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Issues Facing Christians Today

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Our Changing World: Is Christian Involvement Necessary?



At the outset of the twenty-first century, we are faced with a bewildering array of challenges which fifty years ago we could never have imagined. On the one hand the pace of technological change has confirmed humanity's cleverness; on the other hand the persistence of global poverty remains a challenge to our sense of justice. We are increasingly interdependent globally and business opportunities abound, but rich and poor are as far apart as ever. We are addressed as consumers rather than as citizens in a material society of great sophistication but with little sense of purpose. The unintended consequences of our actions have caused environmental problems which seriously threaten our future together. Although the threat of nuclear war has receded, we are having to come to terms with the rise of global terrorism, the advent of the suicide bomber and the resurgence of violence which is religiously inspired. The breakdown of the family, particularly in the West, has laid heavy burdens on single parents, has threatened the cohesion of the community and in many cases has led to a sense of alienation amongst young people. We are confused about the nature of human identity, and this confusion can be seen both in the destruction of life through abortion and euthanasia and in our intention to create life through genetics and cloning.

Why get involved in such a world? It is extraordinary that we need to ask this question and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. All of these issues and many others affect both Christians and those with no religious faith. They challenge our sense of identity and purpose. They challenge us to apply Christian thinking to new issues which come upon us at a rapid rate. In the next chapter I will look at how Christians are called to develop a Christian mind, but in this chapter I

want to look at the call to become involved in this world. It is sadly still the case that some believe that Christians do not have social responsibility in this world but only a commission to evangelize those who have not heard the gospel. Yet it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both “went about . . . teaching . . . and preaching” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35 RSV) and “went about doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38 RSV). 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 any need to define what they were doing or why.”¹ Our God is a loving God who forgives those who turn to him in repentance, but he is also a God who desires justice and asks us, as his people, not only to live justly but to champion the cause of the poor and the powerless.

Why should Christians get involved? In the end there are only two possible attitudes which Christians can adopt towards the world. One is escape and the other engagement. (You could say that there is a third option, namely accommodation. But then Christians become indistinguishable from the world and on that account are no longer able to develop a distinctive attitude to it. They simply become part of it.) “Escape” means turning our backs on the world in rejection, washing our hands of it (though finding with Pontius Pilate that the responsibility does not come off in the wash), and steeling our hearts against its agonized cries for help. In contrast, “engagement” means turning our faces towards the world in compassion, getting our hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within us the stirring of the love of God which cannot be contained.

Too many of us evangelicals either have been, or maybe still are, irresponsible escapists. Fellowship with each other in the church is much more congenial than service in an apathetic and even hostile environment outside. Of course we make occasional evangelistic raids into enemy territory (that is our evangelical speciality); but then we withdraw again, across the moat, into our Christian castle (the security of our own evangelical fellowship), pull up the drawbridge and even close our ears to the pleas of those who batter on the gate. As for social activity, we have tended to say it is largely a waste of time in view of the imminent return of the Lord. After all, when the house is on fire, what is the point of hanging new curtains or rearranging the furniture? The only thing that matters is to rescue the perishing. Thus we have tried to salve our conscience with a bogus theology.

THE HERITAGE OF EVANGELICAL SOCIAL CONCERN²

Yet evangelicals have a remarkable history in terms of their commitment to social and economic justice, not least in eighteenth-century Europe and America. The Evangelical Revival, which stirred both continents, should not be thought of only in terms of the preaching of the gospel and the converting of sinners to Christ; it also led to widespread philanthropy, and profoundly affected society on both sides of the Atlantic. John Wesley remains the most striking instance. He is mainly remembered as the itinerant evangelist and open-air preacher, but the gospel he preached inspired people to take up social causes in the name of Christ. Historians have attributed to Wesley's influence rather than to any other the fact that Britain was spared the horrors of a bloody revolution like that in France.³

The change which came over Britain during this period was well documented in J. Wesley Bready's remarkable book *England: Before and After Wesley*, subtitled "The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform". His research forced him to conclude that "the true nursing-mother of the spirit and character values that have created and sustained Free Institutions throughout the English-speaking world", indeed "the moral watershed of Anglo-Saxon history", was "the much-neglected and oft-lampooned Evangelical Revival".⁴ Bready described "the deep savagery of much of the eighteenth century",⁵ which was characterized by:

The wanton torture of animals for sport, the bestial drunkenness of the populace, the inhuman traffic in African negroes, the kidnapping of fellow-countrymen for exportation and sale as slaves, the mortality of parish children, the universal gambling obsession, the savagery of the prison system and penal code, the welter of immorality, the prostitution of the theatre, the growing prevalence of lawlessness, superstition and lewdness; the political bribery and corruption, the ecclesiastical arrogance and truculence, the shallow pretensions of Deism, the insincerity and debasement rampant in Church and State – such manifestations suggest that the British people were then perhaps as deeply degraded and debauched as any people in Christendom.⁶

Then things began to change. In the nineteenth century slavery and the slave trade were abolished, the prison system was humanized, conditions in

factories and mines were improved, education became available to the poor and trades unions began.

Whence, then, this pronounced humanity? – this passion for social justice, and sensitivity to human wrongs? There is but one answer commensurate with stubborn historical truth. It derived from a new social conscience. And if that social conscience, admittedly, was the offspring of more than one progenitor, it nonetheless was mothered and nurtured by the Evangelical Revival of vital, practical Christianity – a revival which illumined the central postulates of the New Testament ethic, which made real the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of men, which pointed the priority of personality over property, and which directed heart, soul and mind, towards the establishment of the Kingdom of Righteousness on earth.⁷

The Evangelical Revival “did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace, than any other movement British history can record”.⁸ For Wesley was both a preacher of the gospel and a prophet of social righteousness. He was “the man who restored to a nation its soul”.⁹

The evangelical leaders of the next generation were committed with equal enthusiasm to evangelism and social action. The most famous among them were Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay, Charles Grant, John Shore (Lord Teignmouth), Thomas Babington, Henry Thornton and, of course, their guiding light, William Wilberforce. Because several of them lived in Clapham, at that time a village three miles south of London, and belonged to Clapham Parish Church, whose rector John Venn was one of them, they came to be known as “the Clapham Sect”, although in parliament and in the press they were mocked as “the Saints”.

It was their concern over the plight of the African slaves which first brought them together. Three days before his death in 1791, John Wesley wrote to Wilberforce to assure him that God had raised him up for his “glorious enterprise” and to urge him not to be weary of well-doing. It is largely to the Clapham Sect (under Wilberforce’s leadership) that the credit belongs for the first settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone (1787), the abolition of the trade (1807), the registration of slaves in the colonies (1820), which put an end to slave smuggling, and finally their emancipation (1833). It is true that “the Saints” were wealthy aristocrats, who shared some of the social blindspots of their time, but they were extremely generous in their philanthropy and the range of their concerns was extraordinary. In addition to the slavery question, they involved them-

selves in penal and parliamentary reform, popular education (Sunday schools, tracts and the *Christian Observer* newspaper), Britain's obligation to her colonies (especially India), the spread of the gospel (they were instrumental in the founding of both the Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society), and factory legislation. They also campaigned against duelling, gambling, drunkenness, immorality and cruel animal sports. Throughout they were directed and motivated by their strong evangelical faith. Ernest Marshall Howse has written of them:

This group of Clapham friends gradually became knit together in an astonishing intimacy and solidarity. They planned and laboured like a committee that never was dissolved. At the Clapham mansions they congregated by common impulse in what they chose to call their "Cabinet Councils" wherein they discussed the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country, and the battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness. And thereafter, in Parliament and out, they moved as one body, delegating to each man the work he could do best, that the common principles might be maintained and their common purposes be realized.¹⁰

Reginald Coupland, in his biography of Wilberforce, justly commented: "It was, indeed, a unique phenomenon – this brotherhood of Christian politicians. There has never been anything like it since in British public life."¹¹

Anthony Ashley Cooper was elected to the British parliament in 1826, aged twenty-five. First in the House of Commons, and then in the House of Lords as the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, he concerned himself successively with the plight of lunatics, child workers in the factories and mills, "climbing boys" or chimney sweeps, women and children in the mines, and the children of the slums, more than 30,000 of whom in London were without a home, and more than a million of whom in the whole country were without schooling. His biographer Georgina Battiscombe, who is often sharply critical of him, nevertheless concludes her account of his life with this generous tribute: "No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery, or to add to the sum total of human happiness."¹² He himself felt able to claim that "most of the great philanthropic movements of the century have sprung from the Evangelicals".¹³

The same story can be told of the United States in the nineteenth century. Social involvement was both the child of evangelical religion and the twin sister

of evangelism. This is clearly seen in Charles G. Finney, who is best known as the lawyer turned evangelist and author of *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835). Through his preaching of the gospel large numbers were brought to faith in Christ. What is not so well known is that he was concerned for “reforms” as well as “revivals”. He was convinced, as Donald W. Dayton has shown in his *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, both that the gospel “releases a mighty impulse toward social reform” and that the church’s neglect of social reform grieved the Holy Spirit and hindered revival. It is astonishing to read Finney’s statement in his twenty-third Lecture on Revival that “the great business of the Church is to reform the world . . . The Church of Christ was originally organized 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.”¹⁴

It is hardly surprising to learn, therefore, that through Finney’s evangelism God raised up “an army of young converts who became the troops of the reform movement of his age”. In particular, “the anti-slavery forces . . . were drawn largely from the converts of Finney’s revivals.”¹⁵

The nineteenth century is known also for the enormous expansion of Christian missions which it witnessed. It must not be imagined, however, that the missionaries concentrated exclusively on preaching, or indeed that their social concern was restricted to aid and relief, to the neglect of development and even socio-political activity. It is doubtful if these distinctions have ever been neatly drawn in practice. No, they took medicine and education, agricultural technique and other technologies as an expression of mission and compassion. They campaigned against injustice and oppression in the name of the gospel. Theirs was not a mission of words but of words and deeds.

“THE GREAT REVERSAL”

Then, however, something happened to challenge the evangelical commitment to social concern. This was especially apparent during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, and especially during the decade following World War I, when a major shift took place which the American historian Timothy L. Smith has termed “the Great Reversal”, and which David O. Moberg investigates in his book with that title.¹⁶

The fight against liberalism

The first cause was the fight against theological liberalism which neglected the preaching of the gospel. Evangelicals felt they had their backs to the wall.¹⁷ Understandably, they became preoccupied with the defence and proclamation of the gospel, for nobody else seemed to be championing historic biblical Christianity. This was the period (actually 1910 – 15) when the series of twelve small books entitled *The Fundamentals* was published in the United States, from which the term “fundamentalism” arose. When evangelicals were busy seeking to vindicate the fundamentals of the faith, they felt they had no time for social concerns.

The rejection of the “social gospel”

Secondly, evangelicals reacted against the so-called “social gospel” which theological liberals were developing at this time, in which the aim was to bring about a Christian society by social and political action. Theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, who was professor of church history at Rochester Seminary, New York, from 1897 to 1917, criticized capitalism and advocated a simple kind of “communism” or Christian socialism.¹⁸ Firstly, he was in error in identifying the kingdom of God with “a reconstruction of society on a Christian basis”.¹⁹ Secondly, he implied that human beings can establish the divine kingdom by themselves (whereas Jesus always spoke of it as a gift of God). The kingdom of God is not Christianized society. It is the divine rule in the lives of those who acknowledge Christ. It has to be “received”, “entered” or “inherited” by humble and penitent faith in him. God’s new society is called to exhibit the ideals of his rule in the world and so to present the world with an alternative social reality. This social challenge of the gospel of the kingdom is quite different from the “social gospel”. It is understandable (if regrettable) that, in reaction to him, evangelicals concentrated on evangelism and personal philanthropy, and steered clear of socio-political action.

The impact of war

The third reason for the evangelical neglect of social responsibility was the widespread disillusion and pessimism which followed World War I, because of its exposure of human evil. Earlier social programmes had failed. Human beings and human society appeared to be irreformable. Attempts at reform

were useless. To be sure, because of the biblical doctrines of original sin and human depravity, evangelicals should not have been taken by surprise. But between the wars there was no evangelical leader to articulate the providence and common grace of God as grounds for persevering hope. Historic reformed Christianity was in eclipse.

The influence of premillennialism

Fourthly, there was the spread (especially through J. N. Darby's teaching and its popularization in the Scofield Bible) of the premillennial scheme. This portrays the present evil world as beyond improvement or redemption, and predicts instead that it will deteriorate steadily until the coming of Jesus, who will then set up his millennial reign on earth. If the world is getting worse, and if only Jesus at his coming will put it right, the argument runs, there seems no point in trying to reform it meanwhile. "Adopting political programs is like cleaning the staterooms on the Titanic after it has hit the iceberg . . . It is far more important simply to preach the Gospel and to rescue souls for the next life."²⁰

The rise of the middle classes

The fifth reason for evangelical alienation from social concern was probably the spread of Christianity among middle-class people, who tended to dilute it by identifying it with their own culture. We have to admit that many of us who place a high value on salvation are deeply conservative culturally and prefer to preserve the status quo rather than get involved in the "messy" business of social and political action. This is one of the reasons why many stereotype Christians as being preoccupied with their own salvation at the expense of the plight of the poor and powerless. Surely, if we are faithful to the Christian gospel, we must take action against injustice wherever we find it. Although I have been able earlier to mention some fine examples of social action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there have certainly been other situations in which the church has acquiesced in oppression and exploitation, and has taken no action against these evils, nor even protested against them.

This "Great Reversal" is explicable for these five reasons. We do not blame our evangelical forebears; in their place we would probably have reacted to contemporary pressures as they did. Not that all evangelicals mislaid their social conscience at the beginning of the twentieth century and between the

wars. Some soldiered on, deeply involved in social as well as evangelical ministries, and thus retained this indispensable outworking of the gospel, without which evangelicalism loses part of its authenticity. But most turned away. Then during the 1960s, the decade of protest, when young people were rebelling against the materialism, superficiality and hypocrisy of the adult world they had inherited, the evangelical mainstream recovered its morale, and things began to change.

THE RECOVERY OF EVANGELICAL SOCIAL CONCERN

Probably the first voice to recall the evangelical constituency to its social responsibilities was that of the American Christian scholar Carl F. H. Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, in his book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947). Not many seemed to listen, but gradually the message caught on. In 1966, at the conclusion of an American conference on world missions, the participants unanimously adopted the “Wheaton Declaration” which firmly bracketed “the primacy of preaching the gospel to every creature” and “a verbal witness to Jesus Christ” with “evangelical social action”, and urged “all evangelicals to stand openly and firmly for racial equality, human freedom, and all forms of social justice throughout the world”.

In Britain in the 1960s a number of evangelical leaders, most of whom were laymen in professional and business life, began to grapple with the social implications of the gospel. Among them were George Goyder, Fred Catherwood and Professor Norman Anderson. Then, at the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele University in 1967, Anglican evangelicals publicly repented of their tendency to withdraw from both the secular world and the wider church, concluding that “evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God”.²¹

The turning point for the worldwide evangelical constituency was doubtless the International Congress on World Evangelization held in July 1974 at Lausanne, Switzerland. Some 2,700 participants gathered from more than 150 nations under the slogan “Let the Earth Hear His Voice”, and at the conclusion of the congress endorsed the Lausanne Covenant. After three introductory sections on the purpose of God, the authority of the Bible and the uniqueness of Christ, its fourth is entitled “The Nature of Evangelism” and its fifth “Christian

Social Responsibility”. The latter declares that “evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty”. But the two paragraphs stand side by side in the covenant, with no attempt to relate them, except for the statement in paragraph 6 that “in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary”.

During the years which followed the Lausanne Congress, there was a certain amount of tension within the evangelical movement, as some emphasized evangelism, others social activity, and all of us wondered how according to Scripture we should spell out the relationship between the two. So in June 1982, under the joint sponsorship of the Lausanne Committee and the World Evangelical Fellowship, the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR) was held in Grand Rapids, and issued its report entitled “Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment”. Although of course we did not see eye to eye on every point, God led us to a remarkable degree of consensus. Social activity was said to be both a consequence of and a bridge to evangelism, and indeed the two were declared to be partners. Besides, they are united by the gospel. “For the gospel is the root, of which both evangelism and social responsibility are the fruits.”²²

Since then the commitment of evangelicals to social action has grown immeasurably. Many consultations have been held and statements issued on subjects as diverse as the environment, disability, war and peace and many aspects of economic and political life. New institutions have been born whose *raison d’être* is to facilitate Christian social action, and a large number of local churches now have projects which seek to apply Christian principles to social action. Many missionary agencies now espouse the concept of holistic mission, which brings evangelism and social action together. Throughout this book, projects, campaigns and organizations are mentioned or listed which are a witness to the recovery of evangelical social concern. Yet sadly in recent years there has also been a backlash against this rediscovery of our Christian social heritage. Some claim that we must focus only on the exposition of Scripture, and personal evangelism as social action is a distraction from these things. But this cannot be so. It is because we have a high view of Scripture and we read it carefully that we find that it does not separate out evangelism from social action and that the supreme example of this is the life and teaching of Jesus. He teaches us that we cannot separate love and justice: for what love desires, justice demands.

THE CHURCH AND POLITICS

In this context it is important to look carefully at the relationship between Christianity and politics, for it is often the case that social action will mean political action of some sort. Yet in the past, evangelicals have been extremely cautious about the relationship between Christianity and politics, believing that they don't mix. This belief was obviously not shared by the Clapham Sect!

In recent years, some of those who were most suspicious of political action have embraced it wholeheartedly. I am thinking here of the many conservative evangelicals in the United States who in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century began to campaign and become vocal on ethical issues such as abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and stem cell research, which they regarded as a threat from a secular liberalism which was antagonistic to the Christian gospel. They became known popularly as the "Moral Majority" and such was the power of their vote that it was thought they were a key factor in the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004, not only because he was sympathetic to such beliefs but also because he professed a personal Christian faith. Others remained cautious about such a close identification of the Christian faith with one political stance, while groups who were focused on social justice also saw political action as an essential part of their commitment to Scripture.²³

It is, therefore, extremely important to examine the relationship between Christianity and politics for two reasons. Firstly, to convince those who are overcautious that there is an appropriate involvement of Christians in politics and that this is part of our Christian calling. Secondly, to delineate the boundaries of that calling so that those who have become deeply involved in politics might appreciate the limits of that involvement and the dangers of politicizing the gospel.

Several different issues are involved in this controversy, and the waters of the debate are muddied by a failure to distinguish between them. The first is the definition of the word "politics". The second concerns the relationship between the social and the political, and why they cannot be kept apart. Thirdly, we need to consider the reasons why some people oppose the church's involvement in politics, and what it is they are trying to safeguard. Then fourthly, we need to examine the relationship between principles and programmes.

The definition of politics

Firstly, we must define our terms. The words “politics” and “political” may be given either a broad or a narrow definition. Broadly speaking, “politics” denotes the life of the city (*polis*) and the responsibilities of the citizen (*politēs*). It is concerned, therefore, with the whole of our life in human society. Politics is the art of living together in a community. According to its narrow definition, however, politics is the science of government. It is concerned with the development and adoption of specific policies with a view to their being enshrined in legislation. It is about gaining power for social change.

Once this distinction is clear, we may ask whether Jesus was involved in politics. In the latter and narrower sense, he clearly was not. He never formed a political party, adopted a political programme or organized a political protest. He took no steps to influence the policies of Caesar, Pilate or Herod. On the contrary, he renounced a political career. In the other and broader sense of the word, however, his whole ministry was political. For he had himself come into the world in order to share in the life of the human community, and he sent his followers into the world to do the same. Moreover, the kingdom of God he proclaimed and inaugurated was a radically new and different social organization, whose values and standards challenged those of the old and fallen community. In this way his teaching had “political” implications. It offered an alternative to the status quo. His kingship, moreover, was perceived as a challenge to Caesar’s, and he was therefore accused of sedition.

It is irrelevant to state that Jesus and his apostles were not interested in politics, and that they neither required nor even commended political action, let alone engaged in it themselves. This is true. They did not. Yet although politics is about the business of the state, it is also about the gaining of power and the exercise of power. The fact that Jesus had a very different view of power was one of the reasons why he was feared by the politicians of his day and why political leaders saw him as attacking their government. It is not for nothing that Mary in the Magnificat said, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52). Although the teaching of Jesus was not overtly political, it subverted unjust political structures, challenged oppression and promised people that there was a new kingdom, characterized by justice, in which the truth rather than political promises set people free. The impact of this on social and political life was so profound that it is quite legitimate to talk of “the politics of Jesus”.²⁴

The outworking of this teaching took some time to have an impact. We have to remember that Christ's followers were a tiny, insignificant minority under the totalitarian regime of Rome. The legions were everywhere, and were under orders to suppress dissent, crush opposition and preserve the status quo. The question is: Would they have been politically active if they had had both the opportunity and the likelihood of success? I believe they would. For without appropriate political action some social needs simply cannot be met. The apostles did not demand the abolition of slavery. But are we not glad and proud that nineteenth-century Christians did? Their campaign was based on biblical teaching regarding human dignity, and was a legitimate extrapolation from it. The apostles did not build hospitals either, or require them to be built, but Christian hospitals are a legitimate extrapolation from Jesus' compassionate concern for the sick. Just so, political action (which is love seeking justice for the oppressed) is a legitimate extrapolation from the teaching and ministry of Jesus. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has commented in his particularly colourful way, "I am puzzled which Bible people are reading when they suggest religion and politics don't mix."²⁵

Social service and social action

Secondly, we need to consider the relation between the "social" and the "political", now using this word in its narrower sense. In its final chapter, the Grand Rapids report "Evangelism and Social Responsibility" addressed itself to this question. It distinguished between "social service" and "social action", and helpfully drew up the following table:

Social Service	Social Action
Relieving human need	Removing the causes of human need
Philanthropic activity	Political and economic activity
Seeking to minister to individuals and families	Seeking to transform the structures of society
Works of mercy	The quest for justice ²⁶

The report went on to delineate socio-political action in these terms: "It looks beyond persons to structures, beyond the rehabilitation of prison inmates to the reform of the prison system, beyond improving factory conditions to securing a more participatory role for the workers, beyond caring for the poor

to improving – and when necessary transforming – the economic system (whatever it may be) and the political system (again, whatever it may be), until it facilitates their liberation from poverty and oppression.”²⁷

It seems clear, then, that genuine Christian social concern will embrace both social service and social action. It would be artificial to divorce them. Some cases of need cannot be relieved at all without political action (the harsh treatment of slaves could have been ameliorated, but not slavery itself; it had to be abolished). To go on relieving other needs, though necessary, may condone the situation which causes them. If travellers on the Jerusalem – Jericho road were habitually beaten up, and habitually cared for by “Good Samaritans”, the need for better laws to eliminate armed robbery might well be overlooked. If road accidents keep occurring at a particular crossroads, it is not more ambulances that are needed but the installation of traffic lights to prevent accidents. It is always good to feed the hungry; it is better if possible to eradicate the causes of hunger. So if we truly love our neighbours, and want to serve them, our service may oblige us to take (or solicit) political action on their behalf.

The politicization of Christianity

Thirdly, we need to understand those who are hostile to the church being politically involved. There is, of course, a real danger of the politicization of the gospel, which is the identification of the Christian faith with a political programme. This is wrong for two reasons. The first is that it ignores the primary concern of the Christian faith, which is to love God – the “first and greatest” commandment. Loving our neighbours as ourselves is also important, and they belong together. The second reason is that in a fallen world, no one political programme can claim to be the expression of the will of God.

As Archbishop William Temple, probably the most socially concerned Archbishop of Canterbury in the twentieth century, put it, “Its assertion of Original Sin should make the Church intensely realistic and conspicuously free from Utopianism.”²⁸ Certainly the evangelical Christians who gathered in Lausanne at the great International Congress on World Evangelization (1974) declared forthrightly in their covenant: “We . . . reject as a proud, self-confident dream the notion that man can ever build a Utopia on earth.”²⁹

We should also not forget that our call to social involvement must be integrated into our spiritual lives. We cannot, for instance, divorce social action or

social service from prayer. One good example of this comes from the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Many who visit Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity are surprised that every lunchtime they leave their life-sustaining work in dispensaries and in the home for the dying. Why go back so soon? To pray. They have learnt that to work without prayer is to achieve only what is humanly possible, and their desire is to be involved in divine possibilities.³⁰

The church should, therefore, not forget its primary calling to pray, worship, evangelize and call people to follow Christ. Politically, it also needs to be aware that even as it seeks the very best for human society and studies the Word of God in pursuit of a Christian mind, it cannot enshrine Christian thinking into a particular political programme. As we shall see, one of the virtues of democracy is that it leads us to humility and the necessity of listening to one another, especially when we disagree with one another and are seeking to find a way forward.

The relationship between principles and programmes

In 1942 William Temple emphasized the important distinction between principles and programmes in his well-known book *Christianity and the Social Order*.³¹ “The Church is committed to the everlasting Gospel . . . it must never commit itself to an ephemeral programme of detailed action.”³² Readers of Temple will know that he was very far from saying that religion and politics do not mix. His point was different, namely that “the Church is concerned with principles and not policy”.³³ The reasons why he believed the church as a whole should refrain from “direct political action” by developing and advocating specific programmes could be summed up as “integrity” (the church lacks the necessary expertise, though some of her members may have it), “prudence” (she may prove to be mistaken and so be discredited) and “justice” (different Christians hold different opinions, and the church should not side with even a majority of its members against an equally loyal minority).

So the Church is likely to be attacked from both sides if it does its duty. It will be told that it has become political when in fact it has been careful only to state principles and point to breaches of them; and it will be

told by advocates of particular policies that it is futile because it does not support these. If it is faithful to its commission it will ignore both sets of complaints and continue as far as it can to influence all agencies and permeate all parties.³⁴

Of course, we need to recognize that individual Christians and even specialist Christian agencies will have expertise on policy issues and will speak out, campaign and conduct research on these issues. It may also be that a large number of Christians find themselves in agreement over a particular policy and unite in either supporting it or protesting against it. However, these are different from committing the church to a particular policy. Even if we agree with this clarification of roles and concede that not all Christians are responsible for working out policies, we still have to grapple with the principles, and these are by no means always easy to formulate.

THREE POLITICAL OPTIONS

What is necessary now is to take up the three possible attitudes to social change which we have been considering and give them a political twist, at the same time noting what view of human beings each presupposes.

Authoritarianism

Authoritarian governments impose their vision of the world on the people. They do not have the checks and balances of a constitution, bill of rights or free and fair elections. Authoritarian governments are obsessed with control and have a pessimistic view of human nature. They do not believe that trust is at the heart of civil society, but are suspicious of the consequences of human freedom and personal choice. Within human history, authoritarian government, whether it be fascist, communist or an expression of dictatorship as it can be found in some countries, does not believe in social discourse, as it does not believe that anything is to be learned from the people. Since people desire to have their human rights and wish to be free to choose how they live their lives, authoritarian government usually not only imposes its vision of society on the people but coerces the people into accepting that vision. This has led to violence and the suppression of human rights in many societies, not only of those who have resisted in the name of freedom but also of those groups who are not tolerated by the authoritarian regime. This, in the twentieth century, led in its

most extreme form to Nazi concentration camps and the Gulag Archipelago of the former Soviet Union. Even if an autocracy were to be genuinely benevolent, it would demean its citizens because it did not trust them to have any share in decision-making.

Anarchism

At the other end of the spectrum comes anarchy. In this philosophy there is such optimism about the individual that law, government and indeed all authority are seen not only as superfluous but as a threat to human freedom. The Russian philosopher Bakunin was against any unequal distribution of power. He commented: “Do you want to make it impossible for anyone to oppress his fellow-man? Then make sure that no one shall possess power.”³⁵ Writer Brian Morris has commented:

The term anarchy comes from the Greek, and essentially means “no ruler”. Anarchists are people who reject all forms of government or coercive authority, all forms of hierarchy and domination. They are therefore opposed to what the Mexican anarchist Flores Magon called the “sombre trinity” – state, capital and the church. Anarchists are thus opposed to both capitalism and to the state, as well as to all forms of religious authority. But anarchists also seek to establish or bring about by varying means, a condition of anarchy, that is, a decentralized society without coercive institutions, a society organized through a federation of voluntary associations.³⁶

Although such a definition seems innocuous, anarchy has been associated with violence as well. Some anarchists have sought to bring about the fall of the state or of other institutions through violence, and in the popular imagination anarchy is more associated with chaos than social order. The problem is, then, that while authoritarianism has a pessimistic view of the human condition and denies people freedom and dignity, anarchy has a too-optimistic view of human nature, seemingly ignoring the fact that the human race is fallen and capable of great depravity. We now know that no Christian view of civil society can be expressed in a utopian dream, because people are not only created in the image of God but are fallen, and any society must come to terms with both of these elements of human nature. It is for this reason that we now turn to democracy.

Democracy

Democracy is the third option. It is the political expression of persuasion by argument. If authoritarianism, being pessimistic, imposes law arbitrarily, and anarchy, being optimistic, has an inadequate view of authority, then democracy, being realistic about human beings as both created and fallen, involves citizens in the framing of their own laws. At least this is the theory. In practice, it is easy for the media to manipulate the people and for corruption to interfere with the political process. And in every democracy there is the constant danger of trampling on minorities.

A number of political philosophies are consistent with democracy. Many forms of socialism see democracy at the heart of civil society, with social democracy seeing the provision of welfare as necessary for a just society. Here the aim is that society should be run for the good of all. In liberal democracy the focus is on freedom and the individual rather than on equality and the community. Economic markets are at the centre of the society and the role of the state is seen as secondary to individual choice. Social democracy and liberal democracy are perhaps the two most familiar models which we see in practice today. Yet two other models are worth mentioning. Libertarianism focuses entirely on the choices of individuals and confines the state to protecting individuals from coercion. In this view, providing help for those who are disadvantaged is to interfere with freedom. In some ways it is a more extreme form of liberalism. In communitarianism, the emphasis is on the community and tradition rather than the individual. It is an alternative to liberalism and libertarianism and points to the need to retain our shared moral values and institutions, such as the family, through which we discover our identity.

“The word ‘democracy’ and its derivatives apply to decision-procedures,” writes John R. Lucas in his book *Democracy and Participation*. The word describes three aspects of the decision-making process. The first concerns who takes it. “A decision is democratically taken if the answer to the question ‘who takes it?’ is ‘more or less everybody’, in contrast to decisions taken only by those best qualified to take them, as in a meritocracy, or those taken by only one man, as in an autocracy or monarchy.” Secondly, democracy describes how a decision is reached. “A decision is taken democratically if it is reached by discussion, criticism and compromise.” Thirdly, democracy describes the spirit in which a decision is made, namely “being concerned with the interests of all, instead of only a faction or a party”.³⁷

So modern democracy has the best chance of reflecting the balanced biblical view of human beings, as we might expect in view of its roots in post-Reformation Christian Europe. It also gives Christians the opportunity to make a constructive contribution in a pluralistic society, by getting into the public debate (whether on disarmament or divorce, abortion or in vitro fertilization) and by seeking to influence public opinion until there is a public demand for legislation which would be more pleasing to God. For if democracy is government by consent, consent depends on consensus (or at least it does so when electoral procedures are truly democratic), and consensus arises out of a discussion in which the issues become clarified.

During the twentieth century the ideologies of fascism and communism were imposed on people by force. Both claimed to be able to reach an ideal state in which humanity could transcend its historical struggles. The result was misery, injustice and terror for millions of people. At the outset of the twenty-first century we have seen, with the collapse of Communism, a wave of democratization sweep over the former Soviet Union and the remarkable sight of elections in Iraq, formerly under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, even though Iraq is still fragile and chaotic.

What is so appealing about democracy? After all, it is a fragile way of organizing a society. It can be hijacked, corrupted and abused by the powerful. Yet, whatever our political colour may be, Christians tend to advocate democracy, which was popularly defined by Abraham Lincoln as “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. Not that it is “perfect or all-wise”, as Winston Churchill conceded in the House of Commons on 11 November 1947. “Indeed,” he continued, “it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government – except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

The fact is that it is the wisest and safest form of government yet devised. This is because it reflects the paradox of our humanness. On the one hand, it takes the creation seriously (that is, human dignity), because it refuses to govern human beings without their consent and insists instead on giving them a responsible share in the decision-making process. On the other hand, it takes the fall seriously (that is, human depravity), because it refuses to concentrate power in the hands of one person or a few people and insists instead on dispersing it, thus protecting human beings from their own pride and folly. Reinhold Niebuhr put it succinctly: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”³⁸

In talking about the importance of democracy, Catholic theologian Richard Neuhaus says:

Democracy is the appropriate form of governance in a fallen creation in which no person or institution, including the church, can infallibly speak for God. Democracy is the necessary expression of humility in which all persons and institutions are held accountable to transcendent purposes imperfectly discerned . . . of course democracy is unsatisfactory. All orders short of the Kingdom of God are unsatisfactory. The discontents of democracy – its provisionality and incompleteness – are the signs of political health. The hunger for a truly satisfying way of putting the world in order is laudable. But that is a hunger for the Kingdom of God and it is dangerously misplaced when it is invested in the political arena.³⁹

Christians should be careful not to “baptize” any political ideology (whether of the right, the left or the centre) as if it contained a monopoly of truth and goodness. At best a political ideology and its programme are only an approximation to the will and purpose of God. Those parties which explicitly label themselves as Christian need also to be aware of this. The fact is that Christians are to be found in most political parties and are able to defend their membership on conscientious Christian grounds. Thus, to indulge in a blunt oversimplification, both the main political ideologies in Western societies appeal to Christians for different reasons. Capitalism appeals because it encourages individual human initiative and enterprise, but also repels because it seems not to care that the weak succumb to the fierce competition it engenders. Socialism appeals, on the other hand, because it has great compassion for the poor and the weak, but also repels because it seems not to care that individual initiative and enterprise are smothered by the big government which it engenders. Each attracts because it emphasizes a truth about human beings, either the need to give free play to their creative abilities or the need to protect them from injustice. Each repels because it fails to take with equal seriousness the complementary truth. Both can be liberating. Both can also be oppressive. As economist and statesman J. K. Galbraith put it: “Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism, it’s just the opposite.” It is understandable that many Christians dream of a third option which overcomes the present confrontation and incorporates the best features of both.

In democracy we are called to listen humbly to one another realizing that we do not have a monopoly of the truth, while pursuing the purposes of God

for our society. Because human beings are fallen there is bound to be a gap between the divine ideal and the human reality, between what God has revealed and what humans find possible.

OUR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

When faced with the complexities of modern life, Christians can be tempted to move to one of two extremes. Firstly, they can succumb to despair and even cynicism. They cite disagreements between Christians, a Bible which is out of date and issues which can only be understood by experts as the reasons why things are hopeless. They do not trust God to speak to us through the Scriptures and to lead us into the truth. Secondly, others can be naïve and simplistic. They want quick solutions and often see the issues in black and white rather than reflecting wisely on them in the light of Scripture. They may deny the problems, cite proof texts, rubbish those who disagree with them and do anything rather than grapple with the issues that face us in the light of Scripture. What is needed, then, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, is to develop a Christian mind and that means analysing the issues, reading the Scriptures, listening to others and taking action.

However, even when we have done our homework and discussed, debated and prayed together, we need to ask, “On whose shoulders does political responsibility rest?” Failure to ask and answer this question is one of the main reasons for the current confusion over Christian political involvement. We need to distinguish between Christian individuals, groups and churches. All individual Christians should be politically active in the sense that, as conscientious citizens, they will vote in elections, inform themselves about contemporary issues, share in the public debate, and perhaps write to a newspaper, lobby their member of parliament or congress or take part in a demonstration. Further, some individuals are called by God to give their lives to political service, in either local or national government. Christians who share particular moral and social concerns should be encouraged to form or join groups which will study issues at a deeper level and take appropriate action. In some cases these will be exclusively Christian groups; in others Christians will want to contribute their biblical perspective to mixed groups, whether in a political party, a trade union or a professional association.

Granted the propriety of political thought and action by Christian individuals and groups, however, should the church as a whole involve itself in politics?

Certainly the church must teach both the law and the gospel of God. This is the duty of the church's pastors, teachers and other leaders. And "when the church concludes that biblical faith or righteousness requires it to take a public stand on some issue, then it must obey God's Word and trust him with the consequences."⁴⁰ Whether we think the church should go beyond teaching and take corporate political action of some kind is likely to depend on whether we adhere to the Lutheran, Reformed or Anabaptist traditions within Protestantism in relation to church and state. At least we can agree that the church should not enter this field without the necessary expertise. But when church leaders do their homework thoroughly, and take time and trouble to study a topic together in order to reach a common Christian mind and recommend common Christian action, their informed and united stand is extremely influential.

Take the individual Christian first. In general terms, every Christian is called to be both a witness and a servant. For each of us is a follower of the Lord Jesus who both witnessed a good confession and said, "I am among you as a serving man". Thus *diakonia* (service) and *martyria* (witness) are inseparable twins. Yet different Christians are called to different specialist ministries, just as the Twelve were called to the ministry of the Word and prayer, while the Seven were called to take charge of the daily distribution to the widows (see Acts 6). The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ enforces the same lesson. Just as each member of the human body has a different function, so each member of the body of Christ has a different gift and so a different ministry. At the same time, whatever our specialist calling may be, emergencies will override it. The priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan could not excuse their shameful neglect of the man who had been assaulted and robbed by saying that their calling was to work in the temple. If we are called to a predominantly social ministry, we still have an obligation to witness. If we are called to a predominantly evangelistic ministry, we still cannot say that we have no social responsibilities.

As for the local church, the versatility of its outreach can be greatly increased if full use is made of all its members with their different gifts and callings. It is a very healthy thing for the local church's oversight or leadership to encourage people with similar concerns to coalesce into "special interest" groups or "study and action" groups. Some will have an evangelistic objective – house-to-house visitation, a music group, a world mission group, etc. Other groups will have a social concern – sick and welfare visiting, a housing association, community or race relations, the care of the natural environment, pro-life,

anti-abortion campaigning, the needs of an ethnic minority, etc. Such specialist groups supplement one another. If an occasional opportunity is given to them to report back to the church membership as a whole, the representative nature of their work will be affirmed and they can receive valuable support from their parent body in terms of advice, encouragement, prayer and financial backing.

No one Christian could, or should try to, get involved in every kind of ministry. But each local church (at least of any size) can and should get involved in as many areas as possible, through its groups. The groups make it realistic for the church greatly to diversify its concern and action.⁴¹ As we shall see in the next chapter, Christians need to have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures in order to give them the theological foundations for Christian involvement. Christian reflection and Christian action cannot be separated.

I end this chapter with what may be a rather surprising reference to the Roman Catholic mass. The word “mass” is said to be derived from the final sentence of the old Latin rite, *Ite, missa est*. In polite English it might be rendered, “Now you are dismissed.” In more blunt language it could be just, “Get out!” – out into the world which God made and godlike beings inhabit, the world into which Christ came and into which he now sends us. For that is where we belong. The world is the arena in which we are to live and love, witness and serve, suffer and die for Christ.

NOTES

- 1 “Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment, The Grand Rapids Report”, in John Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974 – 1989* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 179.
- 2 The adjective “evangelical” is used in different ways by different people, but in this book it denotes those Christians who, as heirs of the Reformation, emphasize Scripture as having supreme authority in the church, and the cross of Christ as being the only ground of salvation.
- 3 G. M. Trevelyan endorsed the opinion of the French historian Elie Halevy that evangelical religion in England “was the chief influence that prevented our country from starting along the path of revolutionary violence”, *English Social History* (London: Longmans Green, 1942), p. 477. See also W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. VI (London: Longmans Green, 1919), p. 376.
- 4 J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), pp. 11, 14.

- 5 Ibid., p. 126.
- 6 Ibid., p. 405.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 327.
- 9 Ibid., p. 316.
- 10 Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics, The "Clapham Sect" and the growth of freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 26. See also Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734–1984* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), chapter 5.
- 11 Howse, *Saints in Politics*, p. 27.
- 12 Georgina Battiscombe, *Shaftesbury: A Biography of the 7th Earl 1801–1885* (Bend, Ore.: Constable, 1974), p. 334.
- 13 Quoted by David O. Moberg in *The Great Reversal, Evangelism versus social concern* (1972; London: Scripture Union, 1973), p. 184. For an account of evangelical social work in Britain in the nineteenth century, see also Kathleen Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).
- 14 Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 15–24. See also Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (1957; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980). Dr Smith begins his preface by saying that Thomas Paine, if he had visited New York in 1865, would have been amazed to discover that “the emancipating glory of the great awakenings had made Christian liberty, Christian equality and Christian fraternity the passion of the land” (p. 7).
- 15 From an article by Donald W. Dayton in *The Post-American* (March 1975).
- 16 Moberg, *The Great Reversal*. See also George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 85–93; Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, p. 212. For a more concise, historical look at the period of “the Great Reversal” see James Davidson Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 23–34.
- 17 Michael Cassidy, *The Passing Summer: A South African Pilgrimage in the Politics of Love* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp. 253–4.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 391–400.
- 19 Ibid., p. 149.
- 20 George Marsden, “An Overview”, in Michael Cromartie (ed.), *No Longer Exiles* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), p. 14.
- 21 Philip Crowe (ed.), *The National Evangelical Anglican Congress, Keele 67* (London: Falcon, 1967), para. 20.
- 22 Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known*, p. 185.
- 23 See Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).
- 24 On this, see Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- 25 Cited on www.christian-aid.org.uk/worship/0210into/quotes.htm.

- 26 Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known*, p. 196.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 197 – 8.
- 28 William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (London: Penguin, 1942), p. 29.
- 29 “The Lausanne Covenant”, para. 15. See Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known*, p. 49.
- 30 Jane Hatfield, *Creative Prayer*, Spirituality Series no. 7 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1983).
- 31 Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, p. 54.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., p. 31.
- 34 Ibid., p. 59.
- 35 Mikhail Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, ed. G. P Maximoff (Rockland, Me.: The Free Press, 1965), p. 271.
- 36 Brian Morris, “Anthropology and Anarchism”, pp. 35 – 41, in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, no. 45, p. 38.
- 37 John R. Lucas, *Democracy and Participation* (1975; Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), p. 10. Also recommended is Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of the Light and the Children of the Darkness* (London: Nisbet, 1945). He wrote it eighteen months before the end of World War II, in which he saw “bourgeois civilization” collapsing before the onslaught of Nazi barbarism. He subtitles his book “A vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defenders”. His faith in democracy was not the blind optimism of liberals who, having no conception of original sin, held a “fatuous and superficial view of man” (p. 15). It was rather that democracy is the best way to resolve the tension between the individual and the community, self-interest and the common good, freedom and order.
- 38 Niebuhr, *The Children of the Light*, p. vi.
- 39 Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 116, 124 – 5.
- 40 Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known*, p. 202.
- 41 CARE, Jubilee Trust, Tearfund and the Institute for Contemporary Christianity (among others) all sponsor groups which seek to blend Christian thought on specific issues, with action. See M. A. Eden and E. C. Lucas, *Being Transformed* (London: Marshall, 1988), especially Appendix 3; and Roy McCloughry, *The Eye of the Needle* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990).