

## SOCIAL ETHICS AND BIBLICAL HOLISM

Our purpose here is to explore the relationship between the Gospel and social responsibility. Some have suggested that a faulty pre-millennial eschatology is the basis for much evangelical social neglect.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that some evangelicals have not been involved in social issues because they have thought it unnecessary to "polish the brass rails of a sinking ship," this is not the basic problem of most evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> To be sure some believers are so caught up with the "sweet-by-and-by" that they forget about the wretched here-and-now, but far more have a different problem. It is our thesis there that much of modern evangelical social neglect springs not from a wrong eschatology but from an incomplete soteriology and a faulty anthropology.

To be more specific, evangelicals have rightly stressed the evangelizing of mankind but have not always properly understood what kind of man they are evangelizing nor the scope of the euangelium (or Gospel) we preach to him. Our theses here are two: the theological corrective for such evangelical social neglect is to understand that the New Testament "Gospel" includes salvation in a present continuous sense, and that the biblical understanding of man includes his bodily and social needs. Hence, social responsibility is an essential part of the Gospel itself and not simply an implication of it. Thus the corrective to evangelical misunderstanding is a broader view of the Gospel and a holistic view of man. In short, my argument goes like this:

1. The "Gospel" as defined in the New Testament includes not only man's justification (from the penalty of sin) but also his sanctification from the present power of sin in his life.

2. By "Soul" or Man is meant the whole man including his individual body (and social needs) as well as his relation to other persons in this world.

3. Therefore, both man's bodily and social needs are included in the efficacy of the Gospel.

I. The Scope of the Gospel.

A. There is only one Gospel.

The two basic terms for "Gospel" (euangelizō and euangelion) are used a total of some 134 times in the New Testament. It is clear that not all of these are identical in their shades of meaning. However, despite the diversity in usage, we are reminded by Paul that there is only one Gospel (Gal. 1:8). Indeed, in this same book Paul declares that the Gospel was preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). For this and many other reasons it seems ill-advised for us to deny the unity of the Gospel, whatever the all-inclusive diversities it may entail.

To be sure there are many different phrases using the term "Gospel." Paul speaks of "my Gospel" (II Tim. 2:8), the "Gospel of the circumcision," the "Gospel of the uncircumcision" (Gal. 2:7), "the Gospel of the Grace of God" (Acts 20:24), "the Gospel of the Glory of God" (II Cor. 4:4), "Gospel of Christ" (II Cor. 10:14), "Gospel of Truth" (Eph. 1:3), the "Gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15), the "Glorious Gospel" (I Tim. 1:11), the "Gospel of Christ" (II Cor. 10:14), and so on. But these are not different Gospels (else he would be condemning himself in Galatians) but simply different descriptions of the same Gospel.

Each of these phrases may stress a different implication or relation of the Gospel but they do not designate a different Gospel.

B. The scope of the "Gospel."

It seems beyond question that the term "Gospel" as used in the New Testament includes what is here described as sanctification. What is not as apparent to all is that this sanctifying process also includes social involvements.

1. The "Gospel" includes sanctification.

We use the term "justification" to describe that judicial act of God by which He declares those who believe righteous before God. This, I take it, happens at the moment a man places his faith in Christ (Rom. 5:1). It pronounces a man saved from the penalty of his sins. By "sanctification" I mean not a past judicial act (which saves one from the penalty of his sins), but a present continuous process by which a man is delivered from the power of sin in his life.

Now what we propose to show is that the New Testament usage of the term "Gospel" sometimes includes the process of "sanctification" and that sanctification includes man's bodily and social needs. This seems clearly to be the case in both Romans and Galatians, as well as Mark and many other New Testament references.

a. The Gospel in Romans.

The Roman epistle begins by noting that the apostle Paul is "set apart for the gospel of God" (1:1), which is also called "the gospel of His Son" (1:9). The key, however, is in 1:16 where the Gospel is declared to be "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...." For in the Gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the Righteous man shall live by Faith'" (1:17). From this point the whole book of Romans unfolds. That is, God's righteousness--

which is in the Gospel--is unfolded in Romans in condemnation on unbelievers (Rom. 1-3a), then in justification of believers (3b-5), and then in sanctification and glorification of believers (6-8). That is to say, God's righteousness is through the Gospel first imputed to the believer (justification) and also continually bestowed on the believer (sanctification). But both justification and sanctification are part of the Gospel wherein God's righteousness is revealed. But regardless of how one describes it, the word "Gospel" in Romans includes the whole ongoing process of salvation in this life (which we call sanctification) and not just the initial act of salvation (which we call justification). The Gospel, said Paul elsewhere, is that by which we "are being saved..." (I Cor. 1:18). Indeed, he exhorts us to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling..." (Phil 2:12). Which clearly indicates salvation is a present process and not simply a past act. That is to say, it is perfectly biblical to say "I am in the process of being saved (sanctified) by the power of the Gospel."

b. The "Gospel" in Galatians.

Paul is even more pointed in Galatians on the all-inclusive nature of the Gospel. He begins sharply, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel; which is really not another" Gospel (Gal. 1:6, 7). Now it is obvious that what these Judaizers were doing they were doing to those who has already become believers. Hence, the "Gospel" in Galatians is clearly inclusive of the saving work of God's grace in the present ongoing life of the believer.

There are three main arguments that can be advanced in support of this broader view of the Gospel in Galatians. First, Paul proudly announced that he resisted "false brethren" (2:4) who insisted on circumcision as

necessary for those who were already believers (such as Titus). "But," wrote Paul, "we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain evident with you" (2:5). From this it is clear that Paul believed that the life of liberty was part of "the truth of the Gospel" (2:51). The same "truth of the Gospel" (2:14) was at stake when Paul rebuked Peter for his inconsistent living. Paul wrote, "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (2:14). There is no question that Paul here considers the Gospel to include the life of Christian liberty and not simply the initial act of salvation.

c. Other New Testament usages of "Gospel."

There are several other passages which support this broader concept of the Gospel. Paul's reference in Philippians (1:27) may fit in this category. He exhorted the Philippians, "conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." A gospel-worthy life is a gospel-like life, which would mean that the Gospel includes the Christian life.

There are a number of passages which amount to the phrase "gospel ministry." Paul speaks to the Thessalonians of Timothy as a "fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith" (I Thess. 3:2). This is surely a much broader ministry than that of evangelizing sinners. It is in fact a gospel ministry of edifying the saints.

It would seem also that Paul's statement that "Christ Jesus... brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tim. 1:10) refers to more than a once-for-all impartation of life, usually called

"regeneration." Indeed, immortality cannot be imparted all at once; it will not be fully realized until "that day" (1:12) when the Lord passes out rewards for His faithful servants (4:8).<sup>3</sup>

2. The "Gospel" includes the whole life of Christ.

Not only does the term "Gospel" sometimes include continual salvation from bondage of sin in the Christian life (Galatians), sanctification or deliverance from the present power of sin (Romans), and even edification of believers (I Thess. 3:2), but it sometimes means the whole of Christ's life. This is particularly true of Mark's usage of the term "Gospel."

In Mark 1:1 the writer speaks of "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." By this he introduces the whole narrative of Christ's life, death and resurrection to follow. This is called the "gospel of peace" (Acts 10:36) which many believe to be the kerygmatic outline of Mark's narrative found in Peter's sermon to the Gentiles (Acts 10:37-42).

Mark 8:35 supports this broader meaning of the Gospel. Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it." In brief, the "Gospel" and Christ's life are used interchangeably. The same is true of Jesus' statement in Mark 10:29-30, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for my sake and for the gospel's sake,...." Certainly "Gospel" here is broader than what we normally present as the "plan of salvation" to an unbeliever.

In addition to Mark's identification of the Gospel with the life of Christ there are other similar New Testament identifications. The phrase

"the Gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 24:14) may imply that the Gospel is as broad as the kingdom (or reign) of God. (See also Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16). In a similar way Paul equates the Gospel with the "word of truth," a phrase that would seem to be broader than the content of the Gospel as described in I Corinthians 15:1f. (cf. John 17:17).<sup>4</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is clear from the Markan passages that the term "Gospel" is inclusive of the person of Christ and His life as a whole.

3. The "Gospel" includes man's social needs.

There are a number of New Testament passages which use the term "Gospel" in connection with human bodily and social needs such as healing, food, and clothing. Matthew says, "Jesus was going about in all Galilee... proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people" (4:23). This is to say that healing of bodies was part of His Gospel ministry.<sup>5</sup> The same truth is repeated in Matthew 9:35 (cf. Luke 8:1, 2; 19:6). A like passage is found in Jesus' answer to John's disciples. He said, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them" (11:5; cf. Luke 7:22).

Sometimes the Gospel is connected with ministry to the poor. Paul speaks to the Corinthians of the offering for the poor in Jerusalem, saying, "Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ..." (II Cor. 9:13).

In addition to Paul's reference, there is the emphasis Luke places in his Gospel on the ministry to the poor. The most noteworthy passage is Jesus' quotation from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18, "The Spirit of the Lord is



upon Me, because He annointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor...."

Some have argued that the reference here is to those who are "poor in spirit," but these seem wrong for several reasons. First, Jesus literally fulfilled other things mentioned in this passage such as giving sight to the blind and freeing the down-trodden and captive. Secondly, the literal interpretation fits well with Luke's well-known economic emphasis (cf. 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3). Thirdly, the meaning of the term "poor" has the distinct meaning of "lack, need, poverty, and helplessness" (cf. Ex. 23:6; Deut. 15:4-11; I Sam. 2:8; Psalms 82:3, 4). Fourthly, the text Jesus quoted from Isaiah (61) has a literal meaning in its Old Testament context, namely, the poor and needy Babylonian exiles. Fifthly, the New Testament uses the word "poor" in a literal sense (in Rev. 2:8-11). Sixthly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Luke does not use the Matthaean phrase "in spirit" (Matt. 5:3).

One thing seems perfectly clear from the foregoing distinction. The term "Gospel" has a broad meaning including the person and life of Christ, and Jesus did spend much of His ministry bringing the good news of help and healing to those who were socially disadvantaged. Indeed, Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew insisted that those who performed social service to the poor and imprisoned were doing it unto Christ (Matt. 25:35-40). That is, the Gospel ministry of Christ (and even to Christ through the needy) was unquestionably one that included bodily needs such as healing and social ministries to the poor and oppressed. In short, the scope of the Gospel is broader than "spiritual"; it is also social.

## II. A Holistic View of Man.

Evangelicals are rightly concerned about saving "souls" through the preaching of the Gospel. Unfortunately this effort has often been narrowed



by a limited concept of the Gospel as well as by a platonic view of the soul. The essence of our point here can be put this way. The Gospel is the power of God to save man--the whole man, and the whole man includes the body with its social needs. Indeed Paul prayed, "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely...your spirit and soul and body (I Thes. 5:23). Therefore, the saving scope of the Gospel of Christ is social as well as "spiritual." It is temporal as well as eternal. There are two basic ways this point can be established: by an examination of the image of God and by a proper understanding of the unity of man.<sup>6</sup>

A. The image of God and social concern.

That anthropology, not eschatology, is the basic problem behind most evangelical social neglect can be demonstrated from the misconception of the image of God among those on both sides of the eschatological debate. Both a-mills and pre-mills have held in common that the image of God refers to man's soul but does not include his body. In fact the pre-mill Lewis Sperry Chafer follows a-mills (such as Hodge)<sup>7</sup> on this very point. He wrote, "man is made in the image and likeness of God and...this resemblance is featured in the immaterial and not the material part of man...."<sup>8</sup>

There are several clear indications in Scripture that God's image in man includes the visible, outward and bodily aspects of man. First of all, the prohibition against killing the body because man is in God's image (Gen. 9:6) would make no sense unless the body is also included in God's image. Jesus said "do not fear those who kill the body..." (Matt. 10:28), and yet God commanded, "whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6). If the image of

God is only in the "soul" but not in the body, then intentionally killing a body would not be a violation of the prohibition against murder.

Secondly, according to Genesis 1:26, 27 the image of God includes male and female for "God created man in His own image..., male and female He created them." But there is no sex distinction without physical bodies. That is, there are no male and female "souls." Hence, the image of God must include the body.

Thirdly, the Incarnate Christ is called the "image of God." Hebrews 1:3 says He is "the exact representation of His (God's) nature...." Colossians 1:15 declares Him to be "the image of the invisible God...." And II Corinthians 4:4 speaks of the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Indeed, John adds, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory..." (1:14). It is clear that the glorious image was manifest in the flesh of Christ (II Cor. 4:4).

Fourthly, Romans 12:1 speaks of presenting our bodies as a spiritual service. If the bodies in no way partook of the spiritual then this would be a pointless command. If, however, the bodies are part of God's image united with the inner spiritual man, then it makes good sense to speak of a bodily spiritual sacrifice.

Fifthly, the very idea that the physical is essentially different from the spiritual is plantonic, not Christian (a point to which we will return below). Indeed, the Bible speaks of the physical universe as "good" (Gen. 1:31). But if the physical is also pronounced good by God and if it radiates God's glory, then there is no reason to exclude it from God's image in man.

Probably the most pointed **objection** to this inclusive view of God's image is this: If the body is decaying and dying, then how can it be included in the image of God which is immortal and undying? Several things should be noted in response to this objection. First, the image of God in fallen man is not perfect; it too is fallen. Hence, the decay and death of the body may be seen as part of this fallenness. Further, when redeemed man is perfected at the resurrection it will be in bodily form. If the body as such were intrinsically incompatible with a perfected spiritual image, then the doctrine of the physical resurrection would be meaningless.

The **other main objection** against this image of God including the body is that God is a spirit. Yet if man's body is in God's image then God would have to possess a body. But this is Mormon heresy not orthodox Christian theology.

This objection is based on a false assumption. The assumption is this: If man resembles God in some essential ways then God must resemble man in every way. This is obviously false. The writing on this paper surely resembles my thoughts in some essential way. Nevertheless my thoughts do not resemble this writing in every way. The writing is physical and material ("bodily" if you will) whereas my thoughts are mental and immaterial. In like manner, man in bodily form can resemble God without God (who is pure spirit--John 4:24) resembling man's bodily form.

To summarize the main point of these arguments we would note that if the image of God in man includes the whole man--body and all--then salvation of man includes deliverance for his bodily and social needs. This same point can be made from another important perspective.

## B. The unity of man.

Probably one of the most persistent anthropological doctrinal deviations in Christendom has been a platonic dualistic view of man. Augustine, following Plato and influencing most of Christendom, held that man is a soul and has a body and that the soul is of higher value than the body.<sup>9</sup> Now the logic of this belief leads to social neglect. For if souls are immortal and if eternal value and bodies are mortal and of mere temporal value, then it is not difficult to see where the Christian should place his emphasis. First and foremost we must preach the Gospel and save man's "immortal soul." The bodily and social needs of men would be of only secondary concern.

Now it seems to me that this platonic-Augustinian view of man is unbiblical. Rather than teaching a duality view of soul and body, the Scriptures teach of unity view of souled-body. Man is not a spirit living through the instrumentality of a body. Rather, man is a unitary whole with inner (spirit) and outer (body) dimensions.<sup>10</sup> We offer the following biblical evidence in favor of the unity of man.

First of all, the word "soul" in the Old Testament often includes the body. Genesis 2:7 is a case in point. We read "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground...and man became a living soul." Two things are to be noted here. First, "man" (Adam) that was made in God's image (1:27). Further, the living "soul" was the "man," the whole man which God formed and not just part of the man. Finally, part of what God used to make this "man" or "soul" was physical dust. Hence, the body (which returns to dust--Ecc. 12:7) is part of man's soul (nephesh). It is the platonization of our concept of "soul" which makes this thought seem repugnant to the western mind.

**Secondly**, the soul (psuche) of Christ included His body. The famous resurrection passage in Acts 2:27 (quoting Psa. 16:10) is sufficient proof of the point. The phrase "Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades..." obviously cannot mean "soul" in a platonic sense. For platonic "souls" do not die or go to a grave. Jesus' "soul" (i.e., body), however, did die and it did rise from the dead. For the passage clearly indicates (vs. 29) that Peter spoke of the resurrection of the body of Christ when he said Jesus' "soul" did not see corruption. This being the case, both David and Peter used the word "soul" of the physical body.

**Thirdly**, it is not uncommon in the Old Testament for the word "soul" (nephesh) to mean "dead corpse." Leveticus 21:41 says, "No one shall defile himself for a dead person...." This is the same Hebrew word nephesh which is elsewhere translated "soul." Perhaps a closer equivalent to the Hebrew word nephesh would be the English word "person." We speak of dead and living "persons," and the word person is more readily understood as including the body.<sup>11</sup>

There are other indications in Scripture that "body" includes the "soul" and that "soul" includes the "body." The point here is simply that there is a soul-body unity. That is, the whole man made in God's image includes both inner (spiritual) and outer (material) aspects in one person. If this is the case and if Christ died to redeem man--the whole man--then redemption does include the bodily and social needs of man as well. As Paul prayed God desires to "sanctify you entirely...spirit and soul and body" (I Thes. 5:23). Hence, we may conclude that the Gospel and its saving effacacy includes the whole of man's needs, spiritual and social.

### Summary and Conclusion

We have suggested that it is not a mistaken eschatology that is the theological basis for most evangelical social neglect but rather an incomplete soteriology and a faulty anthropology. The Gospel has been misconceived as a redemptive message dealing only with salvation from the penalty of sin (justification) and not also with salvation the present and continuing power of sin (sanctification). In this narrow understanding of the Gospel there is no reason to include and present social or bodily needs of man under the redeeming influence of the Gospel message.

And since Gospel preaching (evangelizing) is clearly the primary obligation of believers, it is understandable how evangelicals who so believe will want to concentrate on "Gospel" preaching and give social issues a secondary role at best. Further, we have sought to show that due to a misconceived platonic-Augustinian dualistic anthropology the Gospel has been thought to apply only to man's "soul" but not to his body. If these are both wrong--and there seems to be adequate biblical evidence to say that they are--then evangelicals rearmed with a full Gospel to preach to a whole man have an even stronger basis for social involvement. Social involvement<sup>12</sup> is not simply a broader moral duty or an implication of the "spiritual" Gospel; it is part of the very essence of the Gospel message itself.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See David Moberg, Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in the Twentieth Century. Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans, 1965, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>It is no doubt true that a faulty eschatology can lead to social neglect. Our point here is simply that no rightly conceived pre-mill eschatology need lead to such neglect. A faulty a-mill view can lead to social neglect too. And it goes without saying that a faulty post-mill view can lead to neglect too--namely neglect of the spiritual (regenerational) aspect of the Gospel.

<sup>3</sup>The New Testament does not speak of the immortality of the soul; this is a Greek concept, not a Christian notion. "Immortality" is used only twice in the New Testament, once of God (I Tim. 6:16) and once of man in the bodily resurrected sense (II Tim. 1:10).

<sup>4</sup>While I Corinthians 15:1f defines the content of the Gospel, the question we address here is the scope to which that saving power (by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection) is applicable. Put more pointedly, we believe the Gospel is that by which man is saved from his "sins" (I Cor. 15:3), but we also insist that some of these sins are social, economic and even political.

<sup>5</sup>There is a legitimate sense in which physical healing is in the atonement. The Isaiah reference to healing through the death of Christ (Isa. 53:4-5) occurs twice in the New Testament. One seems to emphasize the spiritual aspect of healing (I Pet. 2:24); the other is used in connection with physical healings wrought by Christ (Mat. 8:17). Where I would differ from those who often claim this verse for so-called healing ministries is in their claim that this verse is a guarantee that God will heal all bodily sickness today--if we have proper faith. The fatal flaw in this thinking is almost the reverse of those who limit salvation to the past tense (i.e. to salvation from the past penalty of sin); it is in assuming that future salvation from the presence of sin is all available today. On the contrary, Romans 5 and 8 made it plain that we live in a fallen world and, hence, we "wait" for the (future) redemption of the body" (8:23). Therefore, no matter how extensive our attempts to meet all of man's bodily and social needs today we must await the eschaton for a complete redemption of man.

<sup>6</sup>For an excellent treatment of the biblical, holistic view of man see George Ladd's article "The Greek Versus the Hebrew View of Man" in Present Truth (February, 1977), pp. 6-18.

<sup>7</sup>See Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans' publishing Co., 1952, Vol. II, pp. 96-97.

<sup>8</sup>Lewis S. Chafer, Systematic Theology, published by Dallas Seminary Press, 1947, Vol. II, p. 160



<sup>9</sup>See St. Augustine, On True Religion XII, 77; On Morals of the Church I, 27.

<sup>10</sup>There are times when the Bible speaks of "taking off" this outer (bodily) dimension (e.g., II Cor. 5:1-5). Of course the "body" that is put off is no longer in unity with the inner man but is merely dust (Eccl. 12:7).

<sup>11</sup>Of course we do not imply that there is an identity of the inner spiritual aspect of man and the outer material aspect but only a unity while they are united. At death, the inner man survives the outer dissolution of the body (II Cor. 5:6; cf also Phil 1:23; Luke 23:43; Rev. 6:9).

<sup>12</sup>Of course, social involvement insofar as it flows from the Gospel [and not broader ethical obligations we have to all men (Gal. 6:10)] must begin (not end) with their salvation from the penalty of sin (justification). Man cannot be saved--wholly saved--from the outside in; he must be saved from the inside out. In other words, the Gospel cannot bring its sanctification to those who have not received its justification.