

# Reversal or Betrayal? Evangelicals and Socio - political Involvement in the Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Augustine prefaces his magnum opus, *The City of God*, with an explanation of its purpose, namely, 'the task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that City'. Augustine presents the City of God 'both as it exists in this world of time, a stranger among the ungodly, living by faith, and as it stands in the security of its everlasting seat'.

Here is the tension between the City of God and its present opponents on the one hand, contrasted with its glorious future on the other. And it is this tension of living between the 'now and the not yet' which creates the problem of how Christians are to relate to society. What do the people of God owe to 'the ungodly'? How are Christians to live out the present in the light of the future?

In his *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Dr John Stott writes:

It is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever need to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both 'went about ... teaching ... and preaching' (Matt 4:2; 9:35) and 'went about doing good and healing' (Acts 10:38). In consequence Evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the church... Christian people have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling the need to define what they were doing or why.<sup>2</sup>

However, controversy there certainly is, not so much over the question of *whether* Christians should engage in socio-political activity, but how that involvement should express itself and upon what theological basis it should proceed. Robert K Johnstone rightly observes:

*That* evangelicals should be involved socially has become a forgone conclusion ... but *how* and *why* evangelicals are to involve themselves in society have proven to be more vexing questions. That they are to be involved brings near unanimity; how that involvement takes shape and what is its Christian motivation bring only debate.<sup>3</sup>

What this paper seeks to do is to trace some of the fundamental developments in twentieth-century evangelical thinking in this area in general, and to analyse more closely how we might properly view the relation between evangelism and social action.

At the risk of some oversimplification we shall argue that the debate hinges on two rival interpretations of history and two models of social involvement. The debate itself is related to other issues such as hermeneutics - how the Bible is to be used - as well as differing understandings of some key doctrinal concepts such as 'The Kingdom of God' and the nature and extent of the work of Christ on the Cross.

### **A Tale of Two Histories**

Kathleen Heasman documents how Evangelicals in the last century and the earlier part of this century were significantly involved in social action and comments that they 'were all agreed upon salvation by faith and the infallibility and overriding importance of the Scriptures'.<sup>4</sup> William Wilberforce, Elizabeth Fry, George Muller, Henry Venn and Anthony Ashley-Cooper are just some of the more notable names which read like a 'Who's Who' of evangelical social activists who played an unquestioned part in securing anti-slavery legislation, penal reform, improving factory working conditions and the care of needy orphans in a society desperately requiring change.

In the United States, Charles Finney was not only vigorous in promoting his own brand of revivalism but in reforming work as well, so that in his twenty-third lecture on Revival he could write: 'The great business of the church is to reform the world. The Church of Christ was originally organised to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world.' One of the followers of Finney who took this call to heart was Theodore Weld, who subsequently devoted his life to the struggle against slavery.

However, between about 1910 and the late 1930s, Evangelicals seemed to be less concerned with social issues, in a marked contrast to their evangelical forebears. At least in part this was a reaction (some would say over-reaction), to the liberal theological developments which were taking place at the time in the form of the so-called 'Social Gospel' espoused by Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister and Professor of Church History at Rochester Seminary. He defined the Kingdom of God as 'a reconstruction of society on a Christian basis', contrasting the 'old evangel of the saved soul' with the 'new evangel of the Kingdom of God' which was primarily a matter not of getting souls into heaven, but 'transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven'. It was the reaction against this teaching that led many Evangelicals to distance themselves from anything which looked remotely like it. Such considerations, when combined with a growing pessimism about the ability of society to make moral progress (a pessimism exacerbated both by the experience of the First World War and premillennialist teaching), make the disengagement by many Evangelicals from social involvement to some extent understandable.

On the wider ecclesiastical scene the social gospel movement became firmly entrenched in the ecumenical movement as embodied in the World Council of Churches from which Evangelicals were becoming further and further removed.

However, the 1960s saw new developments amongst Evangelicals which led to modifications in their views of mission, evangelism and social action, which some have argued now run parallel to those of the ecumenical movement itself.<sup>5</sup>

The congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission at Wheaton, Illinois in 1966 was called in a conscious reaction against the direction in which the WCC was moving. The paper on social responsibility entitled 'Mission and Social Concern' offered the following four guidelines:

- 1 That any programme of social concern must point men to - not away from - the central message of redemption through the blood of Christ.
- 2 Expression of social concern must provide an opportunity for spoken witness to Christ recognizing the incompleteness of non-verbal witness.
- 3 Efforts must not arouse unrealistic and unscriptural expectations; the reality of sin and the Second Coming were not to be minimized.
- 4 The desire to do good in the name of Christ should not lead to wasteful competition with secular agencies.<sup>6</sup>

What can be considered to be a distinctive evangelical approach to social action over and against the more liberal ecumenical approach continued at the more ambitious Berlin World Congress of Evangelism later that year. The tone and general theological flavour of the conference is captured by the opening address given by Billy Graham in which he firmly maintained that: 'If the church went back to its main task of proclaiming the gospel and getting people converted to Christ, it would have a far greater impact on the social, moral and psychological needs of men than it could achieve through any other thing it could possibly do'.<sup>7</sup>

We find the same outlook echoed at Berlin by John Stott:

The commission of the Church is not to reform society, but to preach the Gospel. Certainly Christ's disciples who have embraced the Gospel, and who themselves are being transformed by the Gospel, are intended to be salt of the earth and light of the world. That is, they are to influence the society in which they live and work by helping arrest its corruption and illumine its darkness. But the primary task of the members of Christ's Church is to be Gospel heralds, not social reformers.<sup>8</sup>

As we shall see, Stott was later to move on from that position, but that was the stance taken by the majority of Evangelicals in 1966.

However, it would seem that already at this conference seeds were sown which were later to germinate into an approach to socio-political involvement which would mark a significant change of direction for Evangelicals. As Paul Rees said:

If the mission of the Church is narrow, the witness of the believing community is broad. The evangelistic mission is to proclaim 'Christ crucified' as the 'one mediator' of our

salvation. But the confirming witness of believers is one in which they stand related to the whole life and to the total fabric of society. Here they bear witness both to the mercy of God's forgiveness and the judgements of God's justice. Nothing human is alien to their interests and, so far as their testimony and influence are concerned, Jesus Christ is Lord of all.<sup>9</sup>

Internationally, the next major development was the Lausanne conference in 1974, which Rachel Tingle claims produced a 'paradigm shift' in evangelical thinking.<sup>10</sup> The 'shift' was toward what is called 'holistic mission' and the term 'social action' was exchanged for the phrase 'socio-political involvement'. We thus have article 5 of the Lausanne Covenant worded as follows:

Evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty... The message of salvation implies also a message of judgement upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination ... the salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

A year later, John Stott's change in thinking as crystallized at Lausanne was openly admitted:

Today ... I would express myself differently. It is not just that the commission [ie the Great Commission] includes the duty to teach converts everything that Jesus had previously commanded (Matt 28:20), and that social responsibility is among the things which Jesus commanded. I see now more clearly that not only the consequences of the commission but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, parallel developments are to be traced within Anglican Evangelicalism as can be observed in the successive National Evangelical Anglican Congresses in 1967, 1977 and 1988. Writing a preparatory paper for NEAC 1 entitled 'Christian Worldliness', Sir Norman Anderson said:

It has sometimes been debated whether the social teaching of the Bible flows from the doctrines of the person and work of Christ - that is, from the facts of redemption - or not... From my own standpoint, I would simply say that the Bible seems to me to approach questions of social responsibility in terms of the doctrine of creation and of God's plan for the created order, and not primarily in terms of the doctrines of incarnation, redemption and God's plan for His Church...<sup>13</sup>

But by the time we come to NEAC 3 in 1988 we have one major platform speaker, the then Secretary to the General Synod's Board for Social Responsibility, John Gladwin, who offered an evangelicized liberation theology when he said, amongst other things, that 'God broke the back of injustice at the cross'. Also, a leading workshop leader, Dr Chris Sugden stated: 'The *content* of the Gospel is to be defined in terms of the physically and socially poor.'<sup>14</sup> It would be fair to say that these were representative of a significant number at NEAC 3, such that one observer could write: 'NEAC 3 revealed sharp tensions and unexpected polarisations. Where major

platform speakers referred to social or political issues, the style and content of their biblical exegesis and contemporary application engendered heated debate in the chalets and caravans of Caister.<sup>15</sup>

During the intervening years, many initiatives were taken in Britain to put into practice the purported rediscovered evangelical social conscience. In 1971 the National Festival of Light was launched. O R Johnston played a major part in this and was later to take up the position of the chief executive of what was to become the Care Trust's political arm, Care Campaigns. In 1975 he put forward a biblical case for such Christian social involvement at the Leicester Ministers' Conference, later to be published under the title 'Christianity in a Collapsing Culture'. In 1982 the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) was founded under the chairmanship of John Stott. This was a creative 'think tank' for Evangelicals wrestling with a wide range of cultural and social matters. Earlier in 1969, the Shaftesbury Project was formed under the umbrella of the IVF and was later to merge with the LICC to form Christian Impact, now known as the Institute for Contemporary Christianity based at St Peter's, Vere Street in London.

## The Great Reversal

One approach has been to refer to these developments as 'The Great Reversal', a term initially coined by the American historian Timothy L Smith and then popularized by the sociologist David Moburg in a book which incorporates the phrase in its title.<sup>16</sup> This assessment notes the social withdrawal of Evangelicals due to the influences already mentioned: disillusionment with social progress, the fundamentalist-liberal controversy, pre-millennialism together with the overwhelming complexity of modern industrial society for which Evangelicals seemed ill-equipped. From this perspective the increased commitment by Evangelicals to social issues is hailed as a 'Great Reversal', a sentiment well captured by Stott writing in 1984:

One of the most notable features of the world-wide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience. For approximately fifty years (c 1920-1970) evangelicals were preoccupied with the task of defending the historical biblical faith against the attacks of liberalism, and reacting against its 'social gospel'. But we are convinced that God has given us social as well as evangelistic responsibilities in his world. Yet the half-century of neglect has put us far behind in this area. We have a long way to catch up.<sup>17</sup>

More recently Dr Stott has been at pains to stress that the consultation at Lausanne I endorsed the primacy of evangelism, a priority underscored at Lausanne II at Manila in 1989:

Evangelism is primary because our chief concern is with the gospel, that all people may have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. The Grand Rapids Consultation of 1982 sought to tease out the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility in the following way: First, social activity is a *consequence* of the Gospel, so 'faith works through love'. But, the report goes on to say 'social responsibility is more than a consequence of evangelism; it is one of its principal *aims*'. Secondly, 'social activity is a *bridge* to evangelism'. And thirdly, 'social activity... accompanies [evangelism] as its *partner*. They are like the two

blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird, as they were in the public ministry of Jesus.' The partnership is, in reality, a marriage.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Great Betrayal?**

A different perspective on these developments asks whether the liberalism which Evangelicals were busy defending themselves against in the 1930s has in fact entered into the mainstream of the evangelical movement by the back door. This verdict on history might be termed 'The Great Betrayal'.

Although this is not a designation adopted by any of those who are critical of developments in the evangelical movement during the last 30 years, it is the conclusion that some are moving towards. Arthur Johnstone of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in his analysis of trends in the theology of evangelism expresses the concern that, far from Evangelicals rediscovering their heritage, they are in danger of losing it.<sup>19</sup>

That concern is articulated by Peter Beyerhaus in his preface to Johnstone's *The Battle for World Evangelism*:

It is particularly one new element, widely hailed by others as a sign that the new Evangelicals have come of age, about which I - like my friend Arthur Johnstone - have argued with my other beloved friend John Stott. For, unlike some of our Latin American colleagues I consider this element incompatible with the concept of evangelism as normatively expounded by both the Fathers of the Reformation and of the Evangelical Awakening. I am referring to the theological co-ordination of evangelism and socio-political involvement as equally constitutive elements of our Christian duty, or even - which is not the same - of the mission which Christ gave to His Church.<sup>20</sup>

Johnstone is of the view that it was principally at Lausanne that the theology of evangelism became blunted because it lost the unique status it had previously held in evangelical thinking prior to Berlin 1966.<sup>21</sup>

Others who would also wholly identify with the call for Evangelicals to engage in social involvement have expressed similar concerns. Thus Sir Fred Catherwood comments:

In the sixties I wrote that we evangelicals should come out of our pietistic ghetto and take part in the social debate as Christian citizens... I and others in the movement won the argument. But we also lost a vital part of the case we were making. We did not allow for the 'zeitgeist'. We argued that it was the task of the Christian church to bring the trends in public opinion to the standards of eternal truth and judge them by God's word. But that was not what happened. The evangelicals joined the liberals in a concern for social issues, but it was the world and not the church which set the agenda.<sup>22</sup>

Is what has taken place a return to the kind of evangelical social involvement characterized by our forefathers and simply brought up to date in a way appropriate to new social

and political contexts, or has a theological mutation occurred such that what is considered by some to be the basis of such action would hardly be recognized by the likes of Wilberforce as being evangelical at all?

### **A Comparison of Two Models**

One way of determining the answer to this question is to consider what some of the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelical social Reformers taught about their theological and moral motivation and compare it with what the heirs of Lausanne are advocating. When we do this, we discover that the differences are not insignificant.

### **The Reforming Evangelicals**

The social reforms of the nineteenth century took place in the wake of the revivals of the eighteenth century, which provided the moral context and spiritual impetus for the reforms. The relationship between the two has been carefully considered by J Wesley Bready in his *England Before and After Wesley*. What did Wesley teach about the gospel and social action? In his *Preface* to the first Methodist Hymn Book (1739) Wesley wrote, 'The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but *social*, no holiness but *social* holiness. This command have we from Christ, that he who loves God loves his brother also.'

In the University sermon delivered in St Mary's, Oxford in 1774, Wesley pictures Christianity as 'beginning to exist in individuals', next as 'spreading from one to another', and finally 'as covering the earth'. He then asks his congregation to pause 'and survey this strange sight, a Christian world!' He proceeded to challenge those in leadership positions within the town as to whether they were of one mind with the love of God shed abroad in their hearts (ie converted). He then pleaded that the sure hope for a better age was a better man and only Christ's new man can herald Christ's new world. So Henry Carter comments: 'To Wesley a scheme of reconstructing society which ignored the redemption of the individual was unthinkable.'<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Bready writes of Wesley:

As a prophet of God and an ordained ambassador of Christ, he did not conceive it his task to formulate economic, political and social theories; nor did he judge himself competent so to do. His 'calling' he believed was far more sacred, and more thoroughgoing: it was to lead men into contact with spiritual reality, to enable them to possess their souls and enter the realms of abundant life. For if once men, in sufficient numbers, were endowed with an illumined conscience and spiritual insight they, collectively as well as individually, would become possessors of the 'wisdom that passeth knowledge'; and in that wisdom social problems gradually would be solved.<sup>24</sup>

Wesley saw his priority as preaching the gospel. Being a Christian also entailed good works, being a good citizen, indeed being a good neighbour. He was committed to the second great commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' But he saw that the second commandment held pride of place: 'Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' (Mark 12:29-31). How can men and women love God while they are in enmity with him?

How can people be addressed as 'Israel' unless they belong to 'Israel'? Reconciliation is first required and the means of that reconciliation is the gospel.

As Bready demonstrates, Wesley's impressive endeavours in promoting social action, working towards slavery abolition, ameliorating the effects of gambling and liquor abuse, promoting literacy and education amongst the poor, as well as his more conspicuous political comments regarding the American Revolution, arose from a Spirit-fired application of the following fundamental Christian doctrines: (1) our unity and responsibilities as creatures before the Creator, (2) the corruption of the will by sin, so that all social problems are fundamentally spiritual, (3) the principle of stewardship and the future judgement to come.<sup>25</sup> At no point did Wesley conceive of gospel proclamation as being of equal theological weight to social action, although the former entailed the latter.

When we turn to William Wilberforce we find the same principles at work. Wilberforce is most widely known for his part in the abolition of the slave trade, but he also had another great aim. On Sunday, 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 1787 he wrote in his diary: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners', that is, the reform of the morals of Britain. In order to achieve his second goal, he devised a plan to form a new Society for the Reformation of Manners, with a view to raising the moral tone of the nation by clamping down on offences such as the publication of indecent or blasphemous literature and the desecration of the Lord's Day. Jonathan Bayes in his treatment of this campaign notes: 'His plan was that his Society for the Reformation of Manners should serve to restore England to its Protestant faith by standing against those moral offences which militated against Christianity. As a by-product, Wilberforce believed, there would follow a general moral improvement.'<sup>26</sup>

Being the shrewd politician that he was, he did not restrict the membership of the society to Evangelicals. Initially he couched his campaign in purely moral terms. But then he went further to challenge the religious outlook of many by writing his book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*. This was published in 1797, having taken four years to write. Wilberforce's aim was to share his testimony and to lead members of his own class into vital Christianity by exposing the shallowness of nominal Christianity. The book, much to the surprise of the printer, went through five reprints within six months and just kept on selling.

Wilberforce argued that the general lack of concern with true Christianity could be traced back to two maxims: 'One is that it signifies little what a man believes; look to his practice. The other (of the same family) is that sincerity is all in all.' So he writes:

The first of these maxims proceeds from the monstrous supposition that, although we are accountable creatures, we shall not be called upon to account before God for the exercise of our intellectual ...powers. The second ... proceeds on this groundless supposition: The Supreme Being has not afforded us sufficient means of discriminating truth from falsehood or right from wrong.

The ignorance of basic Christian truths was the result, argued Wilberforce, of a failure to recognize the depth and extent of man's moral depravity through original sin and that although nominal religion may pay lip service to Christ, it lacked that which was required of authentic faith, a commitment of the totality of one's life so that everything is done to the glory of God.

Bayes suggests that in the medium and long term, the impact of both the Society and *A Practical View* was considerable. Bayes contends that the improved moral mood in society in the 1830s and the sense of being accountable to God which pervaded society at every level was, 'in no small measure due to Wilberforce'. However, as *A Practical View* shows, Wilberforce, like Wesley before him, saw conversion as being the main need, especially given his strong view of human corruption by original sin. In drawing out some of the implications for today, Bayes concludes: 'Like Wilberforce we need to be convinced of the primacy of conversion: until men and women are made new by the Holy Spirit, there will never be a genuine external reformation.'<sup>27</sup>

Of particular significance in shaping the Reforming Evangelicals' approach to social involvement was their view of eschatology and the reality of judgement. For example, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, confessed: 'I do not think in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return.' Wilberforce in his *A Practical View* writes of the authentic believer:

That he was created by God, redeemed from death, the consequence of original sin, by the incarnation of the Son of God, who had commanded him to be grateful and pious towards God, merciful and benevolent towards men; ... and that, as he neglected or obeyed these commands, he was to expect punishment or reward in a future life.

Such an understanding of the relation between gospel renewal and societal reformation is very similar to the position advocated at Wheaton and Berlin in 1966 but rests less easily with what some Evangelicals have proposed since.

The model of the Reforming Evangelicals might be contrasted with that of the Radical Evangelicals whose spiritual pedigree can, as we shall argue, be traced directly back to Lausanne.<sup>28</sup>

## **The Radical Evangelicals**

Ronald Macaulay observes that at Lausanne a rift occurred which centred on the meaning of the phrase 'Kingdom of God'.<sup>29</sup> This is key to understanding much of the debate that has ensued.

Back in 1967, in his paper for NEAC 1, Sir Norman Anderson argued:

There is a sense in which that Kingdom is already a present reality, for the King is already on his throne, waiting till all things are put under his feet... But is there a wider sense in which one can think of the Kingdom as advanced wherever the will of the King is done, even by those who do not give Him personal allegiance? This, it seems to me, is

dangerous ground, for we cannot regard the Kingdom of God as having materialized in a factory for example, merely because social justice and harmony reign therein... The Evangelical holds no brief for the so-called 'social gospel', for society, as such, cannot be 'redeemed' or 'baptised into Christ'... But it can be reformed.<sup>30</sup>

Matters have moved on a long way since then, for the Radical Evangelical would contest almost everything in Anderson's statement. Rather ironically, in the first Sir Norman Anderson lecture delivered at the Salt and Light Conference at Swanick, 1998, we find Graham Cray stating: 'Jesus' proclamation concerned the "reign of God" – God who is creator, upholder and consummator of all that is. We are not talking about one sector of human affairs ... we are talking about the reign and sovereignty of God over all that is.' Then in an attempt to substantiate the belief that the Kingdom of God is extended by the Spirit via non-Christians he said: 'Since Pentecost the Spirit has been poured out on *all* flesh, not just all Christians.' The same argument has been advanced more recently by Nigel Wright: 'All the earth is the Lord's and so we trace the Spirit at work beyond the Church, especially in movements that make for human dignity and liberation.'<sup>31</sup>

Dr Chris Sugden, also advocating the Kingdom of God as the basis for evangelical socio-political involvement, extends the redeeming work of Christ on the Cross to cover all positive social change in society, thus: 'Jesus' rule and action are cosmic. He disarmed the principalities and powers which create division in society. Where we see barriers broken down, can we divorce this from God's will seen in Christ's victory over the powers on the cross? (eg between Jew and Gentile slave and free (Gal 3:28))' and 'this understanding gives us a basis for seeing God at work in society beyond the church applying the effects of Christ's victory on the cross through social change'.<sup>32</sup>

Developing this point, Sugden and Samuel argue that *any* movement, Christian or not, which tries to establish social justice is to be interpreted as having the same character as Jesus' Kingdom acts of power and healing.<sup>33</sup> What is one to make of such a claim?

First of all, it is based upon a dubious understanding of the term 'Kingdom of God' which means far more than 'God rules'. In Scripture it is something to be entered into, sought, requiring poverty of spirit (Matt 5:3; 7:21; 7:13). As Professor Don Carson correctly maintains, it is to be understood in terms of the sphere of salvation entered into through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> RT France similarly contends:

It is wrong to identify the Kingdom of God with social reform as it is with the church or heaven, and for the same reason: it is a category mistake... To talk of men, even Christian men, bringing about God's kingdom is to usurp God's sovereignty. Yet this sort of language is increasingly being heard in evangelical circles. It is strangely reminiscent of the language of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism, which called upon men to create a just and caring society which was called the 'Kingdom of God'.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps liberalism has entered via the back door after all!

Secondly, it must be said that Scripture is being handled in a way which is hermeneutically suspect from an evangelical point of view. Instead of Scripture being determinative, it is the *context* in which the Christian finds himself which shapes belief and biblical interpretation. In the NEAC 3 booklet, *Evangelical Roots*, Chris Sugden states: ‘The Good News we love is defined in the Scripture as good news to the (physically and socially) poor; and that means that what the good news means to poor Christians (in Scripture and today) should set the criteria for focusing what the good news means to others.’<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere he gives an example of how this contextualized exegesis works out in practice with a group of Christians operating amongst quarry workers in Bangalore. The team sought to ‘affirm’ the socially oppressed workers’ desire for security ‘in the light of the Bible’. Therefore, it is asked: ‘Had not God provided Israel with land, a place to belong and access to resources?’ So they began to work with the quarry workers towards their goal. A pay rise resulted and the workers attributed their good fortune to God. ‘This’ it is claimed by Sugden, ‘represented the starting-point for these people to enter the life of the Kingdom’.<sup>37</sup> Not only is this ‘paradigmatic approach’ to interpreting Scripture common to the proponents of liberation theology, it is reminiscent of the principles taught by the peddlers of prosperity healing. But we might ask: why select these themes of Exodus and Blessing? Why not the prophetic call of Jeremiah that the oppressed people of God should not rebel against the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar?<sup>38</sup>

Also, when it is said by Sugden that *wherever* just relationships are established we are to take these signs of God’s Kingdom, and Galatians 3:28 is cited in support, it must be firmly pointed out that what Paul is referring to is what happens in the *church* as a result of people hearing the gospel, and not ‘just relationships’ in society at large.

Such a loose and selective approach to handling the Bible hardly accords with what is generally regarded as a hallmark of Evangelicalism, namely, respecting the historical integrity of the text and how it functions within the overall canonical sweep of Scripture.

But thirdly, it is worth noting that the Kingdom approach of the Radical Evangelicals to social ethics is remarkably similar to that of Rauschenbusch, as Brian Stanley observes: ‘This is extremely difficult to distinguish from the claim of Rauschenbusch that wherever corporations abandon monopoly capitalism for the “law of service” or undemocratic nations submit to real democracy “therewith they step out of the Kingdom of Evil into the Kingdom of God”’.<sup>39</sup> It is evident too that it bears little, if any, relation to the Reforming Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So Oliver Barclay comments: ‘I can discover no signs of Kingdom thinking in the programmes of Wilberforce, the “Clapham Sect” and Shaftesbury ... They ... used much more straightforward biblical themes.’<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere Dr Barclay writes:

Certainly we seem to be doing much less than our theologically less sophisticated nineteenth-century forebears did. There is no evidence that the nineteenth-century evangelicals were troubled by these theological questions. They accepted a straightforward responsibility to help the deprived, and therefore set to work to tackle some of the structures that upheld such deprivation.<sup>41</sup>

This is a sad indictment indeed.

It may be argued, however, that the departure of the Radical Evangelicals from the evangelical mainstream is an aberration and not a necessary result of the changes which took place at Lausanne I and II. After all, Stott himself would hardly endorse the 'Kingdom' approach outlined above. Indeed, in his response to another 'Kingdom' advocate, Ron Sider, he is so critical that he can write: 'I still want to insist that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is fundamentally a *Christological* concept, and that it may be said to exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord.'<sup>42</sup>

But it may well be the case that the Radical Evangelicals were simply attempting to be consistent in drawing out the implications of the way of thinking that was developing at these conferences. The result is the emergence of two streams of thought: those represented by the likes of Catherwood and Anderson on the one hand that would be placed in the Reforming Evangelical category, and those represented by Sugden and Wright on the other, who would be identified with Radical Evangelicalism and its salient similarities with the old liberalism. If this is so, then the position of Dr Stott is most interesting, for it would appear that there is an internal inconsistency in his position which places him a foot in both camps.

Therefore, going back to Dr Stott's treatment of the results of the Grand Rapids Consultation,<sup>43</sup> it may be granted that while the Reforming Evangelicals would have agreed that 'social activity is a *consequence* of evangelism', one would be hard pressed to find any evidence that they would have shared the view that it was one of its 'principle *aims*'. Where in the New Testament is this ever put forward as being the case if evangelism is taken as proclaiming the evangel? The evangel is (as presented by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:2-5, and indeed the rest of the epistle) an exposition of that gospel together with its implications. It is impossible to find any reference to social transformation being integral to its message, it is a spiritual transformation which is its focus. As people's relationship with God is changed, social change also takes place, which is primarily, although not exclusively, within the realm of the redeemed community – the church (Ephesians 1:13: 'And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation. You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he promised' (GNB)).

Some, however, would question this definition of the evangel, like Paul Schrottenboer: 'I would see the term "holistic evangelism" as including both the telling of the Good News and the regal summons to convert to God and the call for social systemic reform in the name of Christ.'<sup>44</sup> But this is a tactical move, establishing a definition *a priori* which outmanoeuvres and displaces all others. Schrottenboer may define evangelism in this way, but does the Bible? The answer is surely 'no'.

Was Paul's aim as an evangelist to bring about social change? Not directly. His priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God was 'so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Rom 15:16). That is, they become incorporated into the people of God by believing the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins through the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if social responsibility is put forward as a principle aim in evangelism, it is a small and logical step to conceiving social change as part of the evangel itself. To take that step is to produce ‘another Gospel’.

Secondly, as we have seen, Dr Stott in elaborating the Grand Rapids document speaks of evangelism and social activity as a *partnership*, like two blades of a pair of scissors or two wings of a bird, while earlier on insisting that evangelism has a logical and theological priority.<sup>45</sup>

This position is untenable, for the very imagery used negates the claim that evangelism has priority. Can one say which blade in a pair of scissors is more important? Hardly, both are equally important, for without both blades the pair of scissors would simply cease to be scissors, let alone function. Similarly, can one speak of one bird’s wing as having priority? Both are equally important, for without a *pair* of wings the bird would not be able to fly at all. Perhaps, unthinkingly, social action has been exalted to the same *status* as evangelism, and, as we have seen, neither Wesley nor Wilberforce would countenance such a notion. But this is an inconsistency, for elsewhere in the Grand Rapids report it is stated explicitly that:

Evangelism relates to people’s eternal destiny [no mention here of social activity], and in bringing them the good news of salvation, Christians are doing what nobody else can do. Seldom if ever should we have to choose between healing bodies and saving souls... Nevertheless, if we must choose, then we have to say that the supreme and ultimate need of all humankind is the saving grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>46</sup>

But such a claim is undermined by talk of evangelism and social action being ‘in reality a marriage’.

Dr John Woodhouse’s comment on this point is very astute:

The significant disagreement among evangelicals has to do with the motivation that has been advanced for our social concern. On the one side of the debate, a perceived neglect of social responsibilities is redressed by arguing that social action is more significant than evangelicals have hitherto acknowledged. It is a worthwhile question to ask whether in the proposed heyday of evangelical social action – last century – the kind of theological justification advanced today was present. My impression is that it was not on the other side of the debate, it is acknowledged that to love one’s neighbour *is* a Christian duty... And who would deny that we have neglected our duties. It is right that we should be called again and again to care. But when that obligation is given the theological undergirding that belongs properly to the task of evangelism, when the evangelistic task is no longer seen as unique in importance, when evangelistic responsibility is taken for granted, and our neglect of social causes deeper remorse than our neglect of evangelism, then the cart has been put before the horse and is trying to grow legs.<sup>47</sup>

A cautionary tale is told by Professor Don Carson of an assessment made by a Mennonite leader of his own movement:

One generation of Mennonites cherished the gospel and believed that the entailment of the gospel lay in certain social and political commitments. The next generation assumed the gospel and emphasized the social and political commitments. The present generation identifies itself with the social and political commitments, while the gospel is variously confessed or disowned, it no longer lies at the heart of the belief system of some who call themselves Mennonites.

Carson comments: 'Whether or not this is a fair reading of the Mennonites, it is certainly a salutary warning for evangelicals at large.'<sup>48</sup>

Is there a better way of understanding the relationship between evangelism and social action? I would suggest that there is, and that it is based on a model proposed by Karl Barth. Barth argues that God's activity in the world has a centre and circumference.<sup>49</sup> The centre is the coming of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ, the circumference around this centre is God's gracious providential rule of all things.

When it is asked what activity of man corresponds to God's overruling providence at the circumference, the answer is *work*. God in his fatherly providence sustains, directs and cares for his world. Therefore, our work is about sustaining, directing and caring for the world.

Just as God's providence surrounds and supports the centre of his action in the coming kingdom in Jesus Christ, so our human work should surround and support our service of the kingdom. Sometimes, of course, the two coincide, as in the case of a full-time Christian minister which would run parallel to the ministry of Christ whose work *was* service. Also, a point will come when the Kingdom of God and creation are at one, with the establishment of the *new* creation towards which salvation history is moving.

This model is extremely helpful in enabling us to grasp the relation between evangelism and social action. Intuitively, Stott recognizes this relation, but in order to give social involvement a greater prominence in evangelical thinking than perhaps it has had at some points in its recent history, that which lies at the circumference has been drawn into the centre and the result is an unstable tension. The Radical Evangelicals extend the centre out to the circumference so that all of God's activity is viewed as kingdom activity. But the advantage of Barth's model is that while recognizing that creation and redemption belong together, as does God's providential activity and his specific saving activity, they are nonetheless to be distinguished, such that God's providential work serves his saving work. Because evangelism is central to the extension of his kingdom, in a way that, say, a Christian politician forming political policy is not, evangelism has priority over social involvement in that it belongs to the centre of God's activity in the world.

### **Dr Lloyd-Jones and Social Involvement**

Given his wide ranging influence it is appropriate to make one or two references to observations made by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones on the issues under discussion, for on these matters, as on many others, he spoke prophetically.

As we have seen, there is a tendency for Evangelicals to appeal for social involvement in the present by upholding as models the great Evangelical Reformers of the nineteenth century. But, as Dr Lloyd-Jones noted, this is a false comparison and doomed to lead to disappointment unless one *at the same time* recognizes the part played by the eighteenth-century Awakening upon such a movement. Of course, herein lies the difference, for we do not live in the aftermath of a Revival. In a letter to Iain Murray concerning the wisdom of publishing an article by Raymond Johnston on Christian social involvement, Lloyd-Jones writes: 'He [Johnston] completely fails to see that the Wilberforces and the Shaftesburys can only succeed after times of Revival when there are many Christians.'<sup>50</sup> This does not mean that Dr Lloyd-Jones put all his eggs in the Revival basket, as it were, for elsewhere he writes:

If we give the impression that we have no concern about political and social matters we shall alienate people; and I suggest that we have done so, and so the masses are outside the church. On the other hand, if we think we are going to fill our churches and solve our problems by preaching politics and taking an interest in social matters we are harbouring a very great delusion.<sup>51</sup>

How, then, are Christians to proceed? In the same address Dr Lloyd-Jones essentially adopts the position of the Reforming Evangelicals. 'The New Testament', he argues, presents the Christian as 'salt in society and leaven and surely the whole point of those two comparisons is that Christian influence is to be a quiet influence and a slow process of influencing society'.<sup>52</sup> However, the eschatological dimension must not be minimized: 'The Christian's primary concern must always be the Kingdom of God, and then, because of that the salvation of men's souls.'<sup>53</sup> With Wesley and Wilberforce we find Dr Lloyd-Jones reiterating:

Men must be born again. How can they live the Christian life if they have not become Christians? ,, Nevertheless, government and law and order are essential because man is in sin; and the Christian should be the best citizen in the country. The Christian must act as a citizen and play his part in politics and other matters to get the best conditions possible ... and be content with that which is less than Christian...<sup>54</sup>

However:

The Christian must of necessity have a profoundly pessimistic view of life in this world. Man is in sin and therefore you will never produce the perfect society. The coming of Christ alone is going to produce that. The consequence of this pessimism about the preacher's primary duty is to exhort people to be ready to meet their judge.<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As we look at our nation, which in terms of its social problems, pagan superstitions and spiritual apathy, is not unlike that of the eighteenth century, the need for authentic evangelism, and some would say, Revival, is obvious to any but the most dewy-eyed romantic. Opportunities and responsibilities for social action also confront Christians simply to demonstrate Christian love and good stewardship as those who live in a democratic land for 'to whom much is given, much will be required'. Also, as Sir Fred Catherwood comments in his autobiography, where churches

have become involved in social care in the inner cities, it has given them a hearing for the gospel.<sup>56</sup> The danger to which we should be alerted by this paper is that because of some within the evangelical movement attempting to provide a theological basis for social involvement which is more akin to the social gospel, conservative Evangelicals are in danger of repeating the same mistake as some of their forebears in the 1920s and 30s, namely, over-reacting and overcompensating by downgrading social involvement in order to preserve the priority of evangelism and the purity of the gospel.<sup>57</sup>

It is not possible to recapture the simple spirit and evangelical convictions of the past which arise out of Scripture so that we can be effective in the present in the light of things to come? After all, the one who said ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’ is the same Lord who said ‘Fill the earth and subdue it’, he is *One* Lord, Creator *and* Redeemer.<sup>58</sup>

It has recently been suggested that a biblical theory of ethics shaped by biblical theology might well provide a basis for such convictions.<sup>59</sup>

Michael Hill argues that the shape of biblical theology is always teleological, that is, moving towards a goal. He writes:

The Bible story begins with an order in creation governed by the purpose of God. The story goes on to tell of the fracturing of that order and the neglect of the purposes of God. Wonderfully it tells of the one obedient man who upholds and fulfils the design of the Father. Knowledge of God’s purposes is restored and the means of recovery established. Kinds and purposes find their true relationship in Jesus. The substance of morality is found in the value of kinds and the true nature of kinds is only detected in their goal or telos ... the goal of creation is the Kingdom of God. The nature of the kingdom is spelt out in terms of harmonious relationships.<sup>60</sup>

Hill maintains that strictly speaking Christian ethics is about applying biblical moral standards to those who have been made new creatures in Christ. But in the world where not all are committed to the Lordship of Christ, the goal of Christian ethics – a community of mutual love relationships – is not always achievable, so ‘retrieval ethics’ operates in situations less than ideal. The corollary of this would be that until the consummation of the Kingdom, society might well be reformed and brought closer into line with God’s creative purposes, not least through Christian involvement as an expression of neighbourly love, but it cannot be said to have been redeemed, that is a term properly applied to the Christian community.

When we turn to Paul’s letter to the Colossians with its distinctive emphasis on the unitary activity of God as Creator-Redeemer, we discover that many of the theological themes noted by Hill, and which shaped the thinking and action of the Reforming Evangelicals, are very much to the fore.

First, thanksgiving is offered to God the Father because of the Christians’ faith and love which springs from their future hope which has broken into their lives through the message of the gospel (Col 1:3-8). This in turn leads on to intercession that fruit ‘in *every* good work’ be borne so that the believers may live lives worthy of the Lord, given their new status as members of the Kingdom of God’s Son (1:9-13). This Son is not only redeemer but the one through whom

all things were created, he is the heir of the universe, the one for whom it was made. Those once alienated from God have been reconciled by his atoning death with a view to being presented to God as holy, a destiny guaranteed if they hold on to the gospel of hope (1:15-23). The commission given to Paul to present the Word of God in its fullness, which means presenting Christ, entails suffering. Christians are to resist being lured away by hollow philosophies, but to persist in Christ (1:24-2:23). In keeping with their new status in Christ, these believers are to be heavenly minded, which involves putting to death desires and practices which arise out of our fallen nature and to put on attitudes and practices which accord with their new nature (3:1-14). These are to work themselves out not only within the community of the redeemed, but also the wider spheres of social relationships in the home and work (3:15-4:1). What is more, there is to be an outflow into what we would call evangelism, so that Paul can ask that prayers be made on the apostles' behalf that God will open a door of opportunity for gospel proclamation and that the Colossian believers themselves might know how they might *act* towards outsiders, making the best of every opportunity with a view to sharing their faith verbally (4:1-6).

In other words, it is the priority of the gospel of redemption which, when rightly appropriated, leads to *both* evangelism and social action as naturally as a seed when planted produces both leaves and flowers (Col 1:6). But given that evangelism *is* the planting of the gospel seed which gives rise to further evangelism and what might be broadly termed social action, there is a certain logical necessity, not to say theological necessity, for evangelism to be given pride of place within the life and purposes of the church. To confuse evangelism with social action will, in view of this survey, inevitably lead to the diminution of both.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The substance of this paper formed the 1999 Evangelical Library Lecture.
- 2) John R W Stott *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshall Morgan and Scott 1984) p 3
- 3) Robert K Johnstone *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta John Knox 1979) p 79
- 4) Kathleen Heasman *Evangelicals in Action: An appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London 1962) p13
- 5) See Efiog S Utuk 'From Wheaton to Lausanne: The Road to Modification of Contemporary Evangelical Mission Theology' *Missiology: An International Review* 14/2 (1986) pp 205-20
- 6) Conference papers published in *The Church's Worldwide Mission* Harold Lindsell (ed) (Waco Texas: Word Publishing 1966)
- 7) 'Why The Berlin Congress?' *Christianity Today* 11 November 1966

- 8) John Stott 'The Great Commissions' in Henry and Mooneyham *One Race, One Gospel, One Task, World Congress on Evangelism, Berlin, 1966* (World Wide Publications 1967) vol 1 pp 50-1
- 9) Paul S Rees 'Evangelism and Social Concern' in Henry and Mooneyham *One Race, One Gospel, One Task* vol 1 p 308
- 10) Rachel Tingle 'Evangelical Social Action Today: Road to Recovery or Road to Ruin?' *The Anglican Evangelical Crises* Melvin Tinker (ed) (Christian Focus Publications 1995) p 196
- 11) Full text in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* J D Douglas (ed) (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications 1975)
- 12) John R W Stott *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Falcon 1975) p 23
- 13) J N D Anderson 'Christian Worldliness – the need and limits of Christian involvement' *Guidelines* J I Packer (ed) (CPAS 1967) p 216
- 14) See Melvin Tinker, 'NEAC 3 – A Conference Too Far?' *Churchman* 1988 vol 102
- 15) Vera Sinton 'Evangelical Social Ethics: Has it Betrayed the Gospel?' in Melvin Tinker (ed) *Restoring the Vision* (Monarch 1990) p 130
- 16) David O Moberg *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Action* (J B Lippincott Company 1977)
- 17) John R W Stott *Issues facing Christians Today* p xi
- 18) John R W Stott 'Holistic Mission' *The Contemporary Christian* (IVP 1992) p340
- 19) Arthur P Johnstone *World Evangelism and the Word of God* (Bethany Fellowship 1974) and *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House 1978)
- 20) Johnstone *The Battle for World Evangelism* p 10
- 21) Johnstone *The Battle for World Evangelism* pp 329-30
- 22) Sir Fred Catherwood 'The Zeitgeist' *Transformation* October/December 1986
- 23) Cited in J Wesley Bready *England Before and After Wesley* (Hodder & Stoughton 1939) p203
- 24) Bready *England Before and After Wesley* p 257
- 25) Bready *England Before and After Wesley* pp 251-2
- 26) Jonathan Bayes 'William Wilberforce – His Impact on Nineteenth Century Society' *Churchman* vol 2 1994 p 125
- 27) Bready *England Before and After Wesley* p 134
- 28) For an exposition of what this term means and entails, see Nigel Wright *The Radical Evangelical* (SPCK 1996)

- 29) Ranald Macaulay 'The Great Commissions' *Cambridge Papers* vol 7 no 2 1998
- 30) Anderson 'Christian Worldliness' *Guidelines* p 231
- 31) Wright *Radical Evangelical* p112
- 32) Sugden *Kingdom and Creation in Social Ethics* (Grove Ethical Studies No 79 Sugden and Barclay 1990) p 20
- 33) See Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden 'God's Intention of the World; Tensions Between Eschatology and History' in Tom Sine (ed) *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Montrovia 1983) pp 225-6
- 34) D A Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Baker Book House 1982) pp 225-6
- 35) R T France 'The Church and The Kingdom of God' D A Carson (ed) *Biblical Interpretation and the Church – Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster Press 1984) p 41
- 36) Chris Sugden 'Passage to India' in *Evangelical Roots* (Church of England Evangelical Council: 1988) p 27
- 37) Chris Sugden 'The Impact of Conversion' Monica Hill (ed) *Entering the Kingdom* (Marc: 1986) pp 39-55
- 38) See Melvin Tinker 'Content, Context and Culture, Proclaiming the Gospel Today' in Melvin Tinker (ed) *Restoring the Vision* (Monarch 1990) p 72
- 39) B Stanley 'Evangelical Social and Political Ethics: An Historical Perspective' *Evangelical Quarterly* 62: 1(1990) pp 19-26
- 40) Barclay *Kingdom and Creation in Social Ethics* (Grove 1990) p23
- 41) O R Barclay *Evangelicalism In Britain, 1935-1995, a Personal Sketch* (IVP 1997) p 111
- 42) R J Sider, with a Response from J W Stott *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Action* (Grove Books 1977)
- 43) John Stott *The Contemporary Christian* p 340
- 44) Paul G Schrotenboer 'Response to the Article by Lesslie Newbigin' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6/4 (1982) p 152
- 45) John Stott *The Contemporary Christian* pp 339-40
- 46) John Stott *The Contemporary Christian* p 339
- 47) John Woodhouse 'Evangelism and Social Responsibility' B G Webb (ed) *Christians in Society* Exploration 3 (Lancer 1998) pp 19-20
- 48) D A Carson *The Cross in Christian Ministry* (Baker 1993) p 63

- 49) Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* III 4 (56) (T and T Clark 1978) pp 565 ff
- 50) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones *Letters 1919-1981* (Banner of Truth 1994) p222
- 51) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State in Revolutionary Times' *The Puritans Their Origins and Successors* (Banner of Truth 1987) pp 342-43
- 52) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State' p 341
- 53) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State' p 343
- 54) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State' p 344
- 55) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State' p 345
- 56) Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'The Christian and the State' p 346
- 57) This concern is highlighted by Macaulay, in *The Great Commissions*.
- 58) For a discussion on how Christian ethics might be commended to society at large see, M Tinker 'The Priority of Jesus' teaching and example in Christian Ethics' *Themelios* vol 13 No 1 1987
- 59) Michael Hill Biblical Theology and Ethics in Interpreting God's Plan – *Biblical Theology and the Pastor* R J Gibson (ed) (Paternoster Press 1998) pp 91-109
- 60) Michael Hill *Biblical Theology* pp 107-8