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**NEW  
ISSUES  
FACING  
CHRISTIANS  
TODAY**

**FULLY REVISED  
EDITION**

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**John Stott**

President, the Institute for  
Contemporary Christianity

**ZONDERVAN™**

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*New Issues Facing Christians Today*

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John Stott asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

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## Abbreviations

The biblical text quoted is normally that of the New International Version. If another text is used, this is stated.

- Arndt-Gingrich *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957).
- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible, 1611.
- JB The Jerusalem Bible (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).
- NASB The New American Standard Bible (Moody Press, Chicago, 1960).
- NEB The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (Hodder & Stoughton, NT 1974; OT 1979; revised edition 1984).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).



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# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION (1984)

One of the most notable features of the worldwide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience. For approximately fifty years (c. 1920–70) evangelical Christians were preoccupied with the task of defending the historic biblical faith against the attacks of theological liberalism, and reacting against its ‘social gospel’. But now we are convinced that God has given us social as well as evangelistic responsibilities in his world. Yet the half-century of neglect has put us far behind in this area. We have a long way to catch up.

This book is my own contribution to the catching up process. Its source may be traced to 1978/9, when Michael Baughen, now Bishop of Chester, but then Rector of All Souls Church, invited me to preach a series of occasional sermons under the title *Issues Facing Britain Today*. Several of these chapters began their life in the pulpit, and subsequently grew into lectures at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, whose *raison d’être* is to help people develop a Christian perspective on the complexities of the modern world.

I confess that several times in the course of writing I have been tempted to give up. I have felt now foolish and now presumptuous to attempt such an undertaking. For I am in no sense a specialist in moral theology or social ethics, and I have no particular expertise or experience in some of the fields into which I trespass. Moreover, each topic is complex, has attracted an extensive literature, only some of which I have been able to read, and is potentially divisive, even in a few cases explosive. Yet I have persevered, mainly because

what I am venturing to offer the public is not a polished professional piece but the rough-hewn amateur work of an ordinary Christian who is struggling to think Christianly, that is, to apply the biblical revelation to the pressing issues of the day.

For this is my concern. I begin with a commitment to the Bible as ‘God’s Word written’, which is how it is described in the Anglican Articles and has been received by nearly all churches until comparatively recent times. Such is the basic presupposition of this book; it is not part of my present purpose to argue it. But we Christians have a second commitment, namely to the world in which God has placed us. And our two commitments often seem to be in conflict. Being a collection of documents which relate to particular and distant events, the Bible has an archaic feel. It seems incompatible with our western culture, with its space probes and micro-processors. Like every other Christian I feel myself caught in the painful tension between these two worlds. They are centuries apart. Yet I have sought to resist the temptation to withdraw from either world by capitulation to the other.

Some Christians, anxious above all to be faithful to the revelation of God without compromise, ignore the challenges of the modern world and live in the past. Others, anxious to respond to the world around them, trim and twist God’s revelation in their search for relevance. I have struggled to avoid both traps. For the Christian is at liberty to surrender neither to antiquity nor to modernity. Instead, I have sought with integrity to submit to the revelation of yesterday within the realities of today. It is not easy to combine loyalty to the past with sensitivity to the present. Yet this is our Christian calling: to live under the Word in the world.

Many people have helped me develop my thinking. I thank the ‘apostolic succession’ of my Study Assistants – Roy McCloughry, Tom Cooper, Mark Labberton, Steve Ingraham and Bob Wismer – who have compiled bibliographies, assembled groups for the discussion of sermon topics, gathered information and checked references. Bob Wismer has been specially helpful in the final stages, reading the MS twice and making valuable suggestions. So has Frances Whitehead, my secretary for 28 years. She and Vivienne Curry typed the MS. Steve Andrews, my present study assistant, has been meticulous in proof correcting. I also thank friends who have read different chapters and given me the benefit of their comments – Oliver Barclay, Raymond Johnston, John Gladwin, Mark

Stephens, Roy McCloughry, Myra Chave-Jones and my colleagues at the London Institute, Andrew Kirk (Associate Director) and Martyn Eden (Dean). I am particularly grateful to Jim Houston, founding Principal and now Chancellor of Regent College, Vancouver, whose vision of the need for Christians to have an integrated world view has stimulated both my own thinking and the founding of the London Institute.

J S

*June 1984*

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## **PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION (1990)**

Six years have passed since the publication of *Issues Facing Christians Today*, and in this brief period the world has witnessed many changes. Detente between the superpowers has dawned, and disarmament has begun. Freedom and democracy, undreamed of only a year ago, have taken root in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, even while brutal repression has trampled on these tender plants in China. Old debates (like the nuclear threat) have moved on, while new debates (like the AIDS epidemic) have arisen.

Hence the need for a second and revised edition of this book. The statistics on armaments, human rights violations, other religions, unemployment, divorce and abortion have all been brought up to date. It has been necessary to read and reflect on newly published books on almost every issue. A number of these have been written by evangelical authors, which is an encouraging sign of our developing social conscience. Another sign of this is the merger of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity with the Shaftesbury Project for Christian Involvement in Society in order to form 'Christian Impact', and so combine research, education and thought with action. Yet other signs are the stronger commitment to social action explicit in the Manila Manifesto, which was adopted at the conclusion of the second 'Lausanne' Congress on World Evangelization (1989), and the 'Salt and Light' project sponsored by the British Evangelical Alliance.

This second edition of *Issues Facing Christians Today* also incorporates new material on many topics – on the rapid growth of the green movement and its warnings about ozone layer depletion and the greenhouse effect; on the Brundtland Report, *Our Common*

*Future*, and its concept of ‘sustainable development’; on the burdens of debt borne by many nuclear families in the West and – to a crippling degree – by Third World countries; on three important Christian documents recently published in South Africa; on further thinking by evangelical Christians about the role, ministry and leadership of women; on human fertilization and modern reproductive technologies; on the theological, moral, pastoral and educational aspects of AIDS; and on the effectiveness of Christian social protest and witness.

I express my cordial thanks to Toby Howarth and Todd Shy, my former and present study assistants, for painstakingly rereading the whole book and making numerous suggestions; to Marty Eden, Elaine Storkey, Roy McCloughry, Maurice Hobbs, John Wyatt and Stephen Rand for perusing individual sections or chapters and proposing changes; and to Frances Whitehead for much retyping and some really skilful ‘scissor-and-paste’ editing.

In conclusion, I feel the need to restate what I wrote in the Preface to the first edition, namely that *Issues* represents the struggles of a person who lays no claim to infallibility, who is anxious to go on increasing his Christian integrity over against the pressures of a largely secular society, and who to that end is continuously seeking fresh light from Scripture.

J S

*January 1990*

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## **PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION (1999)**

*Issues Facing Christians Today* was first published in 1984, and its second, updated edition appeared in 1990. Since then eight more years have passed, and a third, revised edition is already overdue. It is extraordinary that in the topic of every chapter the debate has moved on, and in some cases the situation has changed significantly.

With the collapse of Euro-Marxism, following the demolition of the Berlin Wall, much of the map of Europe has had to be redrawn. The end of the cold war has made possible some international disarmament treaties. The 'Earth Summit' at Rio in 1992 both mirrored and stimulated growing public alarm over ozone layer depletion and global warming. New policies of development and proposals for debt cancellation have brought realistic hope to the poorest nations. The conciliatory leadership of President Mandela and the dismantling of apartheid shine brightly against the increase of racially motivated violence and the re-emergence of nationalism in Europe. Christians are also disturbed by the influences which undermine marriage and the family (especially cohabitation and same-sex partnerships) and which challenge the sanctity of human life (especially abortion and euthanasia).

Ten consultants, each a specialist in his own field, have been kind enough to read the chapter of their expertise and then to recommend changes to make, books to read and new issues to consider. I am most grateful for their criticisms and suggestions. They are (in alphabetical order) Sir Fred Catherwood, Martyn Eden, Dr David Green, Gary Haugen, Sir John Houghton, Roy McCloughry, Dr Alan Storkey, Pradip Sudra, Dr Neil Summerton and Professor John Wyatt.

I reserve my special gratitude for John Yates, my current study assistant. Not only has he given himself the chore of reading the book's second edition several times over, made his own insightful suggestions, and updated the statistics, but he has also followed up our consultants' proposals, done some redrafting himself and advised me which books and articles I needed to read and ponder myself. I cannot speak too highly of his conscientious work.

JS

*Autumn 1998*



PART I

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**CHRISTIANS IN A  
NON-CHRISTIAN  
SOCIETY**



## **INVOLVEMENT: IS IT OUR CONCERN?**

**I**t is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever have needed to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both ‘went about ... teaching ... and preaching’ (Matthew 4:23; 9:35 RSV) and ‘went about doing good and healing’ (Acts 10:38 RSV). In consequence, ‘evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the Church ... Christian people have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why.’<sup>1</sup>

### **The evangelical heritage of social concern<sup>2</sup>**

There were some remarkable examples of this in eighteenth-century Europe and America. The Evangelical Revival, which stirred both continents, is not to be thought of only in terms of the preaching of the gospel and the converting of sinners to Christ; it also led to widespread philanthropy, and profoundly affected society on both sides of the Atlantic. John Wesley remains the most striking instance. He is mainly remembered as the itinerant evangelist and open-air preacher. And so he was. But the gospel he preached inspired people to take up social causes in the name of Christ. Historians have attributed to Wesley’s influence rather than to any other the fact that Britain was spared the horrors of a bloody revolution like France’s.<sup>3</sup>

The change which came over Britain during this period was well documented in J. Wesley Bready’s remarkable book, *England Before*

*and After Wesley*, subtitled ‘The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform’. His research forced him to conclude that ‘the true nursing-mother of the spirit and character values that have created and sustained Free Institutions throughout the English-speaking world’, indeed ‘the moral watershed of Anglo-Saxon history’, was ‘the much-neglected and oft-lampooned Evangelical Revival’.<sup>4</sup>

Bready described ‘the deep savagery of much of the 18th century’,<sup>5</sup> which was characterized by ‘the wanton torture of animals for sport, the bestial drunkenness of the populace, the inhuman traffic in African negroes, the kidnapping of fellow-countrymen for exportation and sale as slaves, the mortality of parish children, the universal gambling obsession, the savagery of the prison system and penal code, the welter of immorality, the prostitution of the theatre, the growing prevalence of lawlessness, superstition and lewdness; the political bribery and corruption, the ecclesiastical arrogance and truculence, the shallow pretensions of Deism, the insincerity and debasement rampant in Church and State – such manifestations suggest that the British people were then perhaps as deeply degraded and debauched as any people in Christendom.’<sup>6</sup>

But then things began to change. And in the nineteenth century slavery and the slave trade were abolished, the prison system was humanized, conditions in factory and mine were improved, education became available to the poor, trades unions began, etc., etc.

‘Whence, then, this pronounced humanity? – this passion for social justice, and sensitivity to human wrongs? There is but one answer commensurate with stubborn historical truth. It derived from a new social conscience. And if that social conscience, admittedly, was the offspring of more than one progenitor, it nonetheless was mothered and nurtured by the Evangelical Revival of vital, practical Christianity – a revival which illumined the central postulates of the New Testament ethic, which made real the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of men, which pointed the priority of personality over property, and which directed heart, soul and mind, towards the establishment of the Kingdom of Righteousness on earth.’<sup>7</sup>

The Evangelical Revival ‘did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace, than any other movement British history can record’.<sup>8</sup> For Wesley was both a preacher of the gospel and a prophet of social righteousness. He was ‘the man who restored to a nation its soul’.<sup>9</sup>

The evangelical leaders of the next generation were committed with equal enthusiasm to evangelism and social action. The most famous among them were Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay, Charles Grant, John Shore (Lord Teignmouth), Thomas Babington, Henry Thornton, and of course their guiding light, William Wilberforce. Because several of them lived in Clapham, at that time a village three miles south of London, and belonged to Clapham Parish Church, whose Rector John Venn was one of them, they came to be known as ‘the Clapham Sect’, although in Parliament and in the press they were mocked as ‘the Saints’.

It was their concern over the plight of the African slaves which first brought them together. Three days before his death in 1791, John Wesley wrote to Wilberforce to assure him that God had raised him up for his ‘glorious enterprise’ and to urge him not to be weary of well-doing. It is largely to the Clapham Sect (under Wilberforce’s leadership) that the credit belongs for the first settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone (1787), the abolition of the trade (1807), the registration of slaves in the colonies (1820), which put an end to slave smuggling, and finally their emancipation (1833). It is true that ‘the Saints’ were wealthy aristocrats, who shared some of the social blindspots of their time, but they were extremely generous in their philanthropy, and the range of their concerns was extraordinary. In addition to the slavery question, they involved themselves in penal and parliamentary reform, popular education (Sunday Schools, tracts and the *Christian Observer* newspaper), Britain’s obligation to her colonies (especially India), the spread of the gospel (they were instrumental in the founding of both the Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society), and factory legislation. They also campaigned against duelling, gambling, drunkenness, immorality and cruel animal sports. And throughout they were directed and motivated by their strong evangelical faith. Ernest Marshall Howse has written of them: ‘This group of Clapham friends gradually became knit together in an astonishing intimacy and solidarity. They planned and laboured like a committee that never was dissolved. At the Clapham mansions they congregated by common impulse in what they chose to call their “Cabinet Councils” wherein they discussed the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country, and the battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness. And thereafter, in

Parliament and out, they moved as one body, delegating to each man the work he could do best, that the common principles might be maintained and their common purposes be realized.<sup>710</sup>

Reginald Coupland in his biography of Wilberforce justly commented: ‘It was, indeed, a unique phenomenon – this brotherhood of Christian politicians. There has never been anything like it since in British public life.’<sup>711</sup>

Anthony Ashley Cooper was elected to the British Parliament in 1826, aged 25. First in the House of Commons, and then in the House of Lords as the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, he concerned himself successively with the plight of lunatics, child workers in the factories and mills, ‘climbing boys’ or chimney sweeps, women and children in the mines, and the children of the slums, more than 30,000 of whom in London were without a home, and more than a million of whom in the whole country were without schooling. His biographer Georgina Battiscombe, who is often sharply critical of him, nevertheless concludes her account of his life with this generous tribute: ‘No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery, or to add to the sum total of human happiness.’<sup>712</sup> And he himself felt able to claim that ‘most of the great philanthropic movements of the century have sprung from the Evangelicals.’<sup>713</sup>

The same story can be told of the United States in the nineteenth century. Social involvement was both the child of evangelical religion and the twin sister of evangelism. This is clearly seen in Charles G. Finney, who is best known as the lawyer turned evangelist and author of *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835). Through his preaching of the gospel large numbers were brought to faith in Christ. What is not so well known is that he was concerned for ‘reforms’ as well as ‘revivals’. He was convinced, as Donald W. Dayton has shown in his *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, both that the gospel ‘releases a mighty impulse toward social reform’ and that the Church’s neglect of social reform grieved the Holy Spirit and hindered revival. It is astonishing to read Finney’s statement in his 23rd Lecture on Revival that ‘the great business of the Church is to reform the world ... The Church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world.’<sup>714</sup>

It is hardly surprising to learn, therefore, that through Finney’s evangelism God raised up ‘an army of young converts who became

the troops of the reform movement of his age'. In particular, 'the anti-slavery forces ... were drawn largely from the converts of Finney's revivals.' Chief among these was Theodore Weld, who gave his whole life to the anti-slavery struggle. He was converted under Finney's ministry and worked for a time as his assistant.<sup>15</sup> Not that Weld was the American equivalent of Wilberforce, however, for he was not a parliamentarian. In fact, 'the agitation [that is, the anti-slavery agitation in America] was accomplished not so much by heroes of reform as by very numerous obscure persons, prompted by an impulse religious in character and evangelical in spirit, which began the Great Revival of 1830.'<sup>16</sup>

The nineteenth century is known also for the enormous expansion of Christian missions which it witnessed. It must not be imagined, however, that the missionaries concentrated exclusively on preaching, or indeed that their social concern was restricted to aid and relief, to the neglect of development and even socio-political activity. It is doubtful if these distinctions have ever been neatly drawn in practice. The American missiologist Dr R. Pierce Beaver has written:

Social action in mission can be traced from the time of the apostles ... Concern was never limited to relief. The itinerating missionary carried with him a bag of medicines, new or better seeds and plants, and improved livestock. Nevius introduced the modern orchard industry into Shantung. The Basel missionaries revolutionized the economy of Ghana by introducing coffee and cocoa grown by families and individuals on their own land. James McKean transformed the life of Northern Thailand by eliminating its three major curses – smallpox, malaria, and leprosy. Wells and pure water often came through the help of missionaries. Industrial schools were stressed through the nineteenth century, and industries were established. In addition, the missionaries were constantly the protectors of the native peoples against exploitation and injustice by government and commercial companies ... They played a very important part in the abolishing of forced labour in the Congo. They resisted blackbirding in the South Pacific. They fought fiercely for human rights in combating opium, foot-binding, and exposure of girl babies in China. They waged war against widow-burning, infanticide, and temple prostitution in India, and above all broke the social and economic slavery of the caste system for the low and outcaste peoples.<sup>17</sup>

### Reasons for ‘The Great Reversal’

It seems, therefore, to be an established fact that at least during the nineteenth century, not only in Britain and America but also through the agency of missionaries in Africa and Asia, the gospel of Jesus Christ produced the good fruit of social reform. But then something happened, especially among evangelical Christians. At some point during the first 30 years of the twentieth century, and especially during the decade following World War I, a major shift took place which the American historian Timothy L. Smith has termed ‘The Great Reversal’, and which David O. Moberg investigates in his book with that title.<sup>18</sup> Although Dr Moberg does not attempt a thorough analysis of the origins of the evangelical renunciation of social responsibility, they seem to have included the following.

The first cause was the fight against theological liberalism, which at the turn of the century was seeping into the churches of Europe and America. Michael Cassidy has called this ‘The Great Betrayal’ (the liberal neglect of the gospel); it occasioned ‘The Great Reversal’ (the evangelical neglect of social responsibility). For evangelicals felt they had their backs to the wall.<sup>19</sup> Understandably, they became preoccupied with the defence and proclamation of the gospel, for nobody else seemed to be championing historic biblical Christianity. This was the period (actually 1910–15) when the series of 12 small books entitled *The Fundamentals* was published in the United States, from which the term ‘fundamentalism’ arose. When evangelicals were busy seeking to vindicate the fundamentals of the faith, they felt they had no time for social concerns.

Secondly, evangelicals reacted against the so-called ‘social gospel’ which theological liberals were developing at this time. Its most popular spokesman was Walter Rauschenbusch, who was Professor of Church History at Rochester Seminary, New York, from 1897 to 1917. He had come face to face with oppressive poverty during his 12-year Baptist pastorate in New York City (1886–97), and this experience shaped his message. In his first book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907),<sup>20</sup> after tracing the social compassion of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and the early Church, he criticized capitalism and advocated a simple kind of ‘communism’ or Christian socialism.<sup>21</sup> He also contrasted ‘the old evangel of the saved soul’ with ‘the new evangel of the Kingdom of God’.<sup>22</sup> ‘It is not a matter of getting individuals into heaven,’ he wrote, ‘but of transforming

the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.<sup>223</sup> Again, the ‘essential purpose of Christianity’ is to ‘transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relationships.’<sup>224</sup> These quotations are enough to disclose his two errors, which led evangelicals to condemn the ‘social gospel’ and so hindered the development of an evangelical social programme. First, he identified the Kingdom of God with ‘a reconstruction of society on a Christian basis’.<sup>225</sup> Secondly, he implied that human beings can establish the divine Kingdom by themselves (whereas Jesus always spoke of it as a gift of God). Though he said he cherished ‘no Utopian delusion’,<sup>226</sup> he nevertheless believed that ‘it rests upon us to decide if a new era is to dawn in the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.’<sup>227</sup> The ‘common aim’ of church and state, he affirmed, ‘is to transform humanity into the Kingdom of God’.<sup>228</sup>

It will be clear from this unguarded language that *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was not a work of serious theology. Nor was Rauschenbusch’s second book, with its misleading title, *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912). His third book gave the game away, however: *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917).<sup>229</sup> He began it with these ingenious words: ‘We have a social gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it.’ Indeed a ‘readjustment and expansion of theology’ is necessary in order to ‘furnish an adequate intellectual basis for the social gospel’.<sup>230</sup> Thus Rauschenbusch betrayed himself. First, we formulate our social gospel, and only then do we hunt round for an intellectual or theological justification for it! He finds it in the Kingdom of God. ‘This doctrine is itself the social gospel.’<sup>231</sup> For ‘the Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God.’<sup>232</sup> ‘The Kingdom of God is the Christian transfiguration of the social order.’<sup>233</sup>

But the Kingdom of God is not Christianized society. It is the divine rule in the lives of those who acknowledge Christ. It has to be ‘received’, ‘entered’ or ‘inherited’, he said, by humble and penitent faith in him. And without a new birth it is impossible to see it, let alone enter it. Those who do receive it like a child, however, find themselves members of the new community of the Messiah, which is called to exhibit the ideals of his rule in the world and so to present the world with an alternative social reality. This social challenge of the gospel of the Kingdom is quite different from the ‘social gospel’. When Rauschenbusch politicized the Kingdom of God, it is understandable (if regrettable) that, in reaction to him, evangelicals

concentrated on evangelism and personal philanthropy, and steered clear of socio-political action.

The third reason for the evangelical neglect of social responsibility was the widespread disillusion and pessimism which followed World War I, because of its exposure of human evil. Earlier social programmes had failed. Human beings and human society appeared to be irreformable. Attempts at reform were useless. To be sure, because of the biblical doctrines of original sin and human depravity, evangelicals should not have been taken by surprise. But between the wars there was no evangelical leader to articulate the providence and common grace of God as grounds for persevering hope. Historic reformed Christianity was in eclipse.

Fourthly, there was the spread (specially through J.N. Darby's teaching and its popularization in the Scofield Bible) of the pre-millennial scheme. This portrays the present evil world as beyond improvement or redemption, and predicts instead that it will deteriorate steadily until the coming of Jesus, who will then set up his millennial reign on earth. If the world is getting worse, and if only Jesus at his coming will put it right, the argument runs, there seems no point in trying to reform it meanwhile. 'Adopting political programs is "like cleaning the staterooms on the Titanic after it has hit the iceberg ... It is far more important simply to preach the Gospel and to rescue souls for the next life"'<sup>34</sup>

The fifth reason for evangelical alienation from social concern was probably the spread of Christianity among middle-class people, who tended to dilute it by identifying it with their own culture. This is without a doubt one of the factors underlying the American sociological findings reported by Milton Rokeach in 1969 and summarized by David O. Moberg. These were highly critical of the negative social influences of organized religion.

The general picture that emerges from the results presented ... is that those who place a high value on *salvation* are conservative, anxious to maintain the *status quo*, and unsympathetic or indifferent to the plight of the black and the poor ... Considered all together, the data suggest a portrait of the religious-minded as a person having a self-centred preoccupation with saving his own soul, an other-worldly orientation, coupled with an indifference toward or even a tacit endorsement of a social system that would perpetuate social inequality and injustice.

David Moberg tells how this report brought a storm of protest on the ground that the research methodology was faulty, but he adds that altogether to ignore these findings and conclusions ‘would be a serious mistake.’<sup>35</sup> Although I have been able earlier to mention some fine examples of social action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there have certainly been other situations in which the Church has acquiesced in oppression and exploitation, and has taken no action against these evils, nor even protested against them.

This ‘Great Reversal’ is explicable for these five reasons. We do not blame our evangelical forebears; in their place we would probably have reacted to contemporary pressures as they did. Not that all evangelicals mislaid their social conscience at the beginning of the twentieth century and between the wars. Some soldiered on, deeply involved in social as well as evangelical ministries, and thus retained this indispensable outworking of the gospel, without which evangelicalism loses part of its authenticity. But most turned away. Then during the 1960s, the decade of protest, when young people were rebelling against the materialism, superficiality and hypocrisy of the adult world they had inherited, the evangelical mainstream recovered its morale, and the process of ‘Reversing the Great Reversal’ (as David Moberg entitles his final chapter) got under way.

Probably the first voice to recall the evangelical constituency to its social responsibilities was that of the American Christian scholar Carl F.H. Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, in his book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947). Not many seemed to listen. But gradually the message caught on. And in 1966, at the conclusion of an American conference on world missions, the participants unanimously adopted the ‘Wheaton Declaration’ which firmly bracketed ‘the primacy of preaching the gospel to every creature’ and ‘a verbal witness to Jesus Christ’ with ‘evangelical social action’, and urged ‘all evangelicals to stand openly and firmly for racial equality, human freedom, and all forms of social justice throughout the world’.

In Britain in the sixties a number of evangelical leaders began to grapple with the social application of the gospel. Most of them were laymen in professional and business life, and prominent among them were George Goyder (*The Responsible Company*, 1961), Fred Catherwood (*The Christian in Industrial Society*, 1964) and Professor Norman Anderson (*Into the World*, 1968). This incipient groundswell of social concern found public expression at the first

National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele University in 1967. There Anglican evangelicals publicly repented of their tendency to withdraw from both the secular world and the wider Church, and committed themselves to conscientious involvement in both. As for the scope of mission, the Report produced by the Congress said that ‘evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God.’<sup>36</sup>

The turning-point for the worldwide evangelical constituency was doubtless the International Congress on World Evangelization held in July 1974 at Lausanne, Switzerland. Some 2,700 participants gathered from more than 150 nations under the slogan ‘Let the Earth Hear His Voice’, and at the conclusion of the congress endorsed the Lausanne Covenant. After three introductory sections on the purpose of God, the authority of the Bible, and the uniqueness of Christ, its fourth is entitled, ‘The Nature of Evangelism’ and its fifth ‘Christian Social Responsibility’. The latter declares that ‘evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty’. But the two paragraphs stand side by side in the Covenant, with no attempt to relate them, except for the statement in paragraph 6 that ‘in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.’

During the years which followed the Lausanne Congress, there was a certain amount of tension within the evangelical movement, as some emphasized evangelism, others social activity, and all of us wondered how according to Scripture we should spell out the relationship between the two. So in June 1982, under the joint sponsorship of the Lausanne Committee and the World Evangelical Fellowship, the ‘Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility’ (CRESR) was held in Grand Rapids, and issued its report entitled *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*. Although of course we did not see eye to eye on every point, God led us to a remarkable degree of consensus. Social activity was said to be both a consequence of and a bridge to evangelism, and indeed the two were declared to be partners. Besides, they are united by the gospel. ‘For the gospel is the root, of which both evangelism and social responsibility are the fruits.’<sup>37</sup> The Report also has a chapter on ‘History and Eschatology’ and a final more practical chapter entitled ‘Guidelines for Action’.

A significant consultation was held in Britain in November 1988 entitled ‘Salt and Light’. Jointly sponsored by the Evangelical

Alliance, Tearfund and the Evangelical Missionary Alliance, it brought over 300 people together from a wide variety of backgrounds in church, culture and experience. Twenty-one specialist groups reviewed the major contemporary issues of social ethics. In spite of participants' different theological and political perspectives, they expressed a common commitment to the integration of evangelistic and social concerns and to promoting this holistic vision among Christians.

Eight years later, in November 1996, the National Assembly of Evangelicals brought 2,700 evangelical leaders together. The Bournemouth Declaration, endorsed at its conclusion, included the following unambiguous statements: 'We recognize that no area of life is outside God's sovereign rule. We take the incarnation and transforming work of Christ as our model for engagement. We affirm our commitment to releasing Christian people for involvement at all levels of society ...'. Moreover, these are no mere pious aspirations. For example, 'UK Action' (a joint initiative of Tearfund and the Evangelical Alliance) is enabling an increasing number of local British churches to develop holistic ministries among the urban poor. In order to encourage more informed prayer and political action, the Evangelical Alliance now produces *Westminster Watch*, a bulletin of news and Christian comment from the Palace of Westminster. And a number of evangelical Christian leaders and organizations were involved in the founding in 1990 of 'The Movement for Christian Democracy'. Its ideals are given a fine biblical expression in its *Westminster Declaration*. Its purpose is 'to further Christian understanding of social and political matters, to initiate appropriate forms of action, to stimulate informed discussion, and to influence policy-making'.

### The Church and politics

It will have been noted that the Lausanne Covenant speaks not just of 'social responsibility' but of 'socio-political involvement'. It is the use of the word 'political' which causes red warning lights to flash in the minds of many evangelicals. They have always engaged in humanitarian work, especially in medical and educational programmes; it is political activity of which they have often fought shy. Indeed, opposition to it is much wider than the evangelical constituency. Whenever the Church (or any branch of it) becomes

politically embroiled, a howl of protest can be expected from both within its membership and from outside. 'The Church should steer clear of politics,' people cry, and 'Religion and politics don't mix.'

Several different issues are involved in this controversy, and the waters of the debate are muddied by a failure to distinguish between them. The first is the definition of the word 'politics'. The second concerns the relationship between the social and the political, and why they cannot be kept apart. Thirdly, we need to consider the reasons why some people oppose the Church's involvement in politics, and what it is they are trying to safeguard. Then fourthly we need to ask to whom Christian political responsibility belongs.

First, we must define our terms. The words 'politics' and 'political' may be given either a broad or a narrow definition. Broadly speaking, 'politics' denotes the life of the city (*polis*) and the responsibilities of the citizen (*politēs*). It is concerned therefore with the whole of our life in human society. Politics is the art of living together in a community. According to its narrow definition, however, politics is the science of government. It is concerned with the development and adoption of specific policies with a view to their being enshrined in legislation. It is about gaining power for social change.

Once this distinction is clear, we may ask whether Jesus was involved in politics. In the latter and narrower sense, he clearly was not. He never formed a political party, adopted a political programme or organized a political protest. He took no steps to influence the policies of Caesar, Pilate or Herod. On the contrary, he renounced a political career. In the other and broader sense of the word, however, his whole ministry was political. For he had himself come into the world, in order to share in the life of the human community, and he sent his followers into the world to do the same. Moreover, the Kingdom of God he proclaimed and inaugurated was a radically new and different social organization, whose values and standards challenged those of the old and fallen community. In this way his teaching had 'political' implications. It offered an alternative to the *status quo*. His kingship, moreover, was perceived as a challenge to Caesar's, and he was therefore accused of sedition.

Secondly, we need to consider the relation between the 'social' and the 'political', now using this word in its narrower sense. In its final chapter the Grand Rapids Report addressed itself to this question. It distinguished between 'social service' and 'social action', and helpfully drew up the following table:

**Social Service**

- Relieving human need
- Philanthropic activity
- Seeking to minister to individuals and families
- Works of mercy

**Social Action**

- Removing the causes of human need
- Political and economic activity
- Seeking to transform the structures of society
- The quest for justice<sup>38</sup>

The Report went on to delineate socio-political action in these terms: 'It looks beyond persons to structures, beyond the rehabilitation of prison inmates to the reform of the prison system, beyond improving factory conditions to securing a more participatory role for the workers, beyond caring for the poor to improving – and when necessary transforming – the economic system (whatever it may be) and the political system (again, whatever it may be), until it facilitates their liberation from poverty and oppression.'<sup>39</sup>

It seems clear, then, that genuine Christian social concern will embrace both social service and social action. It would be very artificial to divorce them. Some cases of need cannot be relieved at all without political action (the harsh treatment of slaves could have been ameliorated, but not slavery itself; it had to be abolished). To go on relieving other needs, though necessary, may condone the situation which causes them. If travellers on the Jerusalem–Jericho road were habitually beaten up, and habitually cared for by Good Samaritans, the need for better laws to eliminate armed robbery might well be overlooked. If road accidents keep occurring at a particular crossroads, it is not more ambulances that are needed but the installation of traffic lights to prevent accidents. It is always good to feed the hungry; it is better if possible to eradicate the causes of hunger. So if we truly love our neighbours, and want to serve them, our service may oblige us to take (or solicit) political action on their behalf.

Why, then, is there so much hostility to the idea of the Church becoming politically involved? This is our third question. An articulate criticism was made by Dr Edward Norman in his 1978 Reith Lectures, *Christianity and the World Order*.<sup>40</sup> He was not actually denying either that 'biblical teachings have social consequences' ('they obviously do,' he said, p. 74), or that the love of God will involve Christians in 'corporate social and political action' (p. 79). His concern was rather over 'the politicization of Christianity', by

which he meant ‘the internal transformation of the faith itself, so that it comes to be defined in terms of political values’ (p. 2). Dr Norman was surely right that Christianity cannot be reduced to or identified with a political programme. But it seems to me that he overreacted to this tendency and so gave many people the impression that he thought the Church should be entirely apolitical.

Yet the 1978 Reith Lectures contained at least four warnings, to which we will be wise to give heed, albeit critically. I will collate them in my own way:

1. The contemporary Church’s political *emphasis*, that is, its frequent preoccupation with political issues, tends to eclipse what should be its central concerns, namely the individual (‘personal redemption’, p. 78), the inward (‘the indwelling Christ’, pp. 72–85) and the eternal (‘the ethereal qualities of immortality’, p. 2). Dr Norman is right that *some* churches have lost these dimensions altogether. Yet in retaining them, the Church must not overlook its corporate, external and temporal responsibilities. Christians are citizens of two kingdoms and have responsibilities in both. To love God with all our being is indeed the ‘first and greatest’ commandment; but to love our neighbour as ourselves is ‘similar’. Each is askew without the other.
2. The contemporary Church’s political *opinions* are nothing but ‘the moral and political idealism of the surrounding culture’ (p. 32), whether this is western bourgeois liberalism or Marxism. All the Church does is ‘tag along, offering a religious gloss’ to borrowed ideas (p. 4). It conforms, instead of criticizing.
3. The contemporary Church’s political *contribution* is amateurish; it lacks the necessary expertise to participate.
4. The contemporary Church’s political *expectations* are naive, because it tends to forget human fallibility and sin.

It will be observed that all four criticisms are levelled at the particular behaviour of *some* churches (though Dr Norman tends to generalize), and not at the concept itself that the Christian Church does have socio-political responsibilities.

To whom do these responsibilities belong? That is our fourth and last question. Failure to ask and answer it is one of the main reasons for the current confusion over Christian political involvement. We need to distinguish between Christian individuals, groups and

churches. All individual Christians should be politically active in the sense that, as conscientious citizens, they will vote in elections, inform themselves about contemporary issues, share in the public debate, and perhaps write to a newspaper, lobby their member of parliament or take part in a demonstration. Further, some individuals are called by God to give their lives to political service, in either local or national government. Christians who share particular moral and social concerns should be encouraged to form or join groups which will study issues at a deeper level and take appropriate action. In some cases these will be exclusively Christian groups; in others Christians will want to contribute their biblical perspective to mixed groups, whether in a political party, a trade union or a professional association.

Granted the propriety of political thought and action by Christian individuals and groups, however, should the Church as church involve itself in politics? Certainly the Church must teach both the law and the gospel of God. This is the duty of the Church's pastors, teachers and other leaders. And 'when the church concludes that biblical faith or righteousness requires it to take a public stand on some issue, then it must obey God's Word and trust him with the consequences.'<sup>41</sup> Whether we think the Church should go beyond teaching and take corporate political action of some kind is likely to depend on whether we adhere to the Lutheran, Reformed or Anabaptist traditions within Protestantism in relation to church and state. At least we can agree that the Church should not enter this field without the necessary expertise. But when church leaders do their homework thoroughly, and take time and trouble to study a topic together in order to reach a common Christian mind and recommend common Christian action, their informed and united stand is extremely influential.

### **The biblical basis for social concern**

What, then, is the biblical basis for social concern? Why should Christians get involved? In the end there are only two possible attitudes which Christians can adopt towards the world. One is escape and the other engagement. (You could say that there is a third option, namely accommodation. But then Christians become indistinguishable from the world and on that account are no longer able to develop a distinctive attitude to it. They simply become part of

it.) ‘Escape’ means turning our backs on the world in rejection, washing our hands of it (though finding with Pontius Pilate that the responsibility does not come off in the wash), and steeling our hearts against its agonized cries for help. In contrast, ‘engagement’ means turning our faces towards the world in compassion, getting our hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within us the stirring of the love of God which cannot be contained.

Too many of us evangelicals either have been, or maybe still are, irresponsible escapist. Fellowship with each other in the Church is much more congenial than service in an apathetic and even hostile environment outside. Of course we make occasional evangelistic raids into enemy territory (that is our evangelical speciality); but then we withdraw again, across the moat, into our Christian castle (the security of our own evangelical fellowship), pull up the drawbridge, and even close our ears to the pleas of those who batter on the gate. As for social activity, we have tended to say it is largely a waste of time in view of the imminent return of the Lord. After all, when the house is on fire, what is the point of hanging new curtains or rearranging the furniture? The only thing that matters is to rescue the perishing. Thus we have tried to save our conscience with a bogus theology.

‘Do you realise,’ a student asked Tom Sine during one of his futurology seminars in the United States, ‘if we start feeding hungry people, things won’t get worse, and if things don’t get worse, Jesus won’t come?’ She was utterly sincere, writes Tom Sine. He continues: ‘The response of the (student) ... reflects what I call the Great Escape view of the future ... The irony of (this) approach to the future is that, while it claims to take God seriously, it unwittingly moves God outside history, insisting that even he is powerless “in these last days” ... It unintentionally fashions him into an impotent absentee landlord, who has lost control of his world and of human history ... The Great Escape becomes an incredible copout from all Christ called us to be and to do.’<sup>42</sup>

Instead of seeking to evade our social responsibility, we need to open our ears and listen to the voice of him who calls his people in every age to go out into the lost and lonely world (as he did), in order to live and love, to witness and serve, like him and for him. For that is ‘mission’. Mission is our human response to the divine commission. It is a whole Christian lifestyle, including both evangelism and social responsibility, dominated by the conviction that

Christ sends us out into the world as the Father sent him into the world, and that into the world we must therefore go – to live and work for him.

Still, however, we come back to the question ‘why?’ Why should Christians get involved in this world and its social problems? In reply, I propose to marshal five great doctrines of the Bible, which all of us already believe in theory, but which we tend to cut and trim in order to make them fit our escapist theology. My plea is that we have the courage to hold these doctrines in their biblical fullness. Any one of them should be sufficient to convince us of our Christian social responsibility; the five together leave us without excuse.

### (1) A fuller doctrine of God

To begin with, we need a fuller doctrine of God. For we tend to forget that he is concerned for the whole of humankind and for the whole of human life in all its colour and complexity. These universals have important consequences for our thinking.

First, the living God is *the God of nature as well as of religion*, of the ‘secular’ as well as of the ‘sacred’. In fact Christians are always uncomfortable about this distinction. For everything is ‘sacred’ in the sense that it belongs to God, and nothing is ‘secular’ in the sense that God is excluded from it. God made the physical universe, sustains it, and still pronounces it good (Genesis 1:31). Indeed, ‘everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving’ (1 Timothy 4:4). We should be more grateful than we usually are for the good gifts of a good Creator – for sex, marriage and the family, for the beauty and order of the natural world, for work and leisure, for friendships and the experience of inter-racial, inter-cultural community, and for music and other kinds of creative art which enrich the quality of human life. Our God is often too small because he is too religious. We imagine that he is chiefly interested in religion – in religious buildings (churches and chapels), religious activities (worship and ritual) and religious books (Bibles and prayer books). Of course he is concerned about these things, but only if they are related to the whole of life. According to the Old Testament prophets and the teaching of Jesus, God is very critical of ‘religion’, if by that is meant religious services divorced from real life, loving service and the moral obedience of the heart. ‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress

and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world' (James 1:27). The only value of religious services is that they concentrate into an hour or so of public, vocal, congregational activity the devotion of our whole life. If they do not do this, if instead we say and sing things in church which have no corollary in our everyday life outside church, at home and work, they are worse than worthless; their hypocrisy is positively nauseating to God.

Secondly, the living God is *the God of the nations as well as of his covenant people*. We Christians sometimes make the mistake which Israel made in the Old Testament when they concentrated exclusively on the God of the Covenant, who had chosen them out of all the nations to be the holy nation, and who had pledged himself to them, saying, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people.' To be sure, this was a glorious truth. The notion of 'covenant' is a major biblical theme; the biblical revelation is unintelligible without it. But it is a dangerous half-truth. When Israel overemphasized it, they diminished the living God. They reduced him to the status of a tribal deity, a petty godling. He became Yahweh the god of the Israelites, more or less on a par with Chemosh the god of the Moabites and Milcom the god of the Ammonites. They also forgot the other nations, or simply despised and rejected them.

But the Bible begins with the nations, not Israel; with Adam not Abraham; with the creation not the covenant. And when God chose Israel, he did not lose interest in the nations. Amos bravely gave voice to the word of the Lord: 'Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites [or Ethiopians]? ... Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor [Crete] and the Arameans from Kir?' (Amos 9:7). Similarly, the arrogant emperor Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes' (Daniel 4:32). He rules over the nations. Their destiny is under his control. Although Satan is called 'the ruler of this world' and is *de facto* its usurper, God remains the ultimate governor of everything he has made. 'From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth – he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do' (Psalm 33:13–15). More than that, he has promised that in blessing Abraham and his posterity he will bless all the families of the earth, and that one day he will restore what the Fall has marred, and bring to perfection all that he has made.

Thirdly, the living God is *the God of justice as well as of justification*.<sup>43</sup> Of course he is the God of justification, the Saviour of sinners, ‘the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6). But he is also concerned that our community life be characterized by justice.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
The Lord sets prisoners free,  
the Lord gives sight to the blind,  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the alien  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

(Psalm 146:7–9)

This does not mean that he does all these things invariably, but rather that this is the kind of God he is.

Moreover, God’s concern for justice, although he expects it particularly among his own people, extends beyond them to all people. Social compassion and justice mattered to him in the nations as well as in Israel. There is no clearer evidence of this than in the first two chapters of the prophecy of Amos. Before Amos rebuked Judah for rejecting God’s law and turning to idolatry, and Israel for crushing the poor and denying justice to the oppressed (2:4–8), he pronounced God’s judgement on all the surrounding nations (1:3–2:3) – on Syria for savage cruelty, on Philistia for capturing whole communities and selling them into slavery, on Tyre for breaking a treaty of brotherhood, on Edom for pitiless hostility to Israel, on Ammon for atrocities in warfare, and on Moab for desecrating the bones of a neighbouring king.

Several of the prophetic books similarly contain a section of oracles about or against the nations. That God is the God of justice, and desires justice in every nation and community is particularly evident from the Book of Nahum, which is a prophecy against Nineveh, the capital and symbol of Assyria. Yahweh’s denunciation of Assyria is not just because she was Israel’s long-standing enemy (e.g. 1:9ff.; 2:2ff.), but because of her idolatry (1:14) and because she is a ‘city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without

victims' (3:1). Twice Yahweh says the terrible words, 'I am against you' (2:13; 3:5), and the oracle ends with the rhetorical question (3:19): 'Who has not felt your endless cruelty?'

It is clear from these Old Testament passages that God hates injustice and oppression *everywhere*, and that he loves and promotes justice *everywhere*. Indeed, wherever righteousness is to be found in our fallen world, it is due to the working of his grace. All human beings know this too. For we have an inbuilt sense of justice, to which the child's expostulation, 'It isn't fair!' bears eloquent witness. It is solid evidence of Paul's teaching that God's moral law is written on the human heart (Romans 2:14, 15). Both God's law and God's gospel are for our good.

Here then is the living God of the Bible. His concerns are all-embracing – not only the 'sacred' but the 'secular', not only religion but nature, not only his covenant people but all people, not only justification but social justice in every community, not only his gospel but his law. So we must not attempt to narrow down his interests. Moreover, ours should be as broad as his.

John Gladwin sums up this argument in his *God's People in God's World*: 'It is because this is God's world, and he cared for it to the point of incarnation and crucifixion, that we are inevitably committed to work for God's justice in the face of oppression, for God's truth in the face of lies and deceits, for service in the face of the abuse of power, for love in the face of selfishness, for cooperation in the face of destructive antagonism, and for reconciliation in the face of division and hostility.'<sup>44</sup>

## (2) A fuller doctrine of human beings

All our philanthropic work (that is, work inspired by love for human beings) depends on our evaluation of them. The higher our view of their worth, the more we shall want to serve them.

Secular humanists, who are sincere in describing themselves as dedicated to 'the human case and the human cause',<sup>45</sup> sometimes appear more humane than Christians. But if we ask them why they are so committed to humankind, they are likely to reply with Julian Huxley that it is because of the human potential in the future aeons of evolution. 'Thus the development of man's vast potential of realizable possibility,' he wrote, 'provides the prime motive for collective action.'<sup>46</sup> The inadequacy of this as a basis for service is obvious. If the unimpeded progress of evolution were our chief concern, why

should we care for the senile, the imbecile, the hardened criminal, the psychopath, the chronically sick, or the starving? Would it not be more prudent to put them to sleep like a well-loved dog, lest they hinder the evolutionary process? Compulsory euthanasia, not compassionate service, would be the logical deduction from the humanists' premise. The fact that they draw back from this abyss indicates that their heart is better than their head, and their philanthropy than their philosophy.

Christian people have a sounder basis for serving their fellow human beings. It is not because of what they may become in the speculative future development of the race, but because of what they already are by divine creation. Human beings are godlike beings made in God's likeness, and possessing unique capacities which distinguish them from the animal creation. True, human beings are fallen, and the divine image is defaced, but despite all contrary appearances it has not been destroyed (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). It is this which accounts for their unique worth and which has always inspired Christian philanthropy.

For these human but godlike creatures are not just souls (that we should be concerned exclusively for their eternal salvation), not just bodies (that we should care only for their food, clothing, shelter and health), nor just social beings (that we should become entirely pre-occupied with their community problems). They are all three. A human being might be defined from a biblical perspective as 'a body-soul-in-a-community'. For that is how God has made us. Therefore if we truly love our neighbours, and because of their worth desire to serve them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the wellbeing of their soul, their body and their community. And our concern will lead to practical programmes of evangelism, relief and development. We shall not just prattle and plan and pray, like that country vicar to whom a homeless woman turned for help, and who (doubtless sincerely, and because he was busy and felt helpless) promised to pray for her. She later wrote this poem and handed it a regional officer of *Shelter*.

I was hungry,  
 and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.  
 I was imprisoned,  
 and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my  
 release.

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I was naked,  
and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.  
I was sick,  
and you knelt and thanked God for your health.  
I was homeless,  
and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.  
I was lonely,  
and you left me alone to pray for me.  
You seem so holy, so close to God  
but I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.

Motivated by love for human beings in need, the early Christians went everywhere preaching the Word of God, because nothing has such a humanizing influence as the gospel. Later they founded schools, hospitals, and refuges for the outcast. Later still they abolished the slave trade and freed the slaves, and they improved the conditions of workers in mills and mines, and of prisoners in jails. They protected children from commercial exploitation in the factories of the West and from ritual prostitution in the temples of the East. Today they bring leprosy sufferers both the compassion of Jesus and modern methods of reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation. They care for the blind and the deaf, the orphaned and the widowed, the sick and the dying. They get alongside junkies, and stay alongside them during the traumatic period of withdrawal. They set themselves against racism and political oppression. They get involved in the inner city, the slums and the ghettos, and raise their protest against the inhuman conditions in which so many are doomed to live. They seek in whatever way they can to express their solidarity with the poor and the hungry, the deprived and the disadvantaged. I am not claiming that all Christians at all times have given their lives in such service. But a sufficiently large number have done so to make their record noteworthy. Why have they done it? Because of the Christian doctrine of man, male and female, all made in the image of God, though all also fallen. Because people matter. Because every man, woman and child has an intrinsic, inalienable value as a human being. Once we see this, we shall both set ourselves to liberate people from everything dehumanizing and count it a privilege to serve them, to do everything in our power to make human life more human.

The film *The Elephant Man* made widely known the extraordinary story with which every English person was familiar at the end

of the nineteenth century. It was in 1884 that Frederick Treves, a young surgeon and lecturer in anatomy at the London Hospital, found the Elephant Man in a rented shop opposite the hospital entrance. When Treves first saw his hunched-up form, he thought him 'the embodiment of loneliness'. He later described him as 'the most disgusting specimen of humanity' he had ever seen. He had an 'enormous misshapen head', with a huge bony mass projecting from his brow, and another from his upper jaw which gave him an elephantine appearance. Spongy, evil-smelling skin, like fungus or brown cauliflower, hung in bags from his back, his chest, the back of his head and his right arm. His legs were deformed, his feet bulbous, and he had hip disease. His face was expressionless, and his speech spluttering, almost unintelligible. His left arm and hand, however, were as shapely and delicate as a young woman's.

To add to his suffering, he was treated like an animal, hawked from fair to fair, and exhibited to the curious for twopence a look. Treves wrote: 'He was shunned like a leper, housed like a wild beast, and got his only view of the world from a peephole in a showman's cart.' He received less kindness than a dog, and, terrified of staring eyes, he would creep into a dark corner to hide.

When he was abandoned by the circus showman, Treves had him accommodated and cared for in a room at the back of the London Hospital where three and half years later he died in his sleep, a few days after he had received his Easter Day Communion.

Treves had imagined that he was an imbecile, probably from birth. But in hospital he discovered that he was a human being, Joseph Merrick by name, in his early twenties, highly intelligent, a voracious reader, with a passion for conversation, an acute sensibility and a romantic imagination. He was also a 'gentle, affectionate and lovable creature'.

When the first woman visited Joseph Merrick, gave him a smile and a greeting, and actually shook him by the hand, he broke down into uncontrollable sobbing. But from that day his transformation began. He became a celebrity, and many notable people visited him. Gradually he changed 'from a hunted thing into a man', wrote Treves. But actually he had always been a man. Treves may never have articulated the Christian doctrine of human beings made in the image of God. Nevertheless, it was his remarkable respect for Joseph Merrick which enabled him to lift up his poor misshapen head, and gain some measure of self-respect before he died.<sup>47</sup>

(3) A fuller doctrine of Christ

There have been many different reinterpretations and reconstructions of Jesus. Indeed, it is right that every generation of Christians should seek to understand and to present him in terms appropriate to their own age and culture. So we have had Jesus the ascetic, the sufferer, the monarch, the gentleman, the clown, the superstar, the capitalist, the socialist, the revolutionary, the guerrilla, the wonder drug. Several of these portraits are mutually contradictory, of course, and others have little or no historical warrant.

We need then to recover an authentic picture of him whom the Lausanne Covenant calls ‘the historical, biblical Christ’ (para. 4). We need to see him in his paradoxical fullness – his sufferings and glory, his servanthood and lordship, his lowly Incarnation and cosmic reign. It is perhaps the Incarnation which we evangelicals have tended to neglect most, in both its theological significance and its practical implications.

The Son of God did not stay in the safe immunity of his heaven. He emptied himself of his glory and humbled himself to serve. He became little, weak and vulnerable. He entered into our pain, our alienation and temptations. He not only proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God, but demonstrated its arrival by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, forgiving the sinful, befriending the drop-out and raising the dead. He had not come to be served, he said, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom price for the release of others. So he allowed himself to become a victim of gross injustice in the courts, and as they crucified him he prayed for his enemies. Then in the awful God-forsaken darkness he bore our sins in his own innocent person.

Should not this vision of Christ affect our understanding of his commission, ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21)? For if the Christian mission is to be modelled on Christ’s mission, it will surely involve for us, as it did for him, an entering into other people’s worlds. In evangelism it will mean entering their thought world, and the world of their tragedy and lostness, in order to share Christ with them where they are. In social activity it will mean a willingness to renounce the comfort and security of our own cultural background in order to give ourselves in service to people of another culture, whose needs we may never before have known or experienced. Incarnational mission, whether evangelistic or social or both, necessitates a costly identification with people in

their actual situations. Jesus of Nazareth was moved with compassion by the sight of needy human beings, whether sick or bereaved, hungry, harassed or helpless; should not his people's compassion be aroused by the same sights?

Leonidas Proaño was formerly Roman Catholic bishop of Riobamba, about a hundred miles south of Quito, Ecuador. Basing his thinking on the Bible, he was strongly committed to social justice in his country, not least for the Indians whose culture he wanted to see preserved against those who were threatening to erode and even destroy it. Although he refused to identify himself with Marxism, and was in fact not a Marxist, he was critical – indeed defiant – of the political and ecclesiastical systems in his country. He opposed feudalism and the oppressive power of the wealthy landowners. It is perhaps not surprising that he was threatened with assassination. At all events, after the overthrow and death in 1973 of President Salvador Allende of Chile, Bishop Proaño preached at a mass for Marxist students in Quito. He portrayed Jesus as the radical he was, the critic of the establishment, the champion of the downtrodden, the lover of the poor, who not only preached the gospel but also gave compassionate service to the needy. After the mass there was a question-time, during which some students said: 'If we had known *this* Jesus, we would never have become Marxists.'

Which Jesus do we believe in? And which Jesus do we preach? Is it possible that in some parts of the Church such a false Jesus ('another Jesus' – 2 Corinthians 11:4) is being presented to the young people, that we are repelling them from him and driving them into the arms of Karl Marx instead?

#### (4) A fuller doctrine of salvation

There is a constant tendency in the Church to trivialize the nature of salvation, as if it meant no more than a self-reformation, or the forgiveness of our sins, or a personal passport to paradise, or a private mystical experience without social or moral consequences. It is urgent that we rescue salvation from these caricatures and recover the doctrine in its biblical fullness. For salvation is a radical transformation in three phases, beginning at our conversion, continuing throughout our earthly life and brought to perfection when Christ comes. In particular, we must overcome the temptation to separate truths which belong together.

First, *we must not separate salvation from the Kingdom of God*. For in the Bible these two expressions are virtual synonyms, alternative models to describe the same work of God. According to Isaiah 52:7 those who preach good news of peace are also those ‘who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”’ That is, where God reigns, he saves. Salvation is the blessing of his rule. Again, when Jesus said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God,’ it seems to have been natural for them to respond with the question, ‘Who then can be saved?’ (Mark 10:24–6). They evidently equated entering the Kingdom with being saved.

Once this identification has been made, salvation takes on a broader aspect. For the Kingdom of God is God’s dynamic rule, breaking into human history through Jesus, confronting, combating and overcoming evil, spreading the wholeness of personal and communal wellbeing, taking possession of his people in total blessing and total demand. The church is meant to be the Kingdom community, a model of what human community looks like when it comes under the rule of God, and a challenging alternative to secular society. Entering God’s Kingdom is entering the new age, long promised in the Old Testament, which is also the beginning of God’s new creation. Now we look forward to the consummation of the Kingdom when our bodies, our society and our universe will all be renewed, and sin, pain, futility, disease and death will all be eradicated. Salvation is a big concept; we have no liberty to reduce it.

Secondly, *we must not separate Jesus the Saviour from Jesus the Lord*. It is little short of incredible that some evangelists teach the possibility of accepting Jesus the Saviour, while postponing a surrender to him as Lord. But God has exalted Jesus to his right hand and made him Lord. From that position of supreme power and executive authority he is able to bestow salvation and the gift of the Spirit. It is precisely because he is Lord that he can save. The affirmations ‘Jesus is Lord’ and ‘Jesus is Saviour’ are almost interchangeable. And his lordship extends far beyond the religious bit of our lives. It embraces the whole of our experience, public and private, home and work, church membership and civic duty, evangelistic and social responsibilities.

Thirdly, *we must not separate faith from love*. Evangelical Christians have always emphasized faith. *Sola fide*, ‘by faith alone’, was one of the great watchwords of the Reformation, and rightly so. ‘Justification’, or acceptance with God, is not by good works which

we have done or could do; it is only by God's sheer unmerited favour ('grace'), on the sole ground of the atoning death of Jesus Christ, by simple trust in him alone. This central truth of the gospel cannot be compromised for anything. But, although justification is by faith alone, this faith cannot remain alone. If it is living and authentic, it will inevitably issue in good works, and if it does not, it is spurious. Jesus himself taught this in his 'sheep and goats' description of Judgement Day. Our attitude to him, he said, will be revealed in, and so be judged by, our good works of love to the least of his brothers and sisters. The apostles all lay the same emphasis on the necessity of good works of love. James teaches it: 'Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead ... I will show you my faith by what I do' (2:17, 18). So does John: 'If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?' (1 John 3:17). And so does Paul. Christ died to create a new people who would be 'eager to do what is good' (Titus 2:14). We have been re-created in Christ 'to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Ephesians 2:10). Again, 'the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love ... Serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:6, 13). This, then, is the striking sequence – faith, love, service. True faith issues in love, and true love issues in service.

It is specially those of us who are called 'evangelical' Christians, who need to take this New Testament emphasis to heart. We have to beware of magnifying faith and knowledge at the expense of love. Paul did not. If he were able to 'fathom all mysteries and all knowledge', he wrote, and if he had 'a faith that can move mountains', yet had no love, he would be nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2). For saving faith and saving love belong together. Whenever one is absent, so is the other. Neither can exist in isolation.

#### (5) A fuller doctrine of the Church

Many people think of the Church as a kind of club, rather like the local golf club, except that the common interest of its members happens to be God rather than golf. They are religious people who do religious things together. They pay their subscription and are entitled to the privileges of club membership. In that frame of mind they forget William Temple's perceptive phrase that 'The church is the only cooperative society that exists for the benefit of non-members.'<sup>48</sup>

In place of the ‘club’ model of the Church, we need to recover the truth of the Church’s ‘double identity’. On the one hand, the Church is a ‘holy’ people, called out of the world to belong to God. But on the other it is a ‘worldly’ people, in the sense of renouncing ‘otherworldliness’ and being sent back into the world to witness and to serve. This is what Dr Alec Vidler, following a lead of Bonhoeffer’s, has called the Church’s ‘holy worldliness’.<sup>49</sup> Seldom in its long and chequered history has the Church remembered or preserved its double identity. Sometimes, in a right emphasis on its ‘holiness’, the Church has wrongly withdrawn from the world and become insulated from it. At other times, in a right emphasis on its ‘worldliness’ (i.e. its immersion in the life of the world), the Church has wrongly become assimilated to the world’s standards and values, and so become contaminated by them. Yet without the preservation of both parts of its identity, the Church cannot engage in mission. Mission arises out of the biblical doctrine of the Church in society. An unbalanced ecclesiology makes mission unbalanced too.

Jesus taught these truths himself, not only in his famous expression, ‘in the world but not of it’ (see John 17:11–19), but in his vivid metaphors of the salt and the light. ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ he said, and ‘you are the light of the world’ (Matthew 5:13–16). He implied (as we shall see more fully in Chapter 4) that the two communities, the new and the old, the Church and the world, are as radically different from one another as light from darkness and salt from decay. He also implied that, if they were to do any good, the salt must soak into the meat, and the light must shine into the darkness. Just so, Christians must penetrate non-Christian society. Thus, the double identity and responsibility of the Church are plain.

In a similar way the apostle Peter describes the members of God’s new people on the one hand as ‘aliens and strangers in the world’ and on the other as needing to be conscientious citizens in it (1 Peter 2:11–17). We cannot be totally ‘world-affirming’ (as if nothing in it were evil), nor totally ‘world-denying’ (as if nothing in it were good); we need to be a bit of both, and we particularly need to be ‘world-challenging’, recognizing its potentiality as God’s world and seeking to conform its life increasingly to his lordship.

This vision of the Church’s influence on society is best described in terms of ‘reform’ rather than of ‘redemption’. As A.N. Triton has expressed it, ‘Redemption is not an infection of social structures ... It results in individuals restored to a right relationship to God. But

that sets up horizontal shock waves in society from which all of us benefit. These benefits are in terms of *reforming* society according to God's *law*, and not *redeeming* it by the death of Christ.<sup>50</sup>

The effectiveness of the Church depends on its combination of 'holiness' and 'worldliness'. We shall return to these images later.

### Practical action

I have assembled five doctrines and pleaded that we hold them in their biblical fullness – the doctrines of God (Creator, Lawgiver, Lord and Judge), of human beings (their unique worth because made in God's image), of Christ (who identified with us and calls us to identify with others), of salvation (a radical transformation) and of the Church (distinct from the world as its salt and light, yet penetrating it for Christ). These five doctrines constitute the biblical basis for mission, for both evangelistic and social responsibility. They lay upon us an obligation to be involved in the life of the world. But how?

Take the individual Christian first. In general terms, every Christian is called to be both a witness and a servant. For each of us is a follower of the Lord Jesus who both witnessed a good confession and said 'I am among you as a serving man.' Thus *diakonia* (service) and *marturia* (witness) are inseparable twins. Yet different Christians are called to different specialist ministries, just as the Twelve were called to the ministry of the Word and prayer, while the Seven were called to take charge of the daily distribution to the widows (see Acts 6). The metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ enforces the same lesson. Just as each member of the human body has a different function, so each member of the Body of Christ has a different gift and so a different ministry. At the same time, whatever our specialist calling may be, emergencies will override it. The priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan could not excuse their shameful neglect of the man who had been assaulted and robbed by saying that their calling was to work in the Temple. If we are called to a predominantly social ministry, we still have an obligation to witness. If we are called to a predominantly evangelistic ministry, we still cannot say that we have no social responsibilities.

As for the local church, the versatility of its outreach can be greatly increased if full use is made of all its members with their

different gifts and callings. It is a very healthy thing for the local church's oversight or leadership to encourage people with similar concerns to coalesce into 'special interest' groups or 'study and action' groups. Some will have an evangelistic objective – house-to-house visitation, a music group, a world mission group, etc. Other groups will have a social concern – sick and welfare visiting, a housing association, community or race relations, the care of the natural environment, pro-life, anti-abortion campaigning, the needs of an ethnic minority, etc. Such specialist groups supplement one another. If an occasional opportunity is given to them to report back to the church membership as a whole, the representative nature of their work will be affirmed, and they can receive valuable support from their parent body in terms of advice, encouragement, prayer and financial backing.

No one Christian could, or should try to, get involved in every kind of ministry. But each local church (at least of any size) can and should get involved in as many as possible, *through its groups*. The groups make it realistic for the church greatly to diversify its concern and action.<sup>51</sup>

I end this chapter with what may be a rather surprising reference to the Roman Catholic mass. The word 'mass' is said to be derived from the final sentence of the old Latin rite, *ite missa est*. In polite English it might be rendered, 'Now you are dismissed.' In more blunt language it could be just, 'Get out!' – out into the world which God made and God-like beings inhabit, the world into which Christ came and into which he now sends us. For that is where we belong. The world is the arena in which we are to live and love, witness and serve, suffer and die for Christ.