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EVANGELICALS AND SOCIAL CONCERN

Frank E. Gaebelein*

Evangelical social concern is no new thing. Nearly eighty years ago the Church historian, F. J. Foakes-Jackson, wrote:

No branch indeed of the Western Church can be refused the honor of having assisted in the progress of humane ideas and non-Christians have participated largely in the work of diffusing the modern spirit of kindness; but the credit for the inception of the movement belongs without doubt to that form of Protestantism which is distinguished by the importance it attaches to the doctrine of the Atonement. . . . History shows that the thought of Christ on the cross has been more potent than anything else in arousing compassion for suffering and indignation at injustice. . . . The later Evangelicalism, which saw in the death of Christ the means of free salvation for fallen humanity, caused its adherents to take the front rank as champions of the weak. . . . Prison reform, the prohibition of the slave trade, the abolition of slavery, the Factory Acts, the protection of children, the crusade against cruelty to animals, are all the outcome of the great Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. The humanitarian tendencies of the nineteenth century, which it is but just to admit all Christian communities have fostered, and which non-Christian philanthropists have vied with them in encouraging, are among the greatest triumphs of the power and influence of Christ.¹

Yes, the record is clear. Such classic studies as Timothy Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform*² and, in relation to the effects of the Wesleyan revival, J. W. Bready's *England: Before and After Wesley*³ document our heritage in social involvement.

But toward the end of the last century and in the early years of the present one, along with the rise of the social gospel and the emergence of modernism in America, something happened to social concern among fundamentalists (I use the word because our current usage of "evangelical" and "conservative evangelical" arose later). Fundamentalist social concern went into an eclipse. This was due in great part to that earlier "battle for the Bible" in which fundamentalist leaders closed their ranks against modernism with its denial of basic Christian doctrine and its link with the more radical Biblical criticism. Also, in their zeal for defending the gospel and the Scriptures, these leaders reacted against the social gospel being promoted by the liberal Protestant establishment.

The term "social gospel" (surely unfortunate in view of Gal 1:6-9) stems from

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¹F. J. Foakes-Jackson, "Christ in the Church: The Testimony of History," in H. B. Swete, *Cambridge Theological Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1905) 512-514.

²T. L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957).

³J. W. Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley. The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

the name of a magazine published by members of the Georgia Commonwealth Colony, a Christian communistic group that resided from 1895 to 1900 on a thousand-acre tract in the state of Georgia. The term was picked up in 1905 by Shailer Mathews and others and became "the accepted name for social Christianity."⁴

From its beginning, the social gospel was linked to evolution and socialism. It stressed social salvation at the expense of individual salvation. So it was not surprising that the fundamentalists opposed it. Moreover their preoccupation with predictive prophecy, especially as the First World War came, contributed to the eclipse of social concern among them. That the two groups—fundamentalist and modernist, the one promoting personal evangelism and the other the social gospel—were thoroughly polarized is evident. For example, C. H. Hopkins' definitive study, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism*, makes no mention whatever of D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, or even of Robert E. Speer.

Sherwood Wirt has summed up the situation like this: "The weakness of the Bible defender of the recent past was not so much his premises or his logic, as his failure to look out for the needs of his neighbors. He was too often blinded by the smoke of the theological brushfires and unable to see what was happening to his world. The social conscience of the evangelical went into rigor mortis."⁵ But rigor mortis follows death, and social conscience did not die, as Wirt himself went on to show. It rather became, in Carl F. H. Henry's phrase, an "uneasy conscience." Even at the most drastic point of its eclipse, evangelical social concern continued through such efforts as rescue missions, prison visitation, opposition to the liquor traffic, and once-removed social work on the foreign mission field. And despite the regrettable slowness of the evangelical community by and large in responding to issues that were coming to the fore in the 50s and 60s—issues like civil rights, political and religious persecution and torture, hunger and poverty, and the nuclear threat—today there are signs of what may well be a renaissance of social concern among evangelicals. For the first time various segments of evangelicalism, ranging from the politically radical through the politically liberal and centrist to the politically rightist and far right, are speaking out. Names come readily to mind: Sojourners, *The Other Side*, Voice of Calvary, Evangelicals for Social Action, National Association of Evangelicals Social Action Commission, National Black Evangelical Association, World Vision, Prison Fellowship, Moral Majority. Nor should we overlook the social agencies of the evangelical denominations themselves.

Amid this diversity a significant trend is, I think, developing: On certain issues like hunger (witness the broad consensus in Bread for the World), abortion (on which *Sojourners Magazine* has taken a conservative stand) and pornography (to which *The Other Side* devoted an issue), evangelicals on both the left and the right have to some extent been at one in voicing their convictions. And the same trend is now developing in concern about the build-up of nuclear armaments.

So far I have been writing descriptively and by way of background. Let us turn

⁴C. H. Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) 196.

⁵S. E. Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper, 1968) 46.

now to some Biblical principles that must underlie a truly evangelical social concern. Doing this will require us to face some of the shortcomings and unfinished business of our social concern and reassess certain attitudes that can blunt it. Above all, it will entail bringing our social efforts under the criticism of the Word of God both written and incarnate.

Here, then, are two assumptions that have restricted and in some circles continue to restrict the full exercise of the neighbor love to which Christ obligates us. Both need re-examination in the light of Scripture.

The first may be stated like this: *Just preach the gospel so that people are born again and then changed people will bring about the needed social change.* But this rests on a simplistic view of evangelism. It mixes the truth that Christian social action has come and can come from people changed by Christ—it mixes this with a truncated view of our Lord's Great Commission. For Matt 28:19-20 combines evangelism ("go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them") with obedience to all Christ taught ("teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"). At the heart of Christ's teaching is loving concern for others. Just as clearly as the NT tells us that salvation is only by grace through faith and in no way by works, so it binds us in total discipleship to the ministry of compassion to which we have been saved. Unmistakably the NT links Christ's giving himself for us with our giving ourselves for others. "This," says John in his first epistle, "is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God dwell in him?" (1 John 3:16-17). Neither Christ nor the NT writers spoke of a kind of disembodied salvation. As Albert Schweitzer said, in Jesus' parable of the lost sheep it was the whole sheep that was saved. The failure to link the essential preaching about being born again with the obligation to obey all of Christ's commands is the reason why in some places where the altar call has been most insistently given certain great social injustices were tolerated so long.

A second assumption that has restricted evangelical social concern asserts this: *A conservative evangelical theology necessarily means a conservative social outlook.* But this too is unbiblical. For one thing it reflects a misunderstanding of the basic nature of Biblical prophecy, which includes far more than its eschatological element on which some evangelicals have concentrated almost to the exclusion of listening to the burning words of the prophets about the poor, about injustice and oppression, about wealth gained through exploitation, idolatry and disobedience to God's righteous requirements, and about the hollowness of worship by people who are blind and deaf to human need.

The other day I completed an extended study of the book of Amos at a weekly Bible study breakfast in Washington that I have been leading for about fifteen years. The group—professional men mostly of politically conservative outlook—needed little prompting from me to see the application of Amos to our society right now.

And Amos does not stand alone. The strain of godly social concern runs throughout all the prophets, major as well as minor, and indeed throughout the entire OT. In *Christianity Today* (October 2, 1981) I spoke about the unbalanced, over-selective use of Scripture into which we evangelicals are prone to slip. It is a strange paradox, is it not? The very people who affirm with all their hearts the in-

errancy of the whole Bible seem content to overlook great sections of its most probing teaching.

It is not only our comparative neglect of the OT that has contributed to our lag in social concern but also our restricted use of the NT. Take, for example, the neglect of our Lord's teaching about the kingdom. Back in 1947 Carl F. H. Henry said, "There is a growing reluctance to explicate the kingdom idea in fundamentalist preaching"⁶—to which I would add that this reluctance still persists in much evangelical preaching today. What right have we to evade the subject to which our Lord devoted the major portion of his teaching, including some of his most searching words? Is neglect of the teaching about the kingdom in the synoptics—it is mentioned 55 times in Matthew, 20 times in Mark, 46 times in Luke, but only 5 times in John—is this one reason for imbalance in evangelical preaching? Can it be that some of us are not sure about how to cope with the great kingdom passages like the sermon on the mount? Be that as it may, preaching and teaching that slides over the more drastic words of Jesus in the synoptics—and many of us have done this—is bound to be deficient in Biblical social concern.

No, a conservative theology, if we mean by that a theology that takes the whole of Scripture seriously, does not necessarily demand a conservative social outlook.

Let me turn now to a basic criterion for evangelical social concern. Because we are evangelicals, such a criterion must be both Biblical and Christ-centered. I believe that in our Lord's Good Shepherd allegory in John 10 we have in v 10 of that chapter a definitive criterion for our social concern. These are the words: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." It was for this purpose that our Lord Jesus Christ was incarnate, that he lived and taught and ministered to human need, that he died and rose again. The gospel is preeminently related to life at its highest and fullest—life in its eternal dimension and also life here and now. Hence anything that denies, threatens, mars or diminishes human life must be the object of our active Christian concern. A criterion like this one sanctions the whole spectrum of our Christian social concern. Under it come the great life issues like hunger, abortion, persecution and torture, racism, violence (including that on the highways), pornography, alcoholism and drug abuse, and nuclear war. All these—and others too—are related to life and to having it to the full.

In view of this criterion, are there any areas of concern where evangelicals have unfinished business? Obviously those in which we are already active come under that classification because they are still ongoing concerns. But there are other areas where our evangelical social concern has been, I think, much too minimal. Let me point out only three of them.

The first, the environmental issue, relates to the quality of human life here and now and in the future. Its Biblical roots go back to the cultural mandate in Genesis and to the principle of stewardship. God placed man in the garden (the archetypal symbol of our environment) not to despoil it but to work it and care for it. We do not really own any of it. The environment is entrusted to us—the lands, the waters, the atmosphere, plant and animal life—to use for human sustenance and betterment, not to squander for immediate gain and this at the risk of threatening the life of future generations. Nuclear war threatens sudden obliteration of human life. Persistent despoiling of the environment threatens gradual but ulti-

⁶C. F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) 51.

mate destruction of human life. Thus far those who have been most concerned about the environment have not been notable for their Biblical and Christian motivation. Yet the issue persists, and evangelicals must put it higher on their agenda.

Another piece of unfinished business relates to the place of women in our society. Evangelicals were divided on the Equal Rights Amendment. But there are areas, quite apart from constitutional action, in which women need greater freedom and more support and recognition. An attitude of male domination rather than of mutual submission in Christ still persists among us and we need to do more about it.

One more issue in which evangelicals need to become far more involved is that of nuclear war. To be sure, some evangelical leaders have already taken a stand on this matter—for example, those who in 1976 signed “A Call to Faithfulness,” a manifesto against nuclear armaments. Since then, concern about this paramount subject has been growing among us. Still the redundant build-up of nuclear armaments seems to evoke very little concern among the rank and file of evangelicals. Rather does passive and uncritical acceptance continue to be the attitude of a great many of us. Some evangelicals have been saying that God will not allow mankind to destroy itself through nuclear holocaust. If this is really their conviction, then outspoken opposition to the build-up of nuclear weapons at a cost that is crippling essential social programs would seem incumbent on them. One other thought: If anything like the kind of intense concern many evangelicals bring to issues like pro-life, pornography, and prayer in the public schools were to be devoted to an evangelical protest against the proliferation of nuclear arms, a courageous stand for life would be made in the name of the Prince of Peace and the race toward destruction might be slowed down.

Like all godly endeavor, evangelical social concern does not go unopposed. As Paul said to Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” It is doubtful whether any Christian life devoid of social concern can really be a godly one. Opposition to godly and concerned living has many forms, including most of all the unremitting pressures of the greedy materialism that pervades our culture and even seeps into Christian homes and churches.

Some of my readers have childhood memories of the Great Depression that struck our country in the early 30s. Many of you were not yet born when it happened. I am one who had to cope with it as an adult—in my case, as head of a school. And this I can tell you. There is a vast difference between the mood in which people faced the hard times fifty years ago—times far, far harder than ours—and the way people are facing economic problems today. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (1981) based on a study of personal letters from ordinary people in the Great Depression, Professor Robert S. McElvaine of Millsaps College calls the people of the 30s the “us” generation because of their willingness to work and make sacrifices together, whereas today we have, he says, the “me” generation in which an insidious spirit of selfishness characterizes a society so accustomed to affluence that it will not let it go. From personal experience I can assure you that McElvaine’s conclusions are correct.

This too I know. The prevalent confusion of success with material things and the growing sense of entitlement to more and more possessions—and evangelicals

are by no means free from it—can cut the nerve of compassionate concern for our suffering brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

Observe again the words of the apostle John: "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." Here is the ultimate dynamic for evangelical social concern. But what *is* it to lay down your life for your brother or sister? Does John mean only the ultimate act of heroism? I think not. I think that laying down one's life for others can and should be a repeated action. It means caring more about people than dollars and things. It means taking part of the lifespan the Lord allots us and laying it down for our neighbors.

The *Denver Post* (December, 1981) told of a twelve-year-old girl, both legally blind and mentally retarded, who is an inmate of the Colorado State Home for the retarded and multiple handicapped. With just a glimmer of sight she could cast her eyes upward to the lights on a Christmas tree. "She has no parents; no one ever comes to see her," the therapist said. It is a situation that can be duplicated thousands of times in similar institutions all over the country. Yet how few care enough even to lay down one hour of their lives to show others who are in need (and they are not just in institutions but all around us) a reflection of the love Christ has lavished on us.

We can and must give our money to causes that demand our evangelical social concern. But not even the most generous gifts can take the place of laying down our lives through giving some of our time, our very lives, to the personal practice of Christian social concern.

Years ago a missionary in North Africa wrote these familiar words:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
 Look full in His wonderful face,
 And the things of earth
 Will grow strangely dim
 In the light of His glory and grace.

A beloved expression of pietism, yet open, I think, to some questions. Yes, at the heart of Christianity and at the heart of our concern there must be the vision of Christ. But the face of Christ to which we turn our eyes in fullest devotion is not the one portrayed in the sentimental pictures of him we put on the walls of our homes and Sunday schools. No, it is the face of the Christ who laid down his life for us, the face of the Christ on the cross, the face that was marred more than that of any man. We look at him and see the crown of thorns and his atoning blood. And when we see him in this way, the needs of this lost world become not "strangely dim" but terribly and compellingly real. For if our hearts are open to him in obedient discipleship, we hear him saying to us what he said to the first believers: "As my father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).