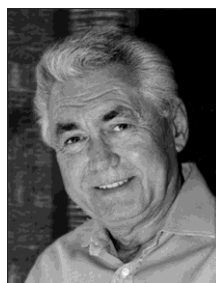


Reflections on Lausanne III

Lausanne: the 'main thing'

Frank Retief *

** Until very recently Frank Retief of South Africa was the Presiding Bishop of the Church of England in South Africa (CESA). The following are his final comments on the Lausanne Congress, October 2010. Reprinted by permission from Evangelicals Now, December 2010, page 7. Bishop Retief is a member of the World Reformed Fellowship and the author of numerous books including Divorce (Christian Focus).*



There were eight major impressions made on me at Lausanne 2010.

1. The technology has evolved to such an extent since Lausanne '74 that we were able to see the world as never before – especially in terms of gospel work. The range and effectiveness of the gospel is astounding. The number of people and the kind of people made me feel very small and insignificant. Of course we know that nothing we do for the Lord is ever in vain so we do not despise our small tasks. But it did make me realise how prone we all are to thinking what we do is so special or that we ourselves are special or how easy it is to dismiss others with whom we may have points of disagreement.

Reconciliation

2. A conference of this size brings all kinds of people together. It obviously stirs up emotions and guilt – especially about our judgmental attitude to others. The session when the Latin-American group apologised to the Africans was heart-rending. The depth, sincerity and humility of their apology was astonishing. This reconciliation was demonstrated to us at the Congress in so many ways with other people, for instance the Palestinians and the Jews.

3. The testimonies we heard from Palestinians, Jews, North Koreans, Chinese, Pakistanis and others whose loved ones had been martyred made us realise that while gospel work is exploding across the world there is still a great deal of danger associated with it. Hence the Congress's call for humility and sacrifice.

4. There is a lot going on in our own continent of Africa that is not appreciated. Africa has leaders, theologians and personnel who are enormously gifted and many are being greatly used by God. However, it was good to hear the problems of corruption and immorality openly mentioned. There is a good deal of discipling work that needs to be done in Africa. There is work to be done here and, sadly, it seemed to me that more people from overseas see the potential than local. I wondered if locally we have not become so cynical about Africa that we are of little use for the gospel. Notwithstanding there are many people of whom we are not aware, who are doing good things about which we know nothing.

Much was said about African genocides and I wondered if we would ever reach the point when we would see the current crop of African leaders apologise to African people for the genocides and corruption of their predecessors in the same way that the Latin-Americans did. Having said that, the sheer power of the personalities and leadership of the African participants was enormous.

What theological line?

5. There were times, especially in the first two or three days, when we wondered what theological line was going to emerge from the Congress. There was a lot of early talk about ‘being Jesus’ rather than simply preaching him. There was also a pronounced push to regard women as equal partners in ministry. Of course, we evangelicals do regard women as equal partners. In fact most of us in ministry feel very ‘unequal’ when we see our wives’ gifts and talents, but the impression I got was a push for ecclesiastical equality. There was also the usual strong emphasis on justice and mercy and alleviating suffering – all of which is, of course, quite right. But John Piper brought the Congress back on track with his magnificent talk on Ephesians 3 when he urged us to remember that in all the attempts to alleviate suffering we must not forget to alleviate eternal suffering by the proclamation of the Christ who died on the cross and rose again. That evening Os Guinness brilliantly reminded us that the often quoted saying (attributed to St. Francis) that we should preach the gospel and, if necessary, use words, was like saying we should feed the hungry and, if necessary, use food. It’s not enough to ‘Be Jesus’. The gospel is propositional and must be proclaimed.



Os Guinness



John Piper

6. The elective sessions in the afternoons offered anything from children evangelism, to ethics, to climate change, to developing global partnerships, to evangelism among Muslims or Jews and a host of others. It was heart-warming to me to see how firmly the elective leaders held on to the gospel imperatives. There was no doubt that for the vast majority of participants this

was a congress on evangelism and the Evangel was the central thing. There was a great push to establish new gospel partnerships around the world. Partnership is seen as the way to go. A statement was made that the day of the once great preacher and leader is over. A bit presumptuous, I thought. God can do anything. Because one Billy Graham or John Stott has been laid aside does not mean God cannot raise up another.

7. The plenary sessions became clearer and more definitive as the week drew to a close. Corruption and false teaching was condemned and the prosperity gospel was criticised as being utterly incompatible with the gospel of Christ and destructive to people in the Third World.

Each evening we were reminded of unreached peoples and challenged to reach them. We were told there were no closed countries if we were willing to pay the price. The use of multi-media was brilliant. It was professional, seamless and slick. The persons on the stage were utterly professional, humble and well cued, a riveting experience.

8. The final service dispelled any doubt that may have lingered about where Lausanne has gone theologically. It was a communion service and the preacher was Lindsay Brown. After holding many prestigious Christian leadership posts, he is now International Director for the Lausanne Movement. His closing message was magnificent and gave a clarion call to the historical, Reformed evangelical faith – the uniqueness of Christ, the importance of the cross, the lostness of people, the preaching of the gospel, the need for conversion. I am aware that there is always a push for the ‘main thing’ to be sidelined. But thank God the main thing remained the main thing at Lausanne.

