

Evangelism, Service and Social Action¹ in the Missional Understanding of the Cape Town Commitment

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Abstract

In the following article, Rose Dowsett discusses the relation between evangelism and diakonia as it has developed within the Lausanne movement. The focus of the article is on the "The Cape Town Commitment" (CTC) from 2010. She points to a development within the Lausanne movement in the direction of an integrated concept of mission where diakonia has a value in itself. She concludes by emphasizing the advantage of diakonia eventually having found its biblical place in mission. Even though there is not yet global agreement within the Lausanne movement, Protestant mission has always operated on the front line when it comes to practical diakonia (health, school, humanitarian aid).

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Norsk sammendrag

Rose Dowsett tar for seg forholdet mellom evangelisering og diakoni slik dette utvikles i Lausannebevegelsens dokumenter. Vekten legges på «The Cape Town Commitment» (CTC) fra 2010. Hun påviser en utvikling innen Lausannebevegelsen i retning av et integrert misjonsbegrep der diakonien tillegges egenverdi. Hun konkluderer med å påpeke hvor bra det er at diakoniens plass i misjonsarbeidet nå endelig er blitt tilkjent en korrekt bibelsk begrunnelse. Samtidig innrømmer hun at det ennå ikke er global enighet om saken innen Lausannebevegelsen. Protestantisk misjon har likevel hele tiden operert i fremste linje når det gjelder praktisk diakoni – helse-, skole- og nødhjelpsarbeid.

'Lausanne should only be concerned with primary evangelism and church planting, reaching the 'unreached' as fast as possible! Let's nail down our strategies and get the job done NOW!' No, that argument was won long ago: Lausanne is committed to a holistic gospel, a wider understanding of the mission of God and the mission of God's people!

Around discussion tables and meal tables, running through seminars, in the corridors as more than 4,000 people from 198 countries made their busy way to and fro, it was easy to hear this longstanding debate still raging. The setting? The Third Lausanne Congress, held in Cape Town, South Africa, in October 2010.

In the world of global mission, the issue is clearly not universally settled. Where in fact does the Lausanne Movement stand? And, given that it is 'a wide umbrella' under which there is great diversity in many matters, and in any case a voluntary association rather than a formal membership, is it actually possible to say 'Lausanne stands for *this...*'?

To answer that question, we need both to look at the Movement's three major documents² – The Lausanne Covenant (1974), The Manila Manifesto (1989), and The Cape Town Commitment (2010) – and also to try to understand some of the theological reflection within and beyond them in the tumultuous years since 1910 and the great Edinburgh Conference, of which Cape Town was a deliberate centenary. In addition, what has happened under the Lausanne banner, and beyond it, in between the three congresses which produced those important statements?

It is often said (wrongly) that Protestant missions, and especially evangelical mission, have always been narrowly pietistic³, focusing on shepherding individuals into heaven. Even a quick examination of the Nineteenth Century and the so-called modern missionary movement shows how mistaken such an assumption is. Both within the Protestant heartlands of Europe and North America, and through the mission agencies they established, these Christian people were at the forefront of spearheading social change, welfare movements, education and literacy, medical care of the poor, and much more. Yes, there were blind spots, sometimes bad attitudes, and many mistakes; but, narrow they were not. 'Evangelization' was understood to embrace much more than evangelism – all that today we call 'integral mission'.

The seeds of theological liberalism, with its increasing undermining of Biblical truth and authority, were already sprouting their destructive harvest by the time of Edinburgh 1910, but tragically that conference deliberately avoided any substantive theological discussion on the grounds that to engage in it would be divisive⁴. The First World War (1914-18) led to millions of Europeans in particular, and North Americans through the influence of their exploding numbers of European immigrants, concluding that the classic Biblical message was now discredited, and that only the ethical parts of the story were relevant: doing good, but no evangelism. Liberal theology flourished. In reaction, the Fundamentalist movement, especially in America, polarized in the opposite direction from Liberalism, and among its casualties was a robust understanding of the mission of the church, and overseas mission in particular, in an integral and wholistic form. In protecting the urgency of evangelism, attention to social transformation as a core part of mission was often lost.⁵

It was not till the late 1940s and early 1950s that a new generation of scholars and theologians such as JI Packer, Alan Stibbs, and others, emerged, confident in the Bible but believing the Fundamentalists had shrunken the Scriptures and marginalized much that was of great importance. As they began to teach and publish, it was against a backdrop of the growing power of Communism, and many people came to believe that most of Asia, Latin America and Africa, even some of western Europe, would soon join the Russian and Chinese blocs. Time was running out for Christian cross-cultural missions, it seemed. Surely the most urgent evangelism must be un-

dertaken while it was still possible, and anything beyond it would be diversionary and a waste of precious and apparently limited time. In addition, there were those, especially in North America, who believed the Lord's return was imminent, and only awaiting a last evangelistic onslaught.

It was in this context that Dr. Billy Graham, by then a world-renowned Crusade evangelist, and the Rev. Dr. John Stott, Rector of All Souls' Anglican Church in central London, already friends since 1951, joined together to invite evangelical leaders to convene in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974 to reflect on how to engage in world mission in such urgent and troubled times. Stott was himself a gifted evangelist as well as pastor, especially among students, and had made many friends around the world, both through those who came to All Souls' while studying in London, and also through conducting student missions through the growing network of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). Exposure to IFES leaders, especially those living in the political and social cauldrons of Latin America and Africa, convinced Stott that mission must embrace not only evangelism but also whole-life issues, including service in every dimension – engaging with political and social challenges, fighting for justice, caring for the poor, and more.⁶

The divergent positions about the nature of mission, with which we began this article, were present at Lausanne I (as it came to be called), in 1974. A few would not sign the Lausanne Covenant⁷ in protest against a wider definition of mission, although the latter in fact recaptured the historic understanding and practice, as we have seen. Stott, assigned the task of harmonizing many submissions, crafted the Covenant with very careful attention to Biblical theological underpinnings without which no practice of mission will be truly in line with God's heart. Paragraph 5 of the Covenant, entitled 'Christian Social responsibility', includes the following:

'We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty...'

In the study guide Stott added later, he wrote: 'In the last half century we have tended to divorce evangelism from social concern, and to concentrate almost exclusively on evangelism; this has led to an imbalance, even to a travesty of the gospel.....' He goes on to root his paragraph 5 in four doctrines: the doctrine of God (including 'God is not just interested in the Church but in the world....We as God's people should share the breadth of God's concerns...his concern for justice...reconciliation....liberation...'); the doctrine of humankind (including the significance of humans being created in the image of God); the doctrine of salvation (including 'Both evangelistic and social involvement are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and humankind, of our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.....'); and the doctrine of the Kingdom (including 'We must seek not only the spread of the Kingdom, nor only to live by its standards, but to spread righteousness in our unrighteous world...').⁸ Stott draws on many parts of Scripture, not just the few limited texts that have too often been used simplistically to support a very narrow understanding of mission.

The disagreements at that first Lausanne gathering about the relationship between evangelism and social action (and even about where exactly the parameters of the latter might be) rumbled on. For the Latin Americans, for example, it was simply not

possible to pursue social engagement, or to address social justice and the demonstration of Kingdom values, without challenging political regimes. On the other hand, some from different contexts believed mission and politics must be kept firmly distinct from one another, though compassion ministries would be embraced. Others again still believed mission is only to be equated with proclamation evangelism. In January 1975, writes Leighton Ford, a 'continuation committee... met first in Mexico City.... It was not an easy meeting. The central issue concerned the mandate of Lausanne. Was it to further world evangelization in the fullest sense of the church's mission? Or was it to promote 'evangelism' pure and simple, in terms of seeking conversions and planting churches? There was a sharp disagreement, and, to be honest, there were sharp words. At one point some of the leaders, including Stott and Dain [Bishop Jack Dain of Sydney, who had been involved in the leadership of the Congress], indicated they would have to resign if the 'narrower' view prevailed over the 'wider' mandate embodied in the Covenant.'⁹ Stott and Graham managed to persuade the group that 'the total biblical mission of the church' stood, but that 'in the church's mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary' (as stated in Section 6 of the Covenant). This diffused the situation but was by no means the end of the matter.

In 1982, John Stott convened the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR). The resulting report¹⁰ laid out in greater detail the relationship between the two, including what is meant by calling evangelism primary. The report concludes:

'To proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour (evangelism) has social implications, since it summons people to repent of social as well as personal sins, and to live a new life of righteousness and peace in the new society which challenges the old.

To give food to the hungry (social responsibility) has evangelistic implications, since good works of love, if done in the name of Christ, are a demonstration and commendation of the gospel. [...]

[...] Thus, evangelism and social responsibility, while distinct from one another, are integrally related in our proclamation of and obedience to the gospel. The partnership is a marriage. *The choice* [between the two, or prioritizing one at the expense of the other], *we believe, is largely conceptual. In practice, as in the public ministry of Jesus, the two are inseparable.[...]*

By 1989, when the second Lausanne Congress was held in Manila, Philippines, if anything some of the disagreements had once again escalated. A significant group, primarily Americans and some Asians, largely as a result of their eschatology, argued that the Lord would most likely come back at the turn of the millennium, the year 2000. With only eleven years to go, every unreached people group must be targeted at once, and every resource poured into primary evangelism and church planting to ensure 'everyone could hear the gospel once'. When the Manifesto in its fourth section once again paid attention to 'The Gospel and Social Responsibility'¹², along the same lines cited above, the dissenting group formed the AD 2000 movement. On the one hand this was the result of passionate and commendable activism, which undoubtedly mobilized many Christians to engage urgently in world mission and specifically evangelism. On the other, it showed significant fissures among evangelicals as to eschatology, the nature of the Kingdom of God, and the Lordship of Christ over every dimension of life, and how each of these shaped understanding of what mission is.

Over the next 21 years, the Lausanne Movement sponsored a number of smaller consultations, and continued valuable networks and working groups to facilitate global co-operation. Some, such as the Strategy Working Group, focused on 'getting the job done'. Others, such as the Diaspora network, addressed the growing issue of extensive migration. The Theology Working Group, in partnership with the World

Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Theological Commission, concentrated on developing theological underpinnings for the practice of mission, unpacking the strapline 'The whole Church, taking the whole Gospel, to the whole World' as well as addressing issues such as globalization and contextualization.¹³ Undoubtedly the growing stature of non-western theologians, missiologists and church and mission agency leaders meant that some traditional western assumptions and practices were being challenged.

It was the Theology Working Group, with its WEA Partners, under the gifted leadership of Dr. Chris Wright, who were tasked with drafting the document for the third Congress, in Cape Town, that would in due course take its place alongside the Covenant and the Manifesto. Painfully conscious of the growing number of fractures among evangelicals globally, and of the sadly ungracious manner in which many disagreements were being conducted, Wright, then the International Director of the Langham Partnership International, pondered how to encapsulate a biblical framework for mission in a fresh and irenic way. This would form a Part 1 of the final document, written and available prior to the Congress, with Part 2 gathering up the work of the Congress itself.

And so was born **Part 1: For the Lord we Love: the Cape Town Confession of Faith**, expressed in ten sections: (1) We love because God first loved us; (2) We love the living God; (3) We love God the Father; (4) We love God the Son; (5) We love God the Holy Spirit; (6) We love God's Word; (7) We love God's world; (8) We love the gospel of God; (9) We love the people of God; (10) We love the mission of God. It was an inspired way in which to re-state biblical foundations, those foundations without which our mission and discipleship will always be distorted. It was especially welcomed by those from the non-western world who often prefer to 'do their theology' in ways different from traditional historic western formularies while still wanting to be faithful to God's Word. All sections, but perhaps especially sections 7-10, quietly, gently, firmly, skillfully demonstrate how authentic mission integrates praxis and proclamation, social responsibility and evangelism.

For instance,

'Love for God and love for neighbor constitute the first and greatest commandments.....Christ told his disciples that only as they obeyed this commandment would their mission be visible and believable..... God's love extends over all his creation. We are called to love in ways that reflect the love of God in all those dimensions' (from Section 1). 'Our heavenly Father [is] the model or focus for our action. We are to be peacemakers, as sons of God. We are to do good deeds, so that our Father receives the praise. We are to love our enemies in reflection of God's Fatherly love...' (from Section 3). 'If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth...Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ... all God's people are commanded – by the law and prophets, Psalms and Wisdom, Jesus and Paul, James and John – to reflect the love and justice of God in practical love and justice for the needy...' (from Section 7). 'We are not saved by good works, but having been saved by grace alone we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (from Section 8).

And, from Section 10:

'The source of all our mission is what God has done in Christ for the redemption of the whole world, as revealed in the Bible, Our evangelistic task is to make that good news known to all nations. The context of our mission is the world in which we live, the world of sin, suffering, injustice, and creational disorder, into which God sends us to love and serve for Christ's sake. All our mission must therefore reflect the integration of evangelism and committed engagement in the world, both being ordered and driven by the whole biblical revelation of the gospel of God'.¹⁴

From this rich Confession of Faith of Part 1, the Cape Town Commitment moves on to Part 2: **For the World We Serve: The Cape Town Call to Action**. A small international team from the Theological Working Group, and again led by Chris Wright, worked their way through mountains of papers submitted in advance of the Congress, listened carefully to every Bible study and plenary session and between them almost every further session, studied every report submitted by recorders assigned to every meeting, and spent many hours trying to discern what God was leading us to focus on. The resultant document is very lengthy, and defies detailed study here, but let us at least note the contours.

Through a lengthy consultative process over the three years beforehand, the themes for the days of the Congress had been established as follows (the capital letters correspond to those in the completed Commitment):

- (A) Bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world
- (B) Building the peace of Christ in our divided and broken world
- (C) Living the love of Christ among people of other faiths
- (D) Discerning the will of Christ for world evangelization
- (E) Calling the Church of Christ back to humility, integrity and simplicity
- (F) Partnering in the body of Christ for unity in mission.

It should, I think, be immediately apparent that each of these big themes is concerned to understand and then relate better to the contexts in which the global mission of the Church must take place today. But, as the title makes clear, this 'Call to Action' is not content merely with exploring ideas, a greater level of mental understanding, a theoretical abstraction, but gathers together many concrete actions that should be part of our praxis of mission today – the lived-out reality of the engagement with the world and loving service to it that is the common thread we have traced so far in the Lausanne story. John Stott and others had to struggle to make the case for integral mission way back in 1974, patiently unpacking the biblical rationale which had been eclipsed over recent decades. By Cape Town 36 years later the overwhelming majority of participants (and almost unanimously among those from the global South) were fully persuaded that proclamation of the Christian message and social service should not be separated from one another. The Commitment reflects that. For some perhaps the conviction was born out of pragmatism ('this is what works'), but for many it was the result of ongoing biblical and theological reflection. Lausanne undoubtedly nurtured the global conversations that led to this fresh embrace of holistic mission, whether or not those at Lausanne I, way back in 1974, could have foreseen developments.

There were, of course, a small minority at Cape Town who still believed that evangelism and church planting are the sole business of mission, especially among those who held dispensationalist or certain forms of pre-millennial eschatology; but in practice, quite a few of these also engaged in mercy ministries of one sort or another alongside their evangelism. The sacred-secular divide, that poisonous fruit of the Enlightenment, is hard to hold on to consistently if one takes seriously the Great Commandment to love God and neighbour, and for most of the global south, that division is incomprehensible: life and belief *are* integrated, and the gospel is, too. And in relational communal cultures, as so many from the global south take for granted, the concept of some kind of disembodied, wholly individual and hyper-spiritual other-worldly concept of the gospel is outrageous.

It is not possible in this limited paper to unpack in detail each sub-section of the Call to Action, but their headings immediately show the scope and range spelled out as

to the nature of fully-orbed mission. The absolute need to articulate the gospel and to call men and women and children to trust in the Lord is never overlooked, but it is always within the context of reflecting the comprehensiveness of God's love for his world, his passion to see his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

So, I list the titles of the sub-sections to illustrate the sweep of concerns that flow from a conviction that mission is total not partial; life as well as words; demonstrating as well as declaring the whole heart of God.

Section A subdivides into seven sub-sections: Truth and the person of Christ; truth and the challenge of pluralism; truth and the workplace; truth and the globalized media; truth and the arts in mission; truth and emerging technologies; truth and the public arenas. (Each includes specific actions that spell out the implications – applying truth at very practical levels, how to move from theory to what we actually do and live by.) B subdivides into six parts: The peace that Christ made; Christ's peace in ethnic conflict; Christ's peace for the poor and oppressed; Christ's peace for people with disabilities; Christ's peace for people living with HIV; Christ's peace for his suffering Creation. (Again, each of these is not simply for life within an individual or even the Church but spelling out how we engage with and serve the whole world.)

Section C engages with our relationship with those of other faiths, or where Christians may be a sorely tried minority: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' includes persons of other faiths; the love of Christ calls us to suffer and sometimes to die for the gospel; love in action embodies and commends the gospel of grace; love respects diversity of discipleship; love reaches out to scattered peoples; love works for religious freedom for all people. (In a world where there is often bitter confrontation between people of different faiths, and persecution of minorities, how practical and heart-searching is this section.)

Section D: Unreached and unengaged peoples; oral cultures; Christ-centred leaders; cities; children; prayer. (Strategies may be helpful, as also a focus on specific communities, but mission is not first and foremost a human undertaking in human abilities, but a humble participation in God's mission, to be done in God's way.)

Section E: walk in distinctiveness, as God's new humanity; walk in love, rejecting the idolatry of disordered sexuality; walk in humility, rejecting the idolatry of power; walk in integrity, rejecting the idolatry of success; walk in simplicity, rejecting the idolatry of greed. (There was very wide concern that superficial, simplistic evangelism produces 'pygmy Christians' rather than true disciples; and that radical discipleship is counter-cultural and costly, but impacts every dimension of life. The gospel is discredited by professing Christians failing to demonstrate the character of Jesus even if they speak of him.)

Finally, Section F: Unity in the Church; partnership in global mission; men and women in partnership; theological education and mission. (The Church needs to live out mutual service and servanthood, as well as serving the world beyond itself.)

As one examines one thoughtful paragraph after another, through all the length of the Call to Action, it is hard to see how more explicit a radical integration of service and evangelism could possibly be. This is surely the whole gospel, for the whole world, from the whole church, being spelled out.

Lausanne does not have a formal membership, and nobody was required to sign the Commitment: in any case, the Call to Action, though absolutely flowing out of the Congress discussions, was not written up till after the event. The Confession of Faith, Part I of the Commitment, in outline was incorporated liturgically into the final stages of the closing ceremony of the Congress, and in that sense was adopted by the delegates. The Call to Action was widely circulated in successive draft form for

consultation, and feedback was taken seriously and acted on. I think it is fair to say that it genuinely represents the mind and heart of most if not all of those present. The Commitment as a whole has been translated into a number of languages, and been adopted by many networks.

Just as the Lausanne Covenant provided the clear parameters of what Lausanne stood for (and stands for still), the Cape Town Commitment provides a shared understanding of what mission is for today's generation, giving both biblical and theological foundations and many significant applications in very practical terms. Smaller consultations, convened by the small Lausanne team, occur at regular intervals, examining themes in turn, and furthering the task of moving from acceptance to worked-out adoption. Mission agencies, churches, seminaries and other groups have studied the Commitment. The test of course will be whether (in the best sense) we live by it (it isn't Scripture!).

As more and more of the world is closed to overt evangelism and church planting, and to the professional missionaries of a previous generation, the Lausanne model of committed integral mission, with loving service and incarnational demonstration of transformed lives alongside open speaking of Jesus when and wherever possible, may become increasingly the pattern we have to adopt anyway. Also, the new mission movements from the global south, combined with widespread migration of global south Christians, many with few economic resources to 'do mission' in the ways of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' western models, increasingly embrace the fully incarnational models that are so closely allied to integral mission.

It is good that the Covenant, the Manifesto, and now the Commitment most fully of all, show that such adjustment is not merely pragmatic but rooted in biblical conviction, that this is indeed the way God asks us to live for him, everyday, wherever we are, in his beloved world. This is truly God's mission for God's people.

Let me finish with words from Lindsay Brown's closing address at Cape Town:

The mission statement for this Congress was "to seek to bring a fresh challenge to the global church to bear witness to Jesus Christ and all his teaching, in every part of the world – not only geographically, but in every sphere of society, and in the realm of ideas." The phrase 'bear witness' is carefully chosen. In many ways I think it is a better word than 'evangelization'. It is often translated from the Greek word *martyria* in the English Bible to imply both speech and behavior, a witness of life and lip. We must be committed to the Lordship of Christ in every area of human activity. I love the words of Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and prime minister, who once said, "There is not one centimeter of human existence to which Christ, who is Lord of all, does not point and say "that is mine".¹⁵

For the glory of God, may we engage in mission in this way.

Noter

- 1 *Different terms are used in different parts of the global church. In some parts of Europe, the preferred term might be diakonia, but the Cape Town Commitment does not use this as 'social action', 'service', and 'wholistic' or 'integral mission' are more widely used in the Lausanne network.*
- 2 *These and many other documents are freely available in Lausanne's website*
- 3 *18th century Pietism was in fact strongly engaged in service, but in the English-speaking world sadly the term pietistic has changed in meaning from fully-orbed spirituality to introverted personal devotion, and unconcern about earthly wellbeing.*
- 4 *The organizing Committee specified that 'No expression of opinion should be sought from the Conference on any matter involving any ecclesiastical or doctrinal question on which those taking part in the Conference differed among themselves' History and Records p.8, quoted in Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now, Eds. David Kerr and Kenneth Ross, Regnum: Oxford, 2009, p.7 For detailed study of Edinburgh 1910 see the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, Brian Stanley, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, USA, 2009*
- 5 *'Fundamentalism' refers primarily to the movement as it specifically played out in North America. Conservative evangelicals, of various streams of the church, also stood for Biblical faithfulness and shared many of the concerns of the Fundamentalists, but were less narrow, and were much more engaged in holistic mission, e.g. medical and educational ministry.*
- 6 *See for instance his own account quoted in John Stott: A Global Ministry, Vol.2 of his biography, Timothy Dudley-Smith, IVP: Leicester, 2001, 127*
- 7 *About 400 (including Ruth Graham) of the 2,400 present declined to sign the Covenant, for varying reasons. See John Stott: A Global Ministry, , p.215 ff.*
- 8 *Also available alongside all three Congress documents in The Lausanne Legacy: Landmarks in Global Mission, Ed. JEM Cameron, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2016; see pp. 28-31.*
- 9 *JEM Cameron, xix-xx*
- 10 *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment can be downloaded as Lausanne Occasional Paper No.21, at www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-21.html*
- 11 *The leader Luis Bush repeatedly said that the movement did not imply such an expectation. He has also been a champion of transformation.*
- 12 *An important new emphasis in the Manila Manifesto was that sin could be structural and had to be fought also on the political level.*
- 13 *Many of the papers produced by this group (and those of other groups, too) can be found on the Lausanne website www.lausanne.org The Lausanne consultation that opened up for contextualization was already in 1978.*
- 14 *I am told that for Lutherans the term 'the gospel of God' raises questions as to precise meaning. Neither Lutherans at the Convention nor Lutherans on the Theology Working Group indicated problems, so I simply quote it as it is written.*
- 15 *The Lausanne Legacy, 165.*

