

# THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

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No responsible believer in Jesus Christ is happy about the presence of such social evils as racial hatred, a spiraling crime rate, the liquor and drug traffic, slums and violence. He realizes that such conditions as these have the potential to destroy his society and therefore ought to be checked. But the problem facing the Christian and the church is their role in curing the ills of society. What is the church's responsibility in the area of social problems? Should the church involve itself in these problems? If so, to what extent? These questions are not easily answered and debate goes on within the church. Hudson Armerding has stated the problem revealing the issue involved: "How may the secular world be confronted, without the probability of an accommodation that eventually will produce capitulation?"<sup>1</sup>

Neo-evangelicalism has declared that the church must get involved in the problems of society or lose its voice and impact in that society. It states that Fundamentalists have overreacted against the social gospel of the old modernist, thus terribly neglecting the social area.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentalism, on the other hand, warns Neo-evangelicalism that it is taking a dangerous step, which likely will lead to the watering down of the complete message of the Bible, and to the further secularization of the church. The Fundamentalist believes that the church is to catch fish out of the pond of sin, while the Neo-evangelical feels that something must be done to clean up the pond as well.

## THE NEO-EVANGELICAL VIEW OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Dr. Harold Ockenga, the "father" of neo-evangelicalism, sounded the keynote of the movement pertaining to social problems.

The New Evangelicalism differs from Fundamentalism in its willingness to handle the social problems which

Fundamentalism has evaded. There need be no dichotomy between the personal gospel and the social gospel. The true Christian faith is a supernatural personal experience of salvation and a social philosophy . . . .

Fundamentalism abdicated leadership and responsibility in the societal realm and thus became impotent to change society or to solve social problems. The New Evangelicalism adheres to all the orthodox teachings of Fundamentalism but has evolved a social philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

This is an emphasis made by others as well.

Nevertheless--unlike fundamentalism--evangelicalism realizes the church has a prophetic mission to society . . . . We must . . . make evangelicalism more relevant to the political and sociological realities of our time . . . unless conservative Christian theologians take more time to point out the relevance of Christ and the Bible to important (social) issues conservatism will be neglected by the rising generation.<sup>4</sup>

These men, and others, feel that it is dangerous for the church to remain aloof, and that it must do something to right wrongs in the social structure. They believe that the gospel carries social implications with it, and that it is wrong to neglect them. Not only is it wrong, but it is also damaging to the potential witness of the church. If the church does not get involved, then society will become more and more secular, making it all the more difficult for the church to penetrate it.

The practical question before the neo-evangelical is how he is going to do this without falling into the social gospel trap. The voice of neo-evangelicalism is neither loud nor distinct on this point. However, most believe that the local church and the denominations can both be involved in implementing social concern.

With respect to social welfare, there is much which can and should be done by the local church as well as by the denomination of which it is a part, and even by interdenominational fellowships . . . homes for the aged, children's homes . . . . These might be termed church-sponsored welfare.

There are other agencies of social welfare which are not directly sponsored and controlled by church

organizations as such. While the church is less directly involved, there nonetheless is opportunity for participation and referral.<sup>5</sup>

What about church involvement in state programs? Neo-evangelicals differ on this point. Some are definitely against it, arguing that state programs fail to meet several criteria of Biblical social concern. Others state that since it is impossible for the church to take care of all society's needs, co-operation between church and state would be beneficial.<sup>6</sup>

What if these with whom you wish to co-operate do not share your beliefs?

I also believe that we should not be afraid of co-operating with others, even those who would not fully or would not at all share our presuppositions.<sup>7</sup>

Man's sufferings must be alleviated, his needs cared for. Here, also, a broadened conception of common grace reveals itself. God is able to work through organizations and institutions which are not expressly Christian. The Christian may and should co-operate with them, if they are the most efficient and appropriate means of carrying out the social responsibilities of his faith.<sup>8</sup>

The neo-evangelical believes that the gospel clearly implies involvement in the societal realm. This is necessary in order to make an impact on society for the gospel. Efficiency and impact dictate that social effort be done on the denominational and local church level, though this does not rule out the involvement of the individual in his community.

#### An Analysis of Supporting Scriptures

The neo-evangelical spokesmen constantly speak of the social implications of the gospel. They claim that their position on the social responsibility of the church is based on a solid Biblical base. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the primary scripture portions used by the neo-evangelicals in supporting their position.

There are certain portions that keep reappearing in the writings of neo-evangelicals: among them are Matthew 25:31-46, James 2:14-17 and I John 3:14-18. The teachings of these passages will be analyzed,

along with several others that have been used. All Scripture quotations will be taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

I John 3:14-18

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. . . . But whosoever hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his compassions from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? (vss. 14, 17)

The neo-evangelical uses these verses to support his position on social responsibility, claiming that they imply the church's involvement in curing the societal ills of the day. After reference to this passage in John's epistle, Millard Erickson, an advocate of the neo-evangelical position, concludes:

Helping others, removing suffering, evil, and injustices, are appropriate results of true faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to His purpose. The Bible does teach the necessity of Christian social responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

Using this as his Biblical base, Dr. Erickson then launches into a discussion of the church's responsibility in social welfare and social action.

However, inspecting these verses more closely reveals that they are not teaching the church's responsibility to society at all, but rather the Christian's responsibility to other believers. Five times, in the English text, John speaks of "brethren." John questions a believer's profession of faith in Christ when that person can observe the needs (material or otherwise) of another believer and do nothing to alleviate those needs. The sphere of discussion here does not include the unsaved man nor society in general. The passage declares the practical outworking of faith as it is seen in the ministering to the needs of the brethren. Concerning this word "brethren" Westcott says:

This is the only place in the Epistle (of I John) where this title of address is used . . . . It contains an implicit argument. By emphasizing the new relation in which Christians stand one to another it implies that this position of necessary mutual affection is characteristic of them as distinguished from other men ('the world') . . . . 'Brethren' expresses the idea of Christian equality in virtue of the common life . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Not only is society in general excluded by the word "brethren" but also the word order of verse 14 makes the distinction clear. The pronoun is in the emphatic position--"as for us," in contradistinction to the world.<sup>11</sup> John, then, is making a careful distinction between the Christian and society in general. Christians are to help and aid one another in the practical as well as spiritual areas of life. But these verses neither teach nor imply the church's responsibility in curing the ills of society.

James 2:14-17

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding, ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works is dead, being alone.

These verses are used in the same manner as the ones previously cited in I John. After mentioning these verses, one neo-evangelical writer states:

If we are really open to the Gospel and its implications, we shall have to learn again to concentrate on the social issues of our day.<sup>12</sup>

All sincere believers certainly want to be open to the Word of God. But is James teaching the neo-evangelical position on the church's social responsibility?

Again, the verses must be given a closer inspection. James is discussing the place of good works in the life of a believer in Jesus Christ. He makes the point that a profession of faith does no good to others if no good works are done. However, James makes it quite clear as to what he means by use of a specific illustration. James talks about doing good to a brother or sister. James is not talking about society in general, but rather about the Christian community.

He (James) imagines Christians in dire need of the necessities of life being sent away by fellow Christians, not after being given those things which are needful to the body, but with a curt command to do something totally impossible. Such persons might be male or female, here called brother or sister, for all who are disciples of Jesus are bound by close family ties.<sup>13</sup>

James is, in unmistakable language, talking about the brotherhood of believers, and not about the world. This passage in James cannot legitimately be used to support the neo-evangelical position on the church's social responsibility. The only conceivable way this could apply to the world is if one subscribed to the concept held by the old modernists of "the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." The neo-evangelical, who diligently avoids association with the old social gospel, surely does not want this anti-biblical concept applied to his position.

#### Matthew 25:31-46

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (vs. 40)

This passage taken from the Olivet Discourse is found in the writings of neo-evangelicalism, allegedly supporting their viewpoint. This portion views a time of judgment, when the Lord credits righteous individuals with ministering to him because of their ministry to others. These are set on his right hand and given eternal life, while those on his left hand receive judgment. Erickson sees some definite implications in this text of Scripture:

Let us note the ground of this judgment. The elect inherit the Kingdom because they have fed Him when He was hungry, given Him drink when He was thirsty, clothed Him when He was naked, and visited Him when He was sick or in prison. When they ask when they have done all of these things, he says, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40 KJV). The unrighteous are judged on the basis of not having done these things.

Two observations emerge: 1. Deeds of compassion and mercy done to anyone are equivalent to ministering to Jesus Himself. 2. Such practical activity is regarded as the criterion of worthiness for the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

It is evident that Dr. Erickson has lightly skimmed this passage, overlooking some important facts. First, this judgment is a specific, not a general judgment. It takes place after the Second Coming of Christ, after the Tribulation period, and involves only the living gentiles.

Kelly correctly details this:

Those gathered before Him as "all the nations"--a term never used about the dead or the risen, but only applied to men while still going on here below, and indeed applied only to a part of living men--the gentile portion, as distinct from the Jews. For we have already had the Jews in chapter xxiv., and now we see the Gentiles; . . . 15

It is, therefore, not proper to attempt to apply it to the church. Second, the neo-evangelical seems to have once again disregarded the important word "brethren." Jesus states that these righteous gentiles have ministered to him when they ministered to his brethren. It is worth noting that Erickson changed "brethren" to "anyone." Jesus speaks of those who sustain a unique, intimate relationship with Him, and not to society or the world in general. This is a very simple point, but of tremendous importance.

#### The Ministry of Jesus

The neo-evangelical uses the ministry of Jesus as the prime example of ministering to needs that aren't strictly "religious" in nature. After viewing the miracles of mercy done by the Lord, they conclude that social work is one of the responsibilities of the church. Billy Graham puts it this way.

Many people have criticized the so-called "social gospel," but Jesus taught that we are to take regeneration in one hand and a cup of cold water in the other. Christians, above all others, should be concerned with social problems and social injustices. 16

The parable of the Good Samaritan and other passages are alluded to. For example, here are a few representative passages used:

Which is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? (Mark 2:9)

Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored well like the other. (Matthew 12:13).

And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

The question is raised, "If Jesus was concerned about the social ills of his day, then shouldn't His church be concerned about the evils of its day?" This, of course, is a loaded question. To say "no" would cause a seeming separation from Christ Himself; to say "yes" would mean that perhaps the neo-evangelical position is right after all. It is necessary therefore to briefly analyze the Lord's ministry.

Several points need to be made regarding His ministry. First, a dispensational distinction must be made. The Lord ministered to the covenant people, Israel. His works were done in the dispensation of the Law, when God was working with His chosen people of Israel; and His works were a fulfillment of prophecy to these people. The point is that care must be exercised any time events of two different dispensations are compared. What was true in one dispensation might not be valid in another. Most everyone, even the non-dispensationalist, would recognize this. Jesus' ministry was not to the church, nor was it in the church context. Second, Jesus did not do good to just anyone in His ministry, but rather to the house of Israel. He was selective, though the neo-evangelical gives the impression He was rather indiscriminate in His doing good. Jesus did go about doing good--but to the house of Israel almost exclusively. This is an important point. The neo-evangelicals advocate getting involved in social efforts whenever they can do so, no matter whom they join with. Matthew 15:21-28 is enlightening at this juncture.

Then Jesus went from there, and departed into the borders of Tyre and Sidon. And, behold a woman of Canaan came out of the same borders, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (vss. 21-24)

After being rejected by the leadership of Israel, Jesus withdrew from the centers of Judaism into a geographical area that was gentile in its make up. A gentile woman approached Him, requesting that He heal her daughter. Jesus did not move to help her, though He could have. Jesus refused "to do good." Why? Because His good works were for the benefit of Israel, and she was a gentile. However, she was persistent, addressing Him in messianic terms. Finally, her great demonstration of faith and knowledge of the truth, brought an answer to her request and her daughter was healed. Jesus had a special group that he did good to: the people of God.



Third, Jesus did things on an individual level, while the neo-evangelical emphasis is on the institutional level. This point will be dealt with later. Fourth, although Jesus' miracles benefitted the individual, they were primarily for the purpose of authenticating His message to Israel. Fifth, the absence of a command to the church, from the Lord Jesus, to enter into the world and become involved in societal ethics is significant. When Jesus gave His followers commands, and when He discussed their relationship to the world (e.g. John 16), he never once mentioned, or hinted at, involvement in society's problems. This silence in itself ought to be a red flag of warning to the believer. On the other hand, He did spend some time warning His followers about the world, which is a Satanically dominated system. The church's ministry was a spiritual one, and the Lord did not imply the involvement in society's problems.

Therefore, it must be concluded that Jesus did not by example or by specific teaching imply that the organized church was to be involved in social problems. Individuals doing good is an entirely different matter and will be discussed later.

#### Weakness In The Neo-Evangelical Position

In their stated attempt to win a new respectability for orthodox Christianity, making it a vital force in reforming society, neo-evangelicalism has placed itself in a position that is vulnerable and difficult to defend from a Biblical point of view. As a result, there are some areas of weakness.

Their position is built on a weak Biblical base. Even from the survey in this article it can be seen that the neo-evangelical has made a poor analysis of the Scriptures. This is always the result when men are too anxious to find support for their ideas in the Scriptures, instead of allowing the Bible to speak. This weak foundation will not support the superstructure they wish to build.

Their position endangers the Bible's message. Neo-evangelicalism does emphasize the need of individual regeneration through faith in Christ. However, danger exists because of its strong emphasis on the social aspect and application of the gospel.

The danger lies rather in the possibility of deterioration to what the social gospel became. Obviously then, the danger in this direction does not lie in what neo-evangelicalism now believes but in that which its present emphasis may very well lead it to believe and proclaim.<sup>17</sup>

It is very dangerous to desire the approval of a Satanically controlled society, and to work hand in hand with that society even if it seems to benefit mankind. Neo-evangelicalism has positioned itself in this situation, and only time will tell if it is able to resist the pull away from the Scriptures.

Their position de-emphasizes certain doctrines. Certain Biblical truths are not being proclaimed with clarity and emphasis. One doctrine that is neglected is that of man's depravity. Although most neo-evangelicals would subscribe to this doctrine, it is a difficult doctrine to hold to in social work. To emphasize man's sinfulness would hurt a social emphasis. Also, the whole area of eschatology has been vague, with the premillennial position de-emphasized. The premillennial position declares clearly the wretched end of man and his society; this is hardly a stimulus for social involvement.<sup>18</sup>

Their position confuses the idea of individual responsibility. The neo-evangelical does discuss individual responsibility; but as far as doing significant things or making vital contributions to society, his emphasis is on the organized church. The stress in the New Testament is upon the individual's doing good. The church, as an institution, has not been given the responsibility of entering into the culture and curing its ills. Any curing of ills is a by-product of the gospel on the individual level. Failure to make this basic distinction has placed neo-evangelicalism in a scripturally dangerous position.

In summary: The motives of many neo-evangelicals are undoubtedly pure. Their sincerity in many cases cannot be questioned. But pure motives and sincerity have never been valid substitutes for scripturally correct positions. To leave the truth of God, even in reaction to the failures of others, is indefensible. Neo-evangelicalism does not have a proper view of the church's role in society. It will be our attempt to construct a proper position.

#### A BIBLICAL VIEW OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The believer in Jesus Christ finds himself in the unique position of holding dual citizenship. He is a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20) as well as a citizen of a country. This situation causes him to view his earthly society in a different way than the non-Christian who possesses but one set of citizenship papers. The Christian's attitudes and motivations are to be different in light of his heavenly citizenship.

The Bible speaks of both spheres of life, the heavenly and the earthly. What is to be the Christian's concern in the realm of the

earthly? Does he have obligations here and now to those around him? By studying the Scriptures it is possible to arrive at some basic answers, and principles.

### An Analysis of Scripture

The epistles are letters written to the churches and individuals within the churches; and it is here that we ought to discover something about the subject of "doing good." Furthermore, the Book of Acts should be helpful since it records the activities of the church in the first decades of its existence.

#### The Book of Acts

When one reads the Book of Acts, he recognizes immediately that the early church was concerned for the physical well-being of its membership, as well as for their souls. Those attaching themselves to the church were sometimes cut off from Jewish society, resulting in real physical needs. The church immediately dealt with the issue. The following passages in Acts mention the response to physical need; Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32-37; 5:2-4; 6:1-4; 9:36-39; 11:28-30; 16:15; 20:28ff.; 21:4, 8, 16.

Several facts are gleaned from these passages, facts which can then be compared with the epistles. First, these believers performed good works almost exclusively for the benefit of the other believers -- the account of Dorcas in chapter 9 possibly being the only exception. Second, social work was done mainly because of individual initiative, and not by church organization and mobilization. Third, when the church as a whole did "good works," these good works were always directed towards believers.

#### The New Testament Epistles

The epistles do discuss Christian social responsibility a great deal. A striking similarity to Acts is seen--which should not come as any surprise. The epistles teach what is given by example in Acts: that social concern is primarily individual and not organizational, and that help is directed almost exclusively to believers, with society in general rarely mentioned. A careful reading of some forty-six references in their contexts will reveal that in almost every case Christians are to be the recipients of the good works.<sup>19</sup>

The very bulk of the passages given should reveal the emphasis that good works are to be directed to the brethren. As has been noted before in this article, two significant passages (James 2:14-17 and

I John 3:14-18) clearly teach the Christian's responsibility to those in the family of believers. This is the emphasis of the New Testament. There are several other passages that throw additional light on the subject.

2 Corinthians 8:1 - 9:15. This passage on Christian giving is one of the relatively few that discusses the good deeds of the church as a body. Here is recorded the noble ministry of the churches in Macedonia as they contributed funds to the saints (8:4). This is an instance of the organized church working in the "practical" area of the social problem. The church at Corinth, too, had labored in this regard (9:2). It is important to note that the organized church aided believers only. "For as touching the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you:" (2 Cor. 9:1). Churches carried on a ministry to the saints, not to society; and there is simply no implication here in the text that the unsaved society is included.

Galatians 6:10. "As we have, therefore, opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."

This verse is one of the very few that includes the unsaved in the social efforts of Christians. By reading the verse in its context certain truths are found. First, it ought to be noted that this passage is dealing with the social efforts of individual Christians and not the organized church ("But let every man prove his own works," 6:4). Second, it must always be remembered in viewing such a verse that the motivation for doing social work on any level is to glorify God, and not simply to be relevant. Third, there is an emphasis in the verse that good is to be geared fundamentally towards the believer. If there is time and substance for the unbeliever, too, that is acceptable. It is more of a practical issue than a theological one here.

The point of view is here extended beyond their teachers, to the love of the human race generally; but since man in the limitations of his condition finds it necessary to restrict himself in the actual exercise of love, because his means do not suffice to help all, Paul points especially to them who are of the household of faith. Thus the expression involves no restriction on love itself, but only a limitation on its exercise on account of insufficient means.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, a believer himself is not to completely neglect mankind, but his emphasis is on the needs of believers, the household of faith.

I Timothy 5:3-16. The support of widows is the subject of this portion of the letter to Pastor Timothy of Ephesus. This portion is

included at this point because it reveals two significant things. First, the church was vitally concerned about the welfare of its own. The church recognized and undertook this responsibility. Second, the passage reveals how careful the church was in distributing its resources. The requirements for financial aid were rigid. The widows had to be more than just professing Christians in order to get relief. They had to be worthy, contributing members of the Christian community (e.g., vss. 4, 5, 10). Again, the practicality is obvious. The church then, as today, had limited resources. Its primary obligation was to distribute wisely to its own--worthy ones at that. The church could have done many good things with their resources, but they chose to do the best things.

1 Timothy 6:17-19. Wealthy believers are encouraged in this passage to use their riches for good, and by doing good they will be making eternal investments. The context doesn't specifically mention believers as the recipients, though the entire epistle would suggest this. In light of Galatians 6:10, we might have here a broader use of wealth for the glory of God. The words of the Lord in Luke 16 might well be a commentary on these verses. In Luke the Lord gives the parable of the unjust steward, in which He discusses money and its use. After telling of the craftiness of the steward Jesus applied the parable to life. He said that the children of light ought to use their money wisely. He suggested that believers "make friends" of the unbelievers, using their money, in order to gain eternal reward. Money can be used by individuals to influence others for Christ. Using one's wealth by investing it in the souls of men will pay off in eternal dividends later.

Some important principles: cultures and societies change but the Scriptures are valid in every situation. After viewing the main portions of Scripture, this writer arrives at these basic principles on which the church should operate in the area of social problem. (1) Christian social work is primarily an individual responsibility. (2) Christian social work is to be directed towards alleviating the needs of fellow Christians. (3) The organizational church is to work only for the betterment of born-again persons. (4) There is no indication anywhere in the New Testament that the church can align itself formally or informally with society in order to bring about social change. (5) Individual Christians are first to help believers, but are also directed to use some of their remaining resources as occasion permits to help the unbeliever for the glory of God.

To some these principles may seem selfish. But it must be remembered that the church and individuals have only limited resources and these are to be used to the best advantage: helping believers. There is also a great truth underlying these principles, and the Scriptures from which they are derived. If the Christian community would actively minister to the individual needs of its members, then the unsaved would

identify these as true followers of Christ and be attracted to them. This is the idea behind the words of the Lord in John 13:34,35.

A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another.

In the passage, Jesus by His own actions (vss. 4-7) and by His teachings (vss. 12-17) reveals that genuine love and concern for fellow believers is demonstrated by meeting their needs. This active concern for each other would be the identifying mark to the unbeliever. A happy, ministering group of believers, using their resources to help one another will attract men, and will be a great aid in evangelization. And if believers would indeed become active in social work within the family, the impact would be felt in secular society today in the same way as the first century. Trying to win a favorable smile from the pagan society by social action within that society is doing the job backwards and will fail.

The neo-evangelical advocates an involvement in societal ethics that he finds difficult to support from the Scriptures. He wants the church as an institution to become active in social affairs. He is shifting from a ministry to the saved to work for the unsaved. He seems to want to use the church's resources on that which may be good, but is not the best.

The Bible does command and encourage Christians to become involved in the lives of others. Believers are to aid believers; and it is here that our responsibility starts and for the most part remains. To attempt another approach is folly, no matter how noble are the motives and the objectives. Let us follow the principles of the Scriptures, and let us do good.

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