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Social Involvement and Evangelism

JOHN GLADWIN

THE NATURE OF OUR involvement in society—how often in the last few years have Evangelical Christians struggled with this problem! The Keele Congress of 1967 made an attempt to face it in a big way and in the process revealed how far we had to go before we could begin to make intelligible and responsible statements about our modern world in the light of the truth of Christ. Since then we have had a regular round of literature on the subject. Christenson,¹ Moberg,² and Sugden,³ fall within this sequence. The first two are American—Sugden alone writes from within the British situation.

The first problem which arises out of the Evangelical conscience is that to do with the relationship between evangelism and social action. The preaching of the Gospel of Christ for a faith response in the individual is at the heart of the Evangelical movement. Are we not, therefore, betraying our calling by diverting our time, thought and energy to the realm of social activity? This may be good, but is it not better to concentrate on winning souls for Christ? Behind all of this lies a whole range of further questions. Is salvation to be thought of only in terms of individual faith—or has it corporate and social implications? What is the relationship between the material and spiritual aspects of life?

Both Moberg and Sugden point us to the fundamental answer to this question. The act of saying, 'I will preach the Gospel and therefore, I have no time for the social and political realm', is in itself a decision which has political and social consequences. Generally such a decision is a decision which will help to preserve the *status quo*. Whilst, therefore, it is essential that some people are called to the specific apostolic task of evangelism, in the generality of Christian activity there must be proper consideration of the way the faith we hold affects the inevitable political and social decisions we must make. The act of entering a monastery is a political act.

The problem with Moberg's book is that it lacks a sufficient theo-

logical framework. Its general stance that individualism is not enough and that there are institutional and corporate questions to face is sound. He does point out the more corporate view of Scripture with regard to human corruption, but his thesis needs a stronger theology to hold it up. It needs a theology of the world as created, a theology of the fall and its implications for human power structures, and a theology of God's Word coming to us in and through the activity of human history—supremely, of course, in the incarnate life of Jesus. If Christianity is a historical world-affirming faith, then the social and political dimensions of the Gospel cannot be avoided. Not only must we accept that we are involved as a matter of plain fact, but we ought to positively accept that this is where God has placed us and ask what our ethical responses ought to be as citizens.

By contrast with Moberg and Sugden, Christenson is much less happy with Christians seeking to express their faith socially within the normal realm of the political world. One can only hope that this book does not represent the charismatic approach to social action. Its theological position is ill-defined to the point of illiteracy. We are to wait for the Spirit to tell us what our agenda for action or non-action is to be. Even if our responsible, human, and Christian assessment of a situation points to some good we are not to do it until the Lord leads us. The implications of this are horrific. Am I, for example, when seeing someone knocked down by a bus and in need of immediate help, to pray to God to see if He will lead me to do this good deed? The book is also for separation. The way to properly help people is to save them into the church which is distinct from the world. The world is made for the fire. Salvation is only in the church and it is primarily in church that our charitable action must take place. Our only link with the world is that of preaching. The Church of the Redeemer, Houston, Texas, it would appear, contains not only the answers to all our ecclesiastical community problems but to all our political and social problems as well! Yet for all its profession of the need to be separate, the book betrays the basic weakness of this whole position. Despite its low view of the political world, it does adopt a political stance—that of the illiterate right. It continually attacks 'liberal' Protestants for advocating courses of political action to help people in need. It is sceptical of the value of centralised welfare programmes, it is keen on maintaining property rights etc. etc. In other words it upholds the ethical and political values of traditional mid-Western American Republicanism! If an author wishes to espouse the cause of the right why does he not do so openly and intelligently?

William Coats book⁴ is in strict contrast. It quite openly seeks to advocate socialism as the proper political philosophy and cause for the Christian church. The thesis springs out of a dissatisfaction with middle-way liberalism which seems implicit in Niebuhr's social ethics. Recent American experience, together with a failure to come to terms

with the need for institutional changes in society if the poor are to be given social justice, has taken political theology beyond the Niebuhr position. This is a brave book and a good book. It is brave because it seeks to earth theology in real political solutions. It is a good book because it takes theology very seriously. Its theology is done within the framework of a form of futurist eschatology. Jesus points us to the Kingdom of God. Since God's work is in the context of history, it is in the context of political and social history that Christians must look for the signs of the Kingdom. Socialism is the political sign of the Kingdom. Servants of the Kingdom must identify with the poor and the oppressed. Capitalism guarantees that power and wealth stay with their present possessors. Liberal politics fail to come to terms with the real problems because they are unwilling to have the system changed. Only socialism offers a political framework in which the hopes of the poor and oppressed can be met. This type of theology is done within the boundaries of a Hegelian framework of thought. American involvement with oppression in Vietnam will produce a counter-reaction towards socialism when that oppression meets its certain defeat. The Vietcong, therefore, can be for Americans a sign of the Kingdom and of hope.

This book has a great affinity to the type of thinking represented in Jurgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*. Its political analysis of the failure of the capitalist system in America is searching. The book would have more to say to the European condition if it had come to terms with our attempt at a middle course using a mixed economy plus welfare-state type of arrangement. It would be theologically stronger if it applied a doctrine of the fall and of human corruption to socialist institutions. It is true Coats does not suggest that socialism is the Kingdom or that a socialist state would be Utopia. He is critical of Marx and of state socialism in Eastern Europe. His comments, however, on these lines cover a very small part of the last chapter on socialism itself. He comes too close to saying that socialism is the only political answer when he would have been better to have said that socialism is the best answer available to us at the present time. In that sense socialism can be a sign on the way to the Kingdom and in that sense socialism in its political structures can never be free of critical analysis. This is one of the few books to come off the political fence and is to be welcomed as a healthy stimulus to realistic debate.

If William Coats finds socialism to be the sign of the Kingdom, Christopher Sugden finds the church to be that sign. Like Coats he has a futurist understanding of the Kingdom. 'It is primarily in the future.' In the present we can know its nature and experience it in part. He rejects the Lutheran doctrine of the two Kingdoms and holds that the perspectives of the Kingdom of God—a kingdom of right relationships—is meant for the whole of human society. The future Kingdom will embrace all of creation and therefore we must have

concern for the whole in the present. The future Kingdom is the catalyst for change of the structures in the present. It provides the values and perspectives by which we determine our stance upon the questions of today. The Kingdom provides the basis for protest, for opportunity, and for hope. The church is the sign of that Kingdom. The Kingdom has burst in among groups of believing people. In itself and in its witness it points to the Kingdom. When the church acts together on race, in support of the fight against corruption in political and economic life, it can become a strong witness to the world to the life of the Kingdom of God.

The case for Kingdom thinking is cogently argued in Sugden. It is refreshing to find such penetrating theological thinking on the social implications of faith coming from Evangelical quarters. This is indeed a very stimulating pamphlet. Yet, one must air two reservations. One concerns the method and the other concerns the argument. Concerning the method, the question must be asked: 'Is it possible to argue this sort of case in a pamphlet 24 pages long without raising more problems than have been solved?' Most Grove Booklets deal with particular, narrowly-defined areas of Christian practice. In this case, a very broadranging and complex question is tackled. If only it were possible to face it satisfactorily in 24 pages—but there must be doubts!

The second problem concerns the argument. Kingdom perspectives on ethics based on a futurist understanding of the Kingdom are very popular at present. Yet the question must be posed: 'Is this a sufficient theological ground for the problem?' Clearly eschatological perspectives must play a considerable part in the argument, but is it a sole basis for the question? There is, after all, a New Testament problem. The overt idea of the Kingdom of God (Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew) is almost unique to the Synoptic tradition. It cannot be easily held that Paul started from a theology of the Kingdom. It is true that his thinking is shot through with eschatological faith but is it of the sort in which the apostle sees the whole in terms of a future Kingdom of God? Surely it would be truer to say that in his developed thought he saw the whole in terms of the given fact of faith, Jesus Christ. This powerful life-transforming reality embraced past, present, and future. The world and its history was to be understood in the light of Jesus Christ. The largeness of the New Testament picture of Jesus Christ set in relation to the purpose of the Father and present in the present reality of the Holy Spirit, provided ground for facing the contextual questions to do with the church in the world. The world, human society, political power, and political history are given a new perspective by faith in Jesus Christ.

All sorts of useful theological categories run out of this basic structure. There is the whole sense of the world as created by God through Christ. This giving that sense of the whole world being set in a dynamically responsible relationship to God. There is a creation

ethic in Scripture—not a static and legalistic ethic—but a living and relational ethic in which the world is seen in a responsive and responsible relationship to God. The Christian must see himself as part of one humanity in the creative purposes of God.

In counterbalance to this is the sense of the world as fallen. The whole reality of human society continually manifests the marks of its corruption in the delusion and abuse of power. Again the Christian man seeing himself in the flesh in a fallen world knows that he shares in this with the whole world.

With these comes the sense of the world as redeemed in Christ. This is a fact of faith established in the purpose of God through the finished work of Christ. The world is not abandoned but redeemed at great cost. This fact of faith is ultimately to be a fact of experience. As such we are led into the eschatological perspectives of Christian faith. We understand the present in the light of the completed work of God in Christ which in itself is a ground for sure hope for the future.

All these perspectives which are the view from within faith call the Christian to see and experience the world positively. The Christian man looks for the marks of the Creator's hand upon the world. At the same time he expects to know the continual disappointment of life corrupted and power abused. Through all he will work for any and every cause which embodies what he believes to be the meaning of salvation in Christ for the world.

Thus the Kingdom has its signs in the secular. It is true that the church as a fellowship is a social indication of the Kingdom of God. Yet, a church which believes in a Creator/Redeemer God will not be surprised to find the sovereign work of God signalled in the secular world. Let us use Sugden's examples to pose further questions out of actual situations. Supposing the one Christian in the corporation of 25,000 people, whom he talks about, finds that he is joined by 200 others in rejecting dishonesty in cooking the books. Supposing they all lose their jobs and are supported by the Trade Union, can we say that when the church supports the Christian man that is a sign of the Kingdom, and are we to say the same of the Trade Union supporting the 200? Using his example in South Africa, what is the difference between the church corporately rejecting Apartheid and that same rejection by the secular political groups of that country? Surely only a theology which sees the whole in relation to the purpose of God in the *present* can embrace such circumstances of life.

This is when we are brought back to the question about evangelism. If the great truths of God must be communicated to us within the concourse of our history and in events within the world, then those who come to see those truths of God by faith must seek to witness to them with the life they have—the earthly historical corporate life of human society. The God who does not meet us at the point of our actual life is unknown. A Gospel which does not unpack in the terms

of that same human life is irrelevant. This is why the church has to reject Gnosticism, and this is why a Gospel which has no necessary ethical tones is no Gospel.

¹ *A Charismatic Approach to Social Action*, Larry Christenson (Lakeland, 1975, 122 pp., £0.60).

² *The Great Reversal*, David Moberg (Scripture Union, 1974, 194 pp., £0.75).

³ *Social Gospel or No Gospel?*, Christopher Sugden (Grove, 1975, 24 pp., £0.25).

⁴ *God in Public*, William Coats (Eerdmans, 1974, 215 pp., \$7.95).