

# APPLICATIONS

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The three preceding papers direct attention to questions which have not been the primary concern of British evangelicals during the last century. The emphasis on personal salvation and sanctification has absorbed most attention, leaving time for only casual glances at the wider world. Present conditions demand a re-assessment of the position. Terms like 'pre-evangelism' are heard. The traditional preaching is way beyond 'secular man'; he sees us as living in an entirely different world from himself. The three papers have tried to show that we *do* live in his world as 'man', but that for us this is part of the wider experience of 'man-before-God'. The good he enjoys as 'man' comes from God just as the greater good of reconciliation and regeneration comes from God when he makes the response of faith.

The following notes, presented as guide to further study, suggest six areas where these principles may challenge us to work out more fully Christ's Lordship and God's giving.

## 1. Secularisation and the New Theology

Over the last fifty years Western thought has attained an undreamt-of scientific and technological expertise. The mechanism of nature and society is increasingly understood and these can now be extensively controlled and used. If this is an autonomous field of knowledge, it can be understood without religious presupposition. Alongside it there remain many traditional Western values (derived from Christian sources but not acknowledged as such). Overall, people have the impression that God is no longer necessary—certainly not a miracle-working God taking over where man cannot cope. This age (*saeculum*) in fact is fairly well understood and under control. The age to come is doubtful or irrelevant. This process of bringing experience under human knowledge and control may be referred to as secularisation. To the Christian it may be seen as the sharpening of the tools for 'dominion'—part of Common Grace. He will welcome it himself, and be sorry that others should accept the gift and deny the Giver. It must be conceded, however, that in such a situation, preaching that *assumes* in the hearers an acceptance of God's existence and righteous character, and then goes on to explain the mechanics of atonement, is starting too far on. It seems quite irrelevant to 'modern man'.

It is to this question that the new theologians have addressed themselves. Their interest is evangelistic and we may commend their intention however much we may deplore some of their programme for carrying it out. The subject is too wide to treat here, but three points are mentioned as having a bearing on the subject of the papers:

(a) The impression is sometimes given by new theologians that the 'ordinary decent chap' is almost a Christian though not using our jargon. The present papers help show why we may agree he *is* a 'decent chap' but still desperately in need of reconciliation. His basic trouble is not that his 'decency' is less than 100 per cent (so it is for most Christians), but that 'God is not in all his thoughts'.

(b) God's immanence as 'Ground of Being' is stressed and it is sometimes taken as if this exhausted God's being. But as Niles comments (*We know in part*) "Yes, in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17: 28)—that precisely is the sign of his grace, but we may not forget what this means. It does not mean that he is the ground of our being, but that the ground of our being is in him". The concept of Common Grace preserves the universal evidence of God at work, God giving to all life and breath and all things, but still maintains His transcendence as separate from what He gives.

(c) Ethics. The new theology urges us to abandon authoritative bases for moral statements. We should not start with 'The Bible says' but draw out of each situation the appropriate action by reference to some high level inter-personal principle labelled 'love'. The third paper suggests we can go a long way with this, provided we see the whole area of moral enterprise (seeking reasons for actions) as part of God's giving to us. We may then also see the weakness of Situation Ethics—that the circumstances may determine what *can* be done, even if it be the lesser of two evils, but cannot make the lesser of two evils 'right'. 'The Bible' will still 'say'—both what is within the compass of reasoning and what must be accepted as revelation. Christians will be able to co-operate in the former and be surer of their reasons for accepting the latter *as* revelation.

The subject is worthy of a *Journal* issue on its own and is mentioned here only because it seems to the writer that Common Grace provides a bridge to understanding and dialogue with the new theology: a bridge by which we can import many good insights from their thinking and experiment, and a bridge along which we may more acceptably approach them.

## 2. Biblical Interpretation

An unbalanced study of God's interest in the individual and the Church has perhaps led to the neglect of a wider study of God's character displayed in his dealings with all men and society at large. The preoccupation with personal salvation in terms of entry upon eternal life (seen as antithetical to life in society and the world) leads to neglect of joy in creation and duty to society. This has been reflected in extreme dispensationalism (e.g. Scofield's note on Matt. 5 'The Sermon on the Mount in its primary application gives neither the privilege nor the duty of the Church. These are found in the epistles', and the long note on alleged distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven.) It is reflected too in a tendency to be ill-at-ease in the study of the gospels but giants in exegesis of the epistles. The prophets Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Jeremiah

in particular, deserve fuller treatment. Grammatical rather than typical exegesis may be commended—how often is the parable of the Good Samaritan assumed to be primarily a gospel medium, and Old Testament stories used as vehicles of ‘gospel’ addresses! We might suggest, too, a renewed interest in the Psalms: not only in those which express personal piety and safety, or prefigure the sufferings of Christ, but also in those which express the wider joy and conviction about God’s creation and judgments in the earth.

### 3. Evangelism

Three main points arise:

(a) Continuity with experience. Secularisation is a fact. Men *do* appear to get on without God. The framework in which they do so is often the fruit of Christian heritage, and God-given reason—i.e. Common Grace, but to them God *is* irrelevant. There must therefore be some introduction, some bridge of understanding. There must be some explanation of how *their* experience fits in the Christian world-view. In many things we stand *with* them, only we accept it as God’s giving. Can we make our Christian declaration in some way continuous with their experience—let us extol the blessings of science, family, art, love, and then go on to declare that God who gives us these things intends ‘that we should seek the Lord, if haply we might seek after him and find Him’. (We might even think how this would affect some prayers at the beginning of ‘gospel’ meetings!)

(b) The call for repentance must be examined. Mr. Barlow suggests “We make it unnecessarily hard for a man to recognise (his unrighteousness before God) if, like Job’s friends, we refuse to acknowledge in any way whatever the goodness he already recognises and exhibits”. The real nature of sin is the failure (neglect or refusal) to see morality as *before God*. Let us then direct such denunciation of sin as we think necessary at this point, and show that the forgiveness in Christ brings reconciliation and the establishment of the believer as ‘man-before-God’ justified, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. The alternative preaching—aimed to show that fancied goodness is only ‘glittering sin’ raises the retort—Aren’t I as good as most Christians?’ and the word-play that often follows leaves them with the impression ‘You seem to think sin doesn’t matter so much to them, because they’ve believed’.

Also, we do not ask people to renounce the world and society except insofar as they ‘deny *themselves*’ i.e. cease holding the world for *themselves* and begin holding it and using it for the true Lord of nature and society. This means that some of our strictures against ‘worldliness’ will need re-assessment.

(c) Threats of doom just bounce off ‘good pagans’. They seem both unlikely and unreasonable. We may know them to be true, and this may powerfully motivate our evangelism, but the method of communication needs a fresh look. Newbigin’s *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (see booklist) suggests a way of approach.

#### 4. Co-operation with Unbelievers

Kuyper, we saw, had no inhibitions about involvement in every sphere—even a political party—but his University and party were Christianly-based and most members were Christians. The English tradition is of no Christian political party, and reluctance even for evangelicals to join existing parties or secular organisations. The previous pages suggest we might welcome the efforts of unbelievers to support society and (from differing world-views, perhaps) work with them. This raises problems:

(a) Joint pursuit of common social ends must not blind us to our responsibility to bear witness *to them* of the Lordship of Jesus. We may, of course, do this best by our good works. Matt. 5: 16.

(b) Priorities. God calls some to the ministry of the word, some to serve tables—both of these at home and overseas. We need to be sure our priorities are in line with God's will for us and at the same time avoid the heresy of the 'specially spiritual'. (The idea that, e.g. the evangelist is doing more 'spiritual' work than the Christian housewife or Marriage Guidance Counsellor.)

#### 5. Education

This is a special field of the former. Do we go all out for Christian schools and universities? Do we work within the secular system? or both? Within the secular system, may we teach morality as an autonomous system, basing it rationally on the 'high-level principles', and showing how these are arrived at by asking questions about living in society? This will be flanked by, but not based on, religious education. Can we welcome secular learning and scholarship, and see the ability to live lawfully and usefully in society as a worthy aim of education in its own right?

#### 6. Art and Culture

There has been some awakening to the power of literature, music and art as evangelistic media—in the case of music there has been an almost pathetic urge to 'get with it' and set lyrics of doubtful orthodoxy to inferior guitar accompaniment. There has been less readiness to see art forms not just as means of communicating the gospel, but as worthy in themselves, expressing God's power and greatness and giving some insight into creation. The modern playwright and existentialist novelist raises the problem of man's destiny and significance. Where are the evangelical playwrights and novelists to show the *whole* picture? (a British evangelical Mauriac?) In art we naturally fear the excesses of veneration and idolatry—and may deplore Renaissance humanistic art anyway. But can we not see something valuable in Sutherland tapestries and Spence's architecture—and maybe encourage young artists to excel? And beyond this in both fields, may we not thank God and acknowledge His giving in the perceptive work of non-Christians in these fields—and pray and work that they may see this, not in a self- or man-centred context, but as one giving of God who challenges them to repentance and acknowledgment of Him as supreme judge and giver?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dr. Hanson has appended to his article an exhaustive reading list on the history and analysis of Common Grace. (See p. 31).

A short treatment of biblical and historical material can be found in Berkhof *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth) pp. 432-446.

Books relevant to the 'Applications' topics include:

L. Newbigin *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (SCM). This gives a good account of secularisation as providing tools for doing God's will in the world. He also deals penetratingly with the New Theology's attempt to deal with the secular.

C. Davis *God's Grace in History* (Fontana) analyses the concepts of 'secular' and 'sacred' and explores the ways in which all life can be seen as under God's control.

R. Murray *The good pagan's failure* (Fontana). The author is daughter to Sir Gilbert Murray, and gives a most sensitive account of the disillusionment of the 'good pagan'. She shows how much the whole secular programme is undergirded by the heritage of faith.

Examples of books arguing a Christian moral standard on rational grounds:

C. M. and W. Whiteley, *The Permissive Society* (Methuen).

S. Duvall, *Why wait till marriage?* (Hodder)

The topic is also dealt with in R. S. Peters' *Ethics and Education* (Allen and Unwin) and Essays edited by R. Niblett *Moral Education in a changing Society* (Faber).

An instructive example of the thinking of the 'good pagan' can be obtained from the essays by five prominent Humanists edited by H. J. Blackham under the title *Objections to Humanism* (Penguin). These show both the intellectual acumen, the goodwill of non-Christians, the difficulties of presupposition they face, and the fact that the basic 'sin' is failure to see the whole human enterprise as God-given, God-maintained, and subject to the judgment of God.

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## **MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

### REVIEW

**The New Scofield Reference Bible.** (Oxford University Press, 1967).  
Pp. xvi, 1392 + concordance and 9 maps. Various prices.

The appearance of a new edition of the world's best-selling reference Bible is indeed an historic event. And it will be of special interest to the members of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship, both because of its widespread use in the churches which we represent and because of the historical roots within the Brethren movement of the dispensationalist theology it represents.

The new edition is a thorough revision, and one can say without fear of contradiction that the changes made are almost without exception for the better. A few of the noteworthy changes may be mentioned.