Social Concern and Evangelization: The Journey of the Lausanne Movement

Valdir R. Steuernagel

Introduction

The day was over. I tried to sleep, but the images kept dancing before my eyes. It had been a memorable day. To visit the Isiolo people in a semi-desert area of Kenya, and the work of the church there, had been a unique experience.

To see camels and zebras walking freely within view had been wonderful. What made the day unique, however, was meeting people, young and old, women and men. There was another side of the picture; there was the desert and the annoying wind blowing unceasingly, making it very difficult to enjoy life. The dust, a close ally of the wind, penetrated every single corner, but seemed to have a special attraction for eyes, irrespective of glasses. But what is dust in your eyes when compared with the pain of absolute poverty, seen more dramatically in the faces of the many dust-covered children without any decent food to eat, or houses to live in, or beds in which to sleep?

The church in Isiolo was talking about Jesus, the water of life, and simultaneously digging wells for the people to have water to live. The word of the Gospel, in Isiolo, has to become incarnate. The word for “incarnation” in Isiolo is water. There word and water are twins, and as such they enhance two symbols of life: Jesus, the water of life, in whose name life-giving water is given to the people.

Words and symbols may change from place to place. However, in every place mission must assume the language of incarnation. Looking at the church and its mission from the perspective of the Isiolo people or better, from the perspective of the poor, it is rather puzzling why there has been so much conflict within the church and theological circles, in the West particularly, about the interrelation of word and water, word and table, preaching and serving, evangelization and social action.

The Lausanne movement, the main object of this study, is a good example of how much tension surrounds the subject within evangelical circles, and how much it has cost sectors of the present and worldwide evangelical family to overcome the dichotomy between evangelization and social concern.

The Journey of the Lausanne Movement

There is no need to speak much about the importance of the International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne I) held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. The history of the event and of the Lausanne movement speaks for itself. The entire movement (which, it could be argued, had its beginnings in the World Congress on Evangelization held in Berlin in 1966) put world evangelization decisively on the agenda of world Christianity and even clearly define its goal: to maintain and expand the momentum for effective world evangelization.

Lausanne was a congress that became a movement, an event that became a symbol. As a congress, its purpose was to ask the worldwide church to embrace the task of evangelization in the context of a modern, growing, and increasingly unevangelized world. As a movement, Lausanne had to shape its identity and clearly define its goal: to maintain and expand the momentum for effective world evangelization.

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) that emerged as a result of the congress tried to establish real and serious continuity to the congress by facilitating a process of networking for world evangelization and by addressing, through several consultations, some of the key issues highlighted by the Lausanne Covenant. The interrelation between evangelization and social responsibility was one of those issues.

The Discussion Within Lausanne

The Lausanne Covenant speaks clearly about a theology of mission that embraces “sociopolitical involvement.” By doing so the Covenant reflects what happened at the congress itself. The congress clearly addressed the need for Christian involvement in the sociopolitical arena and said that in order to be relevant and faithful, evangelization has to take into account the social context and to make evident God’s holistic concern and commitment to justice for all people.

Lausanne’s attention to social concern reflected the effort of North American evangelicalism to reread the Bible in the light of its own growth and public reemergence. This evangelicalism, typified by Billy Graham, had already become widely recognized and accepted. Lausanne’s attention to sociopolitical involvement reflected the British vein of evangelicalism, which, unlike its North American counterpart, has consistently kept alive its rich heritage of social and political involvement. John Stott is a good example of this tradition. But Lausanne went even further to raise issues of social justice and to express concern about “every kind of oppression.” This primarily reflected the contribution of a third-world evangelicalism that was reading the Bible in contexts of dependency, poverty, injustice, and oppression. This evangelicalism, in its search for a missionary obedience, was prepared to

Valdir Steuernagel, a Lutheran pastor in Brazil, is Vice-President of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, and an alternate member of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.
reevaluate the evangelicalism imported from the North and to face the challenge of becoming contextual. This was a kingdom-oriented evangelicalism, with the Latin American Theological Fraternity being a good example.

If it is true that the Covenant found room for the above expressions of Christian sociopolitical concern, it is also true that the so-called “Lausanne consensus” was a nervous one. The task and challenge of interpreting Lausanne became the real battlefield. How to understand “sociopolitical involvement,” how to relate it to world evangelization, and how far and deep Lausanne, as a movement concerned with evangelization, should go into the subject became key issues. Conflict started very early, indeed at the very moment the task of the Lausanne Committee was being defined.

**Mexico 1975: Defining the Task of Lausanne**

In January of 1975 a meeting of the Lausanne Continuation Committee took place in Mexico City, to elaborate on the future of Lausanne. This turned out to be a difficult meeting. While Billy Graham challenged Lausanne to “stick strictly to evangelism and missions,” John Stott, as he wrote to Anglican Bishop Jack Dain, was “very reluctant to see any network for the specialist and exclusive purpose of evangelism,” and envisioned a continuity that “in keeping with the spirit of Lausanne . . . could accept from the beginning that as evangelicals the responsibilities God has laid on us are broader than evangelism.”

In the end, Mexico ’75 said that it was the task of Lausanne “to further the total Biblical mission of the church, recognizing that ‘in this mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary,’ and that our particular concern must be the evangelization of the 2,700 million unreached people of our world.”

By aiming to wed a “broader” and a “narrower” understanding of Lausanne’s task, the Mexico meeting left the question open for interpretation.

**Simple Lifestyle! Too Radical?**

In March of 1980 an International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle was called with the purpose of further developing the Covenant’s reference and challenge “to develop a simple lifestyle in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism” (para. 9). By relating simple lifestyle to evangelism, relief and justice, the consultation concluded that none of those aspects could be separated from each other:

So then, having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to his call, in heartfelt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the Day of Judgment, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple lifestyle, to support one another in it and to encourage others to join us in this commitment.

In spite of the effort to interrelate evangelism and simple lifestyle and to express commitment to world evangelization, there was a sense of nervousness with the outcome of the consultation within LCWE. Chairman Leighton Ford regretted the lack of a more focused and direct discussion on evangelism. Donald Hoke, was very clear about his unhappiness:

I feel very, very strongly that we must recognize that we cannot commit ourselves to move forward in every area covered by the Lausanne Covenant. On retrospect, I feel that the Consultation on a Simple Lifestyle was a mistake. There is no clear note issued in their report that we are to sacrifice for the sake of world evangelization.

**COWE: Reaching the Unreached.**

The LCWE Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE), held in June of 1980 in Thailand, was a full-scale international consultation designed to concentrate on “how the unreached people should be reached with the Gospel.”

While some of the working groups within COWE did address the issue of social concern, COWE as a whole did not want to do so. This refusal opened wounds: What is the authority of the Covenant within the movement? Is the whole Covenant still accepted?

The reaction at COWE came in the form of “A Statement of Concern on the Future of the LCWE,” signed by 200 participants, addressed to the LCWE Executive Committee. The intention of the “Statement” was to challenge LCWE to “reaffirm its commitment to all aspects of the Lausanne Covenant,” including those that deal with the issue of justice and oppression, and to “convene a World Congress on Social Responsibility within three years.”

The reaction to the “Statement” was, according to Orlando Costas, “cool and disappointing.” It included an endorsement of the entire Covenant by the “Thailand Statement” and referred the issued to a future “small consultation . . . on ‘The Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility.’ ”

By the end of 1980, the evangelical family was more divided than when the year started. The Simple Lifestyle Consultation was interpreted as speaking too much the language of the “radical evangelicals,” whereas COWE was criticized not only because “social responsibility” had been excluded from its program but also because it was embracing a definition and strategy of evangelization that did not sufficiently take into account the broader definition of mission as articulated in the Covenant. The year 1980 showed that LCWE preferred to take the safe road of mainstream “evangelism only” instead of risking to walk down the streets to the many “Isiolo people,” where water and food are short, poverty grows, and the signs of exploitation, oppression, and injustice are abundant.

**CRESR 1982: Building In-house Bridges**

The Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR, June 1982) was the most carefully planned and potentially threatening consultation ever held by the LCWE. The consultation was prepared in such a way that the radical tone of the Simple Lifestyle Consultation would be avoided, a clear relation to evangelization would be maintained, and the “primacy of evangelism” would not be discussed.

In the light of this strict framework, it is amazing how well the Lausanne community received CRESR and the consensus document it produced (the “Grand Rapids Report, Evangelism and Social Responsibility: an Evangelical Commitment”). Elaborating on the relationship of evangelism and social responsibility, the report recognized “at least three equally valid relation—
ships": 1. "Social action is a consequence of evangelism"; 2. "Social action can be a bridge to evangelism"; and 3. "Social action not only follows evangelism as its consequence and aim, and precedes it as its bridge, but also accompanies it as its partner."13

Having dealt with the relationship between social responsibility and evangelism, the report moved on to "the question of primacy," affirming that "evangelism has a certain priority" because, at the end of the day, it "relates to people's eternal destiny."14

The statement produced by CRESR is impressive for the volume of material that it covered and for the sense of wholeness that surrounded it. Although it became an in-house document that helped to alleviate tensions within the Lausanne movement, it did not become a working tool for those who live at the frontier of life, dealing daily with bare survival, discrimination, injustice and oppression. Lausanne still owes the broader Christian community, as well as the poor, a study process that addresses the relationship of evangelism and social responsibility from the perspective of justice and of those who suffer and whose lives are characterized by an enormous variety of needs—need for the Bread of life and need for bread to live.

CRESR certainly did not say the last word about evangelization and social responsibility. However, it is difficult not to reach the conclusion that, after CRESR, there was a tendency within Lausanne to close the chapter on social responsibility. This is why Lausanne II and the way it would treat the issue of social concern was so important.

Lausanne II: The Poor Were on the Agenda, But...

The Second International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne II), which gathered more than 4,000 people in Manila, Philippines, in July of 1989, did not have the advantage of being the first. It had to respond to the question of continuity to Lausanne I and, at the same time, to deal with the demands faced by another generation.

The challenge faced by Lausanne II could clearly be seen on the issue of "sociopolitical involvement" and its relation to evangelization. Would Lausanne II endorse, sharpen, and bring up to date the fifth paragraph of the Covenant, or would there be an attempt to stick with it without giving it much attention, staying more in the tradition of COWE than of Lausanne I?

An occasional observer of Lausanne II would say that the poor won a place in the agenda of Lausanne. Two major plenary sessions dealt respectively with "Good News for the Poor" and "Social Concern and Evangelization." Both subjects were pursued in workshops; the challenge of poverty and of evangelizing the poor was always on the screen through media presentations. And two affirmations of "The Manila Manifesto" referred to it: "We affirm that we must demonstrate God's love visibly by caring for those who are deprived of justice, dignity, food and shelter" (A-8), and, "We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this scriptural witness" (A-9).15

In spite of the place of the poor on the agenda there was, for many, a sense of uneasiness and disappointment:

a. The main tone of Lausanne II was the evangelization of the world under the catchword "AD 2000." In this view the Gospel is a programmatic content to be shared, the world is a demographic scenario to be reached, and people are categorized as "reached" and "unreached." The poor receive attention primarily because they are unreached.

b. The poor were seen as the objects of our care and evangelistic effort. Lausanne had not gone through a pedagogic conversion, inspired by the Gospel, that would dilute such paternalism, allowing for real partnership and making the poor the co-agents of their own confrontation with the Gospel.

c. The Lausanne movement has consistently refused to pursue the consequences of what the Covenant calls "sociopolitical involvement," in spite of some attempts in that direction, at Lausanne II.16

According to my view Lausanne can no longer avoid entering into a study process that would concentrate on justice and would further develop a theology of the kingdom as the basis for mission. Expressing the uneasiness of many Latin Americans present at the congress, I had the opportunity on the final day to address briefly the plenary and to ask Lausanne to move in that direction:

It is interesting to observe how much Lausanne II has expressed concern for social involvement as a part of mission. Again and again, the videos have given us the image of the poor and of the work of the church among them. What we have not done quite enough is to push the question further by dealing with what the Lausanne Covenant calls "socio-political involvement." I am afraid that by working mainly with the biblical motif of compassion and by interpreting it through the eyes of a liberal and individualist ideology we have produced a "cup of water" tradition, which does not respond entirely or adequately to the needs of many who live not only in the Third World but in the First World as well. The compassion motif needs a companion motif, and that is called justice, kingdom's justice. ... May I suggest that the time has come when we have to ask the political and economic questions of our times and to grapple with them within the perspective of our Christian mission. ... At this point, however, we seem to suffer from a syndrome of cautiousness that paralyzes us. ... How can we keep silence about millions of abandoned children, about the degenerating poverty, immorality and exploitation in our cities? How can we keep silence about apartheid, drug traffic, nature destruction and the terrible issue of foreign debt?17

The Lausanne movement has no other option if it wants to be contextualized, faithful, and recognized in the poor southern hemisphere as a movement that is holistic about world evangelization. Lausanne still has to struggle and sharpen the issue of "sociopolitical involvement." The plea at COWE for a "World Congress on Social Responsibility" came alive again at Lausanne II. One of the Social Concern Track's recommendations is that the Lausanne Committee "convene a global conference on Evangelical Response to contemporary social evils including abortion, abuse of the creation, drug trafficking, forced displacement of people, the international debt crisis, violation of human rights, political oppression, racial injustice and all forms of unjust discrimination."18 This time, I hope, Lausanne will say "yes." The "Isilo people" still need word and water.
Notes

1. Some of the consultations sponsored by LCWE were “The Homogeneous Unit Principle” (Pasadena, June 1977); “Gospel and Culture” (Willowbank, January 1978); “Evangelical Consultation on Simple Lifestyle” (London, 1980); “Consultation on World Evangelization” (Pattaya, 1980); “Evangelism and Social Responsibility” (Grand Rapids, 1982); “Holy Spirit and Evangelism” (Mexico City, 1985); and “Consultation on Conversion,” Hong Kong, 1988.


7. Donald Hoke to Ford, July 8, 1980, Folder 12, Box 7, Collection 46, Archives of the Billy Graham Center.


10. Ibid.


15. It should also be recognized that many of those at Lausanne were committed to mission in a holistic perspective and were networking for it at Lausanne II. The Covenant had been too big a blessing to be chained and the Lausanne informal network had become too wide and deeply rooted in third-world soil to be restricted to a narrow and ascetic understanding of evangelization.

16. See especially Caesar Molebatsi’s address entitled “Reaching the Oppressed,” in Transformation 7 (January/March 1990): 25–27. However, there was an unavoidable sense that Molebatsi was out of tune with the official stance of the congress, even if very much in tune with many participants who gave him a significant ovation.

17. From the writer’s own unpublished manuscript.