

the providence of God preserving the language and literary style as originally given. The Biblical literature is neither allowed to become colloquial nor permitted to be passed on in contemporary speech.

TO BE CONTINUED

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2. E. Ullendorff, Is Biblical Hebrew a Language? Studies in Semitic Languages and Civilizations, 1977, pp 3-16
3. op. cit. p128

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL WORK?

REFLECTIONS FROM CHURCH HISTORY

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This is the fourth article we have published on the subject of social action. In Issue 2, Alan Gibson provided us with an agenda for evangelical discussion and in the following issue Ian Stringer argued convincingly that it is through the responsible exegesis of the Bible that our attitude to social action should be formed and developed. "Exegesis", he warned, "is hard work. There are no valid short cuts" (p30, Issue 3). 'Issues in Social Ethics' was the title of an article by Peter Milsom in Issue 5 in which he summarized papers given at the 1980 B.E.C. Study Conference.

In this article, Dr. Shaw, Lecturer in Sociology in University College, Cardiff, provides us with an historical perspective on the subject.

In what ways ought Christians to consider and act upon their responsibility to demonstrate concern for the social welfare of their fellow human beings? One approach to this question is to ask how Christians in previous generations tried to find an answer.

Church History should not be looked to as a store of blueprints which simply require copying in our own day. Our predecessors may have made mistakes. Moreover, there are special characteristics in our own situation. The whole state welfare apparatus will inevitably influence the way we work out applications of biblical principles which we share with earlier generations.

Having acknowledged these limitations, there remain good reasons for trying to outline the qualities of evangelical social concern in earlier years. It is too easy to assume that Christians today are wrestling with the relationship between social concern and the gospel for the first time. A realisation that this is not the case will safeguard against the opposite pitfalls of heady optimism and conservative negativism. These extremes probably represent the twin dangers facing evangelical believers in negotiating this question. On the one hand there is a tendency to loosen the biblical moorings, evidenced in some of the neo-evangelical writings on social issues. On the other hand, there is still in evidence a fundamental mistrust of expressions of social concern, by those who "would have it believed that zeal and public spirit cannot be indulged without vital and practical religion suffering and dying away" (Archibald Bruce, 1746-1816). Both attitudes spring from a lack of biblical realism, and are uninformed by the invigorating, yet cautionary stimulus of church history.

The aim of this article is to differentiate and do justice to the attempts of Christians, with greater or lesser success, and with more or less conscious intent, to wrestle

with their responsibilities to evidence concern for the social welfare of others. In particular, we are concerned to identify the various ways in which they struggled to elucidate the sense and extent to which a distinct Christian approach to the problem was needed.

Optional Extra?

Evangelical Christians of previous centuries typically worked on the assumption that being a Christian entailed a more or less distinct Christian approach to the care of the needy. More precisely, it was not to be regarded as an optional extra or fringe activity for those who had the time, inclination and means. Such activity as they engaged in was characterised by a belief that specifically Christian and biblical justifications could be offered for Christian social concern. Arising out of this, they generally believed that their social work practice was or ought to be distinctively Christian in some way, with regard both to the objectives, and, in some cases, the specific methods adopted. Though they did not always regard social intervention as a necessarily controversial activity, in the same sense as preaching the gospel, they typically were aware of important differences between themselves and some other broadly Christian patterns of social intervention.

Auguste Francke was the founder, in the late seventeenth century, of an institution for the residential care of children, which was to be admired and imitated for the next two hundred years. The following quotation from a sermon illustrates the centrality of social concern for Christians of his generation.

"If I find my mind never so well disposed to relieve the wants of the poor and necessitous; yet in all this, I do no more than barely answer my duty. I own God almighty to be my Lord, and my Sovereign, and the supreme disposer of all that I have. And since He hath commanded me to exercise charity to the poor; why should I be so bold as to rebel against His holy will, by withdrawing that from the poor, which He will have

bestowed upon them? God forbid!"

(Francke)

The example of Francke particularly influenced Jonathan Edwards in the following century. Edwards, not a man to use words lightly, wrote as follows:

"It is ... our bounden duty, as much a duty as it is to pray, or to attend public worship, or anything else whatever ... I know of scarce any duty which is so much insisted on, so pressed and urged upon us, both in the Old Testament and New, as this duty of charity to the poor"

(Edwards)

'Grounds Peculiarly Christian'

Not only was such responsibility regarded as a focal one for the Christian, it was believed that it could and should be justified on specifically Christian grounds.

Recent attempts to find grounds for a Christian involvement in society have centred on the doctrines of creation and common grace, in the hope that they will provide a basis for expression of concern which is not restricted to narrowly 'spiritual' issues, but which finds its impetus from characteristics which are common to Christians and non-Christians. This is a comparatively new avenue of thought, and for those who are accustomed to think in such terms, we find ourselves in strange territory when we look at the way Christians of previous generations accounted for their social involvement. While one occasionally comes across references to the 'manishness' of humanity as a justification, few attempted to work out a biblical doctrine.¹

Far more common were justifications of social concern grounded in the work of Christ, and the effect they thought this ought to have on their lives. Needless to say, there are sharp limitations on the extent to which such grounds could be shared with unbelievers.

Christ's Example

II Corinthians 8:9 was a favourite text in the argument. If Christ loved us and died for us when we were poor, and did so ungrudgingly, then we are to pattern ourselves on his example. We are to love one another as Christ has loved us. This is a new commandment, a distinctively Christian one. Christ's love involved self demand, to people far below him, who could offer no recompense, when they were opposed to him. Our social concern should exhibit the same qualities. It was, to use Charles Hodge's words on "grounds peculiarly Christian" that such concern was to be enforced.

Proof of New Life

While the example of Christ was the major justification, it was not the only one. Although it figured much less largely than we might anticipate, social concern was regarded as one evidence of regeneration. Thus, speaking from James 1:27, Charles Spurgeon insisted that "this charity ... must be manifested if we would have 'pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father'".

Christian Ties

Most earlier writers insisted also on the special responsibility which exists between fellow Christians. While related to all, there was a special relation to other Christians. So, in response to a social gospel it could be argued, "the true brotherhood, according to Christian teaching, is the brotherhood of the redeemed" (Machen).

Christian Social Work

Those holding such views believed also that their social work practice was, or ought to be, distinctively Christian in some way. Thus, George Muller, who made residential provision for children left with neither parent in 19th century Bristol was always ready to insist that

"The chief and primary object of the work was not the temporal welfare of the children, nor even their spiritual welfare, but to show before the whole world

and the whole church of Christ that ... God is ready to prove Himself as the living God ... so that we need not go away from Him to our fellow men."

(Muller, a)

To state the position more formally, it was believed that Christian ethics were not entirely congruous with systems of social welfare current at any given time. Neither was it regarded as satisfactory to view Christian values as supplying a topping up operation for basic human values. Because Christian ethics have their own distinct source, they would, it was believed, produce their own independent results.²

Consistent with these views, people like Muller and Spurgeon were prepared to stand aside from others when necessary. It was not that they saw themselves as having nothing in common with other groups. They were ready to be influenced by patterns of care then current in society, and, at the laying of the foundation stone for Stockwell in 1867, Spurgeon declared that "On these occasions we do not meet either as Church-people or as Dissenters. When we have to help orphans, or to take care of the poor, we lay aside all that." (Spurgeon). They were well aware that the offence of the cross was not a matter which primarily applied to this sphere.

Yet apart from the need "to show our love of truth by truthful love" (Spurgeon) in situations when the gospel is under fire, there does occur an occasional example where practice is positively influenced by a specifically Christian frame of reference. A significant example of this occurs in George Muller's handling of discipline problems at Ashley Down - significant because almost certainly unconscious. Various accounts in the Dismissals Book kept by Muller illustrate his patience in an age of severe discipline, and suggest by the phraseology that Muller is drawing on the biblical model of excommunication. One boy was dismissed five years after entering the home. Despite delinquency, boasted activities with a gang of thieves and absconding on two previous occasions, he had until then been received back, "hoping that by bearing with him,

admonishing him, speaking to him privately, praying with him, and using a variety of other means, he might be reclaimed". Then, "solemnly, with prayer, before the whole establishment (he was) expelled, if by any means this last painful remedy might be blessed to him. Yet we follow even this poor young sinner with our prayers". (Muller, b)

The reason for relating the foregoing is not to suggest that Christians should opt out of social work in favour of private, independent Christian social work practice. Though there is clearly a case for healthy Christian activity within the voluntary sector, such a conclusion would be a far too simplistic transfer to the 1980's of forms of activity born in very different circumstances. Yet this glance at evangelical involvement demonstrates the close intertwining that ought to exist between practice and purposes.

Social Work and the Gospel

What is the relation between social concern and preaching the gospel? How does social work relate to 'good works', and what are legitimate motives for engaging in it? Again, should help be given entirely indiscriminately, without regard for the character, attitude or religion of the recipient, or are some more 'deserving' than others?

These are live issues throughout the field of social welfare. To many, the answers given by Christians, at least until recently, seem at once obvious, worthy of little attention and, on the whole, thoroughly disagreeable. It is widely assumed that social concern was demonstrated, if at all, only as a bait for preaching the gospel. Worse still, it is believed that 'good works' were the result of morbid introspection, and a desire to prove eligibility for eternal bliss.

Demarcation Disputes

Without doubt, a close relationship was envisaged between social involvement and Christian witness, and the former was often made subordinate to the latter. This is plain

enough from the earlier part of this article, yet it does not tell the whole story. In the work of Thomas Chalmers, for example, there was a somewhat different emphasis. Chalmers, an important formative influence on the early development of social work, established a series of schemes for the relief and education of the poor of Glasgow and Edinburgh from 1819 onwards. He was acutely conscious of the abdication of Christian responsibility to the state poor law machinery, and the failure of the church to reach the working classes. In the 1840's he selected an area of about two thousand population in the worst part of Edinburgh. He divided the 411 families into twenty districts, and appointed a home visitor for each district. The significant point for our purposes is the insistence of Chalmers that the visitors were not to regard their activities as a kind of undercover evangelism. "You ladies", he remarks on one occasion,

"go about among the poor with a tract in one hand, and a shilling in the other. How can the eye be single? - it will keep veering from the tract to the shilling".

(Harvey)

There was, he felt, a want of compatibility between the two objects and he kept them separate - not, of course, to shelve evangelism, but rather to strengthen the effectiveness of both his evangelism and his social concern. He may have felt the same misgivings concerning the broad generalisations about 'mission' that are popular in our own day.

Pay Offs

It is a commonplace to play down any personal benefits received by the social worker from his own practice. While a stress on the reciprocal nature of social work help is largely absent from present day thinking, people in earlier periods were less squeamish in recognising such benefits as part of social work. Indeed, Christians often openly used such arguments to encourage others to help the social outcasts of their day.

On the question of benefits in the world to come, they had

little to say, regarding it as self evident on the basis of texts like Matthew 10:42 and Luke 14:13-16. George Whitefield's comment, "I hope to be rich in heaven by taking care of orphans on earth", would have received ready assent, without any thought that motives might be questioned.

Rewards in the present life were a more vexed question. Some, though disclaiming any absolute guarantee, would claim biblical support for the view that we do not ordinarily lose out by giving to others, quoting verses like Proverbs 11:24-25; 28:27, Deuteronomy 15:10 and II Corinthians 9:6-8. Hesitations hedged this assertion. Jonathan Edwards insisted on two reservations. First, it is the inward motive that counts, not the outward act. "A man may give something to the poor, and yet be entitled to no promise, either temporal or spiritual ... What he does may be more a manifestation of his covetousness and closeness, than anything else." Second, the fulfilment of duty is not to be viewed as the way to happiness and prosperity in absolute terms.

"If you expected to meet with no trouble in the world, because you gave to the poor, you mistook the matter. Though there be many and great promises made to the liberal, yet God hath nowhere promised that they shall not find this world a world of trouble" (Edwards)

Other writers expressed still stronger reservations. Francke insisted that, "Whatsoever I do is duty and no merit", and he was anxious that the Christian should not

"rest in these lower motives to the duty of Charity. For these being in some degree bent toward temporal interest they may yield some encouragement to a weak beginner in the Practice of Piety, but ought never to be the only or principal Motive to a more grown Christian"

Some Christians doubtless place too much emphasis on the personal benefit of social service, but a naive altruism is an equally poor guide.

The Deserving Poor

"Something more is necessary than to compassionate the poor - he must also consider them; and let him learn at length that there is indeed a more excellent way of charity than that to which his own headlong sensibilities have impelled him"

This need, in Chalmers' words, to 'consider' the poor was argued urgently in the latter part of the last century. Indiscriminate charity was denounced and 'disinterested social service' replaced it. However, criticism of indiscriminate almsgiving is older than the Reformation. Lollards, the Reformers, Puritans and the founders of the SPCK all made appeal to similar motives.

Throughout this century, however, this position has been roundly criticised as little more than a rationalisation for tightfisted self interest. A brief review, however, of the evidence demonstrates readily that Christians have rarely, if ever, conformed to the stereotype of limiting social concern to those who on moralistic criteria are judged to be deserving - despite widely held opinions to the contrary.

Edwards, because of his characteristically thorough treatment of the question, must serve as our example.' Having argued the case for Christian charity, and encouraged his hearers to implement it, he deals with a number of hypothetical objections, one of which is that "he is an ill sort of person; he deserves not that people should be kind to him". He disagrees. We are to love our neighbour as ourself, and our enemy counts as our neighbour. He refers to his favourite justification, in reminding them to love as Christ has loved.

He then anticipates the further objection that they are not obliged to give until they know that the poverty is not due to idleness or prodigality. This replies Edwards, was the excuse that Nabal used for not showing hospitality to David. "There be many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master" (I Samuel 25:10). This should "discountenance too great a scrupulosity as to the object on whom we bestow our charity, and the making of this merely an objection against charity to others, that we do

not certainly know their circumstances". While we are not to be naive, yet "it is better to give to several that are not objects of charity, than to send away empty one that is". Edwards would probably favour some sort of means test in our present system, but he is no advocate of repressiveness. Neither would he have countenanced a laissez-faire approach. "It is not to devise liberal things if we neglect all liberality till the poor come a begging to us".

But suppose, his imaginary questioner asks, that we have good evidence for idleness or prodigality. Even here, Edwards argues, the Christian is left with room to manoeuvre. There may be physical or mental handicap ('want of a natural faculty to manage affairs to advantage') and 'that is to be considered as his calamity' and not his fault. Furthermore, if there is a fault, it is not our responsibility to punish by withholding help. We are to apply the principle, "as Christ hath loved us" once more. This applies even in extreme cases of "vicious idleness and prodigality" over a long period prior to our intervention. If there is hope that the attitude of the recipient may change, then the customary analogy still holds good - "We foolishly and perversely threw away those riches with which we were provided". And in the most pessimistic situations, where help is thought certain to be of no avail, we still have responsibility to the family members. To those who argue that this is only a backdoor way to benefiting the offending family member, Edwards says that the command to help is 'positive and absolute', and we still are to relieve family members.

Edwards clearly rejects the use of the 'deserving' principle in determining help given. While he retains the belief that individuals may be responsible for their hardship, pronouncement or even the ratification of deserts is not the job of fellow members of society.

Evangelical Retrenchment

The more pervasive concern of earlier Christians with the social dimensions of their faith serves to illustrate and confirm a recurrent theme of criticism, to the effect that twentieth century evangelicalism has been marked by a

negative and defensive attitude to social involvement. We have become so far cut off from earlier Christian activity and thinking in this sphere - partial and incomplete as it was - that some have reached the altogether false conclusion that evangelicalism never has had anything distinctive to offer. It is not a big step from that position to conclude that there is something in the heart of evangelicalism which makes it impossible to develop a basis for social action. Hence the implication in much writing that evangelical social involvement has an 'in spite of' quality, carried out in the face of fundamental doctrines which tend to lead elsewhere.

That the fundamental thrust of such a conclusion is untenable should by this point have become clear. Christians have worked out biblically based rationales for social action, and have derived such rationales directly from the heart of their understanding of scripture.

Why did such thinking come to a halt? The question is complex, and lies beyond our scope. However, as a corrective to some common criticisms, we should observe that the evangelical response to the preaching of a social gospel was, if not excusable, more understandable than frequently implied. The criticism is commonplace. In rejecting the totality of liberal theology, evangelicals lost the liberal emphasis on social issues, thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Typical of the targets of such complaints were the immediate forerunners of the IVF who, against the spread of higher criticism reasserted the central features of the gospel and added,

"we can see nothing in scripture or in history to lead us to believe that social work on any other foundation lasts to eternity, or is to the glory of God" (Johnson)

In an interesting article, Walter argues that, because of these deficiencies, evangelicalism drifted towards conservatism, secularism and theological liberalism. The suggested sequence of events is significant. However, much of the available evidence suggests the reverse order of events - the decline of evangelicalism preceded rather than followed the rising stress on social issues from the mid

nineteenth century onwards. Rather than seeing a lack of theological framework for social involvement as an occasion of drift, we should start by observing the consequences of a failing grip by Christians on doctrines at the heart of the gospel. To adopt the unintended euphemisms of one writer, it was the 'mellowing' of evangelicalism, and the emergence of theologically more 'progressive' evangelicals that heralded an extension of certain kinds of social work.

(Heasman)

Present day analyses of social work motivations need to take greater account of social service as an alternative to, and perhaps a form of rejection of Christian faith. In the light of such developments it was more than understandable that evangelicals should look askance at substantial elements of emerging social work - it was virtually inevitable. Having admitted as much, the precise character of this negative reaction so far has been inadequately documented, and may well have been overstated. There were Christians around in the inter-war period who were careful to assert that the biblical stress on the worship of God as the chief end of man, "does not mean that in the Christian view the worship of God is ever to be carried on to the neglect of service rendered to one's fellow-men"

(Machen)

Conclusion

Most of the illustrative material on Christian social involvement in this article has been drawn from periods when evangelicalism was a powerful force in society. The Christian response to issues of social concern, contrary to much opinion, appears to have been at its strongest in periods when a thoroughgoing, conservative evangelicalism was in evidence. To state the principle more generally, the Christian response to social welfare reflects the general condition of evangelicalism at a given time. Likewise, divisions in evangelical attitudes to social issues need to be seen in the context of more general divisions between evangelicals. The coherent evangelicalism of the earlier part of this century bred a certain stance on welfare issues. Evangelicalism in the last decade has fragmented into charismatic, neo-evangelical and reformed

groups, thus producing a corresponding division over the Christian response to social involvement.

This historical survey of Christian writing and action should not lead us to the conclusion that no common ground exists between Christians and unbelievers. Indeed, we should be prepared to look for common cause in unexpected places. Yet some of the people mentioned in this chapter have a lot to teach us, at points where the present renaissance of evangelical interest is weakest. Their argument from scripture is strong. While God's creatorship is used in the Bible as a motive to helping the poor (Proverbs 14:31; 17:5. Job 31:13-23), it is not put forward as the sole or even predominant motive for the Christian. Christ's humanity, God's sovereign election, the evidence of sanctification and, perhaps most of all, the example of God's grace in sending Christ, are all present (Matthew 25:40, James 2:5, I John 3:17,18, II Corinthians 8:9, John 13:24; 15:17). Neither are we to make a strong disjunction between the two, as if God's creation and redemption are two parallel purposes that co-exist but never coincide.

While earlier Christians have attempted biblical justifications for their activities, their emphasis was first and foremost, on the importance of living as a Christian. Christians engaged in social work are too prone to regard themselves as falling into a special category, and having special problems which the local church is ill-equipped to deal with. Alternatively, it is implied that they have something special to offer the church. In either case there is a danger of inflated notions of what the Christian social worker can offer, and the risk of injured self pity at not being appreciated.

In conclusion, we should reiterate the danger of lifting the specific form of earlier Christian solutions wholesale into the late twentieth century. Changing patterns of welfare provision in our society mean that, while voluntary social work plays a large and even increasing part, many Christians wishing to practice social work are likely to train on government sponsored courses for employment in local authority agencies. I would guess that a high proportion of churches known to readers of this magazine have

at least one of their members with social work experience in the public sector.

Second, there is always the danger of investing the predominant attitudes of the day with Christian sanction. We have indicated as much in earlier discussion. In our own day there is a too ready use by Christians of terms like 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. How many of us would be willing to work out the principles stated by Edwards? Further, there is a related tendency to regard official decisions as always right, and to suspect that interest in social reform springs from a basic questioning of God ordained state authority.

Finally, there is a need for Christians to work at the positive aspects of present day secular social work, and to imitate where appropriate. Cause for Concern (Christian Concern for the Mentally Handicapped) is a case in point, where Christians have rightly benefitted from the movement towards care of the mentally handicapped in the community. (Indeed, in the writer's estimation they might carry the principle still further).

To refuse to take this line cannot be defended on the grounds of preserving Christian principle. We have argued more than once that the form in which Christian principles are to be expressed in the area of social concern needs freshly working out in every generation. There is a regulative principle governing church order, but not one for our social responsibilities.

Failure to recognise the manifestations of common grace in the welfare activities of unbelievers can have detrimental effects on Christian work and witness. There have been periods in the present century when, to a greater or lesser extent, the successors of George Muller and Charles Spurgeon have allowed loyalty to what they believed to be a founding ideal to blind them to a hardening of the arteries of Christian social outreach.

Yet, while we cannot copy in our own day the answers given by earlier Christians, they do provide sufficient stimulus both to warn us off wholesale disregard, and to strive to emulate their sensitivity to biblical demands.

Notes

1. Edwards himself is a partial exception: "Men are made in the image of our God, and on this account are worthy of our love". Deuteronomy 15:7 and Leviticus 25:35 was his biblical basis. (Edwards)
2. I have tried elsewhere, through a discussion of the idea of vocation, to illustrate that this approach is not barren. (Shaw)
3. Others could be cited. Francke urged contemporaries to "more regard the present want of the poor than be overnice about enquiring into their worth and dignity" Chalmers warned his elders "to be in the ready attitude of prepared and immediate service for all cases and for all applicants in the first instance".

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