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Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

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Epilogue
Tasks Which Await Us
John Stott

EPILOGUE

Tasks Which Await Us

I HAVE BEEN GREATLY ENCOURAGED BY THESE LAST FEW days. An evangelical conference on social ethics would have been impossible even ten years ago. It is good to see the growing number of comparatively young university and college lecturers in such fields as sociology, politics, economics and law, not to mention professional people, all of whom are Christians anxious to relate their faith to their academic discipline or professional life.

I have three suggestions to make about the further tasks which await us, and will conclude with the vision which, it seems to me, we should keep before us.

Answers

First, *we need to go beyond questions to answers*, however tentative our answers at first may be. The fact is that many more questions have been asked this week than answers given. Speaker after speaker has modestly declined to answer his own questions. It is not his field, he has said. Or he has not had time to develop his theme. Or he is a theologian *in via*, who would rather be a pilgrim than a heretic.

I am not criticizing this stance. There are several reasons why I agree with it. To begin with, it is the way of the scholar, who carefully weighs up all the evidence and cautiously

balances the alternatives. Next, it is understandable because we are conscious of being novices in social ethics. We have much catching up to do. The backlog of work is enormous. Moreover, this attitude is welcome for its humility. If evangelical *enthusiasm* was 'a very horrid thing' to Bishop Butler, then evangelical *triumphalism* should seem horrid to us. Many of today's complex questions have no glib, easy or even sure answers. To concede this is humble because it is honest.

Nevertheless, we must not be content to remain for ever in a state of suspended animation. One of the best aimed of James Barr's poisoned arrows in his *Fundamentalism* is directed at our evangelical lack of theology. We have a stale tradition he suggests, not a fresh theology. 'Fundamentalism (from which he scarcely seems to distinguish evangelicalism) is a theologyless movement.' If we have a theology at all, he continues, it is either 'formalized' or 'fossilized'. This criticism is a broad generalization, as inaccurate as all generalizations are bound to be. Yet it contains an uncomfortable degree of truth. The resurgent evangelical movement has produced biblical scholars rather than creative thinkers.

What then shall we do? We must pray that God will raise up from our evangelical constituency creative, imaginative, courageous thinkers, in theology and ethics, in politics and economics, and in other fields of public life. They will need to be 'holistic' biblical thinkers, committed to the fourfold biblical scheme (of which we have been reminded) of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. They must also heed the warnings of Oliver O'Donovan and Howard Marshall against partial or selective positions, such as concentrate on the creation rather than the kingdom, on nature rather than history, on history rather than eschatology, or in each case vice versa. And they will need to be people who are prepared to explore, and to take the risks which all exploration demands, as they propose new ways of putting things and new ways of doing things which are strange to our evangelical tradition, though not alien to the biblical revelation.

If God answers our prayers for such pioneer thinkers, then it will be our responsibility to create the context within which they can do their work. The greatest peril to which any thinker is exposed is the isolation of his ivory tower. So we must not allow our thinkers to become isolated. For we need each other, men and women, thinkers and practitioners,

tories and socialists, first-world and third-world citizens. We need each other not only in order to try out our ideas in a group which loves and trusts us, but also to allow the fellowship to check (not stifle) us, questioning us, where necessary challenging and correcting us, and always supporting and encouraging us. I visualize a developing community of evangelical thinkers, in the Shaftesbury Project and elsewhere, who are strongly committed to one another in biblical truth and steadfast love, and who with the confidence such fellowship brings are ready for perilous work on the frontier where the Christian mind and the secular mind engage with one another.

Actions

Secondly, *we need to go beyond words to actions*. This has been a conference on social ethics, rather than on social action, although to be sure participants have formed a healthy mix of academics and activists. And many are working productively, e.g. in the Nationwide Festival of Light and in the Evangelical Race Relations Group. Throughout the conference, however, there has lurked in the wings the shadowy spectre of Karl Marx, who was concerned, he said, not just (like the philosophers) to understand the world, but to change it. Repeatedly we have been reminded of his emphasis on *praxis*, of the need to integrate theory and practice, and of the new ways of 'doing theology' in Latin America which are inspired by the concrete challenges of socio-political reality.

But we Evangelicals tend to be strong in piety and weak in praxis. I remember hearing Dr. John Mackay, more than twenty years ago, while he was still President of Princeton Theological Seminary, say: 'Commitment without reflection is fanaticism in action; but reflection without commitment is the paralysis of all action.' All of us will agree that the theological reflection is indispensable; I hope we agree that it is equally indispensable to translate our theology into action. Knowledge of Scripture can never be an end in itself. We are called not only to 'believe' the truth, but to 'do' or 'obey' it. As Bruce Nicholls has urged us, we must 'get involved'.

If we have another conference like this, and if the Shaftesbury Project study groups continue, I suggest that a self-conscious attempt be made to earth our thinking, *with a view to concrete action*. This might be something quite

modest like a single project in a local church such as a job creation or retraining scheme, or it might be a more ambitious programme in terms of literary propaganda or political agitation on some particular issue. But get involved we must. As John put it centuries ago, 'My little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth' (1 Jn. 3:18).

Passion

Thirdly, *we need to go beyond thought and action to passion*. Our conference has certainly been more cerebral than visceral. We have laughed a good deal, but we have not cried very much. We have thought about, but I am not sure how deeply we have felt, the tragedies and sufferings of the world.

I am certainly not advocating the artificial arousal of emotion. But I am reminding you that the most influential leaders in history, the social reformers and pioneers, have been men and women of *action* because they have been men and women of *thought* and *passion*.

The most powerful motivation in the public healing ministry of Jesus was a combination of indignation and compassion. Confronted by the evils of disease and death he was indignant. The verb *embrimaomai*, which is more than once employed to indicate his response, was used of the 'snorting' of horses, and so of humans snorting with anger or indignation (Mk. 1:43; Jn. 11:33, 38). But if the condition aroused his indignation, the sufferer aroused his compassion (e.g. Mk. 1:41).

Let me put this point in another way. An essential quality of all leadership is vision. And vision combines a disenchantment, even a disgust, with the *status quo* together with dreams of what could be. Yes, we need evangelical dreamers as well as evangelical thinkers, who will dream their dreams of a better world, until their hearts burn within them and they go out and do something.

Once or twice during the conference I have detected (and been disturbed by) a note of pessimism. But pessimism is a strange bedfellow for Christian faith.

The vision we need is the vision of God himself, the God of the whole biblical revelation, the God of creation who made all things fair and good, and made man male and female to bear his image and subdue his world, the God of the covenant

of grace who in spite of human rebellion has been calling out a people for himself, the God of compassion and justice who hates oppression and loves the oppressed, the God of the incarnation who made himself weak, small, limited and vulnerable, and entered our pain and alienation, the God of Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, and so of universal authority and power, the God of the church or the kingdom community to whom he has committed himself for ever, and whom he sends into the world to live, serve, suffer and die, the God of history who is working according to a plan and towards a conclusion, the God of the *eschaton*, who one day will make all things new.

There is no room for pessimism here, or for apathy either. There is room only for worship, for expectant faith, and for practical obedience in witness and service. For once we have seen something of the glory of our God, and of the greatness of his commission, we can only respond, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.'