

EVANGELICALS AND SOCIAL ACTION -The Place of Exegesis

Rev I.M.Stringer, BA  
(High Wycombe)

*"Social Ethics is a growth industry among evangelicals"*. So observed Alan Gibson in the second issue of *'Foundations'* (p.34). The shelves in our Christian bookshops alone bear witness to this, but there are other signs which confirm this statement. There are organisations such as the Festival of Light, study groups as the Shaftesbury Project and magazines as Third Way. The reaction against the social gospel, if this is a true assessment of why evangelicals retreated into pietism, is over. Some express shame for this pietistic past, but by the swing of the pendulum, a worse danger might confront us, that of an evangelical world view where the Kingdom of God is seen mainly, if not purely, in social terms.

This renewed emphasis on social action has raised certain problems which demand answers. Alan Gibson's article outlined some of these. How is this to be done? In view of our attitude to Scripture, evangelicals should not need to think long over this question. It is through the careful exegesis of the Bible that our whole attitude to social action should be forged. By this way alone can we ensure that our growth industry does not grow into a Frankenstein.

The Evangelical View of the Place of Scripture

The classic evangelical view, as expressed by A.A. Hodge, is that we should *"deduce from the doctrines and precepts of the Bible, rules ... for the guidance of the individual in all the relations of life."* Non-evangelical writers reject this position. N.H.G.Robinson, for instance, considers *"It represents revelation as if it consisted of objective, external, and so far as its*

*recipients are concerned, arbitrary truth which is simply set there to be blindly accepted, and of objective, external and similarly arbitrary commands which are likewise set there to be blindly obeyed.*" [The Groundwork of Christian Ethics, p.153]. As we shall see, this is a misunderstanding of the evangelical position, but it indicates that a different view of Scripture will lead to a different view of ethics.

This is not the place to establish the evangelical attitude to Scripture. Once this is accepted, however, it becomes obvious that our ethics should come out of Scripture and we should not read into Scripture what we want to find there. The so called insights of General Ethics cannot help us. It is true that many non-Christians preach Christian values on non-biblical grounds, but that does not mean that there is a Natural Ethic which exists completely independently of revelation. When non-Christians *"do by nature things required by the law, ... they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts."* [Rom.2:14f]. The natural man sees things dimly; the Bible is, to use David Field's phrase, *"God's demister"*. Why should we use the thickly steamed up window of Natural Ethics, when through the Bible things are much clearer?

It must be admitted, however, that we cannot wash ourselves clean of presuppositions when we open the Bible. We are members of a society and have its views fired at us all the time. We mix with particular social groups and incline to different political philosophies. What we should endeavour to do is to recognise these presuppositions, test them by Scripture and amend or perhaps even exchange them.

### The Nature of Christian Ethics

The Bible speaks and we must listen. It will soon become clear, however, that the Bible is not an exhaustive directory of social behaviour. We will

look in vain if we expect to find verses explicitly giving instructions on, say, the method of educating our children, the disposal of atomic waste or what to do with micro-processors. It was this characteristic of Scripture which made the Pharisees fill the gaps with their traditions.

A further look will reveal that not every aspect of the Bible's social teaching has the same value. There are the "*weightier matters of the law*" which must be carried out without neglecting the others. This is not simply a league table of priorities, but also a distinction between precepts and principles. The New Testament especially, although it is far from absent in the Old, seeks to get behind the precepts of the law to the principles which produce them. Our Lord's teaching in Matt 5 and the statements that love is the fulfilment of the law are examples of this. Oliver Barclay comments, "*God has given us some rules (e.g. Thou shalt not commit adultery) but a reading of both Old Testament and New Testament soon shows that these are specific applications of wider principles. If it were left at the level of principles many of us would find it hard to apply at all. If it were left at the level of rules we should easily fall into legalism.*" [*The Nature of Christian Morality in the symposium, Law, Morality and The Bible, p.142*].

The Biblical ethic, then, includes both precept and principle. The precept illustrates and gives substance to the principle, and the principle explains the precept. This means that an important task of Christian ethics is to find the principles, apply them to the precepts and through this apply them to the modern world. Generally, evangelicals have related these principles to the theme of Creation. This includes the creation ordinances such as marriage, work, subduing the earth; the imitation of the Creator in, for instance, truth, love, faithfulness, justice;

and the spoiling of creation by sin. An example of this last point is our Lord's words on divorce, where the lowering of the creation ideal had to be controlled by legislation (Mark 10:2-9).

Some evangelicals wish to add other themes to that of creation, such as the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom theme is not entirely irrelevant, but it does bring in problems. There can be no doubt that being under Christ's rule affects our attitude to our neighbour, making us more concerned for him. Also, it gives us a stronger commitment to the biblical view of life and enables us to see the fallenness of man much more clearly. On the other hand, if we wish to maintain the distinction between social concern and evangelistic concern, as evangelicals must, then seeing social concern as the imitation of Christ in redeeming the world has obvious dangers. Another consideration is its impact as a major principle. As all men are created and are responsible to their creator whether they accept it or not, Creation Ethics, in the Christian's view, are binding on all men. Non-Christians, however, are not in the Kingdom. It is difficult to see how an ethic based on the Kingdom of God can be related to those who are in the Kingdom of Satan. (For further discussion, see the brief appendix on this subject to A.N. Triton's 'Salt to the World').

Having principles as well as precepts leads to the Biblical Ethic being a reasonable ethic. They are not arbitrary commands, but once the concepts of the Bible are accepted, reasonable ones. As they are built into creation, they can be argued on rational grounds. We do not arrive at our own position by a process of rational argument, the Christian ethic is a revealed ethic, but as God has given the "why" as well as the "what", we are able to hold it together in a logically consistent system which is also compatible with nature.

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their textual, biblical and cultural context, then we must agree. This form of proof is hardly exegetical. On the other hand, we must go to the very text of Scripture. Oliver Barclay reports that a respected evangelical leader told him his method was to base his ideas on the general themes of Scripture and not on particular scriptures. He adds this comment: "*The result is a deductive system which can very quickly take off and lose contact with the ways the biblical themes are in fact used.*" [Third Way, April 1979, p.31]. It is this thematic approach which seems to be in Bishop Ronald Williams' mind when he says, "*I never find it too easy to prove in so many words from the Bible that pre-marital intercourse is wrong, but I am quite sure that this can be deduced from the whole spirit and message of the Bible.*" [Christian Ethics, 1973 Islington Conference, p.8f]. Is it possible that the Bible as a whole says something that does not arise from the actual text?

We have discussed principles and precepts, but where do we get these principles from? We can easily go astray here and assume that the reason behind certain laws is something akin to modern hygiene or political thinking. Scripture should explain scripture, therefore ethical principles should be demonstrated from the Bible. There is two way traffic here. Exegesis finds the ethical principles and these in turn guide the exegesis of the text.

It is also by careful exegesis that the problem of cultural differences should be met. Some Christians deny that culture should be taken into account at all, considering that it diminishes the authority of the Bible and makes knowledge of ancient social history essential before anyone can understand the Bible. We do not wish to detract from the authority or the clarity of the Bible, but to ignore cultural distance altogether is impossible to do consistently. What it means in practice is that certain passages are ignored or allegorised, which in fact

lowers the authority and clarity of Scripture.

The Bible is a human as well as a divine book. It was written in human languages, which are a part of culture. When originally spoken and written, it was addressed to people with a particular social and cultural background. The Bible itself is aware of cultural differences (e.g. Mark 7:3f). In fact, the Bible can be used as a source book of ancient middle-eastern culture. Most readers of the Bible have some knowledge of biblical culture, much of which is drawn from Scripture itself, but also from other elements including teaching at school and in their churches.

Having said this, it is also true that cultural differences have been overplayed in recent years. The Bible deals with a phenomenon that all cultures know: sin. The various forms that sin takes, such as murder, stealing, lying, pride, oppression, adultery, have not changed. They are all transcultural. Creation Ethics demand that the principles of right and wrong are the same for all cultures, because the one God made all men. The remedy for sin remains the same; the punishment for sin remains the same. What is most important is that the God who reveals himself in the Bible remains the same.

Setting a text in its cultural background does not mean that any of its content can be discarded as untrue to fact, if the standpoint of the text indicates its truth. In the Bible, God speaks to a culture (primarily, not exclusively), not through it. Angels, devils, hell, heaven are not symbols or mythical packing, they are real. There can be no place for radical reconstructions of the biblical message, on the basis that it is an alien culture, to suit the different cultures of today's world. Rather we should apply the biblical theology in its wholeness to our

different cultures to enable us to order ourselves by the biblical standard, and where necessary, to be challenged and changed by it. Modern culture is not the Absolute: Biblical Theology is. The expression of this theology may be different to meet different situations, but the theology itself must remain.

The exegete must identify any cultural context as well as the theological content of the text. The cultural content can then be applied, through the theology behind it, to our own culture. Where, however, the text is transcultural, then it is binding as it stands. Two examples should clarify this. The law on parapets (Deut.22:8) relates to a culture where roofs were flat and people could walk freely on them. The principle is that we are our brother's keeper and are responsible for his safety. Putting parapets on our roofs in Britain would not fulfil this principle, but guards on circular saws and gale warnings to shipping do. On the other hand, laws against bribery are transcultural, *"for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous"* [Lev.23: 8].

Not only the cultural background, but the place in the scheme of Scripture must be clearly seen. We have taken some Mosaic laws as relevant to today, but does this commit us to the food laws or the execution of Sabbath breakers? Unless we have sound principles of interpretation that exegesis can use, we can lead ourselves into dreadful trouble. The effect that the New Testament has on the Old is of relevance here. In the case of the food laws, for instance, it can be seen that our Lord pronounced all foods clean, although we still have to ask what the relevance of Lev.11 is for today. Within the Old Testament itself, we can see historical situations having an effect on the social ethic. We have already mentioned the change that our Lord noted on marriage and divorce. The commands to kill the Sabbath breaker and to wipe

out nations seem to demand setting in their historical contexts. Slightly different is the movement for racial purity in Ezra and Nehemiah. In their proper context, they will not support Apartheid, for it was religious purity that was at stake, as both books state quite clearly.

The whole of Scripture must be taken into account. The principles and precepts can explain each other and counterbalancing themes can have their effect. Not only would the themes of Social Ethics reflect more accurately the Biblical teaching, but also Social Ethics as a whole would take its proper place in the scheme of Christian thought and not take too small or too important a part.

Finally, there is the application of our exegesis to the modern world. Unless the exegete knows today's society, its structure, morality and problems, his Social Ethics will have little practical use. Again, two way traffic is essential. The exegete needs to be aware of the problems of modern society, and Christians in life's thick forest need instruction on how to think through these problems biblically, that is, exegetically.

Exegesis is hard work. There are no valid short cuts. Unless, however, we are content to leave the field to those not committed to this outlook, the hard work must be done.

#### FORM CRITICISM AND THE GOSPELS

Rev Peter Naylor, M.Th.  
(Wellingborough)

Form criticism is basically a method of study of literature both Biblical and extra-Biblical, religious and secular, which attempts to isolate