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MODERN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL CONCERN AND HOPE: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by ROBERT D. LINDER

THIS is a revision of Dr. Linder's contribution to the discussion which followed the reading of Dr. Clouse's paper. Dr. Linder is a member of the teaching staff of Kansas State University.

EVANGELICAL Christians have expressed considerable interest lately in Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Theology of Hope*. Moltmann's "hope" is based on a virile eschatology which makes much of the history of God's interaction with his people in the past and his promises of great things for the future. Moltmann's most recent volume, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, has elicited charges of "Hegelian optimism" from some quarters. Whatever the case, even this work is highly stimulating and provocative when taken in an evangelical context in that it stresses the promises of God, hope for the hopeless, the certainty of a new and better social order of the future, and raises the possibilities of Christian co-operation in eschatological fulfillment.¹

For evangelicals, one of the most significant aspects of Moltmann's work is his emphasis on the relationship between theology on the one hand and social concern and hope on the other. This has grave implications for biblical Christians, especially in the light of the somewhat tarnished image of evangelicals in relation to social issues and ethics in the eyes of the outside world. In recent years a number of sociologists and historians have purveyed a stereotype of evangelical Christianity as the bulwark of political and social reaction. For example, one eminent historian of American Christianity, William G. McLoughlin, recently characterized U.S. evangelicals as "the spiritual hard-core of the radical right".²

Perhaps the best way to handle these charges is to admit that

¹ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) and *Religion, Revolution and the Future* (New York: Scribner, 1969). See a review of the latter work by David P. Scaer in *Christianity Today*, XIV, (Dec. 19, 1969), p. 26.

² William G. McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?" *Daedalus*, (Winter, 1967), p. 61.

they contain too much truth to be gainsaid and probe the evangelical past to see if this always has been the case. Both the Old and New Testaments bear witness to a deep concern with social ethics and eschatology. True and absolute peace, justice and righteousness will come with the future kingdom of God. In the meantime, God's people must do all in their power to promote and approximate these sacred values in the present life. Contrary to popular present-day evangelical mythology, the Good Samaritan was *not* a theological liberal! Social concern was characteristic of Jesus. In fact, he knew of no dichotomy between the "religious" and the "social" such as that constructed by some of his latter-day disciples.³ In a context of social concern, Jesus declared: ". . . I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me".⁴ One of the first major decisions of the Christian community at Jerusalem after Christ's ascension was the settlement of a social problem, the distribution of food to Greek and Jewish believers.⁵

For all its shortcomings, the medieval Christian Church did a great deal to benefit humanity. It attempted to ameliorate the suffering caused by war, provided hospitals for the ill, helped the poor, spawned the modern university and gave the world St. Francis of Assisi and Peter Waldo.

The Reformation era is replete with examples of evangelical Christian concern. Martin Luther believed in social action, even without the Epistle of James to prod him. As Professor George W. Forell has shown in his study *Faith Active in Love*, Luther struck a balance between an abiding eschatological expectation of the end of the age and a deep concern for the ethical problems of his day. As Forell put it, Luther believed that: ". . . through the person of the individual believer . . . faith active in love penetrates the social order . . . the Gospel becomes available to the social order".⁶

Calvin would have been appalled and somewhat mystified by the reluctance of so many evangelical Christians to involve themselves in government and social action. He himself set an example of a positive attitude toward politics and social concern. For him the aim of government was the public good conceived of in a very

³ For a sound discussion of this subject, see Sherwood E. Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 1-18.

⁴ Mt. 25: 40. All quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁵ Acts 6: 1-6.

⁶ George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 187.

broad sense, thus he supported public welfare and education. Even more important, he could not imagine true Christians abandoning the affairs of state to ungodly men or the church leaving civic officials in the lurch, without direction, to fend for themselves.⁷

Even the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, often charged with withdrawal and exclusivism, had a rather extensive concern with social issues, although not always in a positive way. Perhaps in the context of the political and social climate of the century, many present-day believers would have followed a similar course of non-participation in political affairs. Whatever the case, Anabaptist non-participation in government did not mean a lack of concern for political and social problems. Their views on the separation of church and state finally triumphed in Great Britain and America, they knew how to take care of their own as few Christians since apostolic times have done, and they spoke eloquently to the issue of war and peace with their refusal to participate in bloodshed and, in many cases, by patiently giving their own lives as a witness to their Christian pacifism.⁸

Similar examples of evangelical social concern from the time of the Reformation could be cited: William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, the American abolitionist movement, the work of General William Booth and his Salvation Army, strong evangelical support in the early years of the YMCA, the founding of the Red Cross as an outgrowth and dream of Genevan evangelical Henri Dunant, and even the United Nations, born of the evan-

⁷ For more information on Calvin and social concern, see John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 233-34; John T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government", in George L. Hunt, ed., *Calvinism and the Political Order* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), pp. 41-45; André Biéler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), pp. 9-26; and Lewis B. Smedes, "The Evangelical and the Social Question", *The Reformed Journal* (Feb., 1966), p. 12.

⁸ See Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 101-108, 127-137; J. D. Graber, "Anabaptism Expressed in Missions and Social Service", in Guy E. Herschberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), pp. 152-166; and Roland H. Bainton, "The Anabaptist Contribution to History", in *Ibid.*, pp. 317-326.

gical fervor and Presbyterian mentality of Woodrow Wilson's dreams and action.⁹

Tragically enough, it was largely the great Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the twentieth century which blunted the social conscience of evangelical Christianity in our own time. Attacking the historic Christian faith and at the same time groping for a reason for existence, theological liberalism latched on to the Social Gospel. In the heat of controversy and in reaction to the liberal thrust, evangelicals responded by rejecting the totality of liberal theology, including its emphasis on social issues. Thus, after a promising beginning, Fundamentalism emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as a largely negative expression of historic Christianity.¹⁰

Recent stirrings among evangelical Christians indicate that the negativism and posture of non-involvement of the immediate evangelical past is no longer acceptable. The challenge of the future is too great. There are many signs that we are on the threshold of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" with its genetic manipulation, social engineering, subordination of individual freedom to group solidarity and goals, and government control of the masses by a calculated allocation of sex and drugs.¹¹ In a frightening new book by political scientist Victor C. Ferkiss entitled *Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality*, the discussion centres not on human need but on human survival. Ferkiss speaks of forcing society to be more rational in its over-all social decisions, of redefining freedom, of the necessity for social discipline and social controls, of the need to lay aside absolute values and the willingness to create provisional myths, and of the inevitability of putting an end to population growth.¹² Surely all of this has im-

⁹ Kenneth S. Latourette, "Historical Perspective", in L. G. Champion, ed., *Outlook For Christianity* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), pp. 11-23; Ernest M. Howse, *Saints in Politics: The Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952); Earle E. Cairns, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1960); and Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

¹⁰ Edward J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), pp. 113-126. See also Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (New York: R. R. Smith, 1931), and Norman F. Furness, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

¹¹ See Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (Garden City, N.Y.: Sun Dial Press, 1932).

¹² Victor C. Ferkiss, *Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Braziller, 1969), pp. 245-272.

mediate and impelling relevance to the topic of the evangelical Christian, social concern and a theology of hope!

If evangelicals cannot accept the conservative, liberal or socialist options for curing current social ills, then they had better get busy and provide the present generation with meaningful alternatives. Evangelical Christians had better do some creative thinking about social issues and take some decisive social action soon, or forfeit their right to be heard. Sherwood E. Wirt in his book *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* has made a start in this direction. He raises a number of issues about which evangelicals have not said much, either individually or collectively. As he suggests, what about war and peace, the involvement of the church in politics and social issues, poverty, highway safety, capital punishment, abortion and euthanasia?¹³ And beyond Wirt, what about the Christian ethics of killing in war, violence in social change, revolution, nationalism, racism, class distinction, population control, capitalism, socialism and the welfare state? What about the issues of peace, justice and righteousness in relation to a Christian theology of hope? And absolutely crucial in the context of current unrest, what do Christian social ethics and eschatology have to say about freedom and equality, the concern for which is so evident among the young people of today's world?¹⁴

Perhaps the place to begin is attitude. First, we need to do away with the attitude of: "If the communists (fascists, liberals, Hegelians, hippies and so forth) are for it, I as a Christian am against it!" Presumably if the Marxists are against sin, then evangelicals should be for it. If Hitler neither smoked nor drank hard liquor (which he did not), then Christians ought to do both. What folly!

Secondly, we need to go beyond the modest statements and commendable but inadequate beginnings of the recent past. As a young Christian, I read with great profit an article on a Christian philosophy of history by the well-known evangelical historian Earle E. Cairns of Wheaton College. In it, Professor Cairns stated:

Evangelicals must give more attention to the function of the Church to be the "salt" of society. The Church should be an active redeemed society which puts into practice the new law of love, the only

¹³ Wirt, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-146.

¹⁴ For an example of a work in which evangelical Christians attempt to come to grips with specific issues, see Robert G. Clouse, Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, eds., *Protest and Politics: Evangelical Christianity and Contemporary Affairs* (Greenwood, S. C.: The Attic Press, 1968).

effective ethical dynamic (Mt. 22: 37-40; Rom. 13: 8-10). This love must manifest itself in good works—not in order to be saved—but because one has been saved (Gal. 6: 10; Eph. 2: 10; Titus 3: 8). The Christian cannot adopt either an apocalyptic otherworldliness, which ignores the world around it, or a neo-monasticism which retreats from the world. The New Testament teaches participation in the world of human affairs by the application of the Gospel to social life.¹⁵

This is in many ways a sound statement of the evangelical position. But it does not define "social life", and it tends to separate the gospel from the whole man with his need for hope, now, as well as in the future life. Furthermore, Cairns argues that the evangelical view of history is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but "pessimistic-optimistic". He writes: "Because of sin in man the evangelical can find no solution for history in history by human effort, but he does not lapse into despairing pessimism because he realized that God is active in history through His Spirit. He can integrate the secondary economic, social, and other material facts of history with its primary spiritual ground in God".¹⁶ I would change this emphasis slightly and describe the evangelical outlook more accurately as "realistic-idealistic". Here I am using these terms in the popular, not the philosophic sense. By "realism", I think I am close to what Cairns means by "pessimism". On the other hand, by "idealism" I mean not only the certainty that history will culminate in the triumph of God and right and the assurance of eternal life confirmed by Christ's resurrection but also the hope of a better life for all men now based upon the "new life in Christ", the implementation of Christian social ethics and the capacity, however limited by sin, of man to do good.¹⁷

In this discussion, "hope" has been used in a general sense and in at least three different, more specific ways. Of these three special usages, one is a historical hope expressed in a belief in the final righteous triumph of God, either in a cataclysmic culmination of history or in the extra-temporal final transformation of history, depending upon one's millennial view. This would include, in one way or another, the often-used Pauline phrase "the blessed hope",

¹⁵ Earle E. Cairns, "Philosophy of History", in Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (New York: Channel Press, 1957), p. 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁷ Or as Reinhold Niebuhr put it when speaking of politics: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary". Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Scribner, 1960), xiii.

that is, Christ's second coming.¹⁸ The second special usage is related to the first, but distinct from it in that the term also is used in the New Testament to connote the Christian hope of immortality or eternal life, in the sense of a confident expectation. This hope is made possible by the death of Christ and guaranteed by his resurrection from the grave.¹⁹

The third special use of the word hope is that which is most relevant to our present discussion. This is using hope in a sense of feeling that what is desirable and wanted will occur in the temporal future. For the evangelical, this kind of hope is based on the fact of the "new life in Christ" and can be furthered by Christian social concern and reinforced by the more distant hope of the eternal and eschatological future.²⁰

The most striking thing about all of this is that, according to the Scriptures, all of these various meanings of hope can be summed up in one name: Jesus Christ. As Paul saluted Timothy: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope".²¹

Furthermore, Paul placed hope in the triad of most cherished Christian virtues in I Corinthians 13: faith, hope, love. The fact

¹⁸ Tit. 2: 13. See also Cairns, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-211; John W. Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), pp. 15-36; and Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), pp. 137-147.

¹⁹ Rom. 5: 1-5; I Cor. 15: 1-28; Col. 1: 21-27; Tit. 1: 1-3; and Barth, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

²⁰ For example, this kind of hope is included in II Cor. 5: 17, Rom. 15 and Jn. 10: 10. This view is suggested, in part at least, by Wolfhart Pannenberg's use of the ministry of Christ as a paradigm in which "the futurity of the Reign of God became a power determining the present" See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Appearance as the Arrival of the Future", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XXXV (June, 1967), 111-112, 118. Also cf. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, p. 338. There seem to be other possibilities for developing a sound theological basis for evangelical social action other than eschatology. For example, a Biblical theology of creation posited upon the fact that all of God's world is basically good and that man was created in the image of God. For more information on this, see J. N. D. Anderson, *Into the World: The Need and Limits of Christian Involvement* (London: Falcon Books, 1968). Another fruitful avenue of approach might be one suggested by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his discussion of Scriptural "mandates" in his book on social ethics. He believes that God has imposed certain mandates on all men, thus there is no distinction between secular and sacred in these particular areas. See *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 207-213.

²¹ I Tim. 1: 1.

that the greatest of these abiding virtues is love in no way derogates the importance of hope.²² In fact, one might argue that love is meaningless without faith and hope. Interestingly enough, the first half of the twentieth century saw the theological liberals leave out faith and misconstrue hope while the fundamentalists largely ignored love and diluted faith. It may be time for historic Christianity to restore all three virtues to their proper place on the throne of Christian thought: faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and emphasis upon good works as the fruit of faith, hope for a better world in the temporal future and in God's eternal kingdom, and love for one's fellowman at all times and in all places. Perhaps then we will see faith, hope, and love in the perspective of evangelical Christian social concern.

We may be in the last days now; I do not know. Christians at various stages in history have felt the end near at hand: during days of the collapse of Rome, throughout the terrible visitations of the Black Death in medieval Europe, all through the turmoil of the Reformation, in the midst of the devastation of the Thirty Years' War, in the course of the horrors of World War One, during the holocaust of World War Two. Whatever the case, genuine Christianity may well be the last, best hope of civilized man in this age. The other politico-philosophical alternatives are not very encouraging: neo-Epicureanism, nihilism, anarchism, totalitarianism (either fascist or communist), or total and complete existential despair. Add to this the growing "crisis of belief" among the university students of the world reported in a recent Ford Foundation study and the challenge before evangelicals seems clear. Either contribute meaningful alternatives to the political and social problems of the period or retire to the backstage of current history.²³

I believe that the Christian hope begins with the individual believer. In my judgment, this is proper and Biblically sound. But can the individual be separated from the Christian community? I think not! And can the Christian community be separated from humanity? I think not! And can Christian hope be separated from Christian social concern? It cannot!

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²² I Cor. 13: 13.

²³ See Joseph A. Califano, *The Student Revolution: A Global Confrontation* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 43-46. Cf. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17.