

2012

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Evangelical Advocacy: A Response to Global Poverty

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Recommended Citation

Evangelical Advocacy: A Response to Global Poverty, "Evangelicals and Structural Injustice" (2012). *Papers, PDF Files, and Presentations*. Book 4.

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EVANGELICALS AND STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE
Why Don't they Understand It and What Can Be Done?
Ronald J. Sider

According to Chris Smith in his important book, *American Evangelicalism* (University of Chicago, 1998), white American evangelicals care about the poor; in fact, they give money to help the poor and volunteer for local community organizations at least as frequently if not more frequently than Catholics, mainline Protestants, and liberal Christians (pp. 38, 41). Furthermore, they vote in elections just as often as mainline Christians and more often than liberals and Catholics (p. 41).

At the same time, they have what Chris Smith calls a “personal influence strategy” for social change: “[white] American evangelicals are resolutely committed to a social-change strategy which maintains that the only truly effective way to change the world is one-individual-at-a-time” (p. 187). White evangelicals see themselves “as uniquely possessing a distinctively effective means of social change: working through personal relationships to allow God to transform human hearts from the inside-out so that all ensuing social change will be thorough and long-lasting” (p. 188).

In his research, Smith found that even the political engagement of evangelicals reflected this individualistic approach. “The primary evangelical strategy for political reform articulated [in their interviews] was to elect good Christians to political office” (p. 193), not promote structural change such as campaign finance reform or alternative electoral approaches such as proportional representation.

In *Divided by Faith*, published two years later by Oxford University Press, Smith and his colleagues found the same thing in evangelical understanding of racial inequality. They used data from the General Social Survey to compare the different explanations of evangelicals and others to the fact that “on average blacks have worse jobs, income and housing than white people.” Respondents had to choose between four possible explanations:

- 1) “Because most blacks have less inborn ability to learn?”
- 2) “Because most blacks just don’t have the motivation or will-power to pull themselves up out of poverty?”
- 3) “Because most blacks don’t have the chance for education . . .?”
- 4) “Mainly due to discrimination?” (pp. 94-95)

Clearly the first two explanations (inability and lack of motivation) are personal and the last two (lack of education and discrimination) are structural.

In their responses, white conservative Protestants (a combined group of self-identified evangelicals and fundamentalists) put substantially more weight on the personal than the structural explanations. Almost two-thirds of white conservative Protestants but only one-half of

other white Americans say black Americans are poor because they lack motivation. On the other hand, white conservative Protestants were less likely to point to lack of access to quality education or discrimination than other white Americans: only one-third of white conservative Protestants pointed to lack of access to education vs. almost one-half of other white Protestants. And only one-fourth (vs. over one-third) pointed to discrimination as a cause (*Divided by Faith*, p. 96).

Obviously, we need a great deal more sophisticated sociological analysis before we will know with any precision the full extent of this individualistic, one-person-at-a-time approach to solving societal problems. But we already have enough evidence to say with considerable certainty that white evangelicals have a one-sided, individualistic approach to societal transformation that does not understand the importance of structures and the reality of systemic evil. As a result, among other things, evangelicals still are more likely in their response to global poverty to respond to immediate disasters and also to the need for community development than they are to engage in changing economic structures to reduce poverty.

Why is this the case? Again, we need a great deal of sophisticated study before we have solid answers to that question. But I want to venture some initial ideas—all with the clear understanding both that I offer only the most modest beginnings of an answer and also that there are many overlapping causal factors.

First, it may be that the fact that evangelicals frequently witness or hear about dramatic conversions that truly change broken people into transformed persons contributing to society leads evangelicals to emphasize the importance of personal conversion in a one-sided way. (Please note: I think personal conversion is one important factor in societal transformation, but it needs to be accompanied by structural change.) Smith borrows the phrase the “miracle-motif” from Woodbridge, Noll, and Hatch to talk about this one-sidedly individualistic emphasis on conversion (p. 190). In this view, social problems would disappear if everyone were converted to personal faith in Christ. The solution to great economic inequality is “not a more equitable restructuring of income distribution, but for rich people to come to Christ and then practice voluntary generosity” (*American Evangelicalism*, p. 192).

Second, there is a very long history of individualism in evangelical thought and practice. It runs through the Protestant Reformation, Puritanism, the Free Church tradition, revivalism, pietism, and fundamentalism. Lacking Catholicism’s emphasis on the community and the common good, evangelicals historically have been highly individualistic in their understanding of the church, conversion—indeed, almost every aspect of Christian faith.

Third, the pioneering spirit of the American frontier where the strong-willed, daring individual was the hero certainly shaped American evangelicalism as nineteenth century Baptist, Methodist, and other churches swept west across the continent along with the settlers. If the individual has the proper courage and persistence, one can solve one’s own problems without governmental help.

Fourth, we ought at least to ask whether a certain kind of dispensational theology may contribute to evangelicalism's hyper-individualism. For those dispensationalists who link the anti-Christ with a powerful one-world government, every form of structural analysis of societal problems that would lead to structural changes implemented by government may lead to a fear that any substantial governmental intervention to solve social problems is just one step down a slippery slope toward the anti-Christ and one-world government.

Fifth, there is some evidence that political conservatism is linked to and is a strong predictor of individualistic explanations of economic equality between blacks and whites. In an article in the *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* (43:2, 2004, 229-238), Hinojosa and Park show that those who are politically conservative are more likely to explain this inequality in terms of lack of motivation rather than lack of access to education and discrimination (p. 235). The fact that a majority of white evangelicals for several decades have been closely linked to political conservatives probably has contributed to their failure to understand the structural causes of poverty.

Sixth, I suspect that the fact that a Platonic spiritualism that emphasizes the soul over the body has exerted a powerful influence in the evangelical world has also contributed to our problem. Historically, evangelicals have talked about "saving souls," not saving the whole person the way Jesus did. If what really matters is the soul, then thinking about the way socio-economic, material structures and institutions shape people is hardly important.

Seventh, and closely related to the last point, evangelicals have largely defined the Gospel as the forgiveness of sins. Salvation means primarily asking God for forgiveness so that one can go to heaven when we die. I often say: if that is all the Gospel is, then it is a one-way ticket to heaven and we can live like hell until we get there. Defining the Gospel primarily as forgiveness of sins rather than, with Jesus, the Gospel of the kingdom, greatly heightens both the individualistic emphasis and the preoccupation with the soul in a Platonic sense (see my *Good News and Good Works* [Baker, 1999], Chapters 3, 4, especially pp. 76-79).

Finally, the fact that evangelical theology has been weak at a number of points where a more fully biblical perspective would have corrected our hyper-individualism is also surely a significant factor. Many evangelicals have a dreadfully weak doctrine of creation; an almost non-existent understanding of either the prophets' or the New Testament's understanding of social sin; and a weak grasp of the church as community.

As you can see, I have only hinted at a number of issues that need much more exploration. We need several doctoral dissertations in sociology, Christian ethics, and theology to explore this in depth.

Before moving to a discussion of how we can begin to correct the problem, I want to note two things about the attitude of evangelicals toward government. My first comment is that I do not think the failure of evangelicals to understand structural injustice and their widespread tendency to be suspicious of governmental intervention in society are identical issues. But they

are clearly very closely linked. A clear grasp of structural injustice certainly strengthens the likelihood that one will favor some substantial governmental action to modify unjust systems. And a strong libertarian orientation will strengthen one's inclination to point to the individual rather than structural causes and solutions.

Second, I am not convinced that the widespread evangelical suspicion of governmental intervention is rooted in substantial theological convictions rather than more accidental historical factors. Certainly the insistence on limited government is rooted in crucial theological convictions (about the danger of unchecked power in a fallen world for example) but that does not in any way lead to a near libertarian view of government. We need a lot more careful study (both historical and systematic), but I will, until proven wrong, continue to argue that fundamental evangelical theological convictions are not only fully compatible with, but even demand, a substantial albeit limited role for government in the search for economic and social justice.

So how can we correct the problem?

The most obvious place to start is to seek a more biblically balanced theological framework that would correct the excessive individualism that shapes and supports the failure to grasp structural injustice. Several items would be important.

The first would be a deeper understanding and wider embrace of the biblical teaching on social sin or structural injustice. Since the first edition of my *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, I have been writing about this biblical theme. The last two editions devote a full chapter to this topic. I won't repeat that material here. But I think it is very important to see that the prophets clearly understand that sin is both personal and social and that they insist that unjust legal and economic structures displease God. In the New Testament, both the word *cosmos* (usually it means "the structures of the world organized against God's designs") and the category of the principalities and powers (which refers both to fallen angelic beings and the distorted socio-economic-cultural structures of this world which they help to shape) contain a clear social ethic and an understanding of structural injustice.

Second, evangelicals need a much deeper doctrine of creation. Humanity's creation in the image of the triune God who is a community of persons, and our creation as male and female who need each other to be fulfilled, both underline the fact that persons are made for community. We are not, as John Locke seems to have imagined, primarily isolated individuals. Designed for community, we find fulfillment only in social relationships that require wholesome structures.

Third, the biblical vision of salvation is not that of isolated individuals enjoying a personal relationship with God, but rather of communities of persons worshipping God and embracing God's design for their common life. That is not to deny in any way that individuals must come to a personal faith in Christ. But it is to insist that at the heart of God's plan of salvation in both testaments is a new people living out a new set of redeemed socio-economic relationships that reflect God's intention for persons in community. Those who come to faith in Christ become part

of Christ's one body which is a new communal reality. It is impossible to embrace the New Testament understanding of salvation and have it only affect one's personal relationship with God; it must also transform one's socio-economic relationships with other sisters and brothers in the body of Christ as one submits to the other brothers and sisters in mutual accountability. A more biblical understanding of salvation and the church would go a long way to correcting the excessive individualism of typical American evangelicalism.

Here, I have only hinted at the kind of extensive biblical/theological inquiry that would make evangelical thinking both more biblical and less individualistic. Again, we need a number of sophisticated dissertations and books.

Finally, a comment on the social sciences in general and sociology in particular. I am certain that it was no accident that one of the earliest major pleas for evangelicals to return to their nineteenth century embrace of social justice came from evangelical sociologist David Moberg with his important book, *Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in Twentieth Century America* (1965). I have not seen studies and I do not know how strong the departments of sociology are in evangelical colleges and universities, but I suspect stronger departments of sociology would help nurture better understanding of structural injustice. Certainly some more careful study of the comparative strength of sociology departments in evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Catholic colleges and universities—and the impact these departments have on the larger life of their respective communities—would be valuable.

I hope that in the next ten years, we see a great deal of study and writing—biblical, theological, and sociological—on the many topics that I have only most briefly and superficially flagged here. We need to know a lot more in detail both about the extent of the problem and the ways to correct it.

I end with one sign that perhaps we are making a bit of progress. I quote from *For the Health of the Nation*, the unanimously approved official public policy document of the National Association of Evangelicals which, at least theoretically, represents thirty million evangelicals.

“From the Bible, experience, and social analysis, we learn that social problems arise and can be substantially corrected by both personal decisions and structural changes. On the one hand, personal sinful choices contribute significantly to destructive social problems (Prov. 6:9-11), and personal conversion through faith in Christ can transform broken persons into wholesome, productive citizens. On the other hand, unjust systems also help create social problems (Amos 5:10-15; Isa. 10:1-2) and wise structural change (for example legislation to strengthen marriage or increase economic opportunity for all) can improve society. Thus Christian civic engagement must seek to transform both individuals and institutions. While individuals transformed by the gospel change surrounding society, social institutions also shape individuals. While good laws encourage good behavior, bad laws and systems foster destructive action. Lasting social change requires both personal conversion and institutional renewal and reform” (pp. 7-8).

I hope and pray for the day when all evangelicals, indeed all Christians, understand and live out that affirmation.