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Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

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Introduction

HIGH LEIGH CONFERENCE CENTRE AT HODDESDON IN Hertfordshire was the venue for five days in September 1978 of the National Evangelical Conference on Social Ethics. Over a hundred invited members assembled under the chairmanship of John Stott. They were drawn preponderantly from the younger ranks of Evangelicals and ranged from academics, schoolteachers, ministers and doctors to business men, people in the arts and the media, M.P.'s, youth leaders and social workers. A small Scots contingent and at least one Irishman gave a limited British dimension to the predominantly English gathering, and a handful of overseas representatives contributed at times an international perspective.

The plenary addresses, published in this book very much as they were delivered, formed the backbone of the Conference. Members had received synopses of these papers in advance, and should have been well prepared to discuss them at the Conference in small groups. In the event, feedback from the groups provided scant guidelines for the speakers in revising their papers for publication. The other main activity of the Conference were the workshops on topics that included Northern Ireland, trade unions, medical ethics, social pressures and the family, and the just war and armaments.

The secretary of the organizing committee was Pat Dearnley, a vicar in North London and a former Director of the Shaftesbury Project. The full administrative resources of the Project under its present Director, John Gladwin, were marshalled in support of the Conference. Since much of the

credit for the Conference's achievements belongs to the growing stature of the Project, a few words about it will not be out of place.

The Shaftesbury Project was founded in 1969 to promote a biblically-based approach to areas of social concern. It draws together evangelical Christians from a wide range of occupations, church allegiances and political viewpoints. Basic to their co-operation in the Project are the twin convictions that God's self-revelation in Christ presented in the Scriptures must be fundamental to any attempt to relate Christian beliefs to society, and that a full-orbed Christian discipleship will not neglect such a responsibility. The Project is particularly keen that not only experts and leaders but also church members in general be stimulated and equipped to be salt and light within their social context. To this end it makes available a steady flow of papers, news-sheets, booklets and memoranda, mostly produced by its study groups working in areas such as race relations, overseas development, crime and punishment, and the role of women in society. The Project enjoys increasing recognition as a kind of evangelical 'think-tank' for social and political issues, and a resource centre for churches and Christian groups and agencies to call upon.¹

The High Leigh Conference was the first national evangelical venture into the field of social ethics to be held in Britain. As such it reflected and endorsed the growing acknowledgement among British Evangelicals of the biblical imperatives of social concern and action, to which the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization gave international expression in 1974.² The relative newness of this commitment among Evangelicals may be set alongside what Ronald Preston has recently identified as 'a certain loss of impetus in Christian social ethics' in Britain since the early 1940's.³ As far as Evangelicals were concerned, little or no impetus was discernible in the first half of the century.

1. Further details of the Shaftesbury Project may be had from the Project office, 8 Oxford Street, Nottingham, NG1 5BH.

2. The Congress papers were published as *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis, 1975). See especially 'Evangelism and Man's Search for Freedom. Justice and Fulfillment' by Samuel Escobar (pp. 303-326), and 'Christian Personal and Social Ethics in Relation to Racism, Poverty, War and Other Problems' by Carl Henry (pp. 1163-1182), but many other contributions are relevant to social ethics. Klaus Bockmuehl has subjected the Lausanne statements to a cautious biblical critique in *Evangelicals and Social Ethics* (Exeter, 1979).

3. R. H. Preston, 'Whither Social Ethics?', *The Modern Churchman* 21 (1978), pp. 81-95, at p. 81.

The roots of this neglect of social ethics are many and various. Some of them are unearthed in the chapters of this book. Professor Preston rightly detects in evangelical Protestantism 'an excessively individualist outlook which has led it to suppose that problems of collective ethics can be solved provided we have individually consecrated persons facing them'.⁴ It is surely no accident that fresh awareness of the social implications of the gospel should follow in the train of a widespread rediscovery of the significance of the church in evangelical teaching. At the same time the kingdom, or better, rule or reign, of God has had to be rescued from its almost total entanglement with evangelical 'futurology', and hailed as begun on earth in the works of Jesus — a reign the signs of whose inauguration among men included the feeding of the hungry, the healing of the sick and the ingathering of the flotsam and jetsam of human society. It would be difficult to refute the charge that the evangelical quest for heaven had too often been attended by a devaluation of the welfare and just ordering of man's earthly life, a failure to accord proper weight in our thinking and priorities to the world of God's creation. The dominant sentiment was well expressed by the Reith Lecturer, Edward Norman: 'the wise aspirant to eternity will recognize no hope of a better social order'.⁵ Although the importance of social involvement has been regularly acknowledged, it has somehow rarely seemed important enough to engage more than marginal commitment. Evangelical ethics have for the most part been content to be personal rather than social.⁶

It is against this background of large-scale evangelical neglect of social action and reform (except vicariously in the reverence paid to our forebears, especially of Shaftesbury's era), that these papers must be judged. They are concerned with what John Gladwin calls 'the shaping of the mind', rather than with determining attitudes or promulgating programmes on particular issues. It is at the level of the evangelical mind that the battle for social ethics will have to be won. If evangelical groups and churches are to embark on

4. *Ibid.* p. 90.

5. E. R. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford, 1979), p. 79. See the responses to these Lectures in *Christian Faith and Political Hopes*, ed. Haddon Willmer, London, 1979. Norman is no Evangelical, and Evangelicals will be wise not to embrace him as an unexpected ally. Not least should this be evident from his treatment of the persecution of Christians in the U.S.S.R. on pp. 33ff.

6. See, for example, the inadequate treatment in *A Guide to Christian Reading*, ed. A. F. Walls, London, 1952 (revised 1961).

Christian discipleship in this area they will need to hear a summons that is Bible-based and gospel-based as well as society-based.

Evangelicals will justifiably want to be assured of the *biblical grounds* for socio-political obligations and activity. Establishing such grounds is an objective to which each of the essays in this collection makes its distinctive contribution.⁷ Howard Marshall carefully plots the path in general terms, concluding that 'the task of the moralist is to extrapolate from Scripture to the particular ethical exhortations appropriate in different situations'. The God-given natural order as a basis for ethical directions is examined by Oliver O'Donovan, and compared with the ethical import of historical revelation and eschatology. He helpfully exposes the different 'cash-value' of the two approaches, the naturalist and the historicist, in relation to differing cultural and social situations. Like Oliver O'Donovan, David Lyon declines to accept the choice between creation ethics and kingdom ethics, but proceeds instead to present the significance of the four pivotal 'moments' of biblical history — creation, fall, redemption, consummation — for a Christian response to the challenge of Marxism. It is probably true that Evangelicals have been inclined to make too little of the Bible go too far in this sphere. In seeking a biblical view of political responsibility, Romans 13:1-7 has been for many the one and only port of call, while the doctrine of God's 'common grace', a doctrine with scarcely a broad biblical basis and only tenuously rooted in Reformation theology, has had to bear ever-increasing weight in interpreting God's involvement with the non-Christian world of men and nature. The essays in this volume will hopefully serve to suggest a more extensive biblical undergirding of social ethics.

In particular, if Evangelicals, that is to say, 'gospel-people', are to make a consolidated advance on this front, they must be clear about the *relation between the gospel and social concern*. John Stott's discussion of this central issue in *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London, 1975) had been an influential catalyst of evangelical thinking, anchoring social commitment in the pattern of the Father's sending of the Son. (Surely the miracles of Jesus are fraught with often unexplored significance in this connexion?) No less important has been Article 5 in the Lausanne Covenant, which deserves to be reproduced in full:

7. See also Bockmuehl's essay referred to in n. 2 above.

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, color, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he 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 man 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. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgement upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

In these collected papers Haddon Willmer attempts to glimpse a theology of the state which is in our sense gospel-based, that is to say, determined by the God-for-others who is the man Jesus Christ. Here the state belongs not solely to the realm of common grace or a fallen humanity but embodies something of 'the "for-other" reality of the gospel'. Haddon Willmer has followed up his Conference paper with another testing exploration of 'The Politics of Forgiveness'.⁸ John Gladwin was at pains in his Conference address to unfold the implications of the Christ of the gospel for human rights — both the creativity released by the yielding of rights and the foundation for respecting the integrity of the conscience of others. And several papers pinpoint the importance of the church, the community that lives by and for the gospel, as the model for the reordering of human society. David Cook suggests we should view it as a test-bed, where, in exploring, for example, masculinity and femininity, 'we can afford to make mistakes, recognising that God's grace is always sufficient'.

But if an evangelical social ethic is to be Bible-based and gospel-based, it must also be earthed in the realities of society. Here belong the essential contributions of social

8. Haddon Willmer, 'The Politics of Forgiveness', in *Third Way* 3:5 (1979).

scientists and fieldworkers, whether doctors, lawyers, parents or politicians. Here we also note the value of John Briggs's historical survey of the transition from Christendom to our contemporary pluralism — a transition which he welcomes rather than laments. In so doing he perhaps speaks for a minority among British Evangelicals, but a minority with an increasingly articulate voice, partly as a result of a small but far from token American Mennonite presence in recent years. Evangelicals who trace their lineage back to the magisterial Reformations of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer and Knox have too long been able to ignore the alternative witness of the Anabaptists. Their claim to be more consistently biblical than the major Reformers is a challenging one. Their present-day heirs have recovered their penchant for posing radical biblical questions in books like John Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972) and Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an age of Hunger* (London, 1978).

There can be little doubt that ethics for society are much easier to fix when that society is a greater or lesser Christendom. The peculiar dilemma of British Evangelicals in the last decades of the twentieth century can be stated in some words of Ronald Preston: 'we have inherited the structures of a Christendom situation but without the reality of it, and are tempted to a nostalgia for its return'.⁹ Some at the Conference were convinced that the desire to restore reality to the structures of Christendom was no nostalgia, let alone a temptation, but a viable Christian objective. The issue remains a tricky one, and the parting of evangelical ways is not far distant. Are biblical ethics (Old or New Testament?) for the whole of society or only for God's people? How far should we in practice accommodate to the political, social and legislative realities of pluralism, which are coloured in various shades of grey but rarely black or white?

In its short history Marxism has become a determinant of social reality for the world's population almost as influential as Christianity. David Lyon's searching consideration of the challenge of Marxism (now backed up by his monograph *Karl Marx: A Christian Appreciation of his Life and Thought*, Tring, Herts, 1979) could not have been omitted if we were to do any kind of justice to the contemporary scene. As an ideology Marxism is uniquely related to Christianity and remains a standing witness to the failure of Christians to give

9. *Art. cit.* p. 93.

social embodiment and expression to the loving justice of their God.

Furthermore, evangelical ethics require the input of social and economic analysis if their theological undergirding is to be not only biblical but also contemporary. Howard Marshall's paper broaches the question whether there is such a thing as progress in ethics analogous to development in doctrine. How should Evangelicals respond creatively to the gospel and its implications in order to meet the needs of today's world? The challenge is a central one for theology no less than for ethics. The story of theological development — of creeds, articles and confessions, of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, *Systematic Theologies* and *Church Dogmatics* — reveals the articulation of church doctrine largely in response to heresy and schism (ecclesiastical disturbances) on the one hand and through interaction with philosophy, history and science (intellectual pressures) on the other hand. It is arguable that for the foreseeable future theology will have to be done at the interface with two fronts which have come to the fore only with the twentieth century. These are presented by the vitality and resurgence of other faiths or religions and the needs of an unequal world. The former of these challenges is taxing enough, although Christian history can throw up some precedents to guide the modern theologian. (I think especially of Christianity's encounter with the distinguished tradition of Greek wisdom in the early centuries.) But never before have the clamant needs of millions of undernourished, underprivileged, oppressed people constituted a creative factor in the explication of the church's theology.

What can we, what must we say *biblically and theologically* about a world — God's world — marked by such massive inequality and injustice as ours, a world in which the dividing lines so detrimentally isolate the so-called Christian west? How must our traditional church doctrines be 'developed' in order to make Christian sense — Bible sense, gospel sense — of such masses of humanity reduced almost to sub-human existence? If theology of an earlier era dare not for its own vitality and integrity fail to confront the philosophical currents of the day, if theology 'after Auschwitz' dare not for shame ignore the Holocaust in speaking of the Jewish people, no more may evangelical theology today neglect to take account of the dominant social, economic and political realities of the world. There lies before us here an undertaking which will require constant interaction in thought and

reflexion between the biblical basis, the gospel basis and the socio-economic-political basis for evangelical social ethics spoken of above.

These are largely uncharted waters for evangelical mariners. Indeed, injustice will be done to these Conference papers if they are viewed as statements of an established evangelical consensus. Some of them display more of a tentative or adventuring quality than others. They all raise questions, some of which are appended to each chapter for group discussion. There must surely be a place for experimental or provisional thinking and writing, as we endeavour to move into new territory or grapple with moral dilemmas and social developments which our forefathers could never have foreseen. Evangelicals must summon the courage not merely to respond to the pressure of changes in society, such as the shrinking of the world to the size of a 'global village', the ethical problems posed by technological advances and the growing totalitarianizing of political life in west as well as east. We must claim the freedom and confidence to map out new paths ahead of the pack and before we have to face the inescapable. If orthopraxis and orthodoxy are both appropriate terms in this field, then both are as much goals to work towards as starting points to work from.¹⁰

The High Leigh Conference should therefore be hailed not as the sign of a new-found evangelical maturity but rather as the seal on an evangelical conversion. We have not arrived but we have reached the end of the beginning; having put our hands to the plough we must no longer turn back. In one respect, however, we may hope and pray to be found mature travellers — in accepting the propriety of different routes and stopping places on the journey. The Conference delegates neither reached nor were programmed to reach unanimity, whether in discussing the main addresses or in workshop debate. Unionists and managers, capitalists and socialists, champions of Christendom and advocates of gathered churches in secular society, conservatives and radicals — along these and other lines divisions were unmistakable. But Evangelicals have long learned to maintain fellowship in the faith despite deep-seated disagreements — on baptism, the nature of the church, the ordering of its ministry, the first things and the last things and many others in between. The critical factor will not be the convictions or policies that

10. With John Stott's Epilogue on 'Tasks Which Await Us' may be compared Bockmuehl's pages on 'The Task Ahead', *op. cit.* pp. 39-43.

divide us so much as how we live and work together despite the divide.

Another reason why Evangelicals may expect strains and frictions in social ethics lies in the instinctive caution that has come to characterize so many of their attitudes. Have we not tended almost unthinkingly to appreciate peace and order in preference to the disturbance that alone may bring forth justice? Are we not inclined to react automatically against the clamorous demonstration, the disruptions of the strike, the confrontations of the hustings, without asking whether the customary peace and quiet mask the sleep of death, the putrefaction of stagnant waters and the suppression of ugly injustice? How do we Christianize our instincts?

But if protest and struggle must come, the tone of evangelical involvement must be distinctive. Can we engage in the hurly-burly of party politics without rancour? Can we chip away at the massive blockages to social health without fatalism? British society can rarely have been in greater need of an injection of hopeful and charitable conviction to counteract the acids of cynical denigration. And if more and more Christians incarnate the biblical principle that 'a *spiritually* liberated person also has a concern for *earthly* liberation',¹¹ should we not look in faith for the expression of that concern to fructify the preaching of the gospel? So may the church of God grow and the hurt of the world of God be healed.

11. Bockmuehl, *ibid.* p. 9.