

## EVANGELICALISM AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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ONE OF THE MOST striking contrasts between evangelicals of today and those of over a century ago is their different attitude to social problems. Increasingly it has become possible to accuse evangelicals of some form of antinomianism, an accusation which, when judged by the standards of some present-day evangelical preaching, is not without justification. Many evangelicals have felt perfectly happy when they were able to rebut this charge on strictly theological grounds, which may be done easily. Their failure is in not realizing that the matter does not end there and that, even though the evangelical ordering of priorities in social reform—the reformation of men before the reformation of society—may be shown to be correct theologically, the practical challenge still remains. This is the heart of the case against evangelicals, and is the practical challenge of greatest interest to the ordinary man, and so, presumably, the greatest challenge in a parish.

### I

Admittedly not all evangelicals show a lack of concern over social problems. Have those who show such concern no faults? Do they follow in the noble line of their predecessors? It is important that they should, because their views are taken as representative of evangelicals generally. Yet in one vitally important respect there is a difference. A notable characteristic of some of the great Christian social reformers of the early nineteenth century was their vast knowledge of the social matters on which they passed judgement. They realized that it was better not to speak at all than to speak with an ill-informed voice. Such, regrettably, is not always so in evangelical circles today. When judgements, sometimes dogmatic judgements, are pronounced on social matters, it is often with a particularly ill-informed voice. Perhaps it is here that the minister has to tread warily for two reasons.

In the first place, it is not possible for a man engaged in parochial work to have the time to assimilate all the vast ramifications of many present-day social problems. They all call for detailed and specialized knowledge. Unless a man has such, he should not speak on a particular issue. Otherwise his opinion might well be harmful. Better for all that ill-informed voices be silent.

Secondly, the minister, in common with many social workers, often encounters many social practices when, for one reason or another, these are not working satisfactorily; hence a false impression of their impact may be engendered. Hire purchase is a good example. Its extensive favourable features are often condemned because of the appearance of what are relatively very few unfavourable cases of its operation. The minister should be careful, therefore, not only that he is fully informed on social problems, but that his judgement is not formed from an unrepresentative sample. The effect of uninformed criticism can sometimes be much more damaging than none at all.

### II

Those who fall in this group are at least fully aware of the need for social criticism; the objection is only to their method of doing so. What of those who see no such need? They lie at the root of our problem, and, let us be

clear, represent the peculiar evangelical phenomenon of the last century. Why has such an important group appeared among evangelicals during this period? The fault may or may not lie with these evangelicals themselves. Many critics are certain that it does lie with them, and explain the change by holding that evangelicals were willing to participate in social reform only so long as it did not lead to any drastic political change—in short, that they were anything but democrats. A reply can be made to this argument, but to follow this discussion is perhaps irrelevant. Whatever the interpretation of it, the fact, which must be stressed, is that in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the field of social reform was increasingly appropriated by those who held a materialist explanation of life. Their approach to social reform was so different from that of evangelicals that the latter began to think increasingly that the field could no longer be theirs. To participate in the same activities with those who were acting from fundamentally different motives was to many evangelicals tantamount to an acceptance of these opposing views. Such a belief has played into the hands of their opponents—whether they be materialists or those who would adopt some other view of the Christian faith is irrelevant. The outcome has been that the initiative for social reform has passed out of evangelical into other, and mainly secular, hands.

The matter does not end there. Not only has much valiant good work been surrendered to others, though that in itself would be sufficient cause for regret, but an impression has grown, which some evangelicals would admit, that the cessation of activity has been the result of a more accurate perception of the theological issues at stake. This is the more fundamental issue. It is possible to concentrate, as we have done so far, on the external changes—on the factors which led evangelicals to be edged off a field which they had previously monopolized. If these were the only influences at work, evangelicals could be placed in a favourable light, as defenders of the faith against secular influences. If, on the other hand, we explain the change by the conscious sheering off by evangelicals, our judgement might be very different. Then, if we decide this represented a failure in their own witness, the failure would stem from an inadequate appreciation of the implications of their own theology. In sum evangelicals would be where they are today because of their own weakness and inadequacy.

### III

Is there an explanation of the change? Perhaps it stems from some doubt on what should be the attitude of the Christian towards material progress. There is a not infrequent tendency to assume that the Christian should have no interest in the increase of material welfare. This opinion may take different forms. On the one hand are those who are personally disinterested in material welfare and progress, though this group is probably much smaller than it is often made out to be. On the other hand, and more important, are those who would deny the desirability of increased material welfare and who often proceed to trace a causal connection between moral decay and higher living standards. Even if there is such a connection, it should be advanced only exceptionally by those who have themselves never experienced the worst effects of low living standards. It must be admitted that one of the dangers of the affluent society is that human activity is made to seem capable of any achievement, a view that is, of course, quite heretical. But those evangelicals who advocate the need for material progress do so, not because they accept this point of view, but because they believe in its inherent desirability as the sign of a Christian conscience. The pursuit of material progress should never be man's only, or even chief, aim. That is always 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'. But material progress should be accepted as a subsidiary aim and a legitimate and desirable one, towards which the chief aim, if properly followed, should lead.

If we order our aims in this way, we become clear as to what aims are legitimate, even though they can never claim an overriding priority in our actions. It is essential that evangelicals should realize what is possible and what is not; what is condemned and what is not. Too often they simply do not carry out the analysis far enough. Is this the root of the weakness of present-day evangelicals? Do evangelicals not far too frequently condemn

some action when at worst it is morally neutral? Are they not often far too willing to pass judgement with only inadequate knowledge? If so, the two attitudes of evangelicals which we have examined both stand under a common condemnation. The great need today is for an informed social witness. This is rare, and far too many evangelicals have retreated into their own surroundings and have no interest in understanding the problems of their fellow men and in trying to grapple with these problems; the remainder do not always display knowledge or wisdom in their pronouncements.