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NEEDED: AN EVANGELICAL SOCIAL ETHIC

by RICHARD V. PIERARD

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ONE of the most profoundly disturbing things about evangelical Christianity is its failure to manifest an adequate social ethic. This grave deficiency is particularly evident in contemporary American evangelicalism. Although we possess a theology of hope, we have fallen far short in actualizing this hope in the everyday lives of human beings. This is a serious charge, one which many evangelical spokesmen would be quick to deny. For instance, a former editor of *United Evangelical Action* declared that "evangelicals have been leaders in the application of Christianity to every aspect of life". Similarly, a noted minister and educator affirmed in no uncertain terms the evangelical "intends that Christianity will be the mainspring in many of the reforms of the societal order".¹

These statements notwithstanding, it is patently clear that far too many evangelicals lack a genuine social concern. Harold Kuhn accurately noted that "there are those who, while professing full loyalty to the teachings of their Lord, assume a stance that not only smacks of social irresponsibility but also at times allies itself with the forces having a vested interest in maintaining social injustice".² We have tragically been left open to such accusations as that made by historian William G. McLoughlin about the National Association of Evangelicals: "The N.A.E.'s outlook on political and economic affairs is so deeply committed to nationalistic, laissez-faire ultraconservatism that it shocks even the most chastened liberal Protestant", and the barbed editorial comment of the *Christian Century* that anyone who has encountered evangelical churches and literature or listened to their spokesmen, "can

¹ James DeForest Murch, *Co-operation without Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 153; Harold John Ockenga, "Resurgent Evangelical Leadership", *Christianity Today*, V (Oct. 10, 1960), 4.

² Harold B. Kuhn, "Evangelicals and the Prophetic Message", *Christianity Today*, IX (May 7, 1965), 55.

say instantly and with deadening predictability which sociopolitical side the vast majority of this leadership and followers are on".³

This lack of concern is generally expressed in the form of either denying the right of the Christian church to take a stand on vital social questions or identifying with a conservative or even reactionary position on such issues. The literature is replete with examples of both types of "social action". One would not be surprised to hear Edgar Bundy of the Church League of America declare: "Jesus Christ was not interested in lobbying before Pilate, Agrippa, or Caesar's government for betterment of social, economic, or political conditions. His Gospel was the Gospel of personal salvation".⁴ But, one of the most wealthy Christian businessmen in the United States and a regular benefactor of evangelical causes, J. Howard Pew, asserted:

The apostles (in Acts 6) knew that prayer and preaching the Gospel would bring a thousandfold greater benefit to mankind than ever feeding the poor. . . . Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the early Church knew that it was very important for the Church to adhere strictly to the Gospel. . . . If the Church proclaims the Bread of Life, she will, as has been proved in the past, so transform society that many of the prevalent social ills will disappear.⁵

In a similar vein, former medical missionary and later Congressman Dr. Walter Judd told a national meeting of Congregationalists: "I don't want the church working in politics. I don't want political action by the clergy and by ecclesiastical bodies. I do want political action by Christians".⁶ A noted Christian educator, Dr. James DeForest Murch, summed up this viewpoint as follows: "The Church must not, as a corporate body, involve itself in economic, social and political affairs. . . . The true purpose of the

³ William G. McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?" *Daedalus*, XCVI (Winter, 1967), 61; "Demythologizing Neoevangelicalism", *Christian Century*, LXXXII (Sep. 15, 1965), 1115.

⁴ Edgar C. Bundy, *Collectivism in the Churches* (Wheaton, Ill.: Church League of America, 1958), p. viii.

⁵ J. Howard Pew, "The Mission of the Church", *Christianity Today*, VIII (July 3, 1964), 12-14. For another expression of the same position by Pew, see his article in one of America's most widely read magazines, "Should the Church 'Meddle' in Civil Affairs?" *Reader's Digest*, LXXXVIII (May, 1966), 49-54. [THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY takes this opportunity of paying tribute to the memory of Mr. Pew, a munificent and self-effacing patron of many good causes, who died on November 27, 1971, in his ninetieth year. ED.]

⁶ Quoted in Kenneth W. Ingwalson, ed., *Your Church—Their Target* (Arlington, Va.: Better Books, 1966), p. 92.

Church is to regenerate men. To fulfill this purpose the Church must restrict its activities to the ecclesiastical realm".⁷

The other response, the conservative stance, was splendidly revealed by a president of the N.A.E., who, commenting on the sections in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights relating to the rights of individuals to such things as social security, employment, and an adequate standard of living, said: "I can rightly report the constituency of the National Association of Evangelicals as feeling this sort of thing is socialistic, that it leads in the direction of statism, and that our members would be opposed to having our country adopt any covenant which would attempt to enforce these principles".⁸ Millionaire Baptist layman W. Maxey Jarman declared the early church "did not mount crusades to reform the general citizenry", while a prominent figure in evangelical circles told an N.A.E. forum on social action that repentance was the cure for the problems of morality, the "confiscation of gold in 1933 was a Communistic trend", the "income tax, first proposed by Marx, is an essential part of Communism", and Jesus "condemned the socialist who did not put his money out at interest, commended the capitalist who did and spoke out against the Communistic view in the principle: 'To him that *hath* shall be given'".⁹ Naturally, Carl McIntire would say: "The 10 Commandments are, in themselves, a social system. . . . This system is a free society of free individuals, and has been called capitalism".¹⁰

To cite one further example, Dr. C. Gregg Singer, a well-known evangelical historian, recently wrote that the federal government was given "extra-biblical powers" by liberal political philosophy and practice during the last one hundred years or so. These included involvement in the field of labor relations, education, mental and physical health, agriculture, housing, and many other areas of legislation. He then asserted that the total scope of government on both the federal and state level must be reduced "to those spheres which are clearly conferred upon it by the Scriptures", and only by doing this "will our government be truly

⁷ James DeForest Murch, *The Protestant Revolt: Road to Freedom for American Churches* (Arlington, Va.: Crestwood Books, 1967), p. 82.

⁸ Stephen W. Paine, recorded in *United Evangelical Action*, VIII (Dec. 15, 1949), 3-4.

⁹ W. Maxey Jarman, *A Businessman Looks at the Bible* (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1965), p. 119; Gordon H. Clark, quoted in Murch, *Co-operation without Compromise*, p. 162.

¹⁰ Carl McIntire, "Author of Liberty" (Collingswood, N. J.: Christian Beacon Press, 1946), p. 160.

Christian and freedom be restored to its former and proper place in the life of the American people".¹¹

Why has evangelicalism fallen into such a pitiful situation? To some extent it is a result of the concentration on premillennialism. Although the revered W. E. Blackstone noted that the "very essence of the doctrine is to WATCH, WORK AND WAIT, and to work NOW for the night cometh when no man can work",¹² the common reaction was that until the return of Christ none of the basic problems of the world could be solved. Thus, stress was placed on winning souls and the moral reform of individuals in preparation for the after-life. The poor may suffer here on earth but will be satisfied in the life to come. The world would inevitably grow worse until the coming of Christ, and human suffering was simply a sign of the last days. But, there are other reasons that need to be mentioned.

A second factor is the extreme individualism of many evangelicals. Because sin is conceived of only as individual evil, they eagerly supported laws to coerce personal morality (prohibition of alcoholic beverages, gambling, use of drugs, pornography, prostitution, etc.), but they were much more reticent about legislation dealing with social and economic immorality. Evangelicals have fallen for the illusion that societal evil is merely the product of individual sin. As J. Howard Pew put it: "Communism, crime, and delinquency are not caused by poverty, bad laws, poor housing, or any other economic, social, or political condition. They are caused by sin. The only way to eradicate sin is by the redemptive power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ".¹³

Also noteworthy is the "success culture" of middle class America. The evangelical church has become so closely identified with contemporary culture that it has, in the words of Conservative Baptist missionary executive Rufus Jones, "become success-oriented with the same zeal for maintaining the status quo as the worldly institutions, even if it means the defense of unjust economic and political programs which rob the poor and protect the affluent".¹⁴ A great many evangelicals feel that financial success is a reflection of personal righteousness and subscribe tacitly, if not

¹¹ C. Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History* (Nutley, N. J.: The Craig Press, 1964), pp. 299-300.

¹² W. E. Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1932), p. 119.

¹³ J. Howard Pew, "Faith and Freedom", *Christianity Today*, VII (June 21, 1963), 14.

¹⁴ Rufus Jones, "Can the Church Reach the World without Losing Itself?" *United Evangelical Action*, XXV (December, 1966), 14.

openly, to the doctrine enunciated by Russell H. Conwell: "If you can honestly attain unto riches . . . it is your Christian and godly duty to do so", and "there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings".¹⁵ These so-called Christians are actually trying to serve God and mammon simultaneously and have cut themselves off from the poor and the needs of society. The brilliant young Negro evangelist, William E. Pannell, expressed in eloquent terms this sorry state of affairs when he wrote that his white brother "taught me to sing 'Take the World But Give Me Jesus'. I took Jesus. He took the world and then voted right wing to insure his property rights".¹⁶

We are, as Carl F. H. Henry pointed out over two decades ago, caught up in the "evangelical predicament". The world changing message of Jesus Christ has been narrowed in scope to the changing of individuals.¹⁷ Christ indicated in John 3: 16 that God so loved the *world* (the collective or society of men) that he gave his only Son, but many evangelicals today downplay or ignore this aspect of God's love and stress merely the *whosoever* (the individual) of "whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life". This was clearly brought out by Harold O. J. Brown who noted in his recent book: "The love of God is for the *world*, but in the New Testament it appeals to *individuals*, challenges *individuals*, and works through *individuals*. Can the church turn from witness to individuals to attempts to reshape society through the state without turning from being a servant of God to trying to play God?"¹⁸

In a recent radio message Billy Graham associate Joe Blinco prophetically asserted: "The Church must speak about world issues".¹⁹ What this means is that the problem of creating a more just society cannot be solved simply by creating good men who on

¹⁵ Russell H. Conwell, *Aces of Diamonds* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1915), pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ William E. Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1968), p. 9.

¹⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1947), p. 26.

¹⁸ Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), p. 64.

¹⁹ Joe Blinco, "The Church's Primary Responsibility" (Radio Sermon, The Hour of Decision) (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Assn., 1967), p. 3. [According to Joe Blinco, when on occasion he visited the United States to take part in Billy Graham crusades, Dr. Graham enjoyed scandalizing his audiences by introducing him as "my Socialist friend". In England we all knew that Joe was a Socialist, and no worse or better an evangelist for that. Ed.]

their own initiative and without guidance will go forth to grapple with social issues. It cannot be assumed that piety and political wisdom go hand-in-hand, for as P. T. Forsyth so aptly put it: "One of the greatest moral dangers is a truly pious man with a conventional morality in the midst of a great crisis".²⁰ Dr. James Daane of Fuller Theological Seminary suggests in no uncertain terms:

The cries of deep and anguished concern of individual voices against massive social structures and entrenched evils with all their inertia and vested interests, have about as much impact as a ping-pong ball. Surely, the Church itself must speak against the ills of our society and the evils that threaten its destruction. If the Church is to stand in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, it must speak in this critical hour to those things that have plunged our society into a time of greater crisis than the country has ever before experienced.²¹

Baptist theologian Culbert Rutenber has brought to our attention that whenever the church adopts a hands-off policy toward all effort for social amelioration, it "perpetuates the injustices of the moment and sanctifies the status quo as, somehow, God's will for the hour".²² He correctly observes that this type of inaction renders the church irrelevant to the needs of our time and in fact imperils its continuing existence. The need to develop a Christian social ethic for the evangelical church is most urgent, and it is my hope that we in the Evangelical Theological Society will devote a greater amount of time and effort to carry out this task than we have in the past.²³

²⁰ Quoted in William McAfee Brown, "Is It 'Christian Economics'?" *Christianity and Crisis*, X (Nov. 27, 1950), 158.

²¹ James Daane, "Who Speaks for the Church?" *Reformed Journal*, XVIII (May-June, 1968), 17.

²² Culbert G. Rutenber, *The Dagger and the Cross* (Nyack, N.Y.: Fellowship Publications, 1958), p. 128.

²³ I would suggest as a starting point in this question the article by Lewis B. Smedes, "The Evangelicals and the Social Question", *Reformed Journal*, XVI (February, 1966), 9-13, and subsequent responses by Carl Henry and Smedes in the May-June, 1966 issue, pp. 6-10. Other recent noteworthy contributions to this endeavor include Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964); David O. Moberg, *Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in 20th Century America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1965); J. N. D. Anderson, *Into the World: The Need and Limits of Christian Involvement* (London: Falcon Books, 1968); Robert G. Clouse, Robert D. Linder, and Richard V. Pierard, eds., *Protest and Politics: Christianity and Contemporary Affairs* (Greenwood, S. C.: The Attic Press, 1968); and Sherwood Eliot Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Wirt's book should be read in conjunction with the perceptive review of it by James Daane cited note 21.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the idea that we evangelical Christians possess a three-dimensional faith. It is not merely the vertical God-man relationship of the fundamentalists nor the horizontal man-fellow men relationship of the liberals, but rather both of these plus a third dimension, namely, time. Our faith looks forward to the future with hope, for at the coming of Christ we shall experience the consummation and fulfillment of our relationships with God and other men. Let us look to the future, not with pessimism or apprehension but with optimism and expectation.

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