

Evangelism and Social Concern

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In recent years, there has been considerable debate among evangelicals regarding the relationship of evangelism and social concern in the mission task. Early in the twentieth century, liberal theologians adopted what came to be called the “social gospel.” These theologians gave up belief in personal salvation from sin through faith in Jesus Christ, and preached a message of salvation that equated it with social justice and liberation. In 1967 the WCC published a set of reports called The Church for Others. Regarding these, John Stott says,

The thesis developed in these reports was that God is at work in the historical process, that the purpose of his mission, of the “missio Dei”, is the establishment of “shalom” (Hebrew for ‘peace’) in the sense of social harmony, and that this “shalom” (which it was suggested is identical with the kingdom of God) is exemplified in ‘the emancipation of colored races, the concern for the humanization of industrial relations, various attempts at rural development, the quest for business and professional ethics, the concern for intellectual honesty and integrity’ (“The Church for Others”, p. 15). (Stott 1975, 17)

Conservative evangelicals opposed this liberal viewpoint, and stressed evangelism as personal salvation. Moderate evangelicals called this ‘the Great Reversal’ and argued that social concern is an important part of the biblical message and should not be given up just because the liberals put an unscriptural emphasis on it.

Strong statements in favor of socio-political action came out of the Congress on the Church’s Worldwide Mission, Wheaton, 1966; the United States Congress on Evangelism, Minneapolis, 1969; and the European Congress on Evangelism, Amsterdam, 1971. At the Urbana 70 Convention, social concern was a primary theological issues. The Declaration of Evangelism Social Concern, Chicago, 1973, was signed ten months before Lausanne and was influential in shaping Article 5 in the Lausanne Covenant.

Billy Graham and the Planning Committee intended that the Lausanne Congress be thoroughly evangelical, and did not include those of liberal theological persuasion. The emphasis was on evangelism, but the issue of social responsibility was raised. Article 5 of the Lausanne Covenant, titled “Christian Responsibility,” states:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all (Ac. 17:26,31). We therefore should share his concern for justice (Ge. 18:25) and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression (Ps. 45:7; Isa. 1:17). Because men and women are made in the image of God (Ge. 1:26, 27), every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age (Lev. 19:18; Lk. 6:27, 35), has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited (Jas. 3:9). Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgement upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again (Jn. 3:3,5) into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness (Mt. 5:20; Mt. 6:33) in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us (2 Co. 3:18) in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:14-26).

The Congress on World Evangelism in Pattayya, Thailand, 1980, issued “The Thailand Statement” which affirmed the statements of the Lausanne Covenant that “evangelism and sociopolitical involvement are both part of our Christian duty. . . [and] in the Church’s mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary.” Some delegates thought this showed a lack of proper interest in social concern. One third of the delegates signed a “Statement of Concern” which objected to the separation of socio-political involvement from evangelism.

As a result of this controversy, LCWE and WEF sponsored the International Consultation of the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR)? at Grand Rapids, 1982. The resulting report clarified issues but did not reduce tensions between moderates and conservatives. It maintains that evangelism and social responsibility are distinct, but also that they are related to one another. The CRESR Report states,

It has been said, therefore, that evangelism, even when it does not have a primarily social intention, nevertheless has a social dimension, while social responsibility, even when it does not have a primarily evangelistic intention, nevertheless has an evangelistic dimension.

Thus evangelism and social responsibility, while distinct from one another, are integrally related in our proclamation of and obedience to the Gospel. The partnership is, in reality, a marriage.

The report affirmed the primacy of evangelism and gave two reasons for this.

First, evangelism has a certain priority. We are not referring to an invariable ‘temporal’ priority, because in some situations a social ministry will take precedence, but a ‘logical’ one. The very fact of Christian social responsibility presupposes socially responsible Christians, and it can only be by evangelism and discipling that they have become such. If social activity is a consequence and aim of evangelism (as we have asserted), then evangelism must precede it. In addition, social progress is being hindered in some countries by the prevailing religious culture; only evangelism can change this.

Secondly, evangelism relates to people’s eternal destiny, and in bringing them Good News of salvation, Christians are doing what nobody else can do. Seldom if ever should we have to choose between satisfying physical hunger and spiritual hunger, or between healing bodies and saving souls, since an authentic love for or neighbour will lead us to serve him or her as a whole person. Nevertheless, if we must choose, then we have to say that the supreme and ultimate need of all human-kind is the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and that therefore a person’s eternal, spiritual salvation is of greater importance than his or her temporal and material well-being (cf. II Cor. 4:16-18).

LCWE next addressed the question of social responsibility at the Second International Congress of Evangelism, 1989, Manila. From this came the Manila Manifesto, “An Elaboration on the Lausanne Covenant Fifteen Years Later.” Section 4 says, in part:

Evangelism is primary (Ro. 10:14) because our chief concern is with the gospel, that all people may have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Yet Jesus not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power (Mt. 12:28). We are called today to a similar integration of words and deeds (I Jn. 3:18). In a spirit of humility we are to preach and teach, minister to the sick, feed the hungry, care for prisoners, help the disadvantaged and handicapped, and deliver the oppressed (Mt. 25:34-46). While we acknowledge the diversity of spiritual gifts, callings (Ac. 6:14; Ro. 12:4-8) and contexts, we also affirm that good news and good works are inseparable (Mt. 5:16).

After fifteen years of discussion, the LCWE continues to give evangelism primacy over social responsibility. The Manifesto states:

True mission should always be incarnational (Jn. 17-18; 20:21). It necessitates entering humbly into other people's world, identifying with their social reality, their sorrow and suffering, and their struggles for justice against oppressive powers (Php. 2:5-8). This cannot be done without personal sacrifices."

A paragraph from Section 4 of the CRESR Report gives a fitting summary to the debate.

But at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the so-called "social gospel" was developed by theological liberals. Some of them confused the Kingdom of God with Christian civilization in general, and with social democracy in particular, and they went on to imagine that by their social programmes they could build God's Kingdom on earth. It seems to have been in over-reaction to this grave distortion of the Gospel that many evangelicals became suspicious of social involvement. And now that evangelicals are recovering a social conscience and rediscovering our evangelical social heritage, it is understandable that some of our brothers and sisters are looking askance at us and suspecting us of relapsing into the old heresy of the social gospel. But the responsible social action which the biblical Gospel lays upon us, and the liberal "social gospel" which was a perversion of the true Gospel, are two quite different things.