

ISSUES IN SOCIAL ETHICS

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Early last month (30 Sep - 2 Oct), representatives from the constituent member-churches of the BEC met in NORTH-AMPTON to consider five papers dealing with fundamental issues in the sphere of Social Ethics.

The papers were distributed to conference members three months beforehand in order to ensure the maximum preparation for, and benefit from, the Study-Conference. In this article, the Rev PETER MILSON, BD, Pastor of the Deeside Evangelical Church in N.E.Wales, has summarized PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE the message of these five Conference papers. We hope the article will stimulate further discussion of these important subjects.

IN THE first paper, Dr Oliver Barclay undertook a 'Survey of Current Positions'. He explored and assessed what evangelicals are actually thinking, saying and proposing in this whole field. He noted the difficulty evangelicals have experienced in rightly applying Old Testament law, which applied to a theocratic society, in a modern pluralistic society. Also, much of the New Testament material is concerned with personal ethics, and wider applications to society must be inferred from them. Historically evangelicals have recently been more concerned to recover a positive attitude to real theology, and are only now recovering a concern for applied theology, including social ethics. As we go further in the application of the truths of God we do so without the benefit of a long recent evangelical tradition. The result is that there is a great variety of thought and no evangelical consensus has yet emerged.

He approached the survey in terms of various theological themes or emphases that have been used as key tools for approaching social ethics. He dealt more fully with two alternatives.

A. 'The Kingdom of God': Many authors see the doctrine

of the Kingdom of God as giving a basis for social ethics. They argue that, "All creation fell under sin, but all of it has come again under the redeeming work of Christ. Christ is Lord of all, society as well as the church, and summons his disciples to Kingdom service in all life's callings. Society no less than church is embraced in Christ's kingly rule." Apart from the fact that the idea of redeeming society is a serious misuse of biblical terms, Dr Barclay highlights two major difficulties with this approach:

1. The Kingdom is a relevant and acceptable motive for Christians, and their duties and the Church's duties can be set out under this head; but most of these writers do not acknowledge that by definition non-Christians are not in the Kingdom. They try to extend the concept to the whole of society in a totally unconvincing way.

2. The use of the Kingdom idea also has a major practical difficulty. No-one can tell us with confidence what sort of social policy it requires in a mixed community. This is basically because nowhere in the New Testament is the Kingdom idea made the 'way in' to social ethics in a mixed society. It appeals exclusively to those who are citizens of the Kingdom.

Thus Dr Barclay concluded, "The Kingdom theme has biblically much to say about personal ethics and the Church but, I submit, virtually nothing to say about social ethics in a mixed society. So by definition it should be ruled irrelevant to our particular interest, but it is constantly dragged in in a loose way, and applied to the whole of society when this vital step in the argument is so far as I can tell invalid. The most the Kingdom approach can do is to call God's people to set an example of what society should be (which includes serving the rest of society)."

B. 'Creation Ethics': This approach starts from the fact that the first commands, given to men before the Fall, have not been rescinded. The Fall has led to the addition of certain other creation/providential ordinances (eg. the state) and these between them provide a structure of ethics (including social ethics) which is not superseded by grace. Dr Barclay argued, "The special relevance of the Creation Ethics approach for our purposes is in three things. Firstly, a creation based law is for all men, not only for

believers, so pagan nations are reproved for some moral faults. Secondly, a creation based ethics with its structures and laws gives us a practical policy. Thirdly, we can argue for it from experience because it works."

After dealing more briefly with approaches from Two Kingdoms, Common Grace, Incarnation, Marxist Analysis, Dooyeweerdian Philosophy, Natural Law, the Church as Prophet, and the Jubilee, Dr Barclay noted, "A vast amount of evangelical social action has depended on no thought out theological system. It has been the immediate response of Christians to the need they see around them. This is biblical. It is an expression of trying to 'do good to all men and especially to those who are of the household of faith' (Gal.6.10). Many local churches are also deeply involved - at least in informal ways - in such service. They accept the call to love and serve their neighbour and they do so with no fanfare of trumpets. It would be a great pity if this does not continue and grow in evangelical circles, but it does not need sophisticated justification."

In the second paper Pastor John Appleby gave a '**Critical Study of Contextualization Theology**', in which he asked the question, "Is there one theology for the World Church or differing theologies for each cultural situation?"

A simple definition of contextualization is that it "has to do with the manner of presenting the gospel message within any given culture". In their attempts to relate the Christian message to particular cultures some have been willing to change almost everything and destroy the distinctive and unique character of the gospel, whilst others have resisted even the slightest allowance for cultural peculiarities in either Scripture or the contemporary situation. In evaluating this issue Mr Appleby outlined the following principles:

1. The presupposition with which we begin is that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice for all time.

2. Knowing God and actually doing the will of God on earth are inextricably tangled. Spirituality without radical discipleship is cheap grace not the costly biblical

sort.

3. The inadequacy of syncretism as an expression of contextualizing. The most that other faiths can do for the Christian is to rebuke him by whatever their various limited virtues may be if he fails to be even more virtuous than they.

4. The argument that the gospel can be contextualized in any religious culture by the expedient of regarding the New Testament as the fulfilment of that religion, rather than of the Old Testament is in total contradiction with the claim of the New Testament itself regarding its relationship with the Old Testament.

5. The theory of a 'hidden' Christ working in hinduism, and other religions, making them a suitable vestibule for Christianity involves a serious confusion between the concept of God as Creator, and God as the Redeemer and Saviour.

6. There is no evidence that any form of contextualization has succeeded in rooting the gospel in other cultures. There is much more evidence that the vital heart of the gospel has been lost in the process, and has died in consequence.

7. But if evangelicalism professes to preserve true biblical doctrine, it seems nevertheless to fall short in the contextualization of that doctrine:

(a) By not submitting to the teaching of Scripture as the regulative principle by which the doing of any religious action should be governed.

(b) By not understanding that the manner in which you proclaim a message can do serious harm to the content of that message.

(c) By not grasping the fact that the gospel must be contextualized in working practices of daily life as well as in preaching methods if it is to be a biblical contextualization.

8. All the understandings of contextualization (liberal and evangelical) surveyed have more or less explicitly, an undertone of universalism.

9. All the understandings of contextualization surveyed seem very unlike what we see in the early New Testament churches. Yet there were social inequalities then, oppressors and oppressed, wealthy and poor, and a gospel

fighting for its life in different cultures!

Mr Appleby suggested that the word 'contextualization' should be replaced by 'disciplined transposition'. In the mission of the Church - the ongoing transposition of the life and truth of God into the souls of men through evangelism - believers are under two obligations: to be intelligible and faithful. (Matt.28.20) This involves: a) our accurate understanding of what is to be taught, and b) our ensuring that our hearers also reach that understanding and no other.

In the third paper Rev Hywel Jones dealt with '**Hermeneutical Principles**'. He addressed himself to two questions, "How do we distinguish between the Bible's permanent principles and its instructions for a passing situation?" and "Is inductionism valid when applied to ethics?"

He dealt with the second question first and more briefly. Inductionism is one way of thinking about ethical questions which is being favoured today, even by Christians. Its essence is to select principles and considerations borrowed from general ethics to lead into (in duco) statements in the Bible which are then read in their light. The validity of this approach is determined by one's view of the status of Scripture, as that bears on these matters and what it says. The infallibility/inerrancy distinction with its consequences for authority raises its head even here. Taking for granted that Scripture has much to say on these matters, our approach must be in principle deductive, for what Scripture says on this, as on every matter which it speaks, God says.

The main part of the paper then considered hermeneutics. Whilst all would accept that there are some features of the Bible's contents which are non-permanent and others which are abidingly authoritative and relevant, the big question is, however, on what basis is such a distinction made, and what principles govern the categorizing of the various features of the Bible? Mr Jones dealt with the relationship between the two Testaments of Holy Scripture, and what Berkouwer calls the 'time-relatedness' of

Scripture, or a particular manifestation of that characteristic, namely the presence of cultural elements in Scripture.

By way of summary he submitted the following propositions:

1. The Old and New Testaments are equally given by God and partake of the same realities of revelation and inspiration.

2. In the main the Old Testament by the purpose of the God who gave it only predicts and prefigures the salvation which is given subsequent to it.

3. In the main the New Testament contains the revelation of that salvation in the coming of the Lord and the outpouring of His Spirit. It brings together the promises, types and shadows of the Old by joining them in Christ, and so brings some to their intended fulfilment in Him and so to an end; others it lifts through His revelation to a higher level of value and significance. The New Testament tells us what these things are and is the final arbiter of the Old Testament revelation because it is the peak of God's revelation this side of the veil.

4. In determining the New Testament use of the Old we are seeking the whole Word of God.

In the fourth paper Dr David Lyon dealt with '**Christian Social Action: A partnership with verbal testimony**'. He addressed himself to the question, "How are good words and good works, both belonging to the Church's biblical mandate, to be rightly related?"

Having traced the background to the current debate Dr Lyons took Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4) as his starting point and guiding thread. The gospel was preached to the poor and certain individuals subsequently found release and healing from Jesus' ministry. Moreover the message which was proclaimed required an acceptance accompanied by the conquest of pride. Thus Jesus had regard both to the spiritual and physical condition of his hearers.

Dr Lyons made it clear that "there is a vital Scriptural connection between evangelism and social action. The two are distinct, but inseparable. They do not have to be

equated in any way in order that the importance of each be demonstrated. To do evangelism is not to do social action, but it is to imply the need for it. This relates to the message and to its hoped-for results. To do social action is not to do evangelism, because evangelism is essentially the verbal proclamation of the good news. People are not 'saved' or 'redeemed' or 'brought into the kingdom' by social action, but by evangelism. However, those who are saved, redeemed, and thus brought into the kingdom of grace must show evidence of the fact, which will include social action."

He then proceeded to deal specifically with the relationship between social action and evangelism. Social action has no catch-all biblical rationale, such as 'kingdom', 'creation', or 'liberation', but neither is it unimportant where one begins. The whole biblical drama relates to social action and, as in any other sphere of biblical interpretation, Scripture must be compared with Scripture, and specific circumstances must also be borne in mind. He then attempted to elaborate on how social action may be related to the whole biblical drama, and to demonstrate why concentration on any one aspect is likely to lead to imbalance.

The Creation yields the ultimate basis for social action. God created persons social creatures, political creatures, to work, to many to have families, to worship, to teach and learn. God gave us ways for doing and being these things, laws, commands, directives, instructions, norms. But never is it suggested that people thereby find true freedom, which is why evangelism must be related to social action even in relation to creation norms.

The Fall shows the limitations upon social action in a God-rejecting world. Not only is the human energy of a Christian minority very restricted, but sin continues to make compromise necessary. Christians should share God's displeasure with the ravages of man's sin on human life, and the appropriate response is 'biblical social action'.

Redemption provides the agents and patterns for Christian social action. For the time being saved sinners - the church - are to work as exiles to bring God's kingdom wel-

fare to the cities in which they are found. Evangelicals have in recent years been rather more inclined to defend the gospel than to practise it. The goal of Christian mission and evangelism in particular is not merely to see faith and hope awoken, but to see more and more people doing God's will.

The Hope of the Final Age - the kingdom of Christ's glory - gives the dynamic and active rationale, linking the others together. Is not one of the greatest motivations to social action that Jesus is coming back as the cosmic Christ to restore all things? (2 Peter 3.11-13)

In the fifth, and final, paper Rev Alan Gibson dealt with '**Christian Social Action: Its nurture in the local church**'. He asked the question, "What should be the role of the local church in nurturing social action as well as worship and evangelism?"

He began by submitting the thesis that it is the role of the local church to co-ordinate the functions of worship, edification, evangelism and social action, and to nurture individual Christian involvement in these realms. He showed that it was true of the church at Jerusalem that "the growing church's deep awareness of the presence of God among them was matched by its keen awareness of the needs of God's world around them."

He developed this by considering the function of a local church. As a visible expression, in one place at one point in time, of the invisible reality of Christ's body, the local church represents a social reality of its own. It is made up of people who are in the flesh and in the world. It is located within a particular social context by God's providence in order to work and witness for him.

Two areas of discussion arise in the matter of the local church and social action. Firstly, has the local church a function which can be called social, and secondly, is this to be expressed in terms of political action? Mr Gibson concluded from the ministry of Christ that the sheer need of those around us justifies an affirmative answer to the first question. The second area, however, is far more problematic, and needs to be approached with care

lest the church appears to confuse its role in and message to society.

He then proceeded to deal with the functions of the individual Christian. His thesis was, "not that the local church should have no social influence, but that the burden of Christian leadership in secular affairs falls overwhelmingly on individual Christians. There are today understandably urgent calls for Christian influence to secure the proper ordering of society, the just and proper exercise of power and protection of the weak from the abuses of the strong. These, however, are best met not by churches acting as churches, but by the involvement of Christian men and women acting as private citizens according to their gifts and opportunities. It is, therefore, the role of the local church to nurture them for this task as an essential aspect of their personal witness. The local church exists primarily for the worship and glory of God. It is in seeking to help individuals to worship God by a consistent and intelligent Christian presence in society that the local church serves its members best, but the first aim is vertical and it is the consequences which are horizontal."

Mr Gibson suggested that "one of our failures has been that churches have not clearly identified the role they should be fulfilling in relation to society around, and in relation to the individual members who represent Christ and his Church within that society. The role is identified as 'nurturing'. Its root means nourishing with food, but it means much more than that. It also means provoking and promoting, training and correcting, encouraging and directing. Only when local churches see this goal clearly will they begin to work consciously towards it". The paper closed with a challenge to Church officers, preachers, and members to work out these principles in their local churches.

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