

BIBLICAL BASES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTION

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My summary paper from 1986!

INTRODUCTION

For the last eleven years I have been involved in urban mission in East London, and for the last five years actively involved in the work of the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission (ECUM) and its partners. I am aware of a wide gap in understanding between any evangelicals in the inner city and most of those in the suburbs, and a suspicion from some quarters that evangelicals who become involved in social and political issues are in danger of departing from "sound doctrine" and the "simple gospel". I believe that such criticism is unfounded on many grounds. In the first place the evangelical tradition is no stranger to social reform and political action, for example through Shaftesbury and Wilberforce.

Secondly most inner city evangelicals, including those in the ECUM network, are involved in mission which includes prayer, evangelism, church planting, and pastoral care as well as social and political action. Indeed it is out of the experience of mission, and the awareness that such evils as poverty, racism, unemployment and bad housing are barriers to the Gospel that our socio-political involvement has grown. We have seen much that is wrong in our society and therefore are committed to work for change. However, finally and most importantly I believe that the Bible impels us to work for justice and Shalom (a Hebrew word embracing such concepts as peace / welfare / righteousness / wholeness) in the society in which we live (Jer. 29;7).

I believe that any theology which seeks to justify, to condone, or to ignore the major social evils that afflict so many of God's children in the Two Thirds World and the inner cities, is a fundamental heresy, rather than true Christian belief. Therefore I offer this document as a series of pointers to explain the type of Biblical theology that underlies my own thinking.

Because ECUM is a wide coalition of Christians, with various theological understandings and emphases this paper presents only my own personal understandings. Even as a personal statement it is not presented as a creed or doctrinal basis of faith, but as a theology in process. Personally I hold to the traditional creeds and would happily sign the Evangelical Alliance's statement of faith. However in the context of urban mission and social action I am happy in the spirit of the ECUM manifesto to "join hands with all who own Jesus as Lord... ". Because I can see a measure of goodness and truth in the ideas and actions of many who do not, I am also able to work alongside non Christians.

I have tried to structure my thoughts around familiar aspects of Christian doctrine, such as creation, the fall, the Law and prophets, the Kingdom of God, the incarnation and the atonement. I am not an academic theologian or Biblical scholar so will be grateful to receive constructive criticism. I am open to correction and refinement based on the Bible, which I take as the authoritative revelation of God. Anyone

wishing to explore these Biblical issues in more depth should study "Lost Bequest" which was compiled by ECUM member Roger Dowley, a Baptist layman. Before opening the Bible I must admit that my understanding of the scriptures is conditioned by my cultural background (rural, working class, Methodist and grammar school), and by my exposure to other cultures (Indian, East London, and British/Afro-Caribbean). I, together with many of my colleagues, have come to see the Bible through a different set of spectacles because of my life experience in the deprived communities and struggling churches of urban Britain. I have tried to listen to those who are challenging the status quo from the 'underside', to black Christians, to Christians from the 'two thirds world', and to a limited extent to those of other faiths.

However, to identify me, or ECUM thinking as a whole, with the "theologies of liberation" or with Marxist revolutionary ideologies is a gross misrepresentation. The most that can be said is that we are addressing from a biblical perspective some of the questions they raise. Many Christian writers have influenced my thinking on social issues and some of the key texts are listed in our suggestions for further reading.

Several key doctrines underlie this approach.

a) The Nature of God

Because the One Almighty God is perfect in truth, justice and love the search for truth, justice and love is one of the highest aspirations of human life. Because God is the only absolute, there are absolute ethical standards which all human beings are called on to obey. These are known through conscience and the Scriptures and are summed up in the two commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself. (Lk. 10;27)

b) The Created Nature of Human Beings

Because all people are the creation of God, human beings are insignificant relative to Him, yet because all are created in the divine image each one is of immense worth, possessing intrinsic dignity, value, moral responsibility and creative potential (Psalm 8;3-8). Furthermore all people are intrinsically equal before God (Rom. 2;11). Because God created a world in which there was abundance of all good things, (Ps 24;1 : James 1;17) it was never part of the plan that there should be poverty.(Dt. 15;4-5 but note v.11 which is realistic about the consequences of sin.)

c) The Fall

Because of human disobedience and rebellion against God, from the earliest time until now, human life falls short of the ideal in every aspect, and the world abounds with injustice, inequality, disharmony and alienation (Romans 1;18-32). Sin is not only present when individual people contravene divine standards, but also infects the structures of society (Is. 6;5 : Eccl. 4;1 & 5;8 : Rev. 18) and the categories of human thought (Is. 55;8-9). In contrast modern 'scientific civilisation' rests on the mistaken philosophical assumption that human beings can ultimately control and perfect their physical and social environment. The Christian is far more pessimistic about purely human efforts to build a better world, for the problem of corrupt human nature will remain in each new generation.

d) God's Justice in the Law and the Prophets

The Old Testament scriptures reveal the God who has a particular concern for the poor, the powerless and the oppressed.(Ps. 146;5-10). God is portrayed as the righteous judge of all the earth. No individual, society or institution can lightly flout the absolute ethical standards which come from God (Dan. 4;34-37 : Amos Chs. 1 & 2). Judging by the number of words devoted to the subjects in the Old Testament idolatry and oppression of the poor are high on God's list of ethical priorities. Therefore divine justice, simply because God abhors injustice and oppression, and the poor suffer this more than the rich (Jam. 2;5-7), is in human eyes 'biased to the poor'.

Israel's understanding of the nature and work of God became clearer because of their historical experience. It was Yahweh who by mighty acts of deliverance liberated them from their slavery in Egypt (Dt. 6;20-23). After the Exodus the Mosaic law was specifically designed so that such oppression should not arise in the new distinctive (Holy) society which was being built. Not only was there legislation for the relief of the 'widows, orphans and aliens', (e.g. Ex. 22;21-27) but there was radical equalisation of wealth envisaged, most explicitly in the law of seven year release and in the year of the jubilee. (Lev. 25). Judaism, and Christianity have a tradition of prophets who use the plumb line of God's revealed law by which to measure society. Time and time again they thunder out against the twin sins of false worship and unjust treatment of the poor (e.g. Amos 5;10-13 and 26-27 Mic. 1;5-7 & 2;1-2). They often expressed their hopes for an ideal, just and compassionate government under a king like David. (Is.32;1-4 : Jer.30;8-9). There is an assumption in both Old and New Testaments that human beings have a moral and political responsibility to structure society in a way which challenges injustice and prevents or eliminates poverty (Is. 58;6-7 applied most clearly in Acts 4; 32-35). We have to admit that no society, even Israel under the Torah (Law), or explicitly Christian societies like Puritan New England, has matched up to the ideal. Fortunately God is also merciful, and willing to forgive those who repent and sincerely seek to follow His way.

e) The Kingdom of God

The central theme of the Bible is the Kingdom, the Rule, of God, which the Gospels show as inaugurated with the appearance of Jesus the promised Messiah (e.g. Is. 9;6-7 : Lk. 4;16-19). The Kingdom is first of all about the Rule of God upon earth as it already exists in heaven. The Kingdom is already breaking into the present age insofar as we place ourselves under God's rule. There is an unresolved tension between what has arrived in the Messiah (Mk. 1;15: Lk. 4;21) and that which is still to come in all its fullness. While we look forward in faith to the redemption of the whole of creation (Rom. 8;19-25), to the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21;1-4), this is to be seen as the work of God, and not as a human political programme. In the meantime we expect to see individuals coming into the Kingdom by faith in (Jn. 3;3 & 16), and obedience to Jesus (Mt. 7;21). Through their action as salt and light, we should expect to see substantial healing in the fallen world.

The Kingdom of God is not to be identified with the visible or invisible church, although it is part of God's plan for his people to be joined together in the "community of the Kingdom", for fellowship and mission to the wider world. This community is to be a worldwide fellowship of love and justice, in which status, racial or sexual discrimination and self seeking have no part. (Gal. 3; 26-28 : Phil. 2;2-8). Furthermore the Scriptures suggest that that God is already at work, beyond the limits of the believing community in upholding justice, restraining evil and in the process of societal transformation (e.g. Is.45;13 : Rom. 13;4 & 6). Ultimately complete justice will be done, and be seen to be done (2 Pet. 3;13). It must be asserted very clearly, that from a Kingdom perspective, this ultimate hope is not merely an opiate with which to lessen the pain felt by the oppressed. It is rather, a vision to inspire, a goal to aim at, and a measuring rod which will allow us to discern whether specific changes and achievements, resulting from present historical struggles, are indeed substantial improvements.

f) The Incarnation

The claim that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine, and that his death and resurrection provide a unique way of salvation, is offensive to some non Christians. However these statements are fundamental to orthodox Christian belief. To the Muslim such claims which appear to associate any created being with God are blasphemous, as they were to the Jewish priests, for such was the religious charge on which Jesus was crucified. These claims are also subversive politically, for they assert the ultimate authority of a king other than Caesar, and were of use to the prosecution in the trial before Pontius Pilate. To those of a relativistic viewpoint they will also present problems for they are particular claims to a universal and exclusive truth, demanding a personal response. However, if these doctrines are true as we believe, they are relevant to socio-political action (as well as to personal forgiveness and salvation). The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is central to my thinking on social issues, because it shows that God is not distant and unapproachable, and not just interested in the "spiritual" world. Rather He cares for the world so much as to come into human life in person, in a specific Asian culture, at a specific point of history. In Jesus, God shared our human nature, with all its pain, suffering and injustice, even to his death on the cross. This solidarity with suffering humanity, is the model for divine and human solidarity with the powerless and oppressed today. It provides a major motivation for Christian mission and socio-political involvement in our fallen world, for "as the Father sent me, I send you" (Jn. 20;21).

g) The Atonement and Resurrection

The difference between the Christian believer and other social and political activists is in our understanding of the cross. Despite our realism about fallen human nature, we have a 'certain hope', because God has already acted in Christ to bring about the redemption of sinners (Rom. 3;25-26), and the healing of the world.(Is. 11;1-9 : Col. 1;20 : Rev.22;1-3). The cross has cosmic as well as personal significance.

The purpose of Christ's death is seen in the Bible in a number of ways. Firstly in dying a sacrificial death for the sins of the world and taking the consequences of sin

upon himself Jesus Christ opened the Kingdom of God and made possible forgiveness for all who trust in him (Col. 2;13-14). Secondly it was in the historical event of the cross that all that is evil and demonic was dealt with and defeated (Col. 2;15). It was there, as if in a new Exodus, that our liberation from captivity to Satan, to sin, and from bondage to the "powers and authorities" responsible for socio-political oppression (among other things), was effected (Col. 2-20). Thirdly the cross is an example of non-violent confrontation for us to follow (1 Pet. 2;21-24). Finally the fact that the crucifixion was not the end, but that Jesus rose from the dead testifies that even where evil and injustice are at their strongest, they shall not have the final word. It is through the power that raised Jesus from the dead, acting through the Holy Spirit which he has sent into the world that both individual lives, and the whole of human society can, and will be transformed and brought under His rule. (Phil. 3;21)

h) Holy Living and Making the Word Flesh

Christians are called not just to be hearers of the word but doers of it (Jam. 1;22-27). Sound doctrine is of little value if we fail to make the word flesh in our daily lives, our local communities and our national and international politics. What God requires is for us 'to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God' (Mic. 6;8). Believers are to live a distinctive lifestyle of Shalom and holiness (Heb. 12;14) which has social and economic implications as well as personal ones (Heb. 13;1-5). Christians receive many different callings and gifts through the Holy Spirit. Therefore we may expect to see members of the family of God serving in many different places and at different levels in society and the church. But there is an obligation on all to "remember the poor" (Gal.2;10). Praying through and working out our discipleship in the context of the current urban crisis is a challenge for every Christian and local church. We would expect Christ to lead to costly involvement in evangelism and pastoral ministry, and in the struggles against injustice in housing, racism, and employment. We would expect Christ to bring us alongside people of other faiths and none, in alliances on particular issues and community projects. We would expect him to bring us into conflict, even with fellow Christians who see things differently. But we would expect him to be with us as we walk with him through the fire, and share in both the fellowship of his sufferings, and the power of his resurrection.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING Bible study books are marked *****

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