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SALTING CAESAR - the case for evangelical socio-political involvement

By Martyn Eden

1. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

One hundred and fifty years ago, British evangelical Christians were actively involved in the socio-political sphere. William Wilberforce, Hannah Moore and the Clapham sect had campaigned for thirty years for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in British territories. Moore also worked to establish Christian based education. Lord Shaftesbury, a little later in the 19th century campaigned vigorously for a wider range of humanitarian causes - the care of orphans and street children, the ending of child prostitution, prison reform and legislation to regulate the conditions under which women and children were employed in factories - to name but a few.

There were many other similarly engaged. The archives of the Evangelical Alliance reveal that members of the Houses of Parliament as well as the local politicians were on its Council in the second half of the 19th century.

Behind all this activity lay the powerful influence of John Wesley and the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival which he led in the UK, but which was also felt in the USA at the same time. Wesley's preaching brought many in turn to Christ but historians also see him as a major influence in deflecting the contemporary revolutionary movement from Britain's shores. One biographer has concluded:

'The Evangelical revival did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace, than any other movement British history can record.' (J. Wesley Bready; "England Before and After Wesley")

Wesley has been described as 'both a preacher of the Gospel and a prophet of social righteousness. Wesley was the man who restored to a nation its soul'. His influence on succeeding generations of evangelical Christians was profound. E.M. Howse has described how they met regularly to discuss:

'the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country and the battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness'.

Their desire was to lessen the extent of human misery and add to the sum total of human happiness. They rightly understood that this required both the preaching of the Gospel for individual salvation and the practice of the Gospel for social transformation. Their convictions and experience were shared by many of their contemporaries who went overseas in the explosion of missionary activity in the 19th century. These men and women not only preached Christ but also engaged in aid and relief work, development and even political activity.

A review of 19th century missions reveals that missionaries contributed to the fight against smallpox, malaria and leprosy; the provision of pure water; the extension of elementary education, the protection of native peoples against exploitation and injustice; the defence of human rights, opposition to foot binding and the exposure of girl babies in China; opposition to

widow-burning and infanticide and temple prostitution in India; the introduction of the modern orchard industry into Shan Tung; and this list is far from complete! Given this close identification of Evangelicalism with social and political involvement in the eighteenth century it comes as a huge surprise that their successors in the early twentieth century withdrew from it in what has come to be called the Great Reversal.

John Stott has identified five reasons for this shift:

- * Firstly a reaction against theological liberalism which was becoming popular at the turn of the century. Faced by challenges to long cherished and basic doctrines they apparently felt they must devote all their energies to the defence of historical Biblical Christianity.

- * Secondly a reaction against what was called the social gospel. Many of the advocates of this had ministered in areas of severe poverty and deprivation and they had tried to develop a theology which seemed relevant to these experiences, rather as the proponents of Liberation Theology have in recent years. The doyen of this movement was probably Walter Rauschenbusch. He argued that "the essential purpose of Christianity is to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relationships". Instead of evangelism to bring people into the Kingdom of God, Rauschenbusch sought transformation of life here on earth. Of course the very idea of the Kingdom of God as Christianised society or of human perfectibility this side of Christ's return is thoroughly unbiblical. No wonder the evangelicals of his day reacted negatively.

- * The third factor which John Stott recognises is the effect of World War One which engendered widespread disillusionment among Evangelicals. The enormity of human evil and fallenness seemed so evident that Evangelicals retreated to a mood of social pessimism. Social Reform seemed pointless. Stott has commented, 'between the wars there was no evangelical leader to articulate the providential and common grace of God as grounds of persevering hope'.

- * Fourthly, we can note the influences of pre-millennialism which was popularised by the Schofield Bible. This encouraged Christians to take the view that whatever reform attempts were made, evil would continue to flourish and the condition of society would continue to deteriorate until Jesus' Second Coming. It would be pointless trying to arrest the decay.

- * Finally, sociologists such as Milton Rokeach and David Moberg have suggested that Evangelicals became alienated from social concern because of the spread of Christianity among the Middle Classes who tend to be more conservative and concerned to preserve the status quo. Moberg has summarised his research as suggesting 'a portrait of the religious-minded as a person having a self-centred preoccupation with saving his own soul, and other worldly orientation, coupled with an indifference towards or even a tacit endorsement of a social system that would perpetuate social inequalities and injustice'. Needless to say his report provoked a storm of indignation.

This retreat from social and political involvement characterised the inter-war years. After the 1939-1945 war there was a very gradual reappraisal, perhaps influenced by the optimism of the Fifties and the Sixties. We are probably too close to the events to construct a definite history of how the Reversal was itself reversed but some individuals and events were obviously influential.

In America, Carl Henry, the founding Editor of Christianity Today, with its large student readership, was important and he seems to have influenced Billy Graham, who at an early stage in his ministry took a stand against racism. John Stott himself has been a major influence in Britain, in his writing, preaching and evangelism, and in the countless groups and organisations which he helped to found. Within the Anglican Church, the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967 was a significant landmark. Likewise on the international scene, the International Congress on World Evangelisation, held at Lausanne in 1974 restored Christian social responsibility to its former place alongside evangelism as 'both part of our Christian duty'. The follow-up conference at Grand Rapids in 1982, further consolidated this restoration. Finally, the British Salt and Light Consultation held in October 1988 will surely be seen as significant when the history of twentieth century social concern comes to be written.

The recovery of the 19th century heritage of Christian socio-political involvement was also spurred by a recognition of what had happened to British society whilst Christians were disengaged. The Christian faith and practice had profoundly influenced British culture but in the twentieth century this Christian heritage has been eroded and undermined by secular humanist influences. Christian heritage has been eroded and undermined by secular humanist influences. Christian values and presuppositions were increasingly challenged and rejected. In the 'swinging sixties' a procession of Bills before the British Parliament legalised abortion, homosexual acts between consenting adults, easier divorce and eroded constraints on obscene publications. Outraged Christians were forced out of their pietistic ghetto to defend the Christian heritage.

We learnt the hard way that whilst personal evangelism is a central part of our Christian calling and duty, it is never enough because personal sin is not the only spiritual problem we face. Lead a prostitute to Christ and we have brought her great personal blessing but until we have also addressed the reasons why she went into prostitution and the facets of our society which sustain a demand for prostitutes, we have not completed the task because others can be tempted into the same peril. In other words, these experiences forced British Evangelicals to go back into our Bibles to look afresh at the whole teaching of Scripture. What have we found?

2. BIBLICAL BASIS

Because we hold the Bible in such high regard, Evangelicals have a duty to interpret and apply it with care and humility. To often Scripture is used to justify non-biblical prejudices and to give a veneer of respectability to thoroughly non-Christian ideas. To avoid proof-texting we will employ the fourfold historical schema which has been used by John Stott in his book, *Issues Facing Christians Today*. The merit of this approach is that it attempts to draw from the whole Scripture rather than looking at particular passages which say what you are looking for them to say. Let us examine what is said with relevance to Scripture in the context of Creation, the Fall, the Redemptive work of Jesus and the final perspective of the end times when he returns to consummate his Kingdom.

Creation

There is much in the Creation passages:

First, they present human beings as having been created to be social beings. For example, Gen. 2:18 'The Lord God said, "it is not good to be alone..."', and in Gen. 1:27 we find that man and woman together bear the image of God. Men and women are different and yet made for each other.

The pattern this gives us is one of unity within diversity. Differences are basic to creation yet they are supposed to be a source of strength, not weakness. All are of equal value before God. But if our differences give rise to conflicts of value or interest, how do we resolve these so as to preserve our creation unity?

Before we pursue that question, let us also note that humankind is given responsibility for ruling over God's creation. 'Fill the earth and subdue it...rule over every living creature.

However, it is clear that we do this as stewards or caretakers. We are accountable to him for how we do this. But nowhere do the Creation passages tell us only to be concerned with the spiritual dimension of life. The Creator is sovereign over all.

The Fall

We must face the fact of the Fall. Our rebellion against God distorted the divine image in us; distorted our relationship with God, with the land, with each other and ourselves.

Which brings us back to the question: How do we resolve differences of value and interest when our fallenness gets in the way. Which value, God's or some other? Which interest, mine or my neighbour's? Which God? And how do we resolve our disagreement when anger, jealousy, pride, envy, class or national superiority get in the way and produce war, deception, conspiracy and selfishness?

Genesis 11 and the Babel incident offer us an early example of this problem. Human pride corrupted a whole people.

So we need government to constrain us with legitimate coercion. Hence Paul's view of government in Romans 13:1-7.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority. Then do what is right. He is God's servant, and agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer....

We have to read this passage in its full context of chapter 12 and 13 as a whole. We should also take account of other passages such as Revelation 13, and be aware of the limits of the divine authority enjoyed by government. They are not absolute. Yet the essential point is clear. God has given us government as part of his providential care for us; to keep us from experiencing the full human potential of fallenness.

Of course, governments can go badly wrong, as in Cambodia under Pol Pot, Hitler's Nazi regime and the Stalin's Russia. We need godly people in government and society who understand about sin and corruption but also have access to God in prayer, the help and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and Christian friends to keep our feet planted firmly in reality.

The redemptive Work of Christ

We do not want to suggest that Jesus was a politician but important strands of his teaching have obvious socio-political implications.

For example, the Salt and the Light metaphors in Matthew 5. Salt was a preservative, a disinfection, a flavourer and may have also been used as a fertiliser. John Stott's exposition of verses 13-16 of Matthew 5 highlights four implications:

i. We should be involved, penetrating society like salt rubbed into meat to retard decay.

Salt that stays in the cellar has no impact, neither do Christians who stay in the ghetto.

ii. We can make a difference. Salt did delay decay. It did not prevent it forever; nor can we defeat evil and bring in God's Kingdom by our efforts. Only Christ can do that. But 'little old me' can make a difference. We can argue the case, for example against legalising euthanasia in our legislature and succeed in preventing it - as we have this year.

iii. We need to be different from the world to make a difference in the world. God is constantly calling his people to be holy; set apart from the world in order to be effective agents of change. This is a real challenge because involvement can be costly. When one is tired and disappointed from working with difficult issues and mixing with those who do not love the Lord, prayer can become an effort. Our distinctiveness can become eroded. We need to work at holiness...

iv. We need to maintain our distinctiveness. The salt must not lose its saltiness or it is good for nothing...

The parable of the Good Samaritan offers us a model for social involvement, caring for those around us in need. But as we have said, should this not include addressing the causes as well as the symptoms; putting a police force on Jericho Road to prevent the mugging? Good Samaritans in Britain today are helping families that have broken up, and taking food to homeless people in the streets. Some families are giving a home to drug addicts under the "Safety Net Scheme", so that the addicts are supported in their struggle to stay off drugs. Should we not also be looking at the public policies and social pressures that help to create these problems?

Luke 20:25 affirms that we do have duties in the political sphere. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Of course, those are not two separate spheres because God is sovereign over all. Thus, what we give to Caesar must also be worthy of giving to God, whose agent he is.

Finally, Matthew 25:1-46 gives us a picture of the final judgement. The sheep will be separated from the goats on the basis of what each has done for the least of 'my brethren'. And what are they to do for the brethren? Feed the hungry, give a home to the stranger, clothe the destitute, visit and care for the sick and the prisoners...who are Jesus' brothers.

This poem was written by a homeless person following a meeting with a vicar:

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group
to discuss my hunger.
I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel
and prayed for my release.
I was naked, and in your mind you debated
the morality of my appearance.
I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
I was homeless, and you preached to me
the spiritual shelter of the love of God.
I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me.
You seem so holy, so close to God.
But I am still very hungry - and lonely - and cold.

There is an old cliché about being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use. Yet being heavenly minded equips us to be of some earthly use, caring for those in need around us and through effective socio-political action with regard to the causes of social problems and driven by the compassionate example and teaching of Christ.

Eschatological Perspectives

Whilst there is much that we can do through our social and political endeavours to tackle particular sins, we can never by our efforts eliminate sin altogether. Only Jesus can do this when he returns. It is the Marxist heresy that human beings are capable of perfection in this life, through education and socialisation. There is no place in the biblical witness for such utopianism. However we know that Jesus will triumph over evil, and we shall all have to give account for what we have done with our opportunities.

This brief summary is far from exhaustive. We have made no mention of the Old Testament Law and Prophets or the Covenant. Yet the Law required Israel to act justly in its social dimensions as well as at the personal level. The Prophets similarly speak against Israel and its government for not following God's values. Nor have we space to consider the historical models of Joseph, Daniel or Mordecai, all of whom were politically involved; not in Israel but in foreign states.

Yet we have surely seen, however, that there is a clear biblical basis for Christian socio-political involvement.

3. OUTWORKING

How is this biblical framework carried forward in practical initiatives? Who is responsible for doing what? What are the respective roles of the Church, individual believers, para-church organisations and national Evangelical Alliances?

We want to suggest that the Church has five roles in relation to the socio-political sphere. The first of these is to exercise a prophetic ministry in society. As the former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda has written, "What a nation needs more than anything else is not a Christian ruler in the palace but a Christian prophet within earshot".

It is crucial that when the Church does seek to speak prophetically, it is not seen to be merely grinding a partisan axe against the government of the day. Nevertheless, there is a biblical model for the Church entering the political arena to speak prophetically about some action or lack of it by government or one of the other political players.

A second role for the Church is to serve as an agent for reconciliation in a divided society. One of the characteristics of Jesus' life was that he brought together people like Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, who were virtually enemies. He also befriended Samaritans who were certainly enemies of the Jews. He not only reconciled people to God, he also reconciled them to each other.

Of course, all Christians have a reconciliation role in their personal relationships but at the community level the Church can have an influence which individuals cannot. Thus, when the Islamic community of Bradford was angered by the Salman Rushdie book, the Christian Church in the city was able to reach out in a gesture of reconciliation. The miners' strike also saw Church leaders trying to bring together those who did not, as agents of reconciliation. In a political system like Britain's which is adversarial in nature, the Church acting as agent of reconciliation can be very political, yet non-partisan.

Thirdly, the Church can spearhead a ministry of prayer for the nation. Again, we should all be praying as individuals but it is important and biblical that there should also be corporate prayer in our churches. How often do your churches include informed and wholistic prayer for the local community - including, where appropriate, confession and thanksgiving as well as petitions. There are specialist provisions in many churches for mothers and small children and for elderly people.

Fourthly, the local Church will also respond to social needs in its local community in so far as it has the resources and God's prompting to do so. Churches in Britain respond to a wide variety of such needs. My own church has a drop-in centre for anyone who is lonely and wants to chat. We have a café where local people come to eat and a book shop with Christian literature. Other churches offer emergency housing for the homeless people and counselling services for families with debt, bereavement or marital problems.

Obviously, churches can only do what they have the resources to do - buildings, people with appropriate skills and time to offer them. Equally obvious is the need not to become a social work agency which is indistinguishable from secular services. But compassionate care coupled with sensitive witness are a proper expression of the Gospel.

The fifth function which the Church can perform is one of teaching and training individual Christians for consistently socio-political involvement. Experience suggests that a Church's teaching will be a major influence on the majority of its members' responses to the faith. So if a local church does not place much emphasis on socio-political involvement, it will be surprising if many of its members do. On the other hand, where the Church offers a balanced Bible teaching programme, including contemporary application, along with discipleship training which helps its members to grow to spiritual maturity, it will be equally surprising if some of its members do not become socio-politically active.

Sadly, there is a tendency for churches to hold so many meetings and events that loyal members have a little time left for service in the wider community. It is said that the doors of the churches in Calvin's Geneva were locked on Sunday night and remained locked until the following Sunday morning. The proper place for the faithful was in the world being salt and light.

The role of the individual begins with her or his role as a citizen. Every believer is both a citizen of the Kingdom of God and a citizen of her/his national political system. Citizenship involves voting in elections and all that goes with that. We urge Christian voters to gain at least a basic understanding of the key issues so that they can prayerfully vote with integrity. There is often not much evidence that Christian voters are very different from other voters in how they make their choices but we persevere.

We also urge people to meet and pray for their legislative representatives and to write to newspapers about current issues to contribute a Christian perspective to national debate. Above and beyond basic duties of citizenship, we hope some will take a more activist role, joining and supporting groups advocating Christian values in society and government. A few even stand for election. We recognise at least 10% of our MP's in Britain as having some sort of Christian involvement, though not all of them are Evangelicals.

Here we need to note the biblical notion of calling. If some individuals are to be socio-politically active they cannot also be busy in the church, outside of Sunday worship. It is important that there should be a balance between those who are socio-politically involved and those who carry the church's other concerns. Who does which should not just be a matter of personal

preference, but a matter of gift and calling. The church has a part in recognising and authenticating its members' vocations.

Moreover, those who go out into the political arena do so with the Church's support. The model of Acts of the Apostles is for the Church to pray and lay hands on those it commissions to go out, just as it does its pastors and evangelists. And, given the pressures and temptations which they will face, those who go into political activity and seek office will be in special need of prayer and pastoral support.

In addition to churches and individuals there are also para-church bodies performing strategic ministries in the socio-political sphere. Some campaign, like Care, the Jubilee Centre, ECRJ, and the Jubilee Campaigns. Others provide services and influence the implementation of public policy in the process. Cause for Concern does it in relation to mentally handicapped adults and the Shaftesbury Society does it in relation to a number of client groups. Without these para-church bodies, individuals, society and the churches would be a lot worse off. They complement what the local church can do. They can also engage in controversial debates more effectively than the churches which have a pastoral duty to all and sometimes welcome not having to be in controversy with a particular group or interest.

The fourth player is the Evangelical Alliance itself. Though not a church, in the UK we are linked directly with 2,500 local churches and indirectly with 3,000 more. Equally, not a para-church body: we have 700 in membership. The metaphor we use in Britain to explain the Alliance is that we are the board or table on which the Evangelical jigsaw is put together and the churches, para-church societies and individuals are the pieces of the jigsaw. How do we engage in socio-political ministry and what impact are we making?

4. EUROPE

We are now alert to the potential impact of the European Union on our culture and society and recognise that it is possible for decisions taken in Brussels or Strasbourg to reinforce or undermine the Christian heritage in our respective countries. We should not want to exaggerate the power of these institutions but we are aware that attitudes to sexual morality, to drug use and to the relationship between religion and education are being discussed by MEPs and that some of the policies they wish to introduce are inimical with our EA(UK) stances. So we keep in close contact with the EEA Brussels office, and greatly appreciate the information and interpretation it can offer.

We also warmly welcome the wider European linkages which the Hope for Europe strategy is generating and look forward to reciprocal relationships with a wide range of Alliances. We in Britain are ready to share our insights and experiences with those not yet experienced in the socio-political sphere but are also keen to learn from those whose experience is different to our own. There are some issues which now recognise no national boundaries and we look forward to the time when Evangelicals can reflect our unity in addressing them in the same way that we come together for prayer, worship, evangelism and Bible ministry.

5. CONCLUSION

Our commitment to socio-political involvement is one part of our response to the Lordship of Jesus. His prayer for his disciples was that they should be in the world but not conformed to its ways. Our aim is to remain distinctively Christian salt and light, penetrating our society as agents of transformation - proclaiming the Good News in both word and deed to the glory of His name.

Martyn Eden is the political affairs officer of the EA (UK) and is a member of the steering group of the Culture, Values and Politics track of Hope for Europe. This paper is adapted from an address delivered at the European Evangelical Alliance annual conference in Prague.

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