

# The Social Conscience of an Evangelical

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Three professors of sociology were seated around a luncheon table at a YMCA in a midwestern city. They were participants in a professional conference then in session. One was an avowed liberal in theology, an ordained minister, who headed the department of sociology in a private university. The second was a liberal, also, and a clergyman, teaching the same discipline in a church-related college. The third was an evangelical layman teaching in an independent Christian liberal arts college. Each in turn confessed that he often spent his weekends conducting services in neighboring churches.

The conversation turned on the social issues under consideration at the professional conference.

“Tell me,” said the professor from the private university as he directed his remarks to the evangelical, “How can a fundamentalist have a social conscience?”

This question is typical of the attitude which many in organized Protestantism have toward the mid-twentieth century evangelical. Because the evangelical is identified with an ethic which is directly related to the Bible, it is assumed that he is unconscious of that which transpires around him. Or, if he is conscious of social needs, it is taken for granted he has in mind no well-organized program for social action.

Stereotypes of this nature are built upon fundamental cleavages in theology, biblical and practical. For the modern evangelical the Bible is the Word of God. A century of biblical criticism has not robbed the Scriptures of their authenticity; rather, it has strengthened their claim for recognition as an authentic record of God's revelation to men. The evangelical has responded to that revelation in faith, and has discovered that a response of the total person to God's call to repentance has brought an inner assurance of salvation through faith in the atoning work of the Christ revealed in Scripture. He now lives in a world where his obligation to God is primary; his obligation to men is secondary. His social outlook is grounded in his vertical relationship to God. He must seek God's

view of himself and of his fellow men before he considers the problem of human need.

The liberal, on the other hand, has drifted far from a biblical orientation in the message which he presents. Consciously or unconsciously, he has assumed that man is central in the Christian message. If a humanist, he has assumed that man is able by the directed use of his reason to deliver himself from the evil that is in the world. He believes that man by the study of history and science may discover the means of transforming himself and his environment. The motivating image of his social concern is that of a "brave, new world" of man's creation. To him the term social conscience really means social program or plan.

Justice is the concern of both the evangelical and the liberal Protestant. Both believe that the Bible has much to say about this problem. They are aware that a major concern of the entire scriptural record is the problem of justice among men and the justice of God in His relation to men. They agree that the biblical revelation has had much to do with the illumination of the minds of men as they face the issues of human living, individual and collective.

The evangelical is more apt to be moved by his sense of the immediate presence of God in history as he endeavors to project his biblical vision of justice. For him God is imminent. By God's acts of grace and judgment He is moving men to the realization of justice in human relations. Social programs, as such, are suspect to him because they tend to minimize the role of God in history and to substitute therein the role of man.

The liberal tends to be impatient with the time process involved in the evangelical's perspective. He wants to implement the realization of God's redemptive justice by a program or programs which purport quickly to establish a system of equity among men.

Historically, the church of Jesus Christ has sought to implement the biblically inspired vision of justice in a number of ways. Private charity in the name of Christ has been encouraged, as well as corporate endeavor in caring for the needy in the community. Christian principles of justice long influenced the adoption of laws defining the rights of person and the rights of property.

The rise of the nation state and the breakup of the unitary society of Mediaeval Europe created tensions in the administration of these principles. Responsibility for the perpetuation of Christian principles gradually shifted from the immediate supervision of the church to the nation. In 1563, for example, the English Parliament ordered the parishes of the national church to assume responsibility for the collection and administration of funds for the poor.

This action introduced an ambiguity into the administration of the biblically-inspired perspective. For if the civil authority was to be considered secular, as many Protestants ultimately came to believe it to be, how can it discharge a religious function? The nineteenth century was to witness a similar confusion of responsibilities in the matter of education of children and the care of persons confined in prisons and reformatories.

Changes of this nature in practical theology and politics are contemporary with a marked change in the intellectual outlook of the Western world. When John Locke declared his belief in the authority of the Scriptures on the ground that their infallibility appeared reasonable to him, he opened the floodgates to a new understanding of the biblical revelation. From this point on it was no longer to rest upon the groundwork of faith, divinely imparted, but upon the sanction of individual reason, humanly conceived. By the end of the next century, the eighteenth, Thomas Jefferson was preparing a new edition of the Bible from which all record of miracle was excised. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Bible was widely regarded to be nothing less than the religious literature of a distinctive people. It contained no principles that could be termed an "infallible rule of faith and practice" for either the Jew or the Gentile.

Protestantism on the Continent and in America had arrived at the impasse in social outlook so clearly implied by Friedrich Engels when he wrote: "Unless we believe in supernatural revelation, we must admit that no religious tenets will ever suffice to prop up a tottering society."<sup>1</sup> Protestantism, no longer believing in a supernatural revelation, sought to find some new intellectual foundations for their view of man and society. Liberalism and its logical derivative, Socialism, became the basis of faith and reason for the Christian world. Man, it was asserted, must build his own conception of the nature of order and reality.

The groundwork for this new vision, it was affirmed, must be laid in scientific knowledge. Any knowledge which savors of the supernatural must be dismissed as unworthy of consideration by a rational man. Since then the Protestant who has continued to believe that man's vision of his fellow men and of society must be rooted in the biblical revelation has been dismissed as a Bibliolator. This is to say that such an individual has a closed mind to any other form of knowledge.

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1. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1907), p. xxxvii.

The Protestant of the liberal persuasion has been earthbound in his approach to an understanding of his fellow men and their needs. His presuppositions concerning the nature of man and society have been grounded in some form of naturalism. He has been able to conceive of man only in terms of his relation to the natural world. Idealists such as Hegel talked and wrote about the importance of ideas. But their ideas lacked incarnation. They assumed that ideas would perform in a uniform order of motion—the order of the dialectic—which, in turn, would motivate men through the path of history in the direction of constructive change. Hegel, personally, rejected the biblical illumination concerning the nature of man and society on the ground that Christianity proposed to deal only with the individual. For him any meaningful approach to the problems of man must be through society. He proceeded, then, to build a theoretical construct concerning the nature of man and of society and to apply it to conditions in the modern world.

A similar development took place in the world of British philosophy and science. Newton's view of a universe of law was widely accepted as a satisfactory representative schema in science. Why could it not be applied to society as well? Liberal economists, such as Adam Smith; utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, all operated within this framework. The social application of this natural science model differed from that employed by scientists. For the economists the model was accepted as a revelation of natural law and thus not susceptible to change. For the natural scientist who followed Newton the model was considered tentative and thus susceptible to change as scientific knowledge expanded.

Modern liberalism, whether structured on the dialectical science of Hegel or the evolutionary science of Darwin, has held before the mind of man the continual possibility of so directing or employing the forces of history that man may eventually enjoy a perfect society. Evangelical Christianity, on the other hand, has continued to stress the importance of the historical biblical insight, namely, that all social change is dependent upon individual change and that the achievement of the perfect society lies outside of history in the "eschaton", the day of Christ's ultimate triumph and kingship.

What, then, are the essential features of the evangelical social conscience? I would answer, first of all, that the evangelical social conscience is grounded in a firm belief in the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men. This commitment of heart and soul to a divine absolute throws a floodlight of illumination upon the role of man, both individually and collectively. Man seeks to discover God's

view of men, the world, and history, rather than to develop a framework of reference based upon a philosophic or scientific interpretation of human life and its meaning. Man then views humanity and history within the light of the City of God. History becomes temporal and contingent. It can never be accepted as an ultimate framework of reference. God's will as revealed in the Scriptures becomes the principle of order for both thought and action.

Secondly, man's sense of the need of change in society and institutions will be grounded in a complete acceptance of God's redemptive purpose for all men as the ultimate end of social action. The inevitable trend of each system of social change developed in modern times has been to suggest that God's redemptive plan is no longer determinative. The liberals of the eighteenth century conceived of man as known only through the rational principle. Sin—estrangement from God—was dismissed as irrelevant in understanding human nature. Man lived in a rational universe, a universe that could be made intelligible through a design based on man's knowledge of mathematical forms. Society could be built upon a grand design created by human reason. Man could be prepared to maintain this society through the training of his mind. Man's conscience would be instructed by philosophy and natural science. Conformity to the "perfect" society, portrayed by man, redeemed man and brought into being a new heaven and a new earth.

The role of the evangelical social conscience in this kind of world is clearly revealed in the work of the Wesleys and their associates in the British Empire of the eighteenth century. John Wesley insisted that society would collapse unless men and women were brought face to face with the biblical revelation of themselves, their condition of sin, and their need of a divine transformation of heart and soul by a supernatural work of grace which transcended the scope of human reason. Similarly, Jonathan Edwards pled in New England for the recognition of an individual act of acceptance of God's message of salvation. It was to be personal in its impact; social in its outreach.

Jonathan Edwards and his associates in America contended at the same time for a renewal of the evangelical social conscience by insisting that it must be based in the biblical revelation and in an act of divine regeneration. For Edwards, God must speak to man personally through His Word, and man must respond by an act of faith and will to God's offer of a supernatural work of individual regeneration. The social outreach of men and women thus transformed is amply documented in the historical records of both England and America.

The evangelical social conscience leads to a clear distinction between the role of the church and the role of the state in effecting social change. This principle is elemental in historic Protestantism, but is frequently overlooked by the contemporary Protestant believer. Whether an evangelical or not, he is caught up in the present tendency to rely upon the state to bring about social change. Liberalism has tended to blur the lines of distinction between those who follow a biblical ethic and those who follow either a rational or romantic humanism. It is assured that all who would identify themselves as men of good will have the same view of man and society. This is to ignore the fact that the evangelical remembers his Lord's renunciation of the use of political power to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Many early abolitionists in both England and America faced this issue in their effort to rid the English-speaking world of the social blight of chattel slavery. They recognized that laws liberating slaves would have little effect unless a large portion of the population had been brought through spiritual regeneration and education to see the evil of human slavery. Hence it was that many of the evangelical leaders in both countries preached the necessity of individual regeneration through faith in Christ as the first step in the total abolition of slavery. They realized that law must have the support of individual conscience in a free society. They realized further that prejudices are so deeply seated in the human subconscious that no act of will, apart from divine grace, could lay a sound basis for constructive social change.

The mid-twentieth century evangelical in America faces a political scene which is confusing and deceptive. Evangelical Protestantism in this country has been associated for over a century with social reform. Professor Timothy L. Smith's penetrating study of Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, indicates quite clearly that the social conscience of the American Protestant of the period after the Civil War was highly stimulated by the widespread revivals in urban centers preceding the outbreak of hostilities.

The apparent success of the anti-slavery movement in bringing the power of the federal government to bear upon this social evil led many to look to the power of government, both local and national, to eliminate other evils such as the traffic in alcoholic beverages and the social evils which grew out of the economic exploitation of farmers, laborers, and cultural minorities by the business and industrial community. The individual conscience of the American Protestant was inspired and instructed by a vision of societal transformation wrought through political force. The Christian Gospel,

as taught in American pulpits, became in time the social gospel, so-called.

The intellectual wellsprings of this movement are varied. There was the reforming zeal of the seventeenth-century Puritans who settled New England, and the eighteenth-century Quakers, who found lodgment in the Middle States, which afforded theological sanction and emotional impetus. There were the liberals of England and the Continent and the socialists of the European scene who pictured a new society in terms of total reconstruction. The Fabian Socialists proposed to achieve an improved social order by education and politically-induced social evolution. The Marxists saw violent revolution only as the path to a new society and a new world. All of these movements played a role in awakening America to the lack of justice in its newly industrialized society.

American political reformers, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, sensed the need for response to the demand for social justice. They brought change to America by dramatizing the need for political change as a contest against evil. By re-invoking the Puritan pattern of confession and restoration they revived the imagery of a religious crusade analagous to the Puritan Revolution in English history. The evangelical found himself in harmony with this approach to social transformation through political action. He could point back to the Old Testament for its sanction and to the history of evangelical Protestantism in both England and America for its conformation.

World War I witnessed the demise of this vision of biblically-inspired social action. The years that followed saw a ready acceptance of the universe and man, scientifically conceived, as the basis of thought and action in both church and state. Many Americans were unaware of the fundamental issue at the bar in the Scopes trial. Only one contemporary writer, David W. Brogan, an English journalist, identified it when he observed that it marked the passing of the Bible as the primary source of illumination of the American conscience.

The program of social and economic transformation inaugurated in the period of the New Deal was ample demonstration of the incisiveness of his insight. One searches in vain for any reference to national error in the public papers of the New Deal President such as one finds in the first inaugural of Woodrow Wilson. Rather, the ideological image of a society structured on the basis of a humanistic interpretation of the Declaration of Independence is set forth as the panacea for a nation stricken with fear and paralyzed by its inhumanity to man.

The evangelical Protestant in America has never recovered fully from the impact of this transformation in the American political scene. He has found it difficult to insist upon his biblically-inspired vision of a social transformation wrought through individual spiritual regeneration when the intellectual climate is so definitely impregnated with visions of social transformation through political action. He finds that religion becomes largely involved in programs of social reform, and that politics is heavily encumbered with the impossible task of human regeneration. Many evangelicals in recent political campaigns found themselves so disturbed by the trend of events in contemporary life that they began to identify the party out of power with the type of political leadership exemplified in Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. A thoughtful examination of the campaign literature issued by the leaders of this party will demonstrate clearly how far short they fell in a return to the earlier pattern of an evangelical crusade.

Let us return to the conversation with which we began.

It soon became apparent that the liberal teachers involved in the dialogue knew little of the social concern of the modern evangelical. They had not read Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of the Modern Fundamentalist*. Nor had they perused the stimulating pages of Frank E. Gabelein's *Christian Education in a Democracy*. They knew nothing of the evangelicals that held places of responsibility in local, state, and national government. The air of incredulity with which the conversation began gave way to an attitude of understanding.

Then came confession.

"You know," said the one liberal to the other, "We will have to admit that these people have an enthusiasm for the church which our people do not possess."

Here is the key to the role of the evangelical in the present crisis. His vision of social transformation through individual regeneration carries with it a dynamic that no program of rationally or socialistically conceived social transformation can convey. Why? Because the evangelical has become personally involved. He has accepted a way of salvation which includes a program for historical development. He is in personal communication with the Author of history. He has a divinely imparted love which provides that agape which is so essential to any process of social transformation.

The development of a social conscience in the contemporary setting is a difficult problem. Automation in industry and existentialism in philosophy and theology tend to drive a wedge into contemporary culture which separates the present from the past. Americans in general are growing up without a consciousness of the values



which form the basis for a free society. The loss of inner-directed values in the lives of many is clearly reflected in the breakdown of traditional norms of social behavior. These conditions suggest the need for a renewal of the evangelical social conscience—a conscience which is illuminated by the biblical revelation and endued with the sense of agape which is mandatory if the values which underlie the free society with its goals of human betterment are to be perpetuated.

The social conscience of the evangelical can be, in the providence of God, the voice which calls men back again to the fundamental principles which underlie freedom in an age of increasing tyranny.