

Salt, Light and Cities on Hills

Evangelism, Social Action
and the Church

How do they relate
to each other?

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Introduction

Present Concerns

Augustine prefaces his magnum opus, *The City of God*, with an explanation of its purpose, namely, ‘The task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that City’. Augustine presents the City of God ‘both as it exists in this world of time, a stranger among the ungodly, living by faith, and as it stands in the security of its everlasting seat.’

Here is the tension between the City of God and its present opponents on the one hand, contrasted with its glorious future on the other. It is this tension of living between the ‘now and the not yet’ which creates the problem of how Christians are to relate to society. What do the people of God owe to ‘the ungodly’? How are Christians to live in the present in the light of the future? These questions especially become acute when we come to the matter of the relationship between evangelism and social involvement.

In his *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Dr John Stott writes: ‘It is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever need to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both “went about ... teaching ... and preaching” (Matt 4:2; 9:35) and “went about doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38). 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 the need to define what they were doing or why.’¹

More recently, Dr Jonathan Chaplin, the Director of The Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE) has gone so far as to say that regarding the relationship between evangelism, social action and the Gospel there really is nothing more to discuss; such ‘either/or’ dichotomies are now passé: ‘I won’t attempt to restate the case that has been compellingly made over many decades by a succession of distinguished evangelical theologians, that a truly biblical faith calls the church to be fully engaged in all aspects of cultural, social and political life—that the ‘Gospel’ actually found on Jesus’ lips (see Luke 4:18–19), unlike the one still too often found on ours, thrusts us out into the world to be servants of healing, justice and peace. Nor am I going to rehearse the tired old debate over the relative priorities of “evangelism” and “social action”, the very framing of which obscures the fundamental point that “proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom”—the only kind of evangelism Jesus engaged in—inescapably includes what we today call “social action” as a constitutive element and not just a “consequence” (still less an optional extra).’²

Dr Chaplin may be rather premature in his pronouncements and certainly his comments have been met with a sharp and robust response from Professor Paul Helm, ‘This looks remarkably like a call for the church unitedly to participate, as a fundamental matter of the gospel of Christ, in agreed programmes of social action. Its reference to the “compelling” work by “distinguished evangelical theologians” could be understood as an attempt to preempt debate. How crass to go against such a powerful trend! How could this trend possibly be gainsaid? He claims that there is no alternative, and that any discussion is nothing but words. But of course there is plenty to be discussed.’³

Helm is quite correct, there is plenty to discuss as well as there being plenty which is controversial. The controversy does not centre on *whether* Christians should engage in social action which can be understood as, ‘acts to improve the physical, psychological and social welfare of people’⁴ but *how* that involvement should express itself and upon what theological basis it ought to proceed. Robert

K. Johnstone observes: 'That evangelicals should be involved socially has become a foregone conclusion ... but how and why evangelicals are to involve themselves in society have proven to be more vexing questions. That they are to be involved brings near unanimity; how that involvement takes shape and what is its Christian motivation bring only debate.'⁵

On one side of the debate may be placed Dr Timothy Keller; 'The ministry of mercy is not just a means to the end of evangelism. Word and deed are equally necessary, mutually interdependent and inseparable ministries, each carried out with the single purpose of the spread of the kingdom of God.'⁶ On the other side is Gary Meadors who argues, 'Jesus did not call Paul or present day Christians to a primary task of changing the world-system, but to evangelise individuals, to teach them all things he commanded, and to recognise that Satan is the "god of this world" and that our only hope for ultimate political correction is Jesus' second advent.'⁷ But he is equally insistent that: 'We do not disagree that we should have compassion for starving people and for those who suffer from political injustice.'

Answers to questions of priority and motivation in evangelism and social action are inevitably shaped by the theological framework in which they are viewed. It is understandable that some evangelicals have strongly reacted against theological models which, in their eyes, are remarkably reminiscent of the 'social gospel' which wreaked havoc in many Western churches from the late 19th century throughout the 1930s and well into the 1960s, not least when definitions of what constitutes the 'Kingdom of God' seemed far removed from the way the New Testament writers use the term. Such a warning was issued by the late Sir Norman Anderson at the 1967 National Anglican Evangelical Conference (NEAC) at Keele University: 'There is a sense in which that Kingdom is already a present reality, for the King is already on his throne, waiting till all things are put under his feet ... But is there a wider sense in which one can think of the Kingdom as advanced wherever the will of the King is done, even by those who do not give Him personal allegiance? This, it seems to me, is dangerous ground, for we cannot regard the Kingdom of God as

having materialised in a factory for example, merely because social justice and harmony reign therein ... The Evangelical holds no brief for the so called “social gospel”, for society, as such, cannot be “redeemed” or “baptised into Christ”... But it can be reformed.’⁸

How, then, are evangelicals to react when they read such a statement as this: ‘All the earth is the Lord’s and so we trace the Spirit at work *beyond* the Church, especially in movements that make for human dignity and liberation.’⁹? Anxiety and caution will be expressed by some and disdain and outright opposition by others. The danger, however, for the more conservative evangelical is *over*-reaction, a concern raised by Ranald Macaulay when he writes of the move in some quarters to ‘place exclusive emphasis on evangelism.’¹⁰

Is it possible to co-ordinate evangelism and social action in such a way that it reflects faithfully the pattern of the New Testament, enabling each to reinforce the other while avoiding the extremes of exclusive gospel proclamation on the one hand and collapsing evangelism into social action on the other? How has the present situation of tension and controversy amongst evangelicals on this issue come about? Are there lessons which we can learn from our evangelical forebears? How does what they believed and acted contrast with their 21st century theological offspring? What might a biblically shaped and theologically informed co-ordination between evangelistic activity and social action look like on the ground in 21st century Britain? These are some of the questions we shall be exploring in this book in the hope of moving beyond caricatured, entrenched positions to a better rounded and clearly recognisable evangelical appreciation.¹¹

Accordingly, the book is divided into three related sections. The first part surveys the different stances taken by evangelicals towards the relation between evangelism and social involvement—both past and present and offering some critical reflections. The middle section involves providing some exegetical groundwork for what is hoped is a well rounded understanding of this relationship which is faithful to the teaching of Jesus in particular. This will also involve a testing of the proposed model by looking at the life of the early church in the book of Acts. The final chapter is more personal; indicating what

applying these principles might look like on the ground in my own ministerial context in trying to ‘reach the unreached’.

ENDNOTES

1. John R. W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1984) p. 3
2. Jonathan Chaplin, KLICE comment: <http://tyndalehouse>
3. Professor Paul Helm, <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.co.uk/>
4. This definition is put forward by John Woodhouse, ‘Evangelism and Social responsibility’ in B. G. Webb (Ed), *Christians in Society*, (Explorations 3, Lancer, 1988), p. 5.
5. Robert K. Johnstone, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) p. 79
6. Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy, The Call of the Jericho Road* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), p. 106
7. Gary T. Meadors, ‘John R. W. Stott on Social Action’, *Grace Theological Journal* 1/2 (1980), p. 146
8. J. N. D. Anderson, ‘Christian Worldliness—the need and limits of Christian Involvement’, *Guidelines*, J. I. Packer (Ed), (CPAS 1967), p. 231.
9. Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (SPCK 1996), p. 112.
10. Ranald Macaulay, ‘The Great Commissions’, *Cambridge Papers* 2/7 (1998)
11. Some of the material included in this book is a development of two major public lectures: The 1999 London Evangelical Library Lecture, ‘Reversal or Betrayal? Evangelicals and Socio-Political Involvement in the 20th Century’, in *Evangelical Concerns*, Melvin Tinker, (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2001) and the 2006 John Wenham Lecture for the Tyndale Fellowship, ‘The Servant Solution—The Co-ordination of Evangelism and Social Action’ in *Transforming the World?*, Ed. Jamie Grant and Dewi Hughes (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009).