

An Evangelical Rationale for Social Action



Social Issues Committee
Anglican Diocese of Sydney

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a theological rationale for social action from a conservative evangelical position. For the purposes of this paper a distinction will be made between social action and social welfare. The term “social welfare” will refer to the actions of individual Christians or groups of Christians by which Christians do good for others be they individuals or groups. Examples of social welfare are feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the homeless. The term “social action” will refer to actions intended to change social structures. Social action may result in the overthrow of an institution or the modification of roles and structures within an institution. Examples of social action are the campaigns to abolish slavery or provide women with the vote. Social action would usually require some type of political activity. Since most evangelicals do not dispute the need for social concern the focus of this paper is on social action. The need for social welfare is conceded and presupposed.

While many evangelicals have written on the topic there does not seem to be a short clear positive statement. Most shorter papers have been disputational and negative. The concern has been to correct or deny positions not consistent with the gospel. As John Woodhouse maintains, “It is not the concern for social issues as such that is disputed, but the way in which this concern is understood...”¹ By way of contrast it is hoped that this paper will be constructive and outline a positive biblical approach.

Perhaps the most direct entry point into the topic is by analysis of the notion of society and what it is to be social.

1. Society and Social Structures

(a) An Illustration

Imagine for a moment that you have taken a car to pieces. Every part that can be separated from other parts has been separated. You place all the parts in a huge container or box. An interesting question now arises. Is there a car in the box? There is no doubt that all the parts of a car are in the box but that does not seem to be the same as having a car in the box. This is obvious from the fact that the box of all the parts does not have the same properties as a car. With all the parts disconnected and collected in random order or a chaotic state, the motor will not run, the car will not move, and the brakes will not work. It seems that the parts have to be connected in the right order or set in the correct relationship before we get the properties that we associate with a car.

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In the light of this illustration we can make a distinction between the properties of each of the separate parts and the properties of all the parts [or any set of parts] connected together in the right order. We shall call the properties of the whole connected systematically together, “systemic properties”. Clearly, systemic properties do not belong to any one of the parts but to the collection of parts. There is nothing mysterious about this. The relationship of the parts enable them to work together (synergy) in a way which generates something new which is above and beyond the properties of the parts acting individually.

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(b) Social Structures

People often speak about structures. A person might point to a collection of bricks, timber, and tiles in which some people live and say, “Look at that structure”. In this particular case they would be referring to a house. But the general sense of the word “structure” refers to the manner in which a number of things or elements are put together. A car is a structure in this sense. Unlike the parts of a car which seem to require a set order there are some things that might be put together in different ways. For example, the same collection of bricks and mortar might be arranged into different designs. A builder could use the same set of materials to build two different houses. When there are two different arrangements we say that there are two different structures.

A society is a collection of people living together and a collection of people can be put together to live in many different ways. In Australia a basic social structure or arrangement is the nuclear family. This is a structure made up of a man and a woman, usually husband and wife, and a number of children. In other countries the basic unit is the extended family or the clan. The basic units can vary considerably when one views or examines a range of cultures or societies. For example, in some Muslim countries a man is allowed to have many wives.

When a system of organisation in a society is relatively permanent it is called an institution. The family is an institution in this sense. There are five basic social institutions present in every large collection of people or society. These institutions have to do with the family, education, religion, economics, and government. Each of these areas will generate structures. Education, for example, might take place on an individual basis at home or collectively at a school. Economic order might be based on agriculture and include a system of bartering or it might be based on manufacturing and cash trading or some other arrangement. In the case where schooling is part of the structure of society, the school has become an institution. Social institutions generate social roles. The basic roles within a school are those of teacher and pupil. The basic roles within the nuclear family are those of husband and wife, parent and child.

The institutions, structures, and roles of a society give it a character or ethos. Like the motor car in our illustration, societies generate systemic properties. These properties are due to the patterns of relationship and not to any individual action by the members. Children born

into a society tend unconsciously to adopt the patterns or structures of the society. These patterns become embedded in their way of thinking.

Some social structures are explicitly adopted. The constitution of the country or a law enacted by the governing body of the land will stipulate that a certain pattern is to prevail. But many social structures exist because an informal consensus has grown up over time. For obvious reasons the individual will find it difficult to change social structures. Tacit structures may be harder to change than explicit ones.

2. The Gospel and Social Structures

(a) The Nature of the Gospel

The origins of the word “gospel” (Greek = euangelion) are not obvious but the use of the word in the New Testament makes its meaning abundantly clear. It refers to the message of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. The various sources in the New Testament testify to one common apostolic gospel. In its briefest outline it contains the proclamation of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy. A theological evaluation of Jesus follows the proclamation of the historical facts and it reveals that He is both Lord and Saviour. As a consequence all people everywhere are called upon to repent and receive the forgiveness of sin.

In the New Testament the word “evangelism” is used in a fairly narrow sense. To evangelise (euangelizomai) is to announce or proclaim the gospel (euangelion). Evangelism is a unique and specific action. It is an action which centres on the gospel.

The apostolic gospel does not appear out of nowhere. It is part and parcel of the revelation of God to his people. Indeed the New Testament claim is that God’s final revelation is in Christ. By this the New Testament writers understand that all of God’s revelation is to be understood and interpreted through the Christ-event.

The gospel of God (Mark 1:14 - 15) which Jesus proclaimed was in terms of the rule or reign of God.² The Jewish hearers of Jesus and those familiar with the scriptures will have recognised that this concept goes back to the first chapter of Genesis where God as Creator orders the creation. In ordering creation God reigns over it. The rule of God is a major theme which runs through the scriptures. God’s rule is not only declared at creation but throughout the Old Testament.

The Ruler of history has a purpose for his creatures and this purpose is reflected in the order of creation. Human rebellion against God’s rule can be active or passive. People can ignore God’s claims upon them or actively disobey his commands. But rebellion does not mitigate God’s power and authority. While God’s purposes are not fully realized at the beginning of human history the scriptures promise that God will usher in a new order, an order in which God will reign explicitly. In this new order creation itself will be renewed. The fulfilment of this promise of a new order, the New Testament declares, is found in the Christ-event. With the coming of Jesus the rule of God is at hand (Mark 1:14 -15) because the ruler, Jesus, is present. Moreover, the time is at hand because God is about to fulfil his promises and purposes. As the King, Jesus appropriately calls on everyone to repent of their rebellion and believe the royal announcement (the gospel)³ that the King is present. This royal announcement is good news to those who accept his rule but ominous news to those who don’t. The king will eventually exercise his authority and punish the rebels.⁴

One must never imagine that God in Christ had ever lost control of creation and that his rule needed to be recovered or restored. With the coming of Christ and the declaration of the gospel the choice that had always confronted humankind has become explicit. That choice is to come under Christ's direct and explicit rule by hearing and obeying his word or to continue to come under his indirect and concealed rule and face his judgment at the end of history. God's power and authority is not diminished by human disobedience whether it be active or passive.

The irony of Christ's rule is that the ruler is servant. In the Christ-event Jesus does not exercise his power by the use of external constraint. Rather he gives himself in service to his people and so wins their hearts.⁵ His governance is one of internal motivation. The nature of his rule is only truly understood within the framework of God's saving acts in history.⁶ An indispensable component within this framework is something called sin.

(b) Sin

The word used for sin in the Old Testament is the same word that is used for an arrow falling short of its target, the idea being that mankind has fallen short of God's goal. God's goal for humankind is described in a number of ways in the Bible. Sometimes the goal is described in terms of rest or peace. The dominant idea within the notion of peace is that people will live in a set of right relationships. There will be peace when everyone delights in God and in their neighbour and in creation.⁷ There will be rest when all can enter into the relationships God has given them and enjoy them fully. At other times the Bible refers to God's goal as a kingdom, a time and place where his rule is direct and complete.

Behind the various images relating to God's purposes there is a number of assumptions. One is that there is a shape or pattern built into the structures of creation and that if people live according to this pattern they will find fulfilment. Moreover, God in his grace gives instructions (torah = law) to his people in order to guide them towards this fulfilment. Despite God's provision, people are unable to find God's goal because they are marred by the same propensity which was displayed in Adam. This was a propensity so to value themselves and their own judgment that they could not recognize and honour God as Creator and Lord.

In the Bible the way people honour or value God is linked to the way they treat their neighbours. The connection is obvious. If we give ourselves such a high value that God is ignored or depreciated then our neighbour is going to be depreciated as well. Moreover the commitment to self camouflages us from our own sin.⁸ Our commitment to self makes the action look justified. The camouflage is greater in our modern egalitarian environment where we are seen to be moral if we count others as equal to ourselves.

The problem is that God expects people to count others not just equal to themselves but greater than themselves. Those who have truly known God have always deemed this to be so.⁹ The expectation has been made abundantly clear to all in the person of God's beloved Son. By his sacrificial service on the cross he revealed God's standard for all to imitate. He modelled true humanity in his humility and self-abasement before God and his self-giving service (self-subjection) to his neighbours. Jesus explicitly taught that his disciples were to love their enemies and do good to those that hate them. For example, the Christ-like attitude might be that even in the experience of being robbed we could focus on the value and need of the neighbour who is the robber. In order truly to understand the nature of sin we must see the standard of the other-person centred love of Jesus.

(c) Salvation

The notion of salvation is used in a range of settings in the scriptures. It can, for example, be used of freedom from political bondage or being cured of a terrible illness. Yet the central use and the one to which all the others are related is the notion of being saved from God's judgment and wrath. Pivotal to the whole concept is the notion of being saved from sin and its consequences. Sin is logically tied to the Lordship of God, and, social disorder, sickness, and death are all seen to follow from the refusal to give God his place. Hence the problems of creation are seen to be in each person's response to God's claim upon them as Lord. The creature has defied and broken the intended pattern. The solution to this problem of sin is found in the royal announcement we call the gospel. Through the gospel the sinner is forgiven and restored. Salvation is attained.

It is precisely because of this understanding of the gospel that conservative evangelicals have come under vigorous attack for their individualistic understanding of sin and salvation. This charge of individualism can be conjoined with the charge of relegating the transformation of society to the future. However the two charges are independent of each other and can be dealt with separately.

If we go back to the illustration of the car we can see how the first argument is mounted. It is argued that each society is like a biological organism. Society grows and shapes itself in accordance with its own internal principles and nature. The function of each part is determined by its relationships to the other parts. To understand a part one has to understand the nature of the whole or at least the cluster of parts that surround it. By way of analogy it is argued that individual people are shaped by the structures of society. Each individual is born into a set of relationships, a family, and this family is found within a society. Hence those born in England in the 19th century grew up with the language pattern known as English and were ordered under a democratic system of government known as the Westminster system. They grew into a set of structures which they did not create and which determined the way they thought and shaped the possibilities for action. If these structures were wrong then the wrong structures led to wrong thinking and action. Hence sin is structural.¹⁰ If there is responsibility before God then it is group responsibility and not individual responsibility.

There is a certain plausibility to this argument. Yet the force of the argument depends upon the understanding that one has of the nature of social structures and the nature of society as a whole. At its weakest the argument seems to defeat the theory that social phenomena are reducible to facts about individuals. This is the theory of individualism where the whole is reduced to the parts and the parts do not include relationships.¹¹ At its strongest the argument may incorporate a notion of social structures that denies the role of individual action. Durkheim's dictum "treat social facts as things" may lead to a view of social structures which leaves no place for individual action.¹² In contrast to the notion of "the abstract

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service on the
cross (Jesus)
revealed
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and self-
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before God
and his
self-giving
service...
to his
neighbours.”

individual” where the individual is visualised as prior to social and political life, this view sees individuals as totally constructed by social forces. Hence if one could get the right structures in place one could engineer not only the perfect society but perfect people. The acceptance of holism¹³ and a realistic¹⁴ view of structures leads to a social gospel where the mission of the church is one of social engineering.

A more moderate view of social structures is expounded by the social theory known as interrelationism.¹⁵ The British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, in describing what he calls the duality of structure, puts it this way: “Social structures are both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution.”¹⁶ The nature of the structure/individual relationship is brought out clearly by Evans. The human being “is not only formed by these social relationships; he acts and by acting helps to form these roles in turn. He is not only constituted by these relationships; he himself constitutes them. He plays a role in continuing them, modifying them for better or worse, enhancing or degrading their quality and character”.¹⁷

Adoption of individualism means that social structures have no real power or force. Responsibility for the shape of society falls clearly and totally on the head of each individual member. If the individual acts rightly as an individual then this will have good social consequence. Yet individualism does not seem to be plausible. There do seem to be systemic properties generated by the pattern of relationships set up within a society.¹⁸ The whole is not merely the sum of the parts. The argument under examination does seem to defeat individualistic accounts. With the defeat of individualism many people have embraced some form of holism.¹⁹ Yet the problem of holism is its tendency to leave no place for individual action and see all social phenomena as the result of systemic properties. As a consequence sin is seen to be structural and nobody takes responsibility for it. Can the whole repent as a whole? Further, since sin is structural, salvation must also be structural. And if salvation is structural then there will be little or no place for personal conversion.

But we are not forced into a commitment to holism just because individualism does not stand up to scrutiny. The real issue for the evangelical is the perspective of scripture on the matter. At this point I want to argue that interrelationalism fits the data of scripture better than either of the alternatives. The scriptures shift their focus from the way individuals are to relate to other individuals to the church or nation as a whole. The focus shifts back and forth and the writers make no attempt to justify or explain this movement. For this reason we cannot declare that the scriptures commit us to interrelationalism. But we can make the more modest claim that interrelationalism fits the data better than the other two accounts. Indeed, the very fact that we observe the shift of focus counts against the other two views. They will not allow or tolerate the shift. For them it is a matter of either/or.

Of those few biblical scholars who have directly addressed this issue H. H. Rowley poses the question most clearly.

*Is man conceived of merely as a fragment of the community, borne along in its life and involved in the vicissitudes of its fortunes, or is he conceived of as an individual, responsible to God for his own life?*²⁰

The backdrop to Rowley’s discussion is the thesis that Isaiah and Jeremiah were the first “to teach that man, the individual, not the nation, was the unit”. The implication of the thesis is that prior to this time the people of Israel in general did not know that God held individuals responsible for their own deeds.²¹ Attacking this thesis Rowley adduces evidence in support of his conclusion that “...in no period of the life of Israel do we find extreme collectivism or

extreme individualism, but a combination of both. Some writers or some passages emphasize the one side of this dual nature of man more than the other, but both sides belong to the wholeness of biblical thought in all periods”²²

The advantages of the interrelationist position are numerous. First, it means that people can change the structures even if it is complex and difficult. The biblical writers indicate that they knew that kings and emperors could do this. And they knew that kings and emperors would be held responsible by God for what they did in this area. Not living in democratic states the biblical writers did not address the questions that we face in this regard and so they did not exhort the brethren in regard to their responsibilities to change structures. Under their systems of government the responsibility belonged elsewhere. With a change in historical circumstances the responsibility for changing social structures has shifted. The responsibility now belongs to the citizens and they must ask questions about the what structures are right and good.

A second consequence of the interrelationist view is that individuals locked within the structure can overcome the evils of the structure. The truth of this fact is indicated by Paul’s approach to slavery.²³ Two individuals relating to one another as master and slave can overcome the evils inherent in the structure for them by committing themselves to serve the good of the other in love. Paul expects that this will be the case where both parties are Christians. Christian slave masters are to do what is right and fair. Now the fact that the evils can be overcome in particular cases in no way justifies the existence of such institutions as slavery.

Paul did not give himself explicitly to answering questions about the morality of slavery as a structure. There were probably several reasons for this. He was focused on the outcome of gospel living. Those who were new creatures in Christ would want to do good to all people, especially fellow believers (Gal. 6:10). The master/slave relationship would be transformed in cases where two Christians were involved. If the ordinary Christian has any responsibility for social structures then Paul’s logic would have doubtlessly pressed him to urge others to take social action to alleviate the suffering of slaves under non-Christian masters. However, in a totalitarian-like-situation, Paul did not see structural change as an option that the ordinary Christian citizen might take up. Structural change was a matter for kings and emperors.

“With a change in historical circumstances the responsibility for changing social structures has shifted. The responsibility now belongs to the citizens and they must ask questions about whether structures are right and good.”

3. The Church and Society

(a) The Nature of the Church

The word “church” is ambiguous. It is used in a number of ways. In the New Testament it was used in three basic ways. All three ways seemed to have referred to some sort of assembly. In the New Testament the word might be used of all the believers in a city, like Thessalonica, as they assembled together. In other places it refers to small assemblies in houses. These small groups might be the total number of Christians in the city or they may be smaller circles of fellowship within a larger group. Finally the word can refer to that

final gathering of Christians around the Lord on the last day. We might refer to this as the heavenly assembly. In modern times people have added at least two other significant uses. Sometimes the word can be used to refer to all the believers and all the assemblies of Christians throughout the world. This is the church universal. Another modern sense is that of denomination. We use this sense when we speak about the Anglican Church in Australia or the Diocese of Sydney.

In this paper our focus is on the local congregations and their association as members of the diocese. If we think of the diocese as an association of local churches then it follows that the association is to help local congregations be effective and achieve their goals. The advantage of this way of thinking is that those parts of the scriptures which address local congregations will, in some way, be relevant to our circumstances.

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the church is an assembly called into being by the gospel. The gospel is the power of God for salvation.²⁴ It is God's effective energy in the world. It is the word of God because it is empowered by the Spirit of God²⁵ and the Spirit endorses the mind of God.²⁶ The Spirit is the active presence of Christ in the world.²⁷ No-one can acknowledge that Jesus is Lord without the power of the Spirit.²⁸ The short creed "Jesus is Lord" incorporates the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead and that he has power over sin and death.²⁹

The unity of the local assembly is found in having the one Spirit, one hope, one baptism, and one Lord.³⁰ Identifying Jesus as Lord and committing oneself to him means that one has died to sin and been made alive to God.³¹ In this sense one is a new creature³² who lives by the Spirit of God.³³ An essential element of being a new creature in Christ is that the Christian life is to be marked by love.³⁴ Love is the fruit of the Spirit³⁵ and makes all the gifts of the Spirit effective in building up the body of Christ.³⁶ As a consequence the local church may be seen as a community of mutual love relationships where each member is committed to the good of the other. This unity and brotherhood arises out of the fact that the members have become children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.³⁷

An interesting aspect of the new nature which comes with being in Christ is that love becomes an aspect of character. Love does not select its objects. Hence Paul can exhort the Galatians to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the household of faith".³⁸ It is this aspect of character which must drive the Christian into social action.

(b) The Mixed Nature of Society

As the church is devoted to Jesus as Lord, it must, by its very nature, separate itself from those who do not recognize that lordship.³⁹ Hence the church will always be a community within the wider society. And this separation is not because Jesus is not Lord of all but because his lordship over the church is direct and explicit. It comes through his Word. By contrast, his lordship over society as a whole is indirect and concealed.

We must never blur this distinction between God's indirect and concealed rule and his direct and explicit rule. The only time that these two aspects of God's rule will come together will be on the last day when Jesus comes to judge the world.⁴⁰ Up until that time there will always be those who oppose his rule.⁴¹ Being in the world cannot be equated with being in God's kingdom. The kingdom is something that has to be entered. It is only the humble (little ones) who look to God in faith that enter.⁴² The temptation to move from the fact that God rules over all to the conclusion that the world is the Kingdom of God, is not one that the biblical writers entertain. If we do make this move and then also adopt a strong holistic account of society then

we have slipped down the path of the social gospel where the only mission of the church is to engage in social engineering and change the structures of society.

On the other hand, by maintaining the distinction between God's indirect and concealed rule and his direct and explicit rule and conjoin this with an interrelationist account of society, one can do justice to all the threads of biblical theology. Social structures will not be independent entities which shape and determine the nature of the individual. Rather, as the patterning of relationships, social structures will not only influence the development of individuals but be influenced by those individuals acting in relationship. Moreover, the complexities of social change and its participation in the Kingdom of God will become apparent.

The complexity of social change can be seen if we contrast the unity of the local church with the unity of society. In the local church the unity is maintained by the fact that all share the one Lord. It is by faith in the Lord Jesus that the believer becomes a son (child) of God and as a result views other members as brethren. There is no such unity in society at large. Members of society have various gods and various lords. Society can be broken up into small and large clusters of relationships promoting different interests and agendas.

The unity of the church is fragile because until the consummation of the kingdom sin still plays a role. Between the fulfilment and the consummation imperfect personal relationships can be restored through the processes of repentance and forgiveness. But even where there is genuine grace and love there are disputations about the direction in which love should head. Knowledge is not complete or perfect and there is contention about what constitutes the good in many situations. Christians cannot always agree on what may be the right structures (patterns of relationships) within the church let alone outside the church in society at large. While knowledge is seen as a function of fellowship, and love is available as a motive, there is a hope that a common understanding may emerge.

But what hope is there for society at large? In western democratic societies a variety of motives drive people's social agendas. Not only are there a range of diverse philosophies at work but numbers of special interest groups. Without common understanding and a unified internal motivation the patterns of relationships are determined by those with economic and/or political power. External constraint and compromise is the order of the day.

4. Possibilities of Social Change

Understanding the possibility of social change depends upon at least three different elements. These are (a) the nature of social structures, (b) eschatological perspective, and (c) the goal to be achieved. Let us look at each of these in order.

(a) Changing Social Structures

Three perspectives on social structures have already been outlined. From an individualistic perspective social change is just a matter of individual action. As a consequence social change will come about as a result of personal piety. A society of righteous individuals will generate just social structures. Accordingly personal conversion and growth in sanctification will be the solution to society's ills. At the other extreme, collectivism, with its strong view of structures, will hold that social engineering through political activity is the only way forward. The cry is not for personal piety but for social justice.

If the perspective of interrelationalism is adopted, where the individual is constituted by social structures and in turn constitutes them, then changing social structures will not be

enough. It will take upright individuals to uphold, maintain, and use these structures properly. The demand will be for both individual piety and just structures; a demand which is strongly reminiscent of the biblical requirement for righteousness and justice.

(b) Eschatology

A biblical perspective divides history up into two ages. The first age is the evil age where the forces of evil are active and effective. The evil age is followed by the age to come where God has vanquished evil and death. The age to come is inaugurated by the coming of Jesus, while the present evil age ends with the Christ's return. We are seen to live in the overlap between the two ages where both the power of God and the power of the evil one are both active. God's promise of victory over sin and death has been fulfilled by Christ through the cross. The resurrection is the guarantee of victory. Yet this fulfilment awaits its consummation. Ours is the age of the now but not-yet.

Eschatology is literally the study of "the last things" and it covers the events which lead to the end or closure of the first age. Eschatology has to do with the establishment of God's reign. Hence a key eschatological question is - how is God's reign established? Following the Bible, evangelicals believe that it is established through the cross of Christ and the subsequent preaching of the gospel. But it does not stop with the preaching of the gospel. All those who respond in faith are drawn together in community around the One Lord who saves them. In this new community, which has its primary expression in the local church, they live under the word of the Lord and exhibit and develop the new nature which God has provided in Christ.

The dual nature of God's rule (that is, his direct and explicit rule over against his indirect and concealed rule) and the overlap of the two ages have allowed Christians to take a range of perspectives on the presence of the Kingdom. Those who operate on an individualistic perspective tend to emphasize the futureness of the Kingdom of God. For it is only in the future that all people will come under God's direct and explicit rule.⁴³ On the other hand those who see the church universal as the body of Christ in a holistic way tend to emphasize the fact that God's reign has been realized and that his kingdom is a present, not a future, reality.⁴⁴ One way the holistic perspective has been developed is by equating the church universal with the body of Christ and drawing on the imagery of incarnation.⁴⁵ The church then becomes the divine agent in the world and its task is to restructure the world and bring about justice. Frequently justice is seen to be brought about by political persuasion and pressure and not through leading people to recognize the One Lord through the preaching of the gospel.

However, it is precisely the dual nature of God's rule which allows the biblical writers to maintain both a realized and futuristic aspect in relation to the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶ God's direct and explicit rule has been realized in those who respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. But God's indirect and concealed rule will not be manifested to the unbeliever until the Day of Judgment. In this sense God's rule is yet to come. It is on the Day of Judgment that God will make the consequences of people's actions match up with their actions.

(c) The Goal of Social Action

Those who see the church collectively as the divine agent of God bringing about the completion of the kingdom through the establishment of social justice in this world have clear-cut goals. Nothing less than permanent social justice is acceptable. Given an interrelationalist account of social reality the goal of permanent social justice is an unrealistic dream. Not

only is there a problem of maintaining the just structures with an ever new and changing population, there is the problem of uniting the believer with the unbeliever. Beyond these problems there is an even greater one. This is the problem of uniting unbelievers with a diverse range of beliefs and values. It is no wonder that Barclay and Sugden observe, “(m)any evangelicals seem to give up on social action because they cannot see any possibility of achieving worthwhile advance in the foreseeable future”.⁴⁷

“If our theology is correct then giving up on social action is not an option.”

If our theology is correct then giving up on social action is not an option. The believer has been transformed into the image of Christ. Love is of the essence of this new nature. Hence the Christian is commanded to do good to all people. And since all people’s good is tied up within the cluster of relationships they share and the structures (patterns of relationship) shaping those relationships, Christians must be involved in social action, not only to express their new nature in Christ but to witness to the values of the Kingdom. Unlike some “liberation” theologies the redemptive perspective will not allow the Christian to imagine that this action is going to usher in the Kingdom of God. Rather it is a consequence of the action of God and it awaits the intervention of God into history to bring all things to completion. The limits upon its success come from the very fact that all of creation stands in need of God’s redemption. Human sin permeates the creation, and humans are inclined towards evil, continually refusing to follow the ways of God. The Bible, therefore, offers a theological explanation for our social problems. The ultimate problem is human nature. The ultimate solution is the redemption of God. The biblical worldview offers an eschatological perspective that places the social crisis in a larger and more decisive spiritual context.

Driven by the obligation of love Christians can become utopians and try to abolish every injustice here and now. Given the limits set by the mixed nature of society within an eschatological setting Christians must learn from Moses and St. Paul and operate on a retrieval ethic. Faced with the hardness of heart of Israel Moses legislated for divorce even though he knew that God hated divorce.⁴⁸ Even within the church Paul allows that husband and wife might separate provided that they do not divorce.⁴⁹ Likewise an unbelieving partner might leave and the believer is not bound.⁵⁰ Where the ideal is not achievable because of the sin of others, the Christian is to operate in order to prevent harm and retrieve as much good as possible.

Both Paul and Peter seem to indicate that rulers in their role of ordering society are to prevent harm and promote good.⁵¹ As they participate in the governing of society through the democratic processes Christians must aim to retrieve the situation in the light of the ideal. “We must aim for a standard as near as possible in the circumstances to the Christian ideal and strive to progress towards that ideal.”⁵²

5. Conclusions

(a) Evangelism and Social Action

Since the 1950s there has been an ongoing debate amongst evangelical Christians over the nature of their task as Christians. This paper is a part of that debate. At one level the debate is about whether or not evangelical Christians ought to be committed to social action. At another level the debate is about the relationship of evangelism to social action. Is one to be given priority over the other or are both on a par?

Given the theology and social analysis outlined in this paper we can advance the following conclusions. Social action is a necessary part of the Christian life. Becoming a new creature in Christ transforms a person, making them other-person centred and loving. Social action flows from love and is an aspect of doing good to others. Since people are social and relational beings their good is found not only in right personal relationships but in the social structures which frame those relationships.

While social action is necessary there is a sense in which evangelism is primary. God's rule and kingdom is not brought about by social action. People enter the kingdom and come under God's rule by hearing and responding to the gospel.⁵³ Evangelism is primary in a temporal sense. One has to be brought under the explicit rule of God and transformed by the gospel before one becomes a member of the people of God. But once people are brought into the community of believers where God rules they are transformed by the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit will manifest themselves. The logic of God's domain requires its members to be committed to the good of all people. The relationship of evangelism to social action is analogous to the relationship between the entry point to a structure and the environment within the structure. Entry to God's domain is logically tied up with the shape of God's domain. A commitment to love and social action follows from coming under God's rule.

There is no point to entering a right relationship if one is not going to be subject to the demands of that relationship. Evangelism cannot be an end in itself. Evangelism, when it meets a positive response, leads to a right relationship with God and that relationship has to be lived out otherwise there is no point to entering it. Evangelism and social action are like shape and size, you can't have one without the other. Nevertheless it is misleading to proclaim that the church has a twofold mission - that of evangelism and social action. Such a declaration implies that social action is an end in itself. But social action could only be an end in itself if one accepted a holist view of the Kingdom and equated the Kingdom with the world. We have presented good reasons to reject the holist view. We also have good reasons not to equate the Kingdom of God with the world since such an equation blurs the distinction between God's indirect and concealed rule and his direct and explicit rule.

Even conceding that evangelism is primary in a very limited sense has its dangers. Such thinking might deny the logical link between evangelism and social action. It might suggest that there could be a choice between the two. Furthermore it could recommend that evangelism is the only legitimate preference. To suggest this option would be like suggesting that one can enter a house and not be subject to the shape and the boundaries of the house. The reality is that evangelism will lead to conversion and conversion will lead to a new creation and that new creation will oblige people to be involved in social action.

Working from within the theological perspective developed in this paper generates its own practical problems. If it is the case that social action is necessary, how much time should be given to it in relation to evangelism? Like most practical problems this issue can only be decided in context. It will depend upon the gifts of the individual Christians involved and the demands of the context. Collective judgment might be needed to secure a sound balance.⁵⁴

(b) The Participants in Social Action

Individual Christians have no real problems expressing their social concern in acts of charity. Frequently individuals join together into small groups or larger societies to ensure that their welfare programmes are more effective. However there are real problems when it comes to social action. It is very difficult for individuals to change social structures. Groups

of Christians from local churches may well influence the structures determined by local government councils, but when it comes to the state or federal level it is quite another matter. At the state and federal level it is obvious that social change requires a large group and a broad base to initiate change or alter structures.

“The reality is that evangelism will lead to conversion and conversion will lead to a new creation and that new creation will oblige people to be involved in social action.”

While Christians can join special interest groups, such as an environmental group, dioceses and denominations are well placed to monitor social change and initiate social action. Involvement in special interest groups should be encouraged but there is no guarantee that such groups will adopt a Christian position or a position compatible with Christian thought.

If Christians want to have a social impact then social action should not be separated from the normal event of Christian assembly. Just as parishes have evangelism and mission committees they should have a small social issues committee. Ideally these local committees would monitor local issues and take action where appropriate. They could keep the local congregation informed of any problems or injustices in the local area.

A local parish-based committee could also be the platform for involvement in broader social issues. Links could be forged with the diocesan social issues committee and the local churches could participate in pressing state and federal issues.⁵⁵ Communication would need to be two-way.⁵⁶

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 APPENDIX A

		Individualism	Interrelationism	Collectivism
A	Dignity	The individual human being is considered to possess supreme and intrinsic value or dignity.	Individual human beings are considered to possess value or dignity in their relations with other human beings.	The collective is considered to possess supreme and intrinsic value or dignity.
B	Autonomy	The Individual is autonomous; he or she is self-directed.	Individuals are self-directed, though influenced by others.	The individual is subject to the totality of social forces; he or she is directed by the collective.
C	Privacy	The individual ought to be left a private sphere of thought and/or action immune from the incursions of others or a wider "public".	The individual ought to think and act, not only with regard to himself or herself, but also with others in mind.	The individual ought to think and act solely with the collective in mind. The thoughts and actions of the collective are of ultimate value.
D	Self Development	The individual can and ought to experience self-development and can do so alone.	Individuals can and ought to develop together, and not at each other's expense.	The collective ought to experience self-development, irrespective of individual members.
E	Abstract Concept	The individual is pictured as possessing interests, wants, purposes and needs, etc., independently of any social context.	The individual's interests, wants, purposes and needs, etc. are affected by his or her relations with others and so cannot be abstracted from those relations.	The individual's interests, wants, purposes and needs, etc. are the result of his or her relation to the collective and so cannot be abstracted from it.
F	Political	Only the individual can be the source of political authority.	Only the relations between individuals can be the source of political authority.	Only the collective can be the source of political authority.
G	Economic	The individual should produce in order to satisfy his or her desires in his or her own way without regard for others.	The individual should produce in a way which takes into consideration not only his or her own desires but also those of others.	The individual should produce in order to satisfy the desire of the collective and in accordance with a plan which has been dictated by the collective.

		Individualism	Interrelationism	Collectivism
H	Religious or Humanistic Destiny	The individual is responsible for his or her own destiny.	Individuals are responsible for both their own and others' destinies.	The collective is responsible for everyone's destiny.
I	Ethical	The source of moral principles is the individual.	The source of moral principles is interpersonal relations.	The source of moral principles is the collective.
J	Epistemological	The individual is the only source and depository of knowledge.	Related individuals are the source of knowledge, and it is dispersed.	The collective is the only source and depository of knowledge.
K	Methodological	The individual is the basis of all explanations of social phenomena.	Related individuals are the basis of all explanations of social phenomena.	The collective, with its own laws, is the basis of all explanations of social phenomena.
L	Ontological	Only individuals really exist.	Individuals exist in relations with others.	Only collectives really exist.

With some slight modification this appendix is taken from an article, *On Individualism, Collectivism and Interrelationalism*, by Alan Carter in the Heythrop Journal, XXXI (1990), p. 25.

Notes

1. John Woodhouse, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, in B. G. Webb(ed), *Christians in Society*, Explorations 3, (Lancer, Homebush West, 1988), p. 16.
 2. The Greek word “baseleia” is normally translated as kingdom. To the modern mind this is misleading. A kingdom is taken to be the area over which a king rules. The biblical focus is on the King and the exercise of his power and authority - his reigning.
 3. At the time of the New Testament the word *euangelion* (gospel) referred to a royal announcement. Royal announcements were generally good news but they need not be.
 4. Biblical scholars have long detected a pattern within the unfolding of God’s activity in history. The basic shape of the ongoing revelation seems to be proclamation, promise, fulfilment, and consummation. Graeme Goldsworthy adds a further dimension. He sees the kingdom pattern **established** at creation in the garden of Eden. After the Fall the kingdom is **promised** to Abraham. It is **foreshadowed** in the reign of David and Solomon and **fulfilled** in Jesus Christ. The **consummation** of the Kingdom comes at the return of Christ. (See Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel and Kingdom, Crossroad edition, 1994.)
 5. The concept of heart in the Bible is very different to our modern concept. In much of our modern use the word “heart” is used in contrast to the word “head”. In this way the concept of heart is seen to indicate the emotions which stand over and against the thinking of the mind. The heart in the Bible is a much more holistic concept. The heart is the centre of a person. It is that cluster of thinking (mind), feeling (emotions), and willing (will), which issues in intentions. Hence a person with a hard heart is a person with fixed intentions.
 6. Commonly referred to as salvation history.
 7. This peace is more than just the cessation of hostility.
 8. See, for example, Psalm 36:2.
 9. See, for example, Abram in Genesis 13.
 10. An example of such structural sin is the practice of slavery.
 11. To be precise we are talking about methodological individualism at this point. There are a cluster of twelve different elements and doctrines to which the word “individualism” might refer. (See Appendix A.) According to individualism social structures are generated by and reducible to individual action. This way of thinking involves the idea of “the abstract individual”. This has to do with the way the individual is conceived. The individual is visualised as logically prior to social and political life. Living in this state of nature prior to the foundations of society, the individual is seen to have fixed and invariant human psychological features such as instincts, the capacity to think, purposes, desires, needs, etc. Social arrangements are seen as a means of fulfilling these independently given individual objectives. All forms of social life are seen as the creation of individual persons. The individual appears not as a result of history but as the starting-point; not a product of history but of nature. If the individualistic account of society is accepted then social structures can be easily changed. It is just a matter of getting the individuals together and changing the pattern of relationships. Karl Marx subjects the notion of “the abstract individual” to its most piercing critique. The notion of the abstract individual is “as great an absurdity as the idea of the development of language without living together and talking to one another”. Nevertheless Marx does not dispense with the notion of the individual. “Man is... not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society.”
 12. David Lyon calls this “the holist snare”. For an outline of holism see Appendix A.
 13. Holism views society as a whole. It is also called collectivism. See Appendix A.
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14. A realistic view of structures is that view which sees social structures as entities in their own right. Social structures do not depend on individuals but actually shape individuals.
 15. See Appendix A.
 16. Cited from Lyons, *Op. Cit.*, p. 133. The quotation is from Anthony Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, (Hutchinson, London, 1976), p. 121.
 17. Cited from Lyon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 131. The quotation is from C. Stephen Evans, Preserving the Person: A Look at the Human Sciences, (IVP, Leicester, 1977), p. 145.
 18. Even if we take the smallest society, the family, it appears that the structure of the group influences the individuals in the group. For example, psychologists have studied the influence of being the first or third child in the family.
 19. For example, some evangelicals have developed a theology and ethic based on the notion of the Kingdom of God viewed holistically.
 20. H. H. Rowley, The Faith of Israel; Aspects of Old Testament Thought, (SCM, London, 1956), p. 99.
 21. The evidence for collective responsibility is found in passages like the account of Achan taking some of the devoted things [Joshua 7]. An individual sins but Israel is held accountable.
 22. *Op. Cit.*, p.100.
 23. See Philemon, Ephesians 6:5 - 9; Colossians 3:22 - 4:1.
 24. Romans 1:16.
 25. Galatians 3:1 - 5.
 26. Romans 8:5 - 8.
 27. The Spirit is given when one calls upon the name of the Lord (Jesus). See Acts chapters 2 - 5.
 28. 1 Corinthians 12:3.
 29. Romans 10:5 - 13.
 30. Ephesians 4:1 - 5.
 31. Romans 6.
 32. 2 Corinthians 5:17.
 33. Galatians 5:16 - 26.
 34. Love in the Bible is marked by a commitment to the good of the one loved. It is not just an emotion or essentially an emotion. This commitment is unconditional and gracious and as a result Christians are to love their enemies, bless those who curse them, and not repay evil for evil (Romans 12:9 - 21). Further, in the Bible the good of the neighbour is not determined by the neighbours subjective desires or wants but by the nature of humanity (as part of the objective order of creation) and God's will for it.
 35. Galatians 5:22.
 36. 1 Corinthians 13.
 37. Galatians 3:26 - 4:7.
 38. Galatians 6:10.
 39. See, for example, 2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1.
 40. See Matthew 13:1 - 43.
 41. They are led by the Adversary = Satan = the one who opposes. See Matthew 12:22 - 37.
 42. Matthew 18:1 - 4.
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43. Those adopting such a *futuristic* eschatology are open to the charge of relegating the transformation of society to the future. It is as if they are not concerned about the present.
 44. Holding a *realized* eschatology these people seem to dismiss or trivialise the element of future hope so prominent in the Scriptures.
 45. This is a very dangerous approach. The Bible only uses the language of incarnation in relation to the divine Son of God taking on human flesh. If not used carefully the imagery could infer that the church was divine in nature.
 46. This approach is known as *inaugurated* eschatology. Inaugurated eschatology has the advantage of generating concern for the present and hope for the future.
 47. Oliver R. Barclay and Chris Sugden, *Biblical Ethics in a Mixed Society*. Evangelical Quarterly, 62:1 (1990), p. 13.
 48. See Deuteronomy 24:1 - 4 and Matthew 19:1 - 12.
 49. 1 Corinthians 7:10 - 11.
 50. 1 Corinthians 7:12 - 16.
 51. See Romans 13:1 - 7 and 1 Peter 2:13 - 17.
 52. Barclay and Sugden, *Op. Cit.*, p. 13.
 53. This is not to deny that some people may grow up in a Christian family and not be conscious of a point when they made a decision.
 54. Bebbington records the experience of the evangelical nonconformist, F. B. Meyer, in Britain in the early 1900s where social action displaced evangelism. See D. W. Bebbington, The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870 - 1914, (London, 1982), p. 83.
 55. To some degree this is already happening. For example, the Social Issues Committee of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney has helped mobilise local church forces by providing pamphlet and video packages in relation to the issue of proposed euthanasia legislation in NSW.
 56. The Diocese of Sydney's Social Issues Committee already provides a *Social Issues Update* in the Southern Cross Newspaper.
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