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Conservative Theology with Radical Politics

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In recent years we have witnessed, on a wide scale, the growth of both conservative religion and conservative politics. It is generally assumed that the two will be found side by side in the same persons. And this is often the case. The so-called New Right or the Moral Majority quite frequently combines a conservative or fundamentalist theology with right wing political causes. We are all aware of the TV evangelists who combine theological conservatism with a defense of the American nuclear buildup, aid for the Contras, and a militant "free enterprise" view of economics. But this is by no means the whole story.

Ronald Sider says, "An historic transformation is in process. In all parts of the world, evangelical Christians in growing numbers are rediscovering the biblical summons to serve the poor, minister to the needy, correct injustice and seek societal shalom."¹ The book in which this quotation appears is itself a verification of Sider's point. It consists of papers delivered at the "Consultation on the Theology of Development" which brought together in Hoddesdon, England, in 1981, forty-one persons from seventeen different countries. These people were evangelical Christians involved in relief and development agencies and theologians from all continents. Their papers reveal that many evangelicals have moved well beyond the idea of providing aid to individuals and they are now ready to grapple with problems of social change and economic reform. Sider also supports his statement by referring to the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973), the Lausanne Covenant's section on social responsibility (1974), the Evangelical Fellowship of India's Madras Declaration on Evangelical Social Action

(1979), and the Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle (1980).

Ronald Sider, who is professor of theology at the conservative Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia and chairperson of Evangelicals for Social Action, has played a vital role in bringing evangelicals to see radical political implications in the Scriptures. His 1977 book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, has won a wide following in evangelical circles. In this book, as we would expect of an evangelical Christian who affirms the inerrancy of the Bible, Sider carefully builds his case upon the Bible. He starts off with a brief description of the inequities today between the wealth of First World Christians and the poverty and starvation of so much of the Third World. Then he turns to the Bible to see how it views such inequity.

From beginning to end Sider finds that the Bible has a special concern for the poor, the weak and the oppressed. He does not like the phrase "God's bias toward the poor" which is popular among many theologians today. It does not seem to him fitting to imply that God is biased. Therefore, he makes an extensive study of how the poor are viewed by God in the Bible.² He analyzes how God acts upon behalf of the liberation of the poor at such crucial points as the Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity, the prophetic witness and the Incarnation. He notes how God identifies with the poor and calls the poor to be special instruments of revelation. He even has one section titled "Is God a Marxist?" The basis for the question is found in the Magnificat and many statements of Jesus in which the rich are condemned and the poor praised. Is this the Marxist class struggle? Interestingly, Sider does not answer the question. He allows the biblical statements to speak for themselves and lets the reader draw the conclusions.

Sider goes on to trace the biblical themes calling for equal justice for rich and poor alike and for us to take up the cause of the weak and oppressed. From Amos through the New Testament, Sider traces the many statements to the effect that those who neglect or oppress the poor will come under the judgment of God. What does this mean for the salvation of rich Christians in an age of hunger? Sider replies.

Certainly none of us would claim that we fulfill Matthew 25 perfectly. And we cling to the hope of forgiveness. But there comes

a point (and, thank God, he alone knows where!) when neglect of the poor is no longer forgiven. It is punished. Eternally.³

As a result of his study, Sider concludes that God is not partial and for that reason God cares as much for the strong and fortunate as for the weak and disadvantaged. But, by contrast to the way that we and the rich of every age act towards the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favor of the poor. But God can be considered biased only by comparison to our sinful unconcern for the poor.

Next Sider examines economic relationships among the people of God. The biblical God calls for transformed economic relationships among God's people. The Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25 makes it clear that although private property is not abolished, nonetheless, the means of producing wealth are to be equalized regularly so that serious inequalities do not appear. The Sabbatical year and laws on tithing and gleaning restrict the use of private property for the sake of aid to the poor. Although such Biblical teachings cannot be legalistically put into practice, the spirit behind them means that we must today search for strategies to provide justice, not charity. Christians are hence called to design new institutions and structures to provide more equality and justice.

The new community called into being by Jesus took very seriously the principle of sharing all things. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 Paul clearly states that when the Lord's Supper was eaten with some feasting and others going hungry, it was not a real Lord's Supper at all. In fact it profaned the Lord's body and blood. The equality and sharing of the early Christians was a powerful factor in the great evangelistic results the early church experienced. Today, however, the division of haves and have-nots in the Body of Christ is a major hindrance to world evangelism.

Throughout, the Bible makes clear that God is to be the Lord of all things. Economics, therefore, cannot be considered a secular sphere outside of the concern of Christians. Private property does not give a person an absolute right to use the property as he or she desires, rather it is a responsibility. Good stewards of their property will attempt to use it to fulfill God's goals for all people. Jesus warns that possessions can be a spiritual danger to the possessor.

Nonetheless, Sider makes it clear that prosperity is not an evil but poverty is. The aim of the Bible is not that the poor should be blessed in their continuing poverty but that they should receive their just dues. It is heresy to suppose that prosperity is a sign or proof that the prosperous one is righteous. On the contrary, all too often the opposite is true. The truly righteous one will use prosperity to help the less fortunate and to strive for justice for the oppressed.

This leads Sider to argue that one of the most dangerous omissions in evangelical Christianity is its neglect of the biblical teaching about structural injustice and institutional evil. Evangelicals too often have seen sin only in terms of "personal" sins. But the Bible sees sin as institutionalized, the principalities and powers in high places. Evangelicals must come to see that if members of privileged classes do not strive to change things, they are as guilty before God as if they had robbed a bank or committed adultery. To espouse compassion and simple living without trying to change the structures of an unjust society amounts to nothing more than an irrelevant ego-trip. In short, evangelicals have to move beyond handing out charity to the political task of changing the structures of the world that result in poverty and oppression.

Although I have spent considerable time summarizing Sider's biblical interpretation, I do not want to leave the impression that he is unique or unusual among evangelicals. I have chosen his work because it expresses themes that are common among those evangelicals today who affirm the biblical call to bring about justice for the poor and the oppressed. Another good example of this movement is *Sojourners* magazine, edited by Jim Wallis, which originates in Washington, D.C.

The political stands taken by *Sojourners* are almost the exact opposite of those taken by the "new right". *Sojourners* has opposed the military buildup in the United States, and in particular has opposed thermonuclear weaponry and Star Wars. It has opposed "Reaganomics" for its neglect of the poor while affording tax relief to the rich. Although not uncritical of Nicaragua, it has consistently opposed all aid to the Contras. It has condemned apartheid and the South African government. It has stood firmly for racial equality, printing articles by black theologian James Cone and other exponents of racial justice. It has been concerned with ecological problems and criticized the

lack of control of industry in matters of pollution. In short, it has dedicated itself to a presentation of the biblical perspective in relation to the political problems and needs of the day.

To some, it will appear strange that a group should appear with a conservative theology combined with radical politics. We have a tendency to think that a conservative will be conservative in all things while a radical will be radical in all things. But this is not always the case. At the very beginning of the fundamentalist movement, early in this century, one of its prominent spokespersons was William Jennings Bryan. He wrote books defending the fundamentalist position and when Scopes was being tried for teaching evolution in Tennessee, Bryan offered his services to the prosecution. Yet Bryan was a radical in politics, so radical that three times he was defeated as the Democratic candidate for President of the United States.

The contemporary radical political stance of evangelicals does not come primarily from Bryan or other earlier representatives of this conservative-radical combination. Evangelicals, to a great extent, have been politically radicalized for the same reasons that many other Western Christians have been in recent years. It was the feedback that came from those churches in the Third World that were originated by the missionary efforts of European and North American churches. Christians in the missions established by evangelicals began to look at the Bible from the point of view of colonial countries. For example, in South America, the Latin American Theological fraternity, which is a fellowship of evangelical theologians, has been in intimate dialogue with the liberation theologians of that area. They have agreed with the liberation theologians that the basic theological question for them is different from the theological question of the Western world. They are not interested in debating whether God exists in a scientific world or how a person may know God. They are interested in the question of what God can do for a poor person and a poor community.

These Third World evangelicals, like other Third World Christians, began to charge that the missionary movement that came to them was too closely allied with imperialism. They charged that the First World Christians were so blinded by the prosperity and power they enjoyed that they were unable to hear what the Bible had to say about the poor and the oppressed.

These Third World Christians called upon the First World Christians to try to see what the gospel looks like in the eyes of those who live with poverty, starvation and oppression. John S. Mbiti, an African evangelical, criticized the idea of so many missionaries that there is only one way of doing theology—the European-North American way. He charged that Christian scholars in Europe and North America “have more academic fellowship with heretics long dead than with living brethren of the church today in the so-called Third World”.⁴ This kind of criticism shocked evangelicals, as it has shocked other Christians in recent years, into realizing just how parochial has been our reading and interpretation of the Bible.

Evangelicals in North America have long argued that the task of the church is not to change society, it is to change individuals. When enough individuals have been changed they will inevitably bring about the needed changes in society. The Latin American Theological Fraternity and evangelical Christians in other countries have attacked this idea. They ask, is such an idea biblically based or is it derived from individualistic western culture? As they see it, Moses, the prophets, Jesus and Paul diagnosed evil as personal, social and cosmic. For example, the Israelite monarchy and Jerusalem society became so unjust that God judged them and raised up new social structures.⁵ Such critiques have forced many evangelicals to reconsider the way in which they have allowed their reading of the Bible to be clouded by their own socio-economic prejudices and world views.

Although evangelicals have been in close association with liberation theologians, I find that most are reluctant to refer to themselves as liberation theologians. There seem to be two reasons for this. First, they have felt that much of liberation theology has been too dependent on Marxist analyses. Second, evangelicals mostly hold to the belief that Christians should use non-violent means of changing society, whereas many liberation theologians have advocated violent revolution.

In fact, the term “liberation theology” is misleading. It implies that there is one monolithic system of thought involved. Actually, however, there are many liberation theologies. There are the South American, African, Asian, black and feminist versions, to name a few. These often differ significantly from each other. By no means are all of them wedded to Marxist

interpretations or dedicated to violent overthrow of the status quo.

What justifies applying the term "liberation" to all of these movements is that they share certain common themes. All are concerned with liberating people from the chains of poverty and/or oppression. All agree that the biblical God calls us to achieve justice for the poor, the suffering and the oppressed. All agree that Christianity has to take political stands in the effort to remove the structures of evil that prevent human beings from achieving their full dignity and potential. And all agree that our reading of the Bible is colored and distorted by our place in the socio-economic structure so that we are in need of listening to those who are interpreting the Bible from out of different life situations in order that our misinterpretations and blindness may be corrected.

Whether or not the evangelicals want to use the term "liberation theology" to describe their radical political positions, in fact they do share these common themes with other liberation movements. I see no reason why we should not view these evangelicals as another manifestation of the liberation theology trends in our time. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity of lecturing at an evangelical seminary in Minnesota on contemporary trends in theology. One of my lectures was on liberation theology. I expected to face considerable criticism. But on the contrary, the lecture was received enthusiastically by students, faculty and the local ministerial. They found the liberation themes to be very close to where they were in their thinking.

The radical political stance is an important element in contemporary evangelical theology. It is particularly strong in Third World churches but it also has a significant following in North America. But, of course, it does not speak for all evangelicals. Conservative forms of Christianity in North America have a sorry history of fighting with each other. Conservative churches have split and resplit over niceties of theological interpretation. In recent decades some real progress has been made in bringing together various conservative groups. In fact, they have had an ecumenical movement among their groups that has paralleled the ecumenical movement of the other churches. Today, however, conservative Christians are being split apart over the questions of the political implications of the faith.

At the time that evangelical theologians have been developing a radical political stance, other evangelicals have been abandoning the non-political stand of traditional conservative religion and have become involved in sponsoring right wing politics. This has put the two groups of evangelicals on a collision course. There has been a tendency for each side to write off the other side as being less than Christian.

In May of 1985 some 248 Christians, mostly evangelicals, were arrested for their activities of praying at various Washington centres for causes such as disarmament, stopping promotion of violence in Central America, opposition to the death penalty and the like. Among those arrested was Jim Wallis of the *Sojourners* group. On this occasion Jerry Falwell, having denounced those involved in the "pray-ins", went on to say, "[Jim Wallis] is to evangelicalism what Adolf Hitler was to the Roman Catholic Church."⁶ In early 1986, Jerry Falwell came out in support of the South African government and the Marcos government of the Philippines. Jim Wallis commented on this saying, "Falwell's foreign policy, like Falwell's gospel, is good news to those who are now in control of places like South Africa, the Philippines, and the United States. But it is decidedly not good news to the poor, as the original gospel message was, and still is."⁷ Wallis went on to affirm that it was not the threat of the Soviet Union that moved Falwell but the threat of justice. When power is threatened, it seeks religious justification and so people like Falwell are ready and willing to be apologists for their powerful friends.

These quotes indicate the fervor of the conflict within evangelical circles today. In alarm over the growing tensions, Ronald Sider wrote an article in *The Christian Century* in October 1986. He began by noting that never have evangelical Christians been so involved in public life and then said, "But ironically, just as evangelical Christianity has the chance to exert its greatest influence on American life, it threatens to self destruct in a blaze of ferocious fratricide."⁸ Sider continued with a moving plea to both sides to listen to each other and acknowledge each other's strengths, to recognize the complexities of political decisions and a new commitment to debating the issues with respect, integrity and biblical faithfulness. He called on both sides to quit the name-calling and the distortions of each other's positions. There is, however, a major irony

in this eloquent appeal for peace within the evangelical camp. The article does not appear in an evangelical publication but in a journal that, for over a century, has steadfastly advocated a liberal position in both theology and politics. It is not a journal that many evangelicals are likely to read. Does this mean that Sider could not find an evangelical journal ready to publish his article?

Christians who do not identify with the evangelicals often think of this group as a monolithic movement, held together by its rigid adherence to a literal interpretation of the "fundamentals" of the faith. In fact, the movement has always had a great deal of diversity within it. The rise of the conservative theologians with radical politics is a vivid reminder that we cannot include all evangelicals in the same stereotype. Certainly the contemporary growth of conservative religion is by no means always linked to conservative politics. We shall watch with interest to see how the political implications of conservative theology will develop.

Notes

- 1 Ronald Sider (ed.), *Evangelicals and Development* (Exeter, Devon: The Paternoster Press, 1981) 1. (Hereinafter abbreviated as *E and D*.)
- 2 Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) 31-167.
- 3 Ibid. 83.
- 4 *E and D* 35.
- 5 Ibid. 27.
- 6 Jim Wallis, "A Consistent Ethic of Life", *Sojourners*, 14/7, July 1985, 4.
- 7 Jim Wallis, "Falwell's Foreign Policy", *Sojourners*, 15/2, February 1986, 6.
- 8 Ronald Sider, "A Plea for Conservative Radicals and Radical Conservatives", *The Christian Century*, 103/28, 1 October 1986, 834.