

academic level, by any means an unequal one. But, even as we enter with a new zest and zeal into the struggle we must exercise a constant watchfulness. The symptoms of intellectualism already exist - not to afford opportunity to hurl the one at the other the charge of backsliding and apostasy; but to alert us together to the dangers which lurk in the Church's perennial commitment to give a reason for the hope that is in her.

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EVANGELICALS AND SOCIAL ACTION - an agenda for  
consideration

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NECOSE is the mnemonic not for a little known trade union but for a little known conference held in the Autumn of 1978. Its full title was the National Evangelical Conference On Social Ethics and it was a refreshingly frank brotherly (and sisterly!) exploration of the theoretical basis for evangelical engagement in the realm of social action. Like many other conferences it managed to ask more questions than it answered and it would be salutary for us to consider what some of these questions are. They are suggested here as an agenda for evangelical discussion, in the hope that readers of this journal might also be among those being provoked to think and write about them for our mutual good.

For starters, as they say, current positions need to be explored. Social ethics is a growth industry among evangelicals and any who have followed developments since Lausanne will be aware of this. In this country the activities of the Shaftesbury

Project and the emergence of the Third Way magazine, although neither owes their origin to Lausanne, are indications of the trend. Those of us who are not yet 'into social ethics' will need to be appraised of what is being thought, said and proposed as this is the chief area of theological reconstruction in Third World countries. We ourselves do not live in a vacuum and we cannot afford to be insulated from all this. Since, theologically speaking, this is where the action is, then we ought to be asking what our brothers are saying to us and why.

To be specific we shall need to make a critical assessment of the theology of contextualisation. The word 'critical' is not used here to be deliberately negative but, theological band-wagons being what they are, it is better to look carefully before we leap on. There is already evidence that some are too ready to discard most traditional theological insight as 'out-dated'. We are even being told that it is no longer justifiable to speak of one theology for the world Church and we must have a particular theology worked out for each cultural context. Does this thinking involve our rejecting all the 'absolutes' Schaeffer speaks of? Or should we rather be learning how to apply one timeless theology to each cultural situation? When Paul urges Timothy to "*keep the pattern of sound teaching*" [2 Tim.1:13] he uses the noun ὑποτύπωμα, a word used for the architect's outline sketch of the building he is planning. He will later go on to fill in the details, but he does not discard the original outline. Orthodox evangelicals have humbly recognised that what has been revealed to them is God's outline pattern. We shall need to fill in the details for that part of the building to be occupied by each cultural group, but is that the same as insisting that the whole plan has to be re-drawn?

The positive value for us of theological thinking in other contexts, however, must not be overlooked. The colonial days of exporting the white man's missionary

complete with pith helmet and pre-packed theology have given way to a cross-fertilisation of ideas as reciprocal as international trade. In some places our brothers are hammering out their ideas in churches seeing a growth rate much more rapid than our own. Interaction with them is going to be an essential feature of any theology which claims to be contemporary and the social dimension is one of its striking features. How else could we expect churches in revolutionary Latin America, crisis-ridden Africa or famine-stricken Asia to speak to us?

Since true evangelicalism is defined in terms of our attitude to the authority of Scripture it is often the interpretation of that Scripture which gives rise to differences among us. This is certainly the case in respect of social ethics and a consideration of current hermeneutical principles might uncover the bases underlying the variety of practical policies within the evangelical world. Such a study would take in the relationship of Old Testament moral teaching to the fuller light of New Testament revelation. Our methods of exegetical study would also come under this heading and especially the validity of inductionism when applied to ethics. Is this an attractive short-cut to solve today's pressing problems or does it have particular dangers? What is being called the 'new hermeneutic' also raises the matter of deriving our principles of interpretation from within Scripture itself. A man may be an evangelical but not a consistent evangelical and unaware of his departure from Biblical principles. In a loving spirit we should reflect on the implications of this for ourselves as well as others.

Another issue to be faced today is the relationship between social action and the verbal communication of the gospel. Is the current vogue for evangelical engagement in the world diverting some from their preaching ministry to the world? There are

evangelicals who seem to suggest that the Kingdom of God can be brought in without evangelism. Is it valid to speak of structures being redeemed without the men who comprise and operate these structures being redeemed? Would we be better to view social action as an imitation of God's work as Creator rather than His work as Redeemer? Since there is clear Biblical mandate for both good works and good words as part of our Christian testimony how are they to be related?

Perhaps the answer to this last question lies in a study of the role of the local church in nurturing social action as well as worship and evangelism. It is understandable that those Christians who give most thought to the field of ethics are those with a professional interest in society's moral issues. But are their churches providing them with the theological tools and Biblical support for their work? How can we expect the pastor to do this when many of the moral dilemmas faced by the church members are posed by a fast moving technological society in which the pastor is a layman? Unless he is aware of their problems, however, he will be ill-fitted to include truly relevant applications in his preaching ministry. Think too, of the pressures being faced by our members, missionaries or otherwise, who are working in developing countries overseas. Are these brothers and sisters right to look to their home church for moral guidance? And just how successful are the churches in the U.K. in influencing a society so largely indifferent to the clamant needs of the stranger next door in our global village?

The Rev John Stott closed the NECOSE discussions by urging those present first of all to "*go beyond questions to answers*". There is, however, just one prior obligation; we must be sure that the questions we are asking are the right questions. Only then will we have any confidence to "*go on from words to actions*".

This is modestly offered as a draft agenda of topics, inviting readers' reactions. It is being proposed to the executive of the British Evangelical Council in the