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# **THEOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION IN SOCIETY: THE SCOTTISH EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY FINLAYSON LECTURE, APRIL 2008**

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In April 2007 it was my privilege to speak at an international conference in Nairobi on the subject of urban mission, attended by evangelical leaders from across Africa. I was asked to bring a perspective from the nineteenth century. Before the conference I spent some time in the vast informal settlement of Kibera in the heart of Nairobi, where several hundred thousand people live in tin or mud houses, most with no water or electricity, and sanitation that at best is a pit latrine. The refuse has not been collected for years, and lies piled beside the pathways as you enter the settlement. It was like walking back into the nineteenth-century slums of the Old Vennel or the Saltmarket in Glasgow, or the Cowgate in Edinburgh. It was also to see responses to urban issues from evangelical churches that mirrored those from the nineteenth century – urgent preaching of the gospel accompanied by a significant number of conversions, alongside deep social compassion expressed in running schools, social relief projects, and micro-enterprise schemes, to give people a chance to begin to earn enough to keep their families. Here was genuine transformation in society through the gospel.

At the conference I sat in on a plenary discussion of the characteristics of a 'true' church. The answers came thick and fast – faith in Christ, the presence of God, preaching from the Bible, love for each other, and then 'social concern'. It was one of the highest priorities amongst that group of African evangelical leaders. When the suggestion was made it elicited no comment, no surprise, it was an entirely natural and non-contentious expression of their being God's people. Indeed the discussion had gone on some ten minutes before the suggestion was made that a genuine church really should include 'the due and proper administration of the sacraments', and that was only because I made it! I wonder how such a discussion amongst evangelical ministers and church leaders would have gone in the UK. I don't think they were right on the sacraments, but I do think that the desire of those African leaders to seek genuine spiritual transformation in the individual through the marriage of gospel proclamation with personal and social transformation, through practical activity, bore the hallmarks of historic evangelical Christianity. David Bebbington sees

activism as one of the four defining characteristics of evangelicalism, and argues that this included not only evangelism, but also social action that expresses the ethics of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> I believe that this activism in both evangelism and social concern was the normal pattern amongst evangelicals from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth, and will survey the ways evangelicals in particular have seen transformation in society flowing from, and being the natural counterpart to, spiritual transformation. I also want to consider how this relationship changed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century before there was a return to the historic position in the late twentieth century. Finally I will reflect on some areas of potential difficulty in this area within contemporary evangelicalism.

### JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) stands as a foundational figure in eighteenth century evangelicalism. In his work, *Christian Charity*, based on a series of sixteen sermons on 1 Corinthians 13 preached in 1738, he emphasized the ‘duty’ of charity to the poor, a duty ‘enjoined and insisted on’ as ‘absolute and indispensable’. It was to Edwards as much a duty as it was to ‘pray, or to attend to public worship’; indeed there was no command in the Bible more peremptory or urgent ‘than the command of giving to the poor.’ Although it was not necessarily binding in the case of ‘idleness or prodigality’, he warns against too great a ‘scrupulosity as to the object on whom we bestow our charity ... it is better to give to several that are not objects of charity, than to send away empty one that is’. An inconsiderate or imprudent act leading to poverty was not to be considered an unpardonable crime. Even if a person was to continue in what Edwards termed ‘vicious ways’, help should not be denied to their dependants. Furthermore, the existence of a legal provision, important as it was, did not ‘free us from the obligation to relieve... by our charity’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 12 quoting H. More, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, (London, 1808 edn), p. 146. There is significant debate about the historic genesis of evangelicalism, and the aspects of continuity with the Reformation and Puritan eras. See K. Stewart and M.A. Haykin, *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Continuities in Evangelical History*, (Leicester: IVP, 2008) (including a chapter by the author of this lecture). For the sake of narrowing the scope of the material to be surveyed, I will begin in the eighteenth century, yet I believe the same point could be argued from the Reformation and the Puritan period.

<sup>2</sup> J. Edwards, ‘Christian Charity: or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced’, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, 1834, reprinted

Not much has been written of Edwards' social concern activity, and it was not his life's work to be a great social reformer. Living in a context where the North American colonies were unsettled by regular threats of war from the French and Native Americans, he was inclined to social conservatism. Although the family followed many others in keeping a domestic slave, he stressed the need for humane treatment of slaves, and wrote opposing the slave trade.<sup>3</sup> Edwards condemned the unfettered operation of the free market, whereby ruthless merchants bought grain cheap and then sold dear in times of grain shortage, which caused great suffering amongst the poor. A Sabbath collection for the poor was also instituted in the Northampton church.<sup>4</sup>

This Edwardsean tradition was continued by Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), Edward's grandson. Dwight became President of Yale in 1795, where he remained for over 20 years. His theme in the 1819 graduation exercises was 'On Doing Good', from Galatians 6: 9-10, 'let us not be weary in well-doing'. Following Edwards, Dwight spoke of a 'duty' to labour in doing good, to be pursued with 'firm resolution and unremitting energy'. He urged his hearers not to 'become feeble and spiritless' in their exertions advocating such causes as running day schools and Sunday schools, overseas mission, and the relief of the poor. He gave both anthropocentric and theocentric motivation for such activism – doing things which are 'not only to be beneficial to mankind', but with such a disposition as 'will render the performance morally excellent and lovely in the sight of God'.<sup>5</sup>

#### JOHN WESLEY

Another key figure in early evangelicalism was of course John Wesley. He approached these issues from an evangelical Arminian perspective. During his life a series of personal religious transformations were worked out in terms of social transformation. His transition from nominal Anglicanism to devoted high church Anglican piety produced the ordered life of the Oxford 'Holy Club', with an active social concern which included charity to the poor and prison visiting, although that system did not bring the assurance of salvation he longed for. His evangelical conversion expe-

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(Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), pp. 163-173.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Edwards, 'Draft Letter on Slavery', *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, (New Haven: Yale, 1998), Vol. 16, 72-76; and K.P. Minhenan, 'Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade', *William and Mary Quarterly*, Oct. 1997, 823-30.

<sup>4</sup> G. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards, A Life*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), p. 304.

<sup>5</sup> T. Dwight, *Sermons*, 2 Vols., (New Haven: Hezekiah, Have, Durrie and Peck, 1828), Vol. 1: 535, 537, 552.

rience yielded that assurance, and continued endeavours in social concern were an activist outflow from his experience of grace. A central feature of this was concern for the poor. As a Fellow of Lincoln College he resolved to live on £28 per year, to give the rest of his income away. The three points of his famous 'On The Use of Money', first preached in 1744, and published in 1760, summarized his living creed: 'Gain all you can; Save all you can; Give all you can'.<sup>6</sup> From his extensive writings he earned the huge sum of over £1,000 per year, some £30,000 in total, almost all of which he gave away.<sup>7</sup>

Wesley set a pattern for Methodist lifestyle and practice: charity was a key Christian duty. In 1741, members of the Methodist Society in London were urged to bring clothes and 1d per week for poor members, and support was offered to the sick. Avoidance of strong drink and simplicity of dress were all advocated to help Methodists save money, although the man who sold all his clothes to support the poor was described as 'mad'.<sup>8</sup> Social concern was not simply restricted to the household of faith – in 1740 Wesley begged money for the poor who received no help from the Poor Law. There was even evidence of a bias to the poor in his thinking. He had, on the whole, a higher regard for the genuineness of the faith of the poor than of the rich. He found in many of them 'pure, serious grace, unmixed with paint, folly and affection'. The 1748 Conference debated whether rich adherents should have a longer probationary period before membership than the poor. Compassionate activity to the poor was to be matched by disposition. Wesleyan Methodism was to be a system of scriptural holiness. In 1747 Wesley wrote 'Abstain from either sour looks or harsh words. Put yourself in the place of any poor man, and deal with him as you would God should deal with you.' He even urged those giving assistance to the poor to do it personally, rather than to send it.<sup>9</sup>

Wesley was also interested in wider social transformation, as demonstrated in his *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774), in which he argued for abolition on the basis of both Christian teaching and enlightenment humanitarianism. Wesley declared that liberty was 'the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air, therefore a slave should be acknowledged as "thy brother"'. To the slave traders he appealed on the basis of common humanity: 'Do you never feel another's pain? Have you no

<sup>6</sup> J. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions [53 Sermons]*, (London, 1771), repr. Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, no date, Sermon L, 702-715.

<sup>7</sup> J. Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, (London, Nelson, 1940), Vol. 8, p. 80. note 85; H.D. Rack, *The Reasonable Enthusiast*, (London: Epworth), p. 361.

<sup>8</sup> G. Whitefield, *Journals of George Whitefield*, (repr. Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1960), p. 267.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, Vol. 4, pp. 358; Vol. 3, p. 301.

sympathy, no sense of human woe, no pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes ... or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, were you a stone or a brute...'<sup>10</sup> Wesley's views were to prove influential in mobilising Methodist opinion against slavery.

The need for faith, the reality of which was to be demonstrated in works, was emphasized not only by the key players in the Evangelical Revival, but also by their heirs, be they Arminian, Evangelical Calvinist, or Moderate Calvinist. All stressed the need for good works in the life of the believer. Charles Simeon's model evangelical parochial work in Cambridge included not only preaching and pastoral work, but schemes to sell bread to the poor cheaply, the running of a Provident bank, and visitation schemes to administer relief to the poor.<sup>11</sup> Evangelical social compassion was but the fruits of the gospel itself. When John Venn, faced opposition to his ministry at Clapham from 'solfidians' for stressing the importance of the fruits of personal faith, his father Henry Venn wrote to reassure him – 'Every Prophet and every Apostle insists as much upon the fruits of faith, as upon faith itself, and the glory of Christ's Person.'<sup>12</sup>

## WILBERFORCE

John Venn's ministry at Holy Trinity, Clapham, was attended by a group of noted evangelicals, the most well-known of whom was William Wilberforce. Evangelical conversion awakened Wilberforce's social conscience, and led him to embrace the cause of anti-slavery. Around him gathered a talented group of thinkers, writers and MPs, nicknamed the 'Clapham Sect,' who began to exercise a very significant moral and social influence. Living out their personal spiritual transformation through acts of social transformation gave moral impetus and drive to the abolition campaign, a movement that crystallized into the first popular mass movement to use widespread propaganda techniques, letter writing, lecture tours, fund raising, and the distribution of large numbers of tracts. There were even boycotts of the produce of slave labour, especially sugar, and attempts at elections to persuade Parliamentary candidates to oppose slavery. Wilberforce had profound Christian motivation for what he did. Evangelicals remained in a religious and political minority in the early nine-

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 1774, in *Wesley, Works* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed: 1872), (repr. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), Vol 11, p. 79f.

<sup>11</sup> R. Carus, *Memoir of Rev. Charles Simeon*, (London: Hatchard and Son, 1847), pp. 80, 440.

<sup>12</sup> H. Venn, Letter to John Venn, 1 January 1796, in ed. Rev. H. Venn, *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, M.A.*, (London, 1836), pp. 530-31.

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teenth century, and it would be wrong to attribute success in the campaign solely to their work, yet Wilberforce made it a badge of evangelicalism to oppose slavery. To him, the Bible provided the principles upon which slavery was to be abolished.

The evangelical theological emphasis on redemption brought a stress on deliverance from the slavery of sin; setting slaves free from the bondage of slavery could appear a physical representation of this inward spiritual experience of evangelicals. This brought a political and theological dynamic of liberation,<sup>13</sup> which was coupled with Enlightenment concepts of individual liberty, and the right to personal happiness, and provided a broad basis of humanitarian thinking to which campaigners frequently could, and did, make their appeal. This enabled those impelled to social transformation through their spiritual transformation to win sympathy and support from those without the same spiritual motivation. For politicians such as Wilberforce, who were politically and socially conservative, operating in a political climate overshadowed by the French Revolution, such tactics were extremely radical, and have been termed 'holy worldliness': a seeking, through alliance with the forces of the world, to achieve a greater Christian good.<sup>14</sup>

### THOMAS CHALMERS

The dominant figure in nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterianism was Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847). He proposed and experimented with schemes combining evangelism and social concern. Chalmers was a complex figure, drawing not only on his Reformation and Westminster Confession heritage, but also on the thought forms of political economy, which he did much to popularise. He is best known for his scheme of poor relief in his central Glasgow parish, whereby the local parish church supported the poor within the parish from its own resources, without resort to further public funding. Money came from voluntary giving at the church door, and the encouragement of private charity. Chalmers sought to establish a godly commonwealth of interests within the parish, with the wealthy exercising responsibility to support those who were less fortunate than themselves from their providentially given wealth.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> R. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), p. 406.

<sup>14</sup> H. Willmer, 'Holy Worldliness in Nineteenth-Century England', in D. Baker (ed), *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), p. 200.

<sup>15</sup> Chalmers' views are set out in his *Right Christian and Civic Economy for a Nation, with a More Special reference to its Large Towns*, (Glasgow: Collins,

His dynamic preaching and visionary leadership mobilised a large volunteer workforce, and significant financial resources. It was a bold scheme, rooted in the Christendom model of the Reformation, and represented the classic Calvinistic holistic understanding of the Christian message, but it was also significantly shaped by Malthusian-paternalist ideas. Although Chalmers conducted a largely successful experiment with the scheme in the St John's parish in the East End of Glasgow, and extensively promoted it, it was not widely followed, and met with an equivocal response from other Calvinists.

Much has been made of Chalmers' horror of perpetuating 'pauperism' (creating a dependency culture), and certainly he did focus on assisting the deserving poor, and discouraging helping more dubious characters. Some of his lay workers were not as sympathetic as they might have been in their emphasis on discouraging mendicancy and indigence, an ethos that was replicated by many Christian charities. Yet he did strive to break down barriers between rich and poor, and preached strongly on the duty of supporting the needy that was laid on the church, especially its more wealthy members and influential members.<sup>16</sup> However, as a scheme it did not fit too well with rapidly changing, and socially unstable, new industrial cities such as Glasgow, when economic forces beyond the control of ordinary workers could plunge many into unemployment and poverty with little notice. It also failed to address the huge environmental problems of the new urban context.

Although Chalmers' scheme was flawed in many ways, it sprang from the conviction that good deeds were incumbent upon believers: 'the proper remedy ... for the wretchedness of the few is the kindness of the many'.<sup>17</sup> That his church did support the poor in his area, and he mobilised a great deal of charitable giving - the church door collection for the poor averaged £400 per annum - is a fact too easily ignored. So too is that this was combined with an urgent, and successful, evangelistic emphasis in his scheme, and a genuine and successful concern to promote education,

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1821). The forces influencing Chalmers, and his influence on others, are discussed in B. Hilton, 'Thomas Chalmers as a political Economist', in A.C. Cheyne, *The Practical and the Pious*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1985); S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> See T. Chalmers, 'The Blessedness of Considering the Case of the Poor', Sermon IX, in *Works of Thomas Chalmers: Sermons on Public Occasions*, (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1853), pp. 285-314.

<sup>17</sup> T. Chalmers, Preface to 1851 edition of *Christian and Civic Economy*, (Edinburgh, Vol. 1, 1851), p. x.



a vital dimension in social transformation.<sup>18</sup> The scheme represented, in the words of Professor S.J. Brown, ‘the pursuit of social justice, particularly through the spiritual, moral, and material elevation of the oppressed labouring poor of industrializing cities’. The first step to this was the spiritual transformation of individuals, but from it flowed genuine social concern.<sup>19</sup>

When Chalmers moved from parish ministry into lecturing posts at St Andrews and then Edinburgh Universities, his influence upon large numbers of students was significant. One such was Robert Murray McCheyne, an earnest evangelistic preacher who extensively visited the poor of his needy Dundee parish, and whose social conscience was keenly awakened. Preaching on a *textus classicus* of nineteenth-century socially active evangelicals, Matthew 25:34-45 he solemnly warned his congregation that there would be some who would not be welcomed into the kingdom: ‘Your haughty dwelling rises in the midst of thousands who scarce have a fire to warm themselves at, and have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost, and yet you never darkened their door. You heave a sigh perhaps, at a distance, but you do not visit them. Ah, my dear friend, I am concerned for the poor, but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in that great day ... there are many hearing me who now know well they are not Christian because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life blood than its money.’<sup>20</sup>

Another figure significantly influenced by the example of Chalmers was Norman MacLeod. In his ministry at the Barony Church in Glasgow he offered a range of social provisions, including dinner rooms offering cheap, wholesome food for working men, and evening services for people in working clothes. MacLeod believed that spiritual and social transformation went together, arguing that if the temporal was separated from the spiritual, we ‘leave the world to Satan, and give him the advantage over

<sup>18</sup> On Chalmers and Urban Mission see I.J. Shaw, ‘Thomas Chalmers, David Nasmith and the Origins of the City Mission Movement’ *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXVI, No. 1, Jan. 2004.

<sup>19</sup> S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 148. For analysis of the scheme see pp. 90-151.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in T. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997 (Second edition)) p. 40. Chalmers also had a profound impact on the urban ministry of Thomas Guthrie in Edinburgh, which combined extensive social provision with a strong preaching and evangelistic emphasis – see D.L and C.J. Guthrie, *Autobiography of Thomas Guthrie and Memoir by his Sons*, (London, 1877).

us'. Why leave it to 'infidels' to offer 'better houses or better clothing'. He asked whether Christ only has to do with Sundays.<sup>21</sup>

#### ANDREW REED

Someone who epitomises how evangelism and social concern, spiritual and social transformation, have belonged together in evangelicalism, is the English Independent minister Andrew Reed (1787-1862). Reed ministered in Stepney, in the East End of London, not far from the London docks, a place of growing poverty. An evangelical Calvinist, he was called in 1811 to a church which had 60 members, worshipping in a building that could hold 800 people. Over the next fifty years of his ministry, the congregation grew to number 2,000. Reed's pastoral interaction with the needs of the area brought him into contact with a range of people with serious social problems. Within a year of starting in Stepney, Reed took two small orphan children into his own home, and from this small beginning developed the London Orphan Asylum. By the time of his death in 1862 it had provided care for over 2,500 children. He was to start two further orphanages, all major projects of social concern accompanied by a desire for the spiritual good of the children. They were given regular biblical instruction, ministers visited to take services, and Reed himself was often present to offer support, counsel, and friendship.<sup>22</sup>

Reed sought to demonstrate the compassion of Christ to the most vulnerable in society. He discovered that 30,000 children in Britain suffered from severe learning difficulties, without specialist care in hospitals or schools; as adults they often ended up locked in prisons or workhouses. Reed developed a scheme that was to be both hospital and school, and he became a world-leader in the understanding that children with severe learning difficulties could be greatly helped by both education and physiotherapy. First at Park House in Highgate, then later at Earlswood Hospital, Surrey, pioneering care for children with severe learning difficulties was given. No matter how seriously disabled the children were, Reed was convinced they were made in the image of God, and insisted they be given religious instruction and spiritual support. He was appalled at those who believed such children had no souls. In his sixties Reed started one last charity, a hospital for those with incurable and terminal illness, that they might live out their last days in comfort and homely surroundings, with

<sup>21</sup> D. MacLeod, *Memoir of Norman MacLeod D.D.*, (London, Daldy, Ibsister and Co, 1876), Vol. 2, pp 7-8.

<sup>22</sup> On Reed's work see I.J. Shaw, *The Greatest is Charity: Andrew Reed (1787-1862): Pastor, Preacher and Philanthropist*, (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2005).

Christian love and care. The result was the Royal Hospital for Incurables, now the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in Putney. It was a pioneering work in palliative care long before the advent of hospice movement.

This great impulsion to charity towards the vulnerable came from his evangelical faith. In 1828 he advised a minister at an induction service: 'Whatever has a tendency to meliorate the sufferings of humanity, to disperse the darkness of the mind, to subdue the vices of society, to restore man to a divine obedience, and to attach his hopes and thoughts to an unseen eternity, you will see as in perfect harmony with the spirit and letter of your commission.'<sup>23</sup> Reed's ethos and practice is an example of holistic transformative mission, which has been characteristic of historic evangelicalism, indeed of biblical Christianity. The Memorial tablet to Reed erected in the London Orphan Asylum exemplified this. On Reed reaches down to care for a group of small children: in one hand is a Bible, in another he offers a plate of bread. The means of social transformation – bread for life, and of spiritual transformation – the Bread of Life, both offered together.<sup>24</sup>

Amongst Baptists in Britain, the Evangelical Calvinist C.H. Spurgeon continued to stress the duty incumbent on Christians to engage in both evangelism and social concern. His Metropolitan Tabernacle ran almshouses for the elderly, a range of different social relief agencies, and an orphanage. Collections were regularly taken up for the needs of various charities. The Christian was to 'meditate methods of working, plan designs of good, act out deeds of mercy, persevere in labour, and continue in service before God'. The agency God had appointed for doing good was the Christian showing forth the fruits of salvation: 'if the poor be fed, it must be by these hands'.<sup>25</sup> On Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 1877 Spurgeon preached a sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on behalf of the Hospitals of London, on one of the great social transformation texts – the parable of the Good Samaritan. He expected criticism from preachers who preached only on 'those doctrinal statements concerning the way of salvation which are known as "the gospel"'. For doing this he would be dismissed for becoming 'legal', and a 'mere moral teacher'. Yet, Spurgeon was not worried: 'We do not stand in awe of such criticism, for we clearly

<sup>23</sup> A. Reed, *The Man of God: A Charge Delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Ebenezer Miller, M.A.*, (London, 1829), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Mention could have been made here of other evangelicals who sought social transformation alongside spiritual transformation – such as William and Catherine Booth, Thomas Barnardo, Lord Shaftesbury, Elizabeth Fry.

<sup>25</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, 'Where to Find Fruit', Sermon Preached on February 28 1864 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, in *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopaedia*, VIII, (reprinted Michigan 1984), pp. 85-87.

conceive that our Lord Jesus Christ himself would very frequently have come under it. Read the Sermon on the Mount and judge whether certain people would be content to hear the like of it ... They would condemn it as containing very little gospel and too much about good works ... he lays great stress on the love which should shine throughout the Christian character.<sup>26</sup>

#### NINETEENTH-CENTURY MISSIONARY PIONEERS

This commitment to spiritual and social transformation was also characteristic of a number of pioneers in the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement. William Carey is rightly remembered for his inspirational cross-cultural work in India, especially in Bible translation, and evangelism. Yet he was a man of profound social concern, sometimes expressed in radical ways. In England he launched a campaign to boycott the use of sugar, as a way of undermining the sugar plantations in the West Indies and their employment of slave labour. In India he campaigned for better care for lepers, and also for the rights of Indian women, especially against *suti*, the burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyre. He introduced a savings bank to resist the excessive payment of interest, founded schools for children of all castes, and promoted libraries. He did much to further the study of agriculture in India.<sup>27</sup>

Timothy Richard, a Welshman, also served with the Baptist Missionary Society, but later in the nineteenth century in China. After his arrival he served in the Shantung and Shansi provinces where he emphasized the need to find contextually appropriate ways of relating the gospel. This made him a controversial figure, although the problem was not so much promoting theological error, as presenting limited theological content. Richard pushed mission into new avenues when a devastating famine was experienced in northern China in 1876-79, which cost some nine and a half million lives. He used the famine to call people to repentance and a turning to God, but he also disseminated news of the devastation in wealthy areas of China, and overseas. With David Hill, of the English Wesleyan mission, he became a leading agent in distributing relief funds. Such compassionate activity won the gratitude of many Chinese towards the mission; for some the first contact they had with Christians was

<sup>26</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Good Samaritan' Sermon Preached 17 June 1877 at Metropolitan tabernacle, in *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopaedia, Vol. IV*, (repr Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984), pp. 105-106, 116.

<sup>27</sup> See S.P. Carey, *William Carey, D.D.*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924); A.C. Smith, 'The Legacy of William Carey', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 1992.

through their role in disaster relief. It was a decisive moment in developing missionary consciousness, making emergency relief an ongoing concern of overseas mission, undertaken not simply to pave the way for evangelism, but as compassionate service following the pattern of Christ who fed the Five Thousand. Mission was about being and doing, as well as preaching.<sup>28</sup>

#### HIGH CALVINIST APPROACHES

This marriage between gospel outreach and social concern was found amongst Arminian evangelicals, moderate Calvinists, and evangelical Calvinists. It was also, surprisingly, found amongst English high Calvinists, who proved to be activists, even though they made little effort to justify that activism, especially in the field of social concern. Two doctrinal emphases appeared to militate against High Calvinist activity in the realm of social concern: a rejection of the concept of progressive sanctification as an Arminian construct; and a reluctance to make exhortations to practical activity, which might lead to a response from the human will, rather than a response prompted by the sovereign grace of God. High Calvinists rejected an ongoing role for the Law in the life of the believer – it was not the believer's rule of conduct, yet they did not dispute that good works were to be present in the life of the true Christian. As the more cautious John Gill expressed it, 'sanctification is absolutely necessary to salvation'.<sup>29</sup> If there was no evidence of good works, that was a sign of absence of grace.

Robert Hawker, vicar of Charles in Plymouth, was a high Calvinist accused of Antinomianism, yet he demonstrated great generosity, and compassion. His pastoral work in Plymouth, included serving as a chaplain to the garrison, with heroic work visiting in times of typhus fever. He established a female penitentiary, an orphanage, and a society for the relief of the poor. He refused to enforce the payment of tithes owing to him, and used the profits from his books to support his charities. As his friend and biographer commented, although Hawker 'denied progressive sanctification', his life gave ample evidence of it.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> B. Stanley, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), pp. 175-190. See also A. Walls, 'The Multiple Conversions of Timothy Richard: A Paradigm of Missionary Experience', in *The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 236-258.

<sup>29</sup> J. Gill, *A Body of Divinity*, 1770, (repr. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971), p. 559.

<sup>30</sup> J. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Robert Hawker, D.D.*, (London, 1831), p. 262.

High Calvinism became popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century amongst some of the poorest of society. The high Calvinist William Gadsby was reared in poverty, and in Manchester had a special ministry to the poor handloom weavers. As minister of a Strict Baptist Church in one of the poorest areas in the town, he built up a congregation of around 1,000, and became well known for speaking out against forms of political and social oppression. He campaigned vigorously against the Corn Laws, which kept the price of grain, and hence bread, artificially high, in order to protect farmers. They were, to Gadsby, a tax on the urban poor. He was also a man of enormous generosity, giving away around one third of his salary to many of the needy living around him. Such generosity, he believed, was a gift of God: 'O my dear friends, what a mercy what a mercy it is to have a heart to give to the really needy.'<sup>31</sup> When he died in 1844, his obituary in the local paper remembered him as being 'animated by an enlarged philanthropy. Benevolent, hospitable, and kind to all who needed admonition, advice, or assistance, he was constantly engaged in acts of mercy and in dealing out bread to the hungry'.<sup>32</sup>

Much could be said by way of criticism of the approach to social transformation amongst this range of nineteenth-century evangelicals, and some of it is justified. From some there was too much adherence to prevalent social and economic philosophies, such as political-economy, which predominated amongst the middle class. There was too much focus on individuals, and symptoms, without tackling the root causes of social injustice – although campaigns such as those against slavery and the Corn Laws did attempt to deal with structural issues. Yet we could have considered the work of concerned Christians who got themselves elected to local councils and helped to deal with structural issues by working to improve sanitation, drinking water, housing, and education.<sup>33</sup> We should also recognise that many churches were comprised largely of poor members, and that a great deal of giving of a philanthropic nature was by the working classes, for the working classes.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> W. Gadsby, Letter to a Friends, 17 April 1842, in *Gospel Standard Magazine*, 14, March 1848, p. 72. On Gadsby's social concern see I.J. Shaw, *High Calvinists in Action: Calvinism and the City, Manchester and London, 1810-1860*, (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> *Manchester Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1844.

<sup>33</sup> C. Brown, 'To Be Aglow with Civic Ardours' *Records of Scottish Church History Society*, 1996.

<sup>34</sup> R. Smith, 'Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare', in ed. M. Daunton, *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 58.

## THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the later nineteenth century, the tide began to turn against this combination of evangelism and social responsibility, and the evidence suggests that this was a significant discontinuity with what had gone before. It was a response to a series of contextual pressures of the time, and for which no single explanation can be given. The movement was gradual and imperceptible, but by 1914 unmistakable.

Pressures on orthodox belief brought about by Biblical criticism and Darwinism, encouraged desires for a more intense, defensive, and inward looking form of piety, which offered power to resist the blandishments of the world or temptations to theological compromise. The resultant holiness movement fostered a devotional inward spirituality which moved inclined evangelicals away from social engagement. This was coupled with a popular pre-millennialism, expressed in various eschatological schemes, which brought urgency to evangelism in a failing world, and huge and often sacrificial missionary labours, but also a lessening of concern to be doing good in a world expected to imminently pass away. Premillennialism and social concern were not necessarily mutually antagonistic. Lord Shaftesbury was capable of combining the two, determined to be found doing good should the Lord return. Even D.L. Moody, who included premillennial references in many sermons, and epitomised the primacy of urgent, immediate soul-saving, ran homes for needy children, took relief parcels to troops in the American Civil War, and promoted the virtues of temperance, an issue with a strong element of social concern.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, this combination of holiness teaching and premillennialism brought a gloomy view of the world: Christ alone would bring a kingdom fit for people to live in. There were concerns that efforts to reform the world were pointless, and might even be an impious attempt to frustrate the purposes of God. Politics was on the whole disavowed. Holiness and premillennial teaching had no place for the 'holy worldliness' of Wilberforce and others. Postmillennialism became, in the United States, largely the domain of advocates of those who focussed their intention on a golden age on this earth, which would be hastened by social and political engagement. The 'Social Gospel' became the domain of those moving towards theological liberalism.<sup>36</sup>

Alongside these factors should be added the increased prosperity and suburbanisation of much of evangelicalism. Many ministers and congre-

<sup>35</sup> L. Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls: The Life of D.L. Moody*, (Chicago: Moody, 1997); W.R. Moody, *Life of D.L. Moody*, (Toronto, E.H. Revell, 1900).

<sup>36</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 194; 211-217.

gations no longer experienced the daily converse with chronic poverty and need which had been a powerful motivation to activity. Social concern became less primary, less urgent. Local authorities, and then national governments, began to take a greater role in the resolution of social issues, bringing resources and influence to bear on areas such as education and health-care, far greater than charities or churches could offer. This intervention built on the pioneering work of evangelicals, but in time served to undercut their influence in those areas.

The 'Social Gospel' came to be viewed as the antithesis of evangelicism, despite the evidence surveyed here suggesting that urgent evangelicism, theological conservatism, and social concern existed in close harmony from at least the time of Jonathan Edwards onwards. By the early twentieth century British evangelicals were in retreat from this arena. Although figures such as F.B. Meyer maintained the balance of evangelicism and social concern in his ministry into the 1920s, after 1918 non-evangelical thinkers were those who spoke most clearly on issues of social reform.<sup>37</sup> The pattern was repeated in North America, although the trend was more gradual than is often depicted. Fundamentalism is usually seen as the antithesis of the social gospel movement, yet one of the papers in *The Fundamentals* series, 'The Church and Socialism,' by C.R. Erdman of Princeton Theological Seminary, included the appeal, 'A true gospel of grace is inseparable from a gospel of good works. Christian doctrines and Christian duties cannot be divorced ... These social teachings of the Gospel need a new emphasis today by those who accept the whole Gospel, and should not be left to be interpreted and applied by those alone who deny essential Christianity.'<sup>38</sup>

Later Fundamentalists did not see things in the same way. Timothy Smith described the process as the 'Great Reversal,' and it was explored in a book with that title by David Moberg.<sup>39</sup> 'Social Gospel' became synonymous with theological liberalism and anti-evangelicism. Fundamentalists argued that social concern was a distraction from the 'main thing', which was urgent evangelicism.

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<sup>37</sup> See I. Randall, *Spirituality and Social Change: The Contribution of F.B. Meyer (1847-1929)*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); B. Holman, *F.B. Meyer: If I Had a Hundred Lives...* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2007); Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 213.

<sup>38</sup> C.R. Erdman, 'The Church and Socialism' in *The Fundamentals*, 1909-1915, 4 vols, Chapter 71.

<sup>39</sup> T. L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); D. O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern*, (London: Scripture Union, 1973).



## THEOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION IN SOCIETY

### THE TIDE TURNS BACK

Whatever the cause, or combination of causes, for the great reversal, it prevailed through much of the twentieth century, but the tide began to turn back in the 1970s and 1980s. This reversal of the 'Great Reversal' was expressed in the Lausanne Covenant, produced at the end of the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization. Here a transformative balance between proclamation and action was articulated: mission should embrace both evangelism and social concern. Significantly at Lausanne there was a strong representation from the Two-thirds world, where the issues of poverty and oppression were much more contextually alive and pressing than they were in the West. In the Covenant, evangelism is described as 'the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally, and so be reconciled to God,' but the covenant continues - 'The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world.' Those who signed the covenant expressed regret for having 'sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive'.<sup>40</sup> John Stott, a key figure at Lausanne, wrote in 1984, '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' (Matthew 4, 23) and 'went about doing good and healing' (Acts 10, 38). In consequence evangelism and social action have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the church.'<sup>41</sup>

### CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

And there the story should end, with evangelicalism returning to the historic position of the need for both evangelism and social concern, with social transformation flowing from spiritual transformation. Yet, the story moves on, and on the basis of this historical perspective, I want to express some concerns about aspects of the contemporary evangelical scene. The first is the tendency by some writers to slip back into placing the primacy on ethical and social action, rather than this historic pattern which includes both evangelism and social concern. Brian McLaren has

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<sup>40</sup> The Lausanne Covenant, in J.D. Douglas (ed) *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, (London: World Wide Publications, 1974), Section 4, p. 4; Section 5, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> J.R.W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1984), p. 3.

called for a need to look less at ‘whose lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology are right’, and place more emphasis on ‘whose actions, service, outreach, kindness and effectiveness are good’.<sup>42</sup> So too Rob Bell, who in *Velvet Elvis* suggests ‘Perhaps a better question than who’s right, is who’s living rightly.’<sup>43</sup> A corrective is certainly needed for those parts of evangelicalism where the practical outliving of the gospel is insufficiently expressed, and where the personal morality of professed evangelical believers is little different from those in wider society. But this is an over-corrective. If the message is that we only need to get the action and experience right, then correct doctrine will follow, it reverses the classic Protestant and evangelical understanding that works that are acceptable to God flow as fruit from new life in Christ, and from the correct theological understanding of that new life. Changed spiritual status is demonstrated by changed living, changed theology and active gospel compassion.

Another concern is an increasing discomfort I sense among evangelicals in giving verbal expression to the gospel in the context of social concern activities. It is typified in a phrase I have often heard quoted, and attributed to Francis of Assisi: ‘Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words’. This troubles me for two reasons. Firstly as a historian, because Francis probably never said it: in Chapter XVII of his ‘Regula non-Bullata’ (1221), a preliminary version before the Rule approved in 1223, he did say, ‘let all the brothers (friars) preach by their (works) deeds,’ [Ch XVII, 166] although the phrase is not included in The Rule of Francis itself. But we should not argue from this that Francis thought words were unnecessary, or not always necessary. The same chapter urges preachers to promote the ‘utility and edification of the people, by announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and glory with brevity of speech’.<sup>44</sup> In the practical dimensions of social concern, proclamation must certainly be proper to the situation, appropriately contextualized, not crass, nor manipulative of those we are showing concern for. Yet it should be a vital part of the expression of wider compassion for a person’s blessing in this

<sup>42</sup> B. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 223; B. McLaren, *The Last Word and After That*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 197

<sup>43</sup> R. Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005), p. 21

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.Franciscan-archive.org>; *regula non-bullata*, chapter XXVII, 166; *regula bullata*, chapter IX, on preachers. The Roman Catholic Church recently re-asserted the need for missionary activity to include more than humanitarian good works. (*Christianity Today*, Feb. 2008, p. 13, quoting a document from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith).

world and for all eternity. James tells us that faith without works is dead. Surely works without faith are also dead. Works without words does not seem to me the Biblical or historical pattern for bringing people to faith.

The contemporary world needs to see a consistency between action and proclamation. Where that is absent, people are far less likely to believe. David Wells adds, 'proclamation must arise within a context of *authenticity* ... to embody that truth in the way that the Church actually lives ... What postmoderns want to see, and are entitled to see, is believing and being, talking and doing, all joined together in a seamless whole.'<sup>45</sup> We must also avoid the situation where evangelicals who speak out against social evils find themselves marginalised by conservative churches, and are therefore pushed towards the radical end of the theological spectrum. Evangelicals need to resist both the drift into liberalism, and the tendency to marginalise those who seek to uphold the cause of the oppressed.

Another more subtle trend is also apparent. Mark Noll observed in nineteenth-century America a shift in the understanding of divine characteristics away from 'ontological' to 'operational' categories, from 'final value' to 'instrumental' values, with a consequent shift from theocentric activism to activist anthropocentrism.<sup>46</sup> To Jonathan Edwards, true virtue was chiefly 'love to God; the Being of beings, infinitely the greatest and best.' Actions were therefore to have doxological intent.<sup>47</sup> Without wishing to diminish our anthropocentric activism, I wonder if the theocentric dimension is being lost. It is when our theocentric vision is restored through salvation by God's grace, that anthropocentric activism flows as the fruit. Compassion so channelled means that social concern becomes truly doxological.

A further observation I would offer is how often genuine social transformation has flowed from not only spiritual change, but awareness of deep needs. Increased prosperity among some Christians, and physical separation from scenes of need, has accompanied a declining pattern of activity. Evangelism has often been most effectively accompanied by social concern when there is knowledge of, and regular exposure to, those with real social needs. Christians have a duty to be informed of the chronic needs of the world in which we live, and with globalisation and information revolutions, we cannot plead ignorance. Mike Davies in *Planet*

<sup>45</sup> D.F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers – Christ in the Post Modern World*, (Leicester: IVP, 2006), p. 315.

<sup>46</sup> M. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 440-42.

<sup>47</sup> J. Edwards, 'The Nature of True Virtue' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 8 Ethical Writings*, ed. P. Ramsey, (New Haven: Yale, 1989), p. 550.

of *Slums* argues that the cities of the future are being constructed not from glass and steel as urban theorists expected, but from 'crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban dweller squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay'.<sup>48</sup> What Christian response will follow from this awareness, or from the knowledge that there are some 11 million Aids orphans in Africa? As the recent Micah Declaration puts it, 'If we ignore the world, we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world.'<sup>49</sup>

My last comment would be that as evangelicals affirm the authority, reliability, and sufficiency of scripture, they should be those who are most serious about believing and acting upon what the Bible says. So what *are* evangelicals going to do about the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, 'I was a hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took invited me in'? Will evangelicals do more than pay lip service to the Sermon on the Mount, or the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the challenge to rich oppressors in James 5:1-6? If these verses are ignored we are in danger of a functional liberalism. Evangelicals need to decide whether they stand with the rich history of Edwards, or Carey, or Reed, or Spurgeon, or with those Christians I met in East Africa? Any dichotomy between evangelism and social concern, or a tendency to emphasise one at the expense of the other, appears to me unsustainable either biblically, or from the rich overall history of evangelicalism. Both are central and inseparable. However, as history proves, the balance has remained difficult to consistently sustain.

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<sup>48</sup> M. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, (London: Verso, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission', in T. Chester (ed), *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 19.