan or Uganda. However, even though participants were blessed by such stories, there appeared to be no mechanisms within the Congress programme to ensure that the conversations and wisdom arising from the table groups, for example, were fed 'up' to the organisers.

On centre stage and in the main plenaries the voices speaking were still primarily those of white, north-Atlantic men, such that it was not clear how the voices of women, of young people, or of the Majority World in general had helped shape the Congress programme. Though held in South Africa, Lausanne III was a very western meeting, scripted down to the minute, with a sense that the world has already been analysed and mapped and that this Congress was going to lead the way to fixing all the world's problem spots. Pain and suffering made themselves known in the testimonies and some dialogue sessions, but in the official programme there was no time for collective silence or even repentance for the ways in which evangelicals have too often grasped for power or failed to stand against those who do.

Ironically, examining these aspects of the Congress in light of Philippians, one must pause to recall that the church in Philippi was anything but a centre-stage type of congregation. In that proud city—a city that grasped for power, a miniature Rome—the first three fruits of Paul's evangelistic endeavour were a rich Asian woman, a young Greek girl who had been possessed by demons, was marginalized and exploited by society, and finally a bureaucrat for the Empire. These were the founding members of Europe's first church!<sup>5</sup> And this was the congregation that gathered alongside a riverbank and is called to humility, service, and moral purity (Phil. 2:15-16).

Paul's use of the theme of suffering and pain harkens back to the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and to an image of the faithful witness who is very far from the power-hungry, status-driven tele-evangelists. The Suffering Servant 'poured out himself to death' (Is. 53:12), voluntarily accepting that 'it was the will of the Lord to crush him' (53:10). This attitude of self-giving, which Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate, is perfectly modelled in Christ.

Throughout the Gospel narratives themselves Jesus time and again refuses to allow power or prestige to shape his ministry or his dealings with people. Rather, what we find in Jesus is the willingness to identify with the sinner in his baptism, with the prostitutes among his friends, with a tax collector as a follower, with the weak and mar-

ginalized as the faithful. At Lausanne III, Chris Wright developed this theme in relation to the temptations that current church leaders face.

Wright pointed out that there are three idols that can have particular appeal to God's people: power, success and greed. The results of these idolatries are fatal. 'Lack of faith, lack of love and lack of honesty contribute to the failure of our evangelism efforts.' He urged the church leaders to come back to being HIS people—people of Humility, Integrity and Simplicity.<sup>6</sup> These tie in well with the themes of unity and witness as Paul displays them in Philippians.

The third temptation Jesus faced was in effect a short cut to fulfilling his task. Satan showed him 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour', saying he would give them to Jesus 'if you will fall down and worship me' (Matt. 4:8-9). In Matthew then, we have the ministry of Jesus beginning after an encounter with the devil which was set on a high mountain involving all the kingdoms of the earth, and ideas of worship and service. The tempter suggests to Jesus a shorter, quicker way to achieve world domination. Satan was offering all that to Christ, provided he took a different path from the one ordained by God for him, the path of suffering. It is a temptation about power and priorities.

At the end of the same Gospel there is the famous passage, mistakenly called The Great Commission ('Great Reminder' would be a better term),

<sup>5</sup> Pedro Arana, 'Commentary on Philippians', in the *Latin American Bible Commentary*, (San Jose, Costa Rica: CLLB), forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lausanne.org/articles/return-to-humility-integrity-and-simplicity.html>



which again is set on a mountain and involves worship, power, authority and all the nations of the earth. But now it is Jesus who has the power and authority, given to him by God. It is on the basis of this power that Jesus re-commissions his disciples, reminding them of the task of world evangelisation he has already commissioned them to do and for which he has prepared and equipped them. But the crucial dimension usually overlooked here is that this closure to Jesus' earthly ministry mirrors the opening of that ministry and concerns the acquisition and use of power.

The temptation is to use power as a short cut to avoid the path of suffering and pain. It is also the temptation to be deaf to the voices from the margins and to focus instead on what is happening in the world's seats of power. Jesus opposes all of this: the path to true authority and power is the path of suffering, of self-emptying, of giving oneself away. It is also the path not only of hearing the voices from the margins, but of being present with and for them.

#### IV Evangelism and Discipleship

Jesus was present with those on the margins. He was brought up in a small and troubled land on the edge of the Roman Empire, surrounded by and befriending the poor, the sick, the weak, the outcasts, peasants and labourers. It was from such as these that he called his disciples. This beautiful example of Christ is held up by Paul—especially but by no means exclusively—in the Philippians hymn. The apostle shows how Jesus exempli-

fies a model of behaviour for Christ's followers to adopt. It is the character of Christian witness—the character of humility and simplicity, and the ability to be present at the margins, listening and telling the small stories that change the world, one at a time. Yet, how concretely is this done?

One theme that arose frequently at Cape Town 2010 was the need for discipleship. That is, various speakers emphasized the fact that evangelicals have been fairly good at spreading the gospel, but are weak in exemplifying and teaching how that good news takes shape and transforms lives and communities. One example given was the genocide in Rwanda. How can a country where over 90% of the population claim to be Christian kill itself in such horrible ways? The lack of depth in Christian formation was one key point mentioned by the speaker and discipleship was named as a necessary ingredient for there to be true reconciliation. Yet despite the call for discipleship at Lausanne III, the very shape of the programme mitigated against dialogue and discernment about what evangelism and discipleship might look like in the 21st century.

In the gospel narratives Jesus' presence with those who are marginalized, with the outcasts, but also before religious leaders and governors, offers the church a model for evangelism, discipleship and the use of power. These are the same elements Paul displays so well in his letter to the Philippians. He congratulates his fellow sisters and brothers for their faithful witness, a witness that is so powerful because it is small, unknown to the Empire, and challenging to the powers precisely in its insignificance. These are the small

stories that change the world for Christ.

A key issue facing the church in the world today is how power is given away or grasped. Since the time of Constantine the church has had a troubled relationship with power and this inheritance remains with us almost 1700 years later. Churches tend towards hierarchical structures, flirting with models of leadership that have, on occasion, brought great dishonour to the name of Jesus. The rich, the powerful, the influential still tend towards setting the agenda and often the voices of those way down the ladder, at the grass roots levels, are not heard.

In contrast, there is a view, well summarized by Lesslie Newbigin, that 'the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation... the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it'.<sup>7</sup> This is essentially an incarnational view, reflecting Paul's kenotic theology but applied ecclesialogically. It emphasises the need for Jesus to be contextualised in the local congregation, the kiln in which disciples are tempered and the seat of authentic witness.

The authority of the churches' witness to and for Jesus in the world is essentially bottom up, not imposed from the top downwards. In order for the church to be the church for the world and in service of God, it must be a place where people are shaped into conformity to Christ. This type of train-

ing cannot be limited to Sunday worship alone, but speaks to the task of making disciples.

Discipleship, according to the biblical texts, is not the result of grand schemes of training Christian leaders or of high-profile congresses. Rather, it is twelve people gathered around a meal with a teacher; it is Bible study and reflection in small groups; it is friendship between two persons who would otherwise have nothing in common; it is the voice of one prisoner, writing to his distant flock about how joyful he is because of their faithful witness.

Out of such relationships, the authority and power of the gospel are displayed in new and surprising ways and the church that embodies and encourages this discipleship is enabled to carry on her evangelistic ministry, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship is therefore primarily relational and didactic and only secondarily (or perhaps thirdly or fourthly or fifthly) programmatic and proscribed.

## V Evangelism, Unity and Transformation

The church that makes disciples is also a unified church, for witness and unity go together. Jesus makes this point explicit in his prayer in John 17:20-23 (NASB):

that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that You sent Me... that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

It is also a theme that arises time and again in Paul's letters. In the text

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<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

of Philippians the apostle uses the language of 'being of the same mind', that is, the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:2-5). Similar to Jesus' prayer in John 17, Paul here draws a connection between love, sharing in the Spirit, and unity. The Christians in Philippi are called to love one another, to be humble, to regard the interests of others as more important, to become like Christ. In other words, the believers are called to a life of discipleship in order to shine as lights in a dark world.

Christians are God's witnesses to this corrupt and lost generation. Therefore, they must be united, not quarrelling or vying for authority (as was the situation in Corinth), but becoming slaves, in service of God and for a suffering world. It is not surprising that John Mott, evangelist and ecumenical pioneer during the first half of the 20th century, called for *the evangelization of the world in this generation*, thus echoing Paul's emphasis on the importance of church unity in the evangelistic task, and, conversely, the importance of evangelism in the ecumenical movement.

The unity of the church was one theme that warranted much greater reflection at Lausanne III, particularly in light of the programmatic focus on 'The Whole Church'. If evangelism is a core ministry of the church, then that same church must look closely at the ways in which its divisions work against the very ministry it seeks to carry out. Historically, the Lausanne Movement has been such a place—a forum where evangelicals of various stripes and colours have come together for the sake of God's kingdom. Such unity is not easily or simply achieved, as Paul's correspondence with Corinth

makes clear.

Whilst it is important to note that Lausanne itself is not the church, it is a place where such divisions can (and should) be overcome, a space open for reconciliation. The challenges facing the church in terms of Christian unity are the very battles to which Paul calls Christians to fight—it is worth the fight because without unity, the witness of the church is rendered void. Without being united, 'minding' Christ, as Paul says, Christians fail in their task of being shining stars in the world. And if Christians fail in this task, then there will be no transformation of society.

There is a great need and urgency in our churches today to recover this link between evangelism, discipleship, unity and the transformation of society. Taken together, they shape a holistic and credible witness of the church and without one or the other, this witness is weakened and our well thought out words of proclamation run the risk of becoming mere noise. As Ajith Fernando said in his opening remarks in Cape Town, Christians must use all their creative powers in the great task of world evangelization. But in order to do this rightly, there must be one mind—the mind of Christ—and the creativity to listen to the voices from below, the voices of those present with God's world in all its suffering and pain.

The transformation of society takes place at the local level—it is the small congregation embracing a teenage mother and raising both the baby and its child-mother as their own. It is the work of one black minister and his white friend who stand together to oppose apartheid in South Africa, or

the young woman who struggles against the caste system in India. Tales of suffering, of reconciliation, of martyrdom, and stories of some believers who face persecution in their efforts to follow Christ and who, like Jesus, pay the highest price for their obedience—these and other such narratives told at Lausanne III powerfully exemplified the work being done in God's upside-down kingdom.

In these stories the kenotic principle of Philippians came to life. The Lausanne Movement needs to discern what God might be saying to the wider church through such stories and how these testimonies can be told, over and over again, in different contexts, so that the evangelistic task of the church is strengthened and encouraged, just as Paul encouraged the Philippians.

It is vital for us—as evangelical and conciliar Christians—to find ways of working together in the task of world evangelization for the glory of God and the sake of a desperately needy and broken world. Our calling to have the same mind, the same love, united in spirit, and intent on one purpose, reminds us of the beauty of the diversity of God's kingdom which was partially but nonetheless beautifully dis-

played at Lausanne III. Yet do we have that unity which Paul talks about? How could this unity have been better displayed and discussed in Cape Town?

If Lausanne is truly going to be a movement for world evangelization, it must actively engage in the wider community of Christ's followers—the whole church—participating in the call to unity through a process of reconciliation. If Lausanne is truly going to be a movement for world evangelization, it must hear the voices from the margins and make itself a space where such voices can speak without threat and without danger.

Such voices must know not only that they are vital parts of the body of Christ, but that without them, the evangelical church falls prey to the temptation of grasping for power. If the church falls, it fails in discerning, as the Philippians did, the best ways to make Christ known in the particularity of each location and each culture. In the insignificance of the 'little people', in the local congregations and the hands-on practitioners, Lausanne will find its greatest authorities and strategizers of world evangelization.

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