

**A RESPONSE TO MARK CHAN'S
"THE THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM"**

*FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE
"TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION"
October 4-5, 2002*

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At the outset of my remarks I want to make it clear that I have no major differences with Mark Chan's excellent paper. On the contrary, his emphasis upon the church as the "embodiment of the Gospel and agent of the Kingdom" is a welcomed alternative to the all-too-common neglect among Evangelicals of the organic unity of the church. My comments, therefore, are intended to offer dialogue regarding certain areas of emphasis and to call for further refinement of his basic argument.

Dr. Chan has presented a well-developed theological mandate for collaborative evangelization. This mandate is grounded in the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. From this foundation he builds a theological construct for collaborative evangelization that is anchored in the Trinity, the nature of the church and the gospel, and the work of the Spirit in the World.

For Chan, evangelism is inherently a corporate activity reflecting the *koinonia* of the people of God. Therefore, collaboration among the people of God is not peripheral to evangelism. On the contrary, collaborative evangelization is integral to the mission of the church in the world.

Chan's emphasis upon the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God as the template for a theological mandate for evangelization is important. It provides the larger, all-

encompassing reality that gives impetus and guidance to the followers of Christ. It is a vision that pulls us out of the tendency to reduce the good news of the gospel to some form of self-help option. God's mission of cosmic renewal stands in judgment of any form of reductionism; God's work in the world is always beyond us. Yet, we are called to participate in the restoration of all things. We are, as Chan notes, "graciously given a part to play in the work of the Kingdom." In light of the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God, how is it that Christians can reduce the good news to some particular brand of the gospel at the exclusion of all others? The eschatological reality of the kingdom should humble us as well as empower us. It calls us to "corporation of the different expressions of the Church" and to a "collaborative dependency upon the Holy Spirit."

Chan notes that the Trinitarian relationship within the Godhead informs our understanding of the nature of salvation and serves as a model for collaborative evangelism. Following Karl Rahner, Chan maintains no disjuncture between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. He notes that the "communion of divine persons within the Trinity thus finds an analogous correspondence in the ecclesial communion of believers."

It would have been helpful for Chan to elaborate upon Miroslav Volf's critique of the Roman Catholic (Ratzinger) and Orthodox (Zizioulas) tendencies to over-emphasize the unity of the Trinity. The Protestant Free Church tradition offers a corrective not only to a hierarchical view of the Trinity, but also challenges an image of the Trinitarian life that results in what Volf terms "pure relationality," namely the loss of differentiation at the expense of unity.¹ On the

¹ Volf acknowledges that the Free Church tradition has difficulty in imaging the life of the church from the life of the Trinity. He observes: "Were the divine persons to unite, as do converted Christians, into a fellowship—as the common Free Church ecclesial model has it – one would have not a Trinity, but rather a tritheism." When the theological grounding of the church is not Trinitarian, but rather *Christological*, and if "personal faith plays a decisive role in the salvific experience, then this exclusive soteriological ecclesiological concentration on Christ

other hand, the rabid individualism found in much of Protestantism is in need of correction. While most Protestants would reject the loss of individual identity found in Roman Catholic and orthodox ecclesiologies, it seems that we also hunger for the *koinonia* that is found in the communion of the saints. We are especially in need of an image of the Kingdom of God and the church that stands in judgment of the “infigtings, competitiveness, and parochialism that often mark relations among churches and organizations...” (Chan). In this regard, Volf’s attempt to wed the Free Church tradition to Trinitarian life offers hope for many Protestants in regards to a richer and fuller ecclesial life.

It should be noted that the nature of the church and how that nature relates to evangelization is a difficult ecumenical issue. When the church is understood as a “collective self” composed of all persons who have experienced grace mediated through baptism, salvation is more often ecclesially bestowed than personally chosen. Difficulties arise when attempts are made to define persons who are “un-churched.” Further difficulties develop where there exists “ecclesial territory,” namely the dominant presence of a particular church within a given society. These difficulties point to the need for prayerful dialogue between churches, especially between the older more established ones and the newer Evangelical and Pentecostal churches.²

Finally, I want to offer a suggestion that Chan develop a view of the church that is more overtly pneumatically constituted. While I agree with him that the church is God’s missional agent and that it is not simply the messenger of the Gospel but the Gospel message itself, I would

can...ground only the salvation of the individual, but not the ecclesial salvific community itself. Each person stands directly under the dominion of Christ; what *all together* are to be remains unarticulated...” See his *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 196-197.

² An example of this type of helpful exchange is the International Roman Catholic –Pentecostal Dialogue. In particular see the report from the fourth phase (1990-1997) on the topic “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness.” This document has been applauded as an excellent treatment regarding the difficult issues surrounding common witness and proselytism.

want to point out that it is the Holy Spirit who actualizes the life of the Trinity in the church and that it is the Holy Spirit who continues the ministry of Christ in the world (Paraclete Sayings of John 14-17).

Chan's emphasis upon the "evangelizing Spirit at Work in the World" would have been more appropriately positioned in his paper after his section on the "Triune Character of Evangelization." By placing pneumatology before ecclesiology Chan would have made clearer the dependency of the church upon the power of the Holy Spirit for its life and mission. When ecclesiology and mission are united without a strong over-arching pneumatology, the church as agent of salvation and "apostle to the world," finds itself in danger of what I call an "over-realized ecclesiology." The church may assume that its life is an accurate reflection of the Divine life to the degree that is difficult to prophetically correct the direction it takes.

Furthermore, when the connection between the charismata and Christ's constitutive presence in the church by the Spirit is downplayed, the mission of the church in the world is reduced to a form of truth telling without the corresponding power of the gospel to heal a broken world. Dr. Chan is correct when he admonishes the church to "look beyond itself to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in the world at large." I would want to add the admonition that the church seek to discern how it may be Spirit-led and Spirit-filled in order to be the agent of healing in a broken world.