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A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

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FOUNDATIONS *(Doing theology on the basics of classical faith)*

Participating in the Sufferings of God Patty Taylor 2

INQUIRY *(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)*

Evangelism and Social Ethics Richard J. Mouw 6

ACADEME *(Reports from seminary classrooms, special events, and TSF chapters)*

News from TSF Chapters Tom McAlpine and Mark Lau Branson 9

INTERSECTION *(The integration of theological studies with ethics, academic disciplines, and ecclesiastical institutions)*

The Public Face of Evangelicalism Jim Wright 10

Guarding the Ashes or Tending the Flame: Wesley
 Theological Society 1981 Annual Meeting Donald Dayton 11

The Tyndale Fellowship — Then and Now R. T. France 12

SPIRITUAL FORMATION *(Probing questions, suggestions, and encouragement in areas of personal and spiritual growth)*

The Search for Spiritual Guidance John W. Ackerman 14

EDITORIALS *(Opinions, Options, and Olive Branches)*

Mainline Theological Education: A Loss of Focus
 Clark H. Pinnock 15

REVIEWS *(Notes and critiques on recent books and periodicals)*

Evangelism and Missions: A Survey of
 Recent Books (part III) David Lowes Watson 16

Book Reviews (Itemized on back cover) 18

INQUIRY

(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)

EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL ETHICS

By Richard J. Mouw, Professor of Philosophy, Calvin College.

During April of 1981, Perkins School of Theology sponsored a conference on Evangelism and Social Ethics, directed by TSF Associate Editor David Watson. Perkins Journal granted us permission to publish several of the papers concurrently. This essay by Richard Mouw is the first of these articles.—MLB

I am neither a missiologist nor an "evangelologist" nor even a theologian by trade. My interest in evangelism stems from the fact that my life has been shaped by a Christian sub-community which places a strong emphasis on what it thinks of as "personal evangelism" and "mass evangelism." My interest in social ethics, on the other hand, has much to do with the fact that I am a professional philosopher working primarily in the area of social-political philosophy.

Early on in my scholarly career I felt uneasy about existing patterns of divorce between evangelistic and social-political concerns. My very first published article, entitled "The Task of Christian Social Ethics," appeared, while I was still a graduate student, in a leading evangelical periodical — after lengthy negotiations with the editor, who was uneasy about some of my emphases. The Christian climate in the 1960's was not especially conducive to attempts to explore positive and non-reductionistic relationships between evangelism and social ethics. Evangelicals insisted upon assurances that one was not trying to "politicize" the Gospel. Non-evangelicals were suspicious of those of us who wanted to explore social issues from a perspective that was tainted, in their eyes, by "obscurantist" convictions and "Biblicistic" assumptions.

The past decade has finally generated some encouraging signs that we are beginning to work beyond some of the older polarizations and suspicions in this area. The Perkins conference on "Evangelism and Social Ethics," with the variety of perspectives and communities represented in its program, is a further sign of hope. The conference-planners obviously intended that an honest and broad-ranging dialogue would take place. In my own comments here I have chosen to honor that intention by speaking from a self-consciously "conservative-evangelical" standpoint — at least in the sense that I take evangelical formulations and confusions and insights as my point of departure.

What does evangelism have to do with social ethics? Or — to signal at the outset the way in which I will be understanding the two key terms in question — what does presenting people with the good news about Jesus have to do with the disciplined attempt to get clear about normative or value questions as they bear on societal or corporate life?

Some Christians would insist that there is a very intimate link between these two areas of concern. As we all know, there is a strong tradition in American Protestantism which views the Christian message as essentially and pervasively a "social Gospel." And more recently proponents of liberation theology have insisted in new and provocative ways that Christianity is at its heart a political religion. José Miranda makes the point clearly with reference to our present topic. "The word

euangelion ('the great news') makes absolutely no sense," he argues, "if we are not yearning, with all the hope of mankind, for the definitive liberation, the total realization of justice."¹

Many evangelical Christians, on the other hand, have viewed the relationship in a very different way. Consider this comment by Charles G. Trumbull, writing about the evangelistic task of Sunday Schools in the series of booklets published around 1910, entitled *The Fundamentals*:

The Social Service program, which includes so many things Christian in spirit, but which in many cases so disastrously puts fruit ahead of root, is a danger against which the Sunday School needs to guard, especially in its adult classes. The salvation of society regardless of the salvation of the individual is a hopeless task; and the Sunday School of true evangelism will not enter upon it. But the Sunday School that brings the good news of Jesus Christ to the individuals of any community lifts society as the usual Social Service program can never do. A striking illustration of this principle has been noted in the work of Evangelist "Billy" Sunday. Sunday preaches the individual Gospel of the apostolic church. He says little about social service. But the community-results where Sunday's evangelism has had an opportunity are revolutionizing. There is no social service worker in America today whose work can compare, in the very results for which the social service program aims, with that of Sunday's. And so the Sunday School of true evangelism will do an effective work in social service, but it will do it in the Lord's way.²

It is also interesting to note that the Lausanne Covenant, issued at the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization, makes no explicit reference in its paragraph on evangelism to justice or other societal concerns in its account of the nature of evangelism. But it does say that "The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world." It is likely that the writers of this document meant "responsible service in the world" as a reference to issues having to do with social ethics. But just as Trumbull views social issues as having to do with the "fruit" of evangelism, Lausanne places these matters in the category of "the results of evangelism." Indeed, in its paragraph on social responsibility, the Lausanne document goes on to insist that while "evangelism and social concern" are not "mutually exclusive," it is nonetheless the case that "social action" is not "evangelism" just as "political liberation" is not "salvation" — although "evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty."³

These comments show that evangelical Christians have often insisted upon drawing lines of demarcation between evangelism and social-political concerns. Sometimes they have spoken of social improvements as taking place only as a result, even as an inevitable "fruit," of the evangelization of individuals. At other times, as at Lausanne, evangelicals have tried to portray the relationship between evangelism and social action as in some sense complementary — while treating them, nonetheless, as two somewhat different areas of concern.

The picture often suggested by evangelical statements of this sort is one in which we concentrate initially and primarily on introducing individuals to Christ by way of a message, in such a way that it is not necessary to understand this process in terms of the concerns and concepts of social ethics or political theology. That is, evangelicals often seem to presuppose that this process — of introducing individuals to Christ — is essentially an a-political or a-social one. Thus Trumbull suggests that once this process is completed it will undoubtedly have important social effects — as in the popular evangelical

cliche. "Changed hearts will change society" — but the evangelistic process is itself an "individual" one. And Lausanne calls for social action as a necessary complement to, but a distinct area of concern from the process of evangelizing.

I am not convinced that this picture is completely wrong-headed. But it is misleading in certain ways. As a way of pointing in the direction of some positive formulations concerning the relationship between evangelism and social action, I will offer some brief observations about the strengths and weaknesses of this commonly held picture of things.

The Individual

First, there is an important sense in which evangelicals are correct — at least as I see things — in viewing the individual as a central focus in the task of evangelism. This kind of emphasis occupies a significant place in the historical origins of almost every Protestant group — an emphasis that is captured well in Wesley's fine hymn: "Died he for me who caused his pain/ for me who him to death pursued?/ Amazing love, and can it be/ that thou my God shouldst die for me?"

There are some Christians who look with disdain on the "I"-centeredness of evangelical piety, and the closely related evangelistic call for a "personal decision for Jesus Christ." But there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a religious perspective that stresses the importance of the individual's relationship to God. As James Cone points out in his fine book, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, black slave-religion was also in important respects "I-centered." But Cone also argues convincingly that slave-religion should not be dismissed for this reason as "individualistic." The "I-centered" claims of the slave were a response to the dehumanizing threat of racism. The slave was affirming a unique core of person-hood as over against the counter-claim embedded in the institution of slavery.⁴

Black slave religion was based on a profoundly important Biblical truth — that the love of God which has reached humankind in a unique way in the redemptive work of Jesus is a love which singles out individuals. As Helmut Gollwitzer has put it, God's love "individualizes" a person "in the same way as the love of the father and mother does with each individual child, however large the number of children."⁵

The Society

But second, it would be wrong to understand the individual who is being evangelized as completely isolated from social, political and economic contexts. Evangelical Protestants have often attempted to draw too rigid boundaries between, say, the "individual" and the "social," or between our "vertical" relationship with God and our "horizontal" social relationships. Thus while John Stott insists that it is a terrible denial of human dignity for persons to be victimized by racism or hunger or unemployment, he goes on to ask: "But is anything so destructive of human dignity as alienation from God through ignorance or rejection of the gospel?"⁶

Stott is correct in pointing to the alienation from God which results from ignorance or the rejection of the gospel as a matter of serious concern. But it is difficult to see how we can think of this kind of thing as being the only properly evangelistic concern, while viewing the other matters which he mentions as "social concerns." This becomes clear, for example, when we think of what it means to evangelize the racist or the sexist or

the economic oppressor. Racism, sexism and greed are not just sins against our human neighbors — although they are at least that. They are also sins against God. Racism itself is an instrument of rebellion before the face of God. Sexism is an idolatrous practice which can serve as a means of alienation from the one who created male and female in the divine image. Economic exploitation is one way in which we reject the Gospel. To evangelize human beings whose lives are caught up in these patterns of rebellion is necessarily to view these patterns as a part of the human being's identity before the God who calls us to an acceptance of the Gospel. We cannot maintain the view, then, which Stott seemingly wants to insist upon, that racism and economic exploitation are one kind of thing — social issues — and alienation from God and rejection of the Gospel are another kind of thing — and thus fall within the domain of evangelism.

Similarly we cannot completely separate these corporate factors from our proclamation of the Gospel to those who are the obvious *victims* of corporate oppression. Again, John Stott seems to suggest that we can. Thus he asks, in an apparently rhetorical manner: "how can we seriously maintain that political and economic liberation is just as important as eternal salvation?"⁷ We can respond to this with some rhetorical questions of our own. How can we seriously maintain — especially when our evangelistic efforts are directed toward the powerless, the disenfranchised and the oppressed — that eternal salvation has nothing to do with political and economic liberation? Can we preach the good news to political prisoners and exploited peasants in such a way that the message of salvation has no essential bearing on their condition of political and economic helplessness? Were the black slaves of North America completely wrong when they failed to distinguish clearly between the freedom offered by the Gospel and liberation from the yoke of plantation-slavery?

The Jesus of Whom We Speak

Third, a similar point can be made by focusing on the one whom human beings are being introduced to in the process of evangelization. As an evangelical Christian I am especially fond of that Biblical imagery which focuses upon the mission of Jesus as the Lamb of God whose blood was shed as a payment for sin. But I find it odd that evangelical Christians seldom pay attention to the way in which "the blood of Christ" theme is spelled out in the "new song" to the Lamb in Revelation 5:

Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom human beings for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.

The blood of the Lamb creates a new peoplehood, made up of a kingdom and priests. Because of the work of the Lamb all previous ways of deciding who is one of "our people" have been rendered obsolete. We may no longer boast of "white blood" or take pride in being "red-blooded males." All who belong to the Lamb's community have been initiated into a new order of rulers and priests. To recognize this is to stand over against present patterns of classifying and grouping human beings. And this recognition is central to the process of evangelization.

Evangelism is introducing people to Jesus. But this requires that people come to know the full scope of his authority, power and healing mission. The so-called "great commission" in Matthew 24 includes a citation of Jesus' credentials as the one who possesses *all* authority in heaven and on earth and it includes the mandate to teach *all* of the commandments of Jesus. It is not that we can first get to know Jesus, by way of evangelism, and then go on, in the area of social concerns, to

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find out that, say, racism is a bad thing. The divine judgment on racism already appears in the context of evangelization.

Evangelical Christians have rightly insisted that the Bible portrays the origins of sin as taking place in human hearts. But that sin which begins in acts of individual rebellion, as portrayed in Genesis 3, has ramifications throughout the entire cosmos. Human rebellion takes institutionalized forms. Sin becomes codified, it is woven into the patterns, institutions and structures of human interaction. These patterns, institutions and structures in turn shape and condition the human psyche. Individuals internalize the patterned actions and attitudes of previous generations of sinners.

Each human person, then, is shaped by the interactions which take place between individuality and the patterned-ness of corporate life. Sin has left a structured residue which can not be adequately dealt with by talking only in terms of "changing human hearts." No human heart stands completely naked before God, stripped of all corporate and institutionalized roles. We stand before God as racists and sexists and exploiters and victims. Evangelistic efforts, properly understood, must recognize that it is as human beings who are immersed in the patterns and roles of corporate interaction that we cry out to God: "Just as I am, though tossed about/ with many a conflict, many a doubt/ fightings and fears, within, without/ O Lamb of God, I come."

Evangelical Christians have in fact recognized what we might call the "situated-ness" of the individual in their own evangelistic efforts. When proclaiming the Gospel to skid-row drunks they have interpreted the evangelistic call as a plea for the addict to turn to Jesus *from* the enslavement of alcohol. Similarly they have viewed the evangelistic message to the prostitute and the adulterer as a call to those individuals *in* their patterns of sexual rebellion. In this sense evangelicals have engaged in what we might think of as "addiction-focused evangelism" and even "sexual evangelism." Why then can we not speak legitimately of "political evangelism" and "economic evangelism"?

The Nature of Salvation

But, fourth, this is not to say that evangelism simply *is* social action or that a theology of evangelism simply *is* social ethics. Stott is, in one sense, correct when he insists that "salvation" is not "political liberation." But, of course, neither is salvation to be identified with "freedom from enslavement to alcohol" or "liberation from sexual infidelity." Nonetheless, evangelicals have correctly operated on the assumption that for a given individual to let go of an addiction or a sexual practice may be the way in which the individual is embraced by the saving love of Christ. A person may first meet Jesus as the one whose power conquers an addiction or a perversion. But in the same sense a person may first meet Jesus as a political or economic liberator.

My own suspicion is, however, that there is a legitimate impulse to evangelical resistance to the suggestion that evangelism and social concerns are coextensive, or to the idea that the Gospel ought to be "politicized" — even though the case is often put in a confused manner. I can only briefly mention an area of concern here. Evangelicals — along with many Roman Catholics and other confessionally oriented Christians — insist that a person's intellectual response to the claims of the Gospel is an important matter. And that seems to me to be correct. Doubt and unbelief are in themselves important problems which must be addressed by evangelistic efforts. The question of what one believes concerning Jesus is one of the most crucial items that any human being can face. Evangelism is, among other things, confronting human beings with claims which must be either accepted or rejected. This is not all that is important about evangelism, of course. But it is one central concern — and conservative Christians rightly suspect that

those who would denigrate this dimension of the church's task are operating with significantly different understandings of the nature of the Gospel.

This is not to say, however, that this cognitive dimension of Christian commitment can be understood in complete isolation from the social reality in which it operates. Indeed, a proper understanding of what we refer to as "the Biblical message" or "the Christian faith" requires that we attend to a variety of "social realities." We must attempt to understand the socio-cultural contexts in which Biblical claims, and past teachings of the Christian churches, originated. We must be aware of the social milieu in which *we receive* and appropriate those claims and teachings. And we must attempt to understand the cultural contexts of the people to whom we are presenting the Gospel in the work of evangelism. Because this kind of attention to social reality is so important, we should be profoundly grateful for the gifts that the entire Christian community has been offered in recent years in the form of various explicitly "contextualized" theologies, which have promoted important sensitivities to the ways in which gender, race and class have influenced theology and evangelism.

In the opening pages of my book *Political Evangelism* I said that I could endorse the brief evangelical summary of the Gospel, "Jesus saves" — just as long as we are clear about what Jesus saves us from and what he saves us for. Jesus saves us from sin — which is more than psychic distress, or negative thinking, or intellectual confusion. Sin is a curse on the entire cosmos — in all of its individual, sexual, political, economic and cultural complexity. And Jesus comes, in the familiar words of Isaac Watts, "to make his blessings flow/ far as the curse is found." The goal of the saving work of Jesus is the renewal of the entire cosmos, and human beings are saved for participation in that program of renewal. Jesus also saves us for incorporation into that community which is a central instrument in the work of renewal, the body of Christ-followers which stands over against the rebellion of the wicked and perverse generations of humankind.

Evangelistic strategies, then, cannot be conceived and expeditious without careful attention to these and other matters. Nor can we separate these concerns from the content of the evangelistic message. This does not mean that every evangelistic word that is spoken must be an explicitly political or economic word. There are times when evangelism must begin with political proclamation; there are other times when that will be the last subject which is addressed. On this subject, too, "contextualization" is an important concern.

But the God who is the primary agent in all evangelistic activity is never aloof from, or insensitive to, the political and economic dimensions of the world which is the product of divine creation. God's heart continually goes out in a special way to those who stand helpless before oppressive and dehumanizing structures. God longs to wipe the tears from the eyes of the widow and the orphan, to heal the loneliness of the sojourner, to silence the mourning of political prisoners, to transform the groans of the poor into laughter. This is the God who commissions us to be agents of the rich and complex work of divine liberation. Evangelism must be an integral part of that total work of renewal.

What these observations, taken together, suggest is that we cannot divorce a common concern for a disciplined investigation of the corporate dimension of human life from our engagement in the task of evangelism. Evangelistic activity is one important task of the people of God, one which cannot be properly engaged in apart from the communal exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts are many, and each of them is many-faceted. But not one of these gifts can be completely stripped of social ethical concerns; indeed social ethics is itself an important way of exercising these gifts. The task of evangelism must be under-

girded — to expand upon the list in I Corinthians 12 — by the utterance of sociological wisdom and political knowledge, by economic faith and corporate healing, by legal miracles and by a prophesying which focuses upon the structures of human interaction, by a distinguishing among the spirits that are at work in the broader patterns of cultural life, and by the use and interpretation of tongues that speak to the issues of justice and righteousness and peace — for “all these are inspired by one and the same Spirit.”

NOTES

¹José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Op-pression*, trans. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 246–247.

²Charles Galland Trumbull, “The Sunday School’s True Evangelism,” *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Co., n.d.), Vol. XII, pp. 61–62.

³Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends No. 2: Evangelization* (New York: Paulist Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 241–42.

⁴James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 67–68.

⁵Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Christian Faith and the Marxist Critique of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 112.

⁶John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 35.

⁷*Ibid.*

ACADEME

(Reports from seminary classrooms, special events, and TSF chapters)

NEWS FROM TSF CHAPTERS

By Tom McAlpine (TSF Associate Staff and Ph.D. student in Old Testament, Yale University) and Mark Lau Branson (TSF General Secretary).

Princeton Theological Seminary

The Princeton Seminary Fellowship seeks to nurture and encourage the spiritual vitality of the seminary community by sponsoring specialized group meetings to enrich the students’ personal lives and their ability to minister to the spiritual and social needs of the world. In its second year of existence, PSF serves as an umbrella organization for a variety of groups and activities. For example, eight “fellowship” groups of about ten students each meet weekly for Bible study, prayer and mutual encouragement. A bi-monthly “praise service” provides an informal time of worship, singing and prayer. Two weekly theological discussions draw faculty and students together for papers and discussion. A Cross-Cultural Missions Group sponsors activities to focus prayerful concern on world-wide needs and to aid students who are preparing for cross-cultural ministry, and it is seeking ways to encourage healthier relationships between international and American students.

At the request of the Princeton student senate, PSF is planning an all-school retreat which will host Professor Richard Lovelace (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). This and other group activities indicate how PSF seeks to reach beyond its own members in order to serve the entire seminary community.

Also at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Theological Forum sponsors lectureships which encourage students to interact with evangelical thought. Speakers in the fall have included Mr. Wayne Alderson on “Christ, Labor and Management:

Peacemaking in the Working World,” Dr. Tony Campolo on “Biblical Personhood” (co-sponsored by the Women’s Center), and Rev. Earl Palmer on “The Power of Expository Preaching.”

Yale Divinity School

During November, sixteen students met with Professor Richard Hayes and TSF’s Tom McAlpine to discuss possible goals and the formation of a group. The following week, a second meeting provided fellowship, singing, and small group Bible study.

Harvard Divinity School

Graduate and Divinity students have begun meeting weekly for discussions that encourage integration of studies, faith, and personal growth. The issue of “wholistic lifestyle” has provided the focus during the fall. The academic environment promotes isolation and ambition. How can values such as cooperation, mutual support and sharing counter these values? This semester’s discussions will center on the unique dimensions of “Christian thinking.” Of special note in November was an ecumenical dialogue on “Liberal/Evangelical Theology — A False Dichotomy?” which included Professors Kaufman and Niebuhr of Harvard and Professors Lovelace and Wells of Gordon-Conwell (There will be a special report on this meeting in the next issue of *TSF Bulletin*).

Wesley Theological Seminary

This new chapter in Washington, D.C., received its charter during the fall. Students used the campus newsletter, an article about TSF which had appeared in *The Christian Century*, and Branson’s “Open Letter to Seminarians” to inform the seminary community about the organizational meeting. Professors Beegle, Logan and Pike are providing encouragement and suggestions. Weekly hour-long meetings provide time for fellowship and theological discussions. Monthly forums feature lectures, such as Professor Logan’s “Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century,” which drew over fifty students. Other topics on the agenda include world religions, the quest for a “Christian” social ethic, and evangelical perspectives on biblical inspiration.

Perkins School of Theology

The Athanasian Society, which serves the seminary community by providing lectureships and panel discussions relevant to biblical and theological studies, hosted three fall meetings. Perkins student Vaughn Baker offered a critique of Professor Charles Wood’s *The Formation of Christian Understanding* (Westminster), which was followed by a discussion with Wood. Union Seminary (New York) professor Gerald Sheppard lectured on Old Testament studies at a convocation and on “Pentecostals and the Politics of Inerrancy Language” at the Athanasian Society. More recently, Perkins professor and Athanasian Society faculty advisor Albert Outler, Pentecostal Holiness minister Vincent Synan and Fr. Paul Hinnebusch discussed “Charismatic Renewal in Mainline Churches.” Spring meetings include a symposium on the relationship between evangelicals and the Moral Majority, and a lecture by Fuller Theological Seminary professor Bill Pannell co-sponsored by the Black Seminarians during a week-long event, “Evangelism and Social Action in the Black Church.” In the fall of 1982, the Athanasian Society will be host to Ron Sider.

The Wesleyan Fellowship at Perkins sponsors bi-weekly meetings which emphasize spiritual life, ministry, and issues in contemporary evangelical theology. Small groups, modeled after John Wesley’s “bands,” provide ongoing fellowship as well as opportunities for service projects. Carl F. H. Henry will be the speaker at a spring banquet, and a visit by Waldron Scott will be sponsored by the fellowship next fall. David Watson, a *TSF Bulletin* editor, is the faculty adviser for this group.