

Perspectives on Social Ethics

Part I: Theological Perspectives on Social Ethics

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Many evangelicals trace the emergence of modern thought about the social implications of the gospel to Carl Henry's book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, which first appeared in 1947. From that same author have also come such works as *Christian Personal Ethics* (1957), *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (1964), and *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (1971). Sociologist David Moberg wrote *The Church as a Social Institution* in 1962 and *Inasmuch* in 1965. The subtitle of the latter was "Christian Social Responsibility in the Twentieth Century." Sherwood Wirt, former editor of *Decision* magazine, wrote *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (1968), which is a strong call to action rather than a detailed discussion of the issues per se. A professor at Philadelphia College of Bible, Charles Y. Furness, produced in 1972 the book *The Christian and Social Action*, which gives blueprints for implementing social concern. In addition, there have been countless articles, seminars, and consultations on the subject.

When new evangelicalism set forth its manifesto, one of its main concerns was to do something about the social implications of the gospel which, in the opinion of the new evangelicals, fundamentalists had abandoned. Now a generation later, there has appeared the unbelievable spectacle of another group pushing aside the new evangelicals (actually the old new evangelicals) and insisting that

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of four articles, first delivered by the author as the Louis S. Bauman Memorial Lectures at Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana, February 10-13, 1976.

they are the true new evangelicals. And so, what was new evangelicalism from the late 1940s through the 1960s is now being called in the 1970s the “establishment evangelicalism”; it has been supplanted by the self-proclaimed young evangelicals who, according to their own publicity, are the only ones who have a genuine social concern. Richard Quebedeaux, their spokesman, charges:

We have found social concern among Establishment Evangelicals to be often merely an offering of pious words rather than a demonstration of prophetic action. Hence, if we are looking for a powerful expression of spiritual renewal in Orthodox Christianity — one genuinely committed to reconciliation and active faith in a secular society — we shall have to search elsewhere.¹

The International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne in 1974 devoted an entire article in its covenant to “Christian Social Responsibility.” Indeed, one receives the impression that this was one of the most significant articles in the entire covenant since almost every news story about the congress devoted considerable space to it. Carl Henry deplored the fact that the covenant “left in doubt whether social concern . . . is a legitimate aspect of — and not simply compatible with and supplementary to — evangelism.”²

In January, 1976 an ecumenical group of twenty-one Boston-area theologians, replying to the conservative-oriented Hartford Declaration of the year before, deplored “escapist” tendencies among conservatives and sought to “anchor social concern in the biblical message and in the central tradition of the church.” Significantly, the *New York Times* noted that “omitted from the document were precise definitions of the significance of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the nature of salvation.”³ One could go on, but the point is clear: this is a timely subject of current interest.

This first article in the series will examine the theological foundations for social ethics, and for this a systematic theology methodology will be employed. Then, using the methodology of biblical theology the other three articles will investigate the Old Testament perspective, Jesus’ perspective, and the perspective of the apostles on the subject.

1 Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 37.

2 Carl F. H. Henry, “The Gospel and Society,” *Christianity Today*, September 13, 1974, p. 67.

3 “Theology Group Urges Activism,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1976, p. 21.

Four areas of theology are often cited as relevant to social ethics. They are the doctrine of God (theology proper), the doctrine of man (anthropology), the doctrine of the Christian life, and the doctrine of last things (eschatology).

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

One’s concept of God is basic to all other doctrines. Henry has correctly emphasized this point:

Christian doctrine is a harmonious unity whose main axis is the nature of God. For this reason a correct understanding of the whole range of Christian faith and duty turns on a proper comprehension of divine attributes. How the theologian defines and relates God’s sovereignty, righteousness, and love actually predetermines his exposition of basic positions in many areas — in social ethics⁴

Writers of all theological persuasions recognize this truth, though not all have the same view of God, nor do all consistently apply their doctrine of God to their doctrine of social ethics. For the liberal, love is the only attribute of God for all practical purposes. All ideas of justice and righteousness are dissolved into love. Though the Barthian distinguishes justice and love, ultimately he considers all acts to be acts of love, including acts of judgment. Unfortunately, evangelicals are not always clear as to which attributes of God relate to social problems, and exactly how they relate. One writer lists relevant attributes, then centers on only one, viz., love. “God is righteous, generous, good, and just. His love is extended to the whole world, not merely to those who love Him.”⁵ Why cannot one also say, “His *justice* is extended to the whole world?” What attributes of God do in fact relate to social ethics?

SOVEREIGNTY

The first attribute is sovereignty. Basically, sovereignty means not that God is a dictator, but that He is the supreme ruler. The word *sovereign* does not of itself tell how He rules. But the Bible does. He rules by working all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph. 1:11). He works those things together in various ways. Sometimes He directly intervenes, as when He elected the nation

4 Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 146.

5 David Moberg, *Inasmuch* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p. 32.

Israel, a decision which certainly carried profound social ramifications for Israel and the rest of the world. Or He sends rain on one city and not on another (Amos 4:7). In the future He will send worldwide judgments which will bring all kinds of social problems. Sometimes He permits men to have free rein over their sinful desires, again with far-reaching social ramifications (Rom. 1). In the realm of government, God raises up and removes rulers (Dan. 4:35), sometimes by direct intervention (Acts 12:23) and sometimes by permitting them to carry out exceedingly sinful purposes (Rev. 13:5-7). But He is in control of all things, regardless of His means of operation. More of this will be discussed later under the topic of eschatology.

LOVE

A second attribute of God relating to social ethics is love. What is love? It is seeking the highest good in the object loved, and ultimately "good" is what brings glory to God. Love in its purest form is seeking the glory of God. When the Bible says that God is love, it is saying that He glorifies Himself, without any suggestion of selfishness or pride. In obeying the biblical command to love one another, believers are to seek the glory of God in each other's lives. In loving outside the family of God, believers are to seek God's glory in the lives of those unbelievers. To love those outside the family of God (that is, to glorify God in their lives) means primarily to seek their salvation, for an individual can glorify God in no better way than by displaying His grace throughout all eternity (Eph. 2:7). Of course, there are degrees of glorifying God. Whenever He is imitated, He is glorified. Every attribute of God, when reflected in man's actions, brings glory to Him, but perhaps none does so as much as the display of His grace in the salvation of a person.

GOODNESS

God's goodness is manifested in many facets of common grace: in nature (Matt. 5:45), in the arrangement of the seasons so that humans may eat (Acts 14:17), in the restraining of sin, and in allowing men to be pricked by the gospel. Writers on social ethics recognize this and usually emphasize it, but they do not generally elaborate on the variety of God's goodness or the reason He is good. God's goodness also includes being kind to the wicked and allowing them to prosper (Luke 6:35). In other words, in the overall perfect design of the sovereign God, injustice is sometimes permitted to triumph in order to accomplish an often unrevealed

purpose of God. Why is God good in these evil-sounding ways? From Romans 2:4 the answer is clear: in order to lead men to repentance.

JUSTICE

Love must always be tempered with justice. When either love or justice is sacrificed to the other, theology and practice both go awry. Since God's justice will triumph, some leaders emphasize that social ethics should be concerned with bringing justice to the world now. They desire justice for the poor by dividing the wealth, or they stress justice for oppressed races by any means, including (in the opinion of some) violent revolution. Micah 6:8 is often cited: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." But these are personal requirements, not programs for social action. To do justice may be different from imposing justice on others. God's just judgments are often delayed for higher purposes known only to Him. This implies that there can be a higher purpose than bringing immediate justice to all men. This is not to say that God is pleased with the injustices men bring on each other, but it is to say He often tolerates scoffers who live lustfully and inflict injustice on others because He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8). So it may be said that there is ultimate justice which God Himself will bring about; there is present justice which can sometimes be accomplished; and there is postponed justice which is often involuntary but is sometimes used by God for higher purposes. How will the believer know when he should fight for immediate justice, or when he must grieve over justice that must be postponed and wait patiently instead for God's ultimate justice?

Suppose a Christian worker who is not being treated fairly by his employer, seeks redress through his union. Or suppose a Christian citizen being defrauded by his government seeks redress in the courts. Or suppose a Christian's neighbor is violating something in the city code and the Christian complains to city hall. These are legitimate avenues of protest and legitimate reasons for lodging a complaint. All the actions are just. But should men insist on their rights because God is just, or deny themselves their rights because God is longsuffering? In insisting on justice, the worker, the citizen, or the homeowner may alienate those against whom he has the grievance. Contrariwise, not to insist on their rights may also alienate those people. Either action might open or close the door to the gospel witness. Merely saying that "Christian social concern imitates

God's concern"⁶ is to mouth a pious platitude that says little theologically or practically. For God's concern is sometimes expressed in love which is kind, and other times in love which is harsh. Sometimes it is expressed in goodness which tolerates evil, and other times in justice which does not. How will the believer know which is the proper course of social action? Only through intimate fellowship with the living Lord will he know what to do in each situation. And that is much more difficult than a well-planned universal course of action. God's nature is multifaceted and His attributes are many; so the believer's imitation of Him must be Spirit-directed or it will not be a true representation of His character.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

In this area of doctrine two themes relating to social ethics commonly appear in the literature on social ethics: the oneness of humanity, and the image of God.

HUMAN SOLIDARITY

The oneness or solidarity of humanity finds its roots in man's common relation to Adam, consisting of limitations and sinfulness. The limitations are seen in bodies made of dust which return to dust (Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:47-50), bodies that are soulish (1 Cor. 15:44-45), and bodies of flesh (Gal. 4:14; Col. 2:5).⁷ All these characteristics exude limitation. The solidarity is also exhibited in man's sinfulness. This is certainly the principal thought of Romans 5:12-21, where Paul describes a sinfulness which brings death to all, both spiritually and physically.

The most obvious ramification of this concept of solidarity is in the field of evangelism. If all men are limited and sinful, then the remedy of eternal salvation through Christ is of primary importance.

A second ramification is in the area of racial prejudice. Paul wrote of God making of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth (Acts 17:26). Although some have taken the phrase "bounds of their habitation" to support such things as apartheid, proper exegesis forbids such an interpretation. God has determined how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be. Since all men are of the same blood, and God's offspring by creation, there can be no superior or

6 Ibid.

7 Russell P. Shedd, *Man in Community* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 104-6.

inferior race of people. James elaborated on the problem of prejudice in the second chapter of his epistle, and plainly labelled it sin. Thus the concept of solidarity of the race underscores the urgency of evangelism and prohibits all racial or national prejudice.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

What is the image of God? The answers are numerous. Eichrodt thinks there is a physical similarity between God and man,⁸ but most theologians do not see any physical connotations in the image. Chafer taught that it consists of the attributes of personality — intellect, sensibility, and will.⁹ Calvin stated that "there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul" and that the image "includes all the excellence in which the nature of man surpasses all the other species of animals."¹⁰ Keil and Delitzsch find the image of God in the spiritual or self-conscious personality of man.¹¹ According to this writer, the image of God includes (a) the dominion which God, the supreme Sovereign, delegated to man (Gen. 1:26 relates the image to man's ruling over the creatures of the earth), (b) intelligence, for one of Adam's first acts was to name the animals (Gen. 2:20), and (c) life itself (Gen. 2:7) in all its creative potential.

Most commentators agree that the image was greatly marred by Adam's rebellion, though not totally erased. Feinberg says, "In spite of the fall man did not become a beast or a demon, but retained his humanity. He did lose, however, his communion with God, his righteousness, his conformity to the will of God. And he became mortal."¹²

The Scriptures suggest at least three specific ways in which the marred image of God should affect social ethics. First, James prohibits cursing another person because even in his fallen state man reflects the image of God in which he was created (3:9). Second, capital punishment was instituted because taking a life demands the

8 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 2:122.

9 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:181, 184.

10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford C. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:208 [I. xv. 3].

11 C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. James Martin, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), 1:63-64.

12 Charles L. Feinberg, "The Image of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (July-September 1972):245.

ultimate in retribution for one who was made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). Third, Paul relates the image of God to the matter of church ethics when he wrote of the uncovering of a man's head in the public worship of the church. He should be uncovered because he was made in the image of God; by contrast, a woman should be covered because she "is the glory of the man" (1 Cor. 11:7). It is obvious that this area of ethics is not made much of these days even though its basis in God's original acts of creation can hardly be written off as cultural and thus inapplicable.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Two emphases commonly found in writings on social ethics which relate to the Christian life need to be evaluated. They are the incarnational model and the servant concept.

THE INCARNATIONAL MODEL

In a word, the incarnational model is this: just as God performed His great work in the world through the incarnation of Christ, so now He continues that work through Christians in whom Christ is continually incarnated. Just as God was in Christ coming to the rescue of the world, so now Christ is in believers to continue His work.

This idea is not entirely unscriptural, but the best one can say is that it is not the most carefully stated concept. The Incarnation is the eternal Word become flesh. Jesus Christ's indwelling of believers is in no sense His becoming flesh again. The means of the Incarnation was the virgin birth; after the Resurrection, the humanity of Christ was a risen and glorified humanity. The incarnational model seems to imply that the present form of the humanity of Christ is the bodies of believers which He indwells. But that is not so. His present form is described in Revelation 1, in which the humanity of the God-man is seen as His body wounded and risen. That Christ lives in and works today through believers is indisputable, but not because of any incarnation in believers. It may be nice sounding, but it is theological confusion.

THE SERVANT CONCEPT

The servant concept is more accurate. The Incarnation resulted in Christ's taking the form of a servant, and that example is held up to believers in several places in the New Testament: Philip-
pian 2; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6, to name but a few. However,

two important facts of the servant concept need to be emphasize and delineated. One answers the question: Why did He become a servant? The other: To whom did He become a servant?

First, why did He become a servant? He became a servant in order to die. That self-sacrificing love is what is exalted as the example for believers to follow (John 13:1-17; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6). This does not mean that the believer's responsibility as a servant is limited to giving his life for someone else, and that if he cannot do that then he is relieved of all obligation. John makes it clear that most believers will never be called on to die for another; therefore, they can show their self-sacrificing love by giving to their brethren (1 John 3:15-16). Peter relates the servant concept to the obedience of slaves to their masters, whether unsaved or saved (1 Pet. 2:18-21). In Philippians 2 Paul likens the work of himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus to the self-sacrificing service of the Lord. Thus the servant concept refers to sacrificial service in the work of the Lord, in testimony before the unsaved, and in selfless giving to other believers.

Whom do Christians serve? The answer in the New Testament is clear: "you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:24). What has happened in the thinking of some ethics writers represents a kind of mutation, whereby the servant of the Lord becomes the servant of the world. "The practical conclusion to which this leads, in practice if not in theory, is that the Church now takes its cues from the world. Casting herself in the role of servant, the church, perhaps unthinkingly, has cast the world in the role of master."¹³ The Scriptures indicate that Christ, not the world, is the Christian master. The ultimate goal in imitating Christ is to do always the things that please the Father (John 8:29). Christenson continues

The church is sent into the world to serve — sent by the Lord. But that is quite another thing from being called *by the world*. The list of needs which the world sets for itself may be quite different than the priorities which God sets for it. The church serves the world only at those places and in those ways and toward those ends which God may determine.¹⁴

The servant concept is an important theological consideration in social ethics, as long as one understands that his greatest service is to exhibit the self-sacrificing love of Christ in specific ways which are directed by the Lord whom he serves.

13 Larry Christenson, *A Charismatic Approach to Social Action* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), p. 102.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Dispensational premillennialism is regularly accused of such pessimism as to make it useless in the realm of personal and social ethics. In personal ethics it is commonly characterized as negative; in social ethics, as impotent. Quebedeaux characterizes what he labels separatist fundamentalism "with its Dispensational pessimism about the human situation" as having "nothing to offer" in regard to social concern.¹⁵ Oddly, however, those he cites as separatist fundamentalists are actually not dispensationalists at all. What he calls "open fundamentalism" (which is, in fact, dispensationalism) comes under the same condemnation: "The unyielding Dispensational view of the present human situation which characterizes Open Fundamentalism deprives it of a meaningful social ethic."¹⁶

Though Moberg does not connect the following with dispensationalism, he feels that some evangelicals have sometimes misinterpreted the prophecy that perilous times shall come in the last days so that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). They have pessimistically taken this to mean that no matter what Christians and other men do, conditions will go from bad to worse; therefore, it is no use trying to do anything about social problems except to rescue souls through personal evangelism.¹⁷

Why these charges? Undoubtedly they stem from teachings often associated with dispensationalism: the apostate church, steadily worsening conditions in the world, no enduring peace until Christ returns to set up His millennial kingdom. From these concepts (which, not so incidentally, are biblical) it is inferred that dispensational premillennialists also teach that there is no point in trying to do anything good to reverse temporarily the evil trends in the world and the church. And perhaps dispensationalists have given that impression.

In viewing the coming of Christ and the ultimate triumph of His rule, premillennialists are optimistic. In viewing the present scene up to the time of His return, they are pessimistic. How do premillennialists properly balance these two opposites? On one occasion during this writer's early years of teaching, he overheard a group of professors heatedly discussing the question of whether a premillennialist was optimistic or pessimistic. After the arguments

15 Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals*, p. 25.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

17 Moberg, *Inasmuch*, p. 19.

had been wrung dry (and some were that way to begin with), one sage in the group calmly put the matter in its proper biblical perspective. He quietly said, "A premillennialist is realistic. He recognizes the present pessimism and the ultimate optimism, and in the meantime is a realist." That is the whole point in a nutshell. Premillennialists are not so optimistic (or unbiblical) as to think that in the present they can do for the world what only Christ can do when He comes to establish universal righteousness. On the other hand, they are not so pessimistic (or unbiblical) as to sit on their hands and do nothing to combat evil.

This is one of those tensions under which Christians live. They know that they cannot bring in peace, righteousness, or social justice; these will be accomplished only by Christ at His second coming. At the same time they know equally well that they ought to pray for peace and practice righteousness. Realistic dispensational premillennialism acknowledges both. Christians will not win the war until He comes; yet they must fight to win battles now. "Evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse" (2 Tim. 3:13), but in the meantime believers must "make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with him" (2 Pet. 3:14). Alva McClain expressed this point well:

The premillennial philosophy of history makes sense. It lays a biblical and rational basis for a truly optimistic view of human history. Furthermore, rightly apprehended, it has practical effects. It says that life here and now, in spite of the tragedy of sin, is nevertheless something worthwhile; and therefore all efforts to make it better are also worthwhile. All the true values of human life will be preserved and carried over into the coming kingdom; nothing worthwhile will be lost.¹⁸

Vernon Grounds stated this idea as follows:

Premillennialism then does not have pessimism as its logical corollary. There is no prophetic necessity for the outbreak of global war now, the unchecked growth of apostasy now, the irreversible collapse of civilization now. Instead, there may be an indeterminable delay of divine judgment, an era of peace, a time of spiritual renewal, an epoch of order and freedom and creativity. Consequently, one may adhere to premillenarianism and still hold out for the world penultimately as well as ultimately. The Christian attitude, one suggests, is like that of a physician who knows that eventually his patient must die. All the skill that doctors and surgeons possess

18 Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 531.

cannot prevent the inevitable end of life. But does that inevitability discourage the physician when illness strikes? Does it reduce him to unethical apathy? By no means! He utilizes all of his abilities and resources to prevent not only that particular illness from becoming fatal, but also to restore health and vitality for how long a time only God knows. So the premillenarian . . . ought to view no particular world-crisis as helpless. The Christian's God-assigned duty is not only to evangelize, but to pray and work for freedom, justice, and peace, doing everything he can within the limits of his opportunity and discernment to secure optimal conditions for a more successful on-going of the Gospel.¹⁹

These, then, are some of the doctrinal perspectives on social ethics. The doctrine of God is a reminder that He is in absolute control and that He must lead through specific displays of His love and justice, since human views of love and justice are often warped and their timing misguided. The doctrine of man points out kinship of all human beings with one another as sinners and in need of mutual respect. The Christian is above all a servant of the Lord and is to do His will by imitating his Master in sacrificial love. This ought to give believers a realistic outlook on life as they seek to do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10), even though they know that universal righteousness awaits the return of Christ.

¹⁹ Vernon Grounds, "Premillennialism and Social Pessimism," *Christian Heritage*, October, 1974, p. 29.