



Evangelicalism  
and  
Social Responsibility

Vernon C. Grounds

M. Daniel Carroll R., editor  
foreword by Ronald J. Sider

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# Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility

Vernon C. Grounds



## FOREWORD

*Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility* demonstrates how far ahead of most people Vernon Grounds has been. This ringing call for evangelicals to combine evangelism and social concern and engage in wise, vigorous political engagement was delivered in lectures in 1967. That was six years before The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973), seven years before the Lausanne Covenant's section five urging evangelical social responsibility. That was back when Jerry Falwell was still condemning Martin Luther King's political engagement with the claim that Christ calls us to preach the Gospel, not affect politics. That was back when many of evangelicalism's most visible voices still understood persons as primarily souls to be saved rather than body-soul beings made for community and needing God's total salvation.

Vernon Grounds was a pioneer. His voice offered an early, biblical plea that the new evangelical movement growing out of fundamentalism embrace a strong social concern. Not only in these lectures but in many more delivered around the country, he helped shape a more biblically balanced evangelical movement.

Vernon Grounds anticipated many of the momentous changes in evangelicalism in the last forty years. With his vigorous

claim that “personal evangelism and social concern are two sides of the same coin,” he was an early harbinger of what is now the evangelical consensus; i.e., that Christian mission must embrace both evangelism and social action. With his insistence that the human person “is not a disembodied spirit” but rather a “flesh-and-blood being who needs bread as well as truth, shelter here as well as heaven hereafter, clothes for his body as well as the robe of righteousness for his soul,” he pointed the way toward a truly Hebraic understanding of persons and away from a one-sided, Platonic over-emphasis on the soul. With his vigorous call for evangelical political action, he anticipated evangelicalism’s political re-engagement so often identified with the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition but did so with the wisdom, caution and qualifications that, if heeded, would have spared us the ghastly mistakes of the Religious Right.

Today it takes precious little courage or new insight to speak for holistic ministry combining evangelism and social action or urge evangelical political engagement. But that was certainly not the case in 1967. Back then what Vernon Grounds says in *Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility* was highly controversial. For the president of a leading evangelical seminary to say these things took courage. It also involved the risk of loss of funds from influential donors and nasty attacks by fundamentalists. But Vernon Grounds was unconditionally committed to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures, not some short-term calculation of institutional self-interest or avoidance of controversy. That’s why he was such an important pioneer.

Nor did Vernon Grounds’ pioneering spirit ever leave him. As Evangelicals for Social Action emerged in the 1970’s, he lent his prestige and authority as an evangelical senior statesman. As an



original signer, he was one of the senior leaders who lent credibility to The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern in 1973. In the early 1980's, after he had retired as President of Denver Seminary, he actually agreed to serve as President of Evangelicals for Social Action. We did not pay him anything. But his good name, wide recognition and articles he wrote for ESA's publication were a gift to our young movement.

I was still in graduate school in 1967 when Vernon Grounds delivered these lectures which reflect his mature thought. Today as I look back on the intervening forty-plus years of work and struggle to shape a more biblically balanced evangelicalism, I thank God for the pioneering insight of Vernon Grounds. As Jim Wallis said at the beginning of a lecture last year at Denver Seminary, "Vernon was right all along."

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## INTRODUCTION

Institutions have their treasures. They may be a magnificent building of which they are justly proud or a cherished library full of historical tomes and a wonderful array of resources. But these treasures also can be people, special individuals that grace the halls of learning and leave a lasting mark on the ethos of that particular place.

Vernon Grounds is such a person for Denver Seminary, where he has served as professor, dean, president, and chancellor. This is not the place to rehearse his life; others have done this in admirable fashion.<sup>1</sup> Our interest lies in another direction, in things social and political.

Evangelicals often wrestle with the place of social responsibility in their Christian faith. Some argue that involvement in more mundane concerns contradicts the primary mandate to evangelize the world, or at best distracts believers from this most important task. Others, however, contend that these issues lie at the very heart of the Gospel. These problems impact in profound ways the lives of human beings—those for whom Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead to offer new life. The breadth of the redemption wrought at the cross responds to the effects of sin in creation and every dimension of human existence.

A few decades ago, when such debates among evangelicals were red hot, Vernon Grounds was an important voice championing evangelical involvement in these matters. He, along with younger voices of that day like Jim Wallis and Ron Sider, urged the church to reconsider the teaching of the Scriptures on injustice, poverty, care for the environment, and war.

The forums were diverse and important, his voice always gentle, his words full of the love of God and informed by the Bible. Several examples bear mentioning. At a time of radical politics to overthrow corrupt and cruel governments, Vernon Grounds wrestled with what might be appropriate Christian participation in social change.<sup>2</sup> On several occasions he raised a warning against the unimaginable destructiveness of the nuclear arms race and wondered aloud about the silence of so many before such a horror. A memorable instance was his participation as the lone evangelical at a forum at the John F. Kennedy Center of Harvard University in 1981.<sup>3</sup> This desire for peace would be communicated again two years later at a gathering in Pasadena, California.<sup>4</sup> As Ron Sider notes in his *Forward*, Vernon Grounds also was a signer of the 1973 Chicago Statement of Evangelical Social Concern and a founding member and president of Evangelicals for Social Action.

This booklet, *Evangelicals and Social Responsibility*, is a paper that was presented at the Evangelicals in Social Action Peace Witness Seminar at Eastern Mennonite College in 1967. It was published in 1969 by Herald Press in the Focal Pamphlet Series and is reissued here with their kind permission. In several ways it betrays the context of that time period. The international problems (communism and the Cold War) and lifestyle

challenges (mixed bathing, card playing) are not those of today. I have changed the biblical quotations of the original from the King James Version to the New International Version. This is the Bible that Vernon Grounds uses now. But even if some things here reflect an earlier era, the central message of these pages remains foundational and the biblical passages it quotes eternally relevant.

The Vernon Grounds Institute for Public Ethics is a testament to some of Vernon's deep commitments. *Evangelicals and Social Responsibility* is the first publication of the Institute. This is fitting. It is a testimony of his legacy and an historical document in the development of the evangelical social conscience in this country. It is a pointer in the right direction, so that others too might continue down the trail blazed in part by this generous and wise Christian saint.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Transformed by Love: The Vernon Grounds Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Revolution and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1971); reissued by Wipf & Stock in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The title of the presentation was "An Evangelical's Concern about Evangelical Unconcern."

<sup>4</sup> "A Peace Lover's Pilgrimage," in *Perspectives on Peacemaking: Biblical Options in a Nuclear Age*, ed. J. A. Bernbaum (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), pp. 161-75.



# EVANGELICALISM AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

## I

WE ARE LIVING in a revolutionary era. Philosophically, technologically, politically, ethically, and religiously our world is in the throes of change. That well-known line from Marc Connally's *Green Pastures* grows more and more relevant, "Everything nailed down is coming loose." It is imperative, then, that as evangelicals we engage in some hard thinking about our social responsibility. Are we faithfully obeying God's will as it has been disclosed in God's Word? Are we communicating and implementing a full-orbed gospel? Is our version of Christianity truncated, perhaps emasculated, and therefore something far less than the dynamic it ought to be? Are we reading the Bible through the dark glasses of tradition, failing to see what it actually teaches and how it actually bears upon every dimension of life? Granted that Scripture is no more a compendium of sociology than it is of science. As evangelicals, we affirm that it is, nevertheless, our infallible rule of faith and practice; and practice certainly includes all of our relationships, internationally no less than interpersonally.

We must not forget, either, that critics of evangelicalism—some within our own ranks as well as many outside our churches—find fault with American evangelicalism because of its apathy with respect to this-worldly concerns, its social

indifference and ineffectiveness. More specifically, evangelicalism is criticized, first, for its *conservatism*. Quite invariably, we are told, Biblicists not only stand far right of center; they are also stubbornly reactionary, fighting against any change, supporting and sanctifying the *status quo*.

In the second place, evangelicalism is criticized for its *quietism*. We are told that it insists on remaining piously aloof from politics and economics, naively trusting that an inscrutable providence in its own time will remedy oppression and injustice.

Evangelicals, we are therefore told, cannot honestly sing:

Rise up, O men of God,  
Have done with lesser things;  
Give heart and mind and soul and strength  
To serve the King of kings.

No, evangelicals, if they are going to be honest, ought to sing:

Sit down, O men of God;  
His kingdom He will bring  
Whenever it may please His will.  
You cannot do a thing!

In the third place, evangelicalism is criticized for its *pietism*. Inner purity, we are told, is its major concern; hence evangelicals are grossly egocentric, devoting attention inordinately to the state of their own souls, so busily taking their own spiritual temperatures and maintaining their own status before God that they have little time for the problems of



society and very little interest in the concrete needs of their neighbors.

In the fourth place, evangelicalism is criticized for its *perfectionism*. We are told that it operates unrealistically on the all-or-nothing principle: every situation must be brought into absolute conformity with biblical norms; anything less than precise alignment with the will of God is compromise, a betrayal of the faith. Because of this, the only consistent stance for a Biblicist is a sort of extramural monasticism, a refusal to soil his holy hands with the dirty realities of political action. How can he do so and still be loyal to his inflexible standards of righteousness?

In the fifth place, evangelicalism is criticized for its *legalism*. We are told that it equates righteousness with undeviating adherence to a set of taboos: spirituality is gauged by abstinence from bad language, tobacco, playing-cards, and perhaps mixed bathing. Evangelicals, we are likewise told, grow indignant when an English teacher assigns a high school class J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*; yet they fail to rebuke churchmen who pay inadequate wages, rent rat-infested tenements to poverty-stricken people, and practice *de facto* segregation.

Once more, evangelicalism is criticized for its *nationalism*. We are told that evangelicals are really chauvinistic; they advocate a patriotism which is fiercely parochial, a prejudiced tribalism which declares, "My country, may she always be right, but right or wrong my country!" Evangelicals therefore are indiscriminating nationalists who reduce Christianity to a folk religion and thus deny the global genius of the gospel.

Last of all, evangelicalism is criticized for its *pessimism*. It usually teaches, we are told, a rigid system of eschatology; its understanding of God's future program for history eliminates any possibility of ameliorating social evils, any prospect for or hope of cultural renewal. Instead, it necessitates the belief that society must inevitably grow more and more corrupt until it falls under divine judgment. Consequently, all attempts to improve man's life and lot in this world, all long-range attempts to promote justice, are as futile as dropping an aspirin in the Pacific to quiet its turbulence.

We shall not stop here and now to consider the legitimacy of these criticisms; we shall merely remark that some evangelicals at any rate appear to merit such rebuke. Unwittingly they lend substance to the communist indictment of religion as an opiate, a drug which induces hallucinatory dreams, causing its addicts to forget the harsh circumstances around them. Some evangelicals, it cannot be denied, propagate a version of Christianity which turns its back on the world, counsels resignation no matter how unjust the prevailing order of things may be, advocates submission to the edicts of whatever powers control a government, and consoles afflicted people with the assurance of "pie in the sky, by and by."

## II

IN APPROACHING the problem of Christian social responsibility let us mention two polar orientations. Obviously there are many other positions which lie somewhere between these extremes, but for the sake of both brevity and clarity we are going to ignore important distinctions and significant nuances. Suppose we say that on the one end of the spectrum we find a policy of *indirect influence*, while on the other extreme we have a policy of *direct involvement*. The policy of indirect influence argues that the gospel is the good news of a post-temporal salvation; it is a message addressed to the individual in his sinful need, a message designed to bring him by faith into a right relationship with God, a message which is therefore only incidentally social in its application and outworking. Years ago this policy was rather classically stated by a Southern Baptist editor, whom Rufus Spain quotes as a representative spokesman for traditional evangelicalism:

The true church is not to deal directly with communities, states, and nations, but with the individual. . . . Our future and eternal interests are as far above our present fleshly interests as the heavens are above the earth. The great question is not how to get ready to live here, but to live hereafter; to go to be with Jesus when we die and to stand acquitted in the day of

final judgment. . . . (Christ favored social reform but) He waited for it as a necessary fruit of the blessed gospel received into men's hearts. . . . If we follow the teachings and example of Christ and the apostles, instead of the instruction and example of many modern reformers, we will act upon the principle that the regeneration of men by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word is the basis and surety of all true reform. It is of little use to make the outside of the platter clean when the inside is corrupt. . . . "Glory to God in the highest" first, and then "Peace on earth, good-will among men."<sup>1</sup>

Antithetical to this stands the policy of direct involvement which argues that the gospel is essentially social in its application and outworking, a message unquestionably designed to bring the individual into a right relationship with God, but consequently—yes, inevitably—a message just as unquestionably designed to bring the individual into a sustained struggle for right relationships in all other areas and dimensions of life; a message which demands that the love of God be expressed and embodied not alone in family and church and neighborhood but in business and government, in politics and economics, internationally as well as interpersonally. George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, has affirmed this position powerfully:

I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died. And that is what He died about. And that is where churchmen should be and what churchmanship should be about.<sup>2</sup>

The policy of indirect influence is by no means a puerile position, a feeble pushover. On the contrary, an impressive phalanx of tests can be marshaled in its support. Let us review them hastily.

1. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” — John 18:36.

2. Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. — Acts 2:40.

3. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. — Romans 12:1, 2.

4. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” — 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

5. [Jesus Christ] who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. — Galatians 1:4.

6. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world... Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. — James 1:27; 4:4.

7. Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. — 1 John 2:15, 16.

Though these texts obviously require intensive study and careful interpretation, we shall allow them to stand without comment except for a few remarks on the concluding passage. The apostle is pointing out the principles which underlie our entire world-system, that enormous complex which we know as civilization, a fallen structure contrary to the mind and will of God. John mentions the lust of the flesh, which is sensualism; the lust of the eyes, which is materialism; and the pride of life, which is egotism. These, he maintains, are the structural principles which underlie and animate the world-system—sensualism, materialism, and egotism. Needless to remark, any order of life which is informed by such principles is necessarily contrary to the mind and will of God. Thus John's delineation of the world-system helps us to understand better the antagonism brought out emphatically in the Fourth Gospel. Take, for example, this passage:

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. If you belonged to

the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. — John 15:18-20.

The Johannine analysis of the world-system helps us, furthermore, to understand a hymn which grates on the sensibilities of our socially involved contemporaries:

Are there no foes for me to face?  
Must I not stem the flood?  
Is this vile world a friend of grace  
To help me on to God?

But is the policy of indirect influence the scriptural viewpoint?

Admittedly, it seems to be. Does it nevertheless move too exclusively on the surface, appealing uncritically to such texts as have been mentioned? Does it plumb the depths and express the demands of revelation? To answer these questions we must analyze the biblical data.

As Christians, we in no way minimize the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament, although we believe that the New Testament clarifies and consummates the Old Testament disclosure of God’s nature, purpose, and will. Before turning to the New Testament, then, we need to remind ourselves of what the Old Testament teaches in this area. And indisputably the Old Testament teaches a social ethic which stands as an abiding challenge to any policy of quietistic withdrawal from

the rough-and-tumble of politics. In God's name the Old Testament demands that injustice be fought, righteousness be established in society, and the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, and the oppressed be made the objects of protection and provision. Consider a passage like Amos 5:10-12, 21-24:

You hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. Therefore, because you make the poor pay taxes on their crops and exact a grain tax from them, you will not live in the houses you built with chiseled stone, nor will you drink the wine from the fine vineyards you planted. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts... "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

There we have the Old Testament stance from Genesis through Malachi. Religion divorced from social justice is a blasphemous mockery: true spirituality manifests itself in a concern for the needs and rights of people.

Consider also that passage which was one of our Lord's favorite texts, Hosea 6:6, a text which He evidently quoted again and again: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Here again we have the Old Testament insistence that genuine religion issues in concern for social justice. Indeed, the LORD does not accept a



man's sacrifice unless that man is doing justice and mercy. What, according to Hosea, is the knowledge of God? In this text the knowledge of God is equated with mercy, and mercy is an inexhaustibly rich Hebrew term signifying an attitude of care and compassion akin to God's own compassion and care.

Hosea's assertion is explained by a passage in Jeremiah 22:16, where once more reference is made to the knowledge of God: "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD." So what is it to know God? To know God is to be like God. To know God is to do justice and judgment. To know God is to share God's compassion and care for the concrete needs of His people.

Consider also a passage like Isaiah 1:10-18:

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your

doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.”

How emphatic this is! God fulminates that He abhors worship carried on by people who tolerate social injustice. Observe the LORD’s explicit directive in verse seventeen: “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” No doubt the eighteenth verse is susceptible of an evangelistic application; in its context, however, that eighteenth verse is exclusively social: “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.’”

Consider, further, a passage like Isaiah 58:1-10; and despite its length the entire passage must be taken into account.

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You

cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: "Here am I." If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Whatever our interpretation of this passage prophetically, we cannot evade its thrust ethically. Isaiah depicts a people who relish worship, a people who love theological discussion, debating the will of God abstractly. Such is the burden of verse two: "For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them." But God fiercely rebukes His hypocritical people, a people who imagine that ritualistic worship and theological discussion are acceptable substitutes for social justice! God Himself defines acceptable worship in terms of specific acts of charity and justice:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Unquestionably, therefore, the Old Testament insists on social justice. Passionately it affirms that the evidence of a right relationship with God is a right relationship with one's neighbor—and this implies a willingness to struggle for his rights.

Now the New Testament, of course, does not negate the Old Testament; it fulfills and intensifies the disclosures and demands of Hebrew revelation. Though it centers in a spiritual kingdom rather than in a space-and-time theocracy, the New Testament in no way cancels out God's demand for social justice. Instead, it adds a new dynamic and a new dimension to that demand. This will become evident as we examine briefly some of the major strands of truth which are woven into the fabric of the New Testament.

What, to start with, are the implications of the *theological* motif which runs through the New Testament? What can we deduce from its disclosure of God's nature and purpose? Building on the Old Testament foundation, the New Testament asserts that God is both holy and loving; it asserts that God, the self-existent Source and Sovereign of all reality, is the Triune Person of Holy Love, perfect in holiness and love, creating, sustaining, governing, judging, and reconciling in infinite holiness which is the obverse of infinite love and in infinite love which is the obverse of infinite holiness. As John declares in his first epistle,

“God is love.” Hence all that God does He does in holy love. His nature is holy love; His purpose, accordingly, is a purpose of holy love; His will, moreover, is always a will of holy love. God’s will for man, consequently, is a life of holy love, a life which in the totality of its relationships is governed by God’s holy love. Paul, for example, compendiously exhorts his readers in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” But the glory of God is precisely the glory of holy love. In short, human existence is to reflect the very nature of God. And plainly the ethical and social implications of holy love baffle adequate exposition.

What, next, about the *Christological* motif runs through the New Testament, a motif inextricably knit together with the theological motif? The nature and purpose and will of God are explicated in the whole Christ-event. The sovereign Creator stands self-revealed in the person of our Lord Jesus who said concerning Himself, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). Jesus Christ is God become Man, God who accordingly is for Man, the Man who accordingly is for God, the God-man who is entirely the Man-for-others.

Thus according to Luke’s Gospel the Man-for-others says at the outset of His public ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18, 19).

Thus according to the tenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel in the unforgettable parable of the Good Samaritan the Man-for-

others teaches that the next-and nearest-person-in-need whom a disciple meets is his neighbor and has a claim upon loving ministry even if that ministry must overleap the barrier of racial prejudice and be carried on at the cost of danger and delay, to say nothing of money which will never be repaid. Thus according to Matthew 5:44-48, the Man-for-others declares:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? e perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Thus according to Matthew 22:37-39 the Man-for-others declares further in a masterful simplification of religion and ethics: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Thus according to that disturbing vision of judgment in Matthew 25:35, 36, the Man-for-others insists that we are to minister to the widow and the poor and the hungry and sick and the imprisoned and the naked, putting love into action. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you

came to visit me.” He can insist on this because He personally ministered to people in their need. Nor must we forget that this ministering love, inspired by Christ’s example, includes enemies no less than friends. In contemporary terms it includes blacks and communists and hippies and deviants and foreigners.

But supremely, of course, it is on Calvary that the Man-for-others revealed His Father’s holy love. As Paul writes in Romans 5:6-10:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Thus Calvary is the definitive exegesis of *agape*, that holy love which satisfies its own demands by a self-giving without any limit.

In Jesus Christ, therefore, the New Testament discloses God’s character as well as man’s obligation and possibility. Hence the New Testament ethic is an imitation of Jesus Christ, an ethic of gratitude and faith and obedience, all grounded in love and issuing in love. It is an ethic which Peter sums up very succinctly in Acts 10:38: “how God anointed Jesus of

Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good...” How simple that is! Simple? Yes—but measurelessly demanding! Indeed, the only dynamic which can enable the Christian do-gooder to meet this demand is the dynamic of a bloody cross and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The imitation of Jesus Christ, Calvary-inspired and Spirit-enabled, means a life of service and sacrifice, a life of sensitive caring, a life of identification with the oppressed and disinherited and needy, a life of constructive revolution against any political and religious *status quo* which in the name of God is frustrating the will of God.

What, in the third place, about the *anthropological* motif? The New Testament doctrine concerning man is inextricably knit together with the Christological motif. For the God-man, as we have already noticed, reveals our human obligation and possibility, what you and I ought to be and can be.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament affirms that man, God-created, is inescapably God-related. Made supernaturally in God’s image, man has a supernatural dignity despite his depravity. But in his depravity man must undergo a supernatural recreation in order to bear once again in unblemished splendor the image of his Maker. This is the quintessential truth about human nature.

The New Testament also affirms that man, God-created and God-related, is not a disembodied spirit. He is a flesh-and-blood being who needs bread as well as truth, shelter here as well as heaven hereafter, clothes for his body as well as the robe of righteousness for his soul. He is the being bound together with his neighbors in the bundle of life. In short, the New



Testament like the Old Testament affirms that man is a social being, a creature-in-community, a person-in-relationship, a being who can find fulfillment only in fellowship, a being who can find fulfillment only as through faith he experiences existence-in-love. So the New Testament affirms that, when by faith man enters into a new orientation to God he enters into a new orientation with his neighbor. As we read in John's first epistle:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God... If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. — 1 John 4:7, 20, 21.

What, in the fourth place, about the *ecclesiological* motif? What about that new society of which Jesus Christ is the Head, that pilot-model of human life as it can and eventually will be? According to the New Testament, the church is the community of faith and love which confesses, embodies, and implements the saviorhood and lordship of God-in-Christ. It is that community which in worship, evangelism, and service seeks to share the truth of God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is that community in which each member assumes unlimited liability for all members. It is that community which lives under the law of love. It is that community which takes the apostolic directives with utmost seriousness.

1. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has

fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. — Romans 13:8-10.

2. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. — Galatians 5:6, 13.

3. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. — Galatians 6:10.

4. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. — 1 Thessalonians 3:12.

5. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. — 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 15.

6. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not

commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? — James 2:8-16.

The church, then, is that community which prayerfully struggles to translate Paul’s eulogy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 from poetry into practice. It is that community which prayerfully struggles to function as light and salt and yeast in the midst of society, bringing individuals into the life and likeness of holy love. It is that community, as the old Anabaptist definition has it, of those who not only believe truly but who live and love aright.

What, in the fifth place, about the *sociological* motif, the consequences of Christian faith as they are worked out in the whole orbit of a believer’s relationship? For man, as the New Testament sees him, is being-in-the-world, the conscious nexus of a bewildering network of relationships, a being inextricably enmeshed in the processes of nature, the movements of history, and the structures of culture—all those aspects of existence which are the proper province of sociology. According to the New Testament, then, on becoming a believer a man is not abstracted from the world with its organizations and its obligations. Rather, he is realigned to the world.

For example, the New Testament has much to say regarding human government, a very worldly structure indeed. Our Lord Himself lays down an all-inclusive principle in Matthew 22:21: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” This imperative imposes upon Christians the necessity of a God-centered relationship to human government; and this relationship includes a five-fold obligation.

We owe the state the *duty of honor* (Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 3:17). And honor means the recognition of the divine source of any state, glimpsing behind its faltering injustice and misused authority the impeccable justice and equitable authority of God. (Compare Psalm 82:6).

We owe the state the *duty of prayer* (1 Timothy 2:1-4). And prayer means the faithful ministry of intercession for all officials because providentially and perhaps unconsciously they are subserving God’s redemptive purposes (Isaiah 45:5).

We owe the state the *duty of support* (Mark 12:13-17); Romans 13:6). And support means quite simply the payment of taxes which are legally demanded even if the state funds are not disbursed in ways of which a Christian can heartily approve. Better to have order than anarchy, and taxes are the cost of order, the price of a stable framework of life.

We owe the state the *duty of service* (Titus 3:1). And service means the glad performance of every ministry which a Christian can conscientiously render.

We owe the state the *duty of obedience* (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13, 14). And obedience means a hearty

compliance with the laws which have been duly enacted. Notice the threefold motive assigned for the performance of this duty: (a) *for wrath's sake*; (b) *for conscience's sake*; (c) *for the Lord's sake*. But notice also the limits of civil obedience. It is by no means unqualified. What if the state does not fulfill its function? What if, instead of being a minister of God, it becomes unmistakably a tool of the devil? What if, as John pictures a tyrannical government in Revelation 13-18, it degenerates into a monstrous beast, energized by demonic power? What if it punishes good and rewards evil? What if it enslaves conscience? Suppose it idolatrously puts itself in the place of God. And the apostolic picture of idolatrous totalitarianism is relevant in our century when Nazism and Communism, to say nothing of nationalism, have demanded unqualified allegiance. What then? Obedience must stop whenever the edicts of the state conflict with the supreme duty of rendering to God the things which are God's. Our final allegiance is to our Creator; every secular loyalty must be subordinate to that (Exodus 20:3; Daniel 3:8-28; Acts 4:19; 5:29). But precisely how shall a Christian register his disapproval of constituted authority? By passive disobedience (1 Peter 2:19), by acts of nonviolence, or by even bloody revolution?

However these problems may be resolved, a Christian is obviously very much enmeshed in the structures of his society. He can no more escape participation in politics than he can divest himself of his own epidermis.



### III

HAVING CURSORILY EXAMINED the biblical data, let us revert to our original question. What guidance does the Word of God, especially the New Testament, offer us in fashioning and following a social ethic? Does it furnish us with perspectives and directives as we relate ourselves to the world? Does it supply guidelines and goals for saints in society? Does it sanction direct involvement no less than indirect influence?

Suppose we flatly lay down some evangelical affirmations, recognizing that they are open to criticism and possible amendment.

We can and must affirm that the church's primary task is that of personal evangelism. Whatever methodology we employ—perhaps, for example, the technique of a mass crusade—our task is that of bringing individuals one by one into a redemptive encounter with Jesus Christ. We can and must affirm that personal evangelism and social concern are two sides of the same coin. This is not a case of either-or; it is rather a case of both-and. We can and must affirm that social concern and personal evangelism are not a dichotomy; they are a both-and duality blanketed by our Lord's word in Luke 11:42: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and

all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.”

II. We can and must affirm that the church has the responsibility of nurturing and judging the ethos of our political and economic life. Its responsibility is that of improving the moral climate of society, elevating standards and sensitizing consciences. In his own turgid style Paul Ramsey expresses this quite forcibly:

Radical steps need to be taken in ecumenical ethics if ever we are to correct the pretense that we are makers of political policy and get on with our proper task of nourishing, judging, and repairing the moral and political *ethos* of our time.

To pay attention to the distinctive and basic features of Christian social ethics would as a consequence lead to much greater reticence in reaching particular conclusions. It would make for a proper hesitation in faulting the consciences of our fellow Christians, or in instructing them too narrowly, by pronouncements issued by official and semiofficial conferences of churchmen on policy questions concerning which there may be legitimate differences in practical, prudential judgment. To eschew the latter would also focus our attention upon the former, more fundamental work of clarifying the church's address to the world.<sup>3</sup>

To say the same thing metaphorically, the church is to be a thermostat instead of a thermometer. It is not simply to register the ethical temperature of its enviroing society; it is to keep that temperature from falling. Let us confess, however,



that through much of its history the church has been more like a thermometer than a thermostat. Concluding his study of Southern Baptists, Rufus Spain writes (and the same thing would be incontestably true of any denomination):

Southern Baptists defended the *status quo*. Their attitudes toward political, social, economic, and other problems of Southern society coincided with the prevailing attitudes of Southerners in general. The degree of influence which Baptists exerted on society cannot be measured, but whatever influence they had was overwhelmingly in support of existing conditions. Is this to suggest that society molded Baptists? Or that Baptists molded society? It would be a serious indictment indeed to hold Baptists responsible for fashioning Southern society as it was in the late nineteenth century. Granted that morals and mores are relative to time and place, by any standard—either in comparison with the best thinking of that day or of a later day—the society of the South between 1865 and 1900 hardly conformed either to high ethical standards or to Christian principles. The conclusion then must be that Baptists conformed to the society in which they lived. Their significance in Southern life consisted not in their power to mold their environment to conform to their standards. Rather, their importance as a social force was in supporting and perpetuating the standards prevailing in society at large. Only on matters involving personal conduct or narrow religious principles did Baptists diverge noticeably from prevailing Southern views. This study, therefore, verifies the sociologists' contention that institutionalized religions respond more amenable to social pressures than to their "heavenly visions." Christ said of His disciples, "These are in the world. . . . But not of the world." But in their attitudes toward social conditions in the South, Baptists insisted on being *in and of* the world.<sup>4</sup>

III. We can and must affirm that the church, a supernatural fellowship living under the law of holy love, is divinely obligated to maximize love by maximizing justice. In so affirming, we recognize the limits of individual concern and private charity. That is why we can and must insist on the necessity of Christian political action. Agitation and legislation, we can and must unhesitatingly argue, are sometimes imperative. Certainly we must seek to increase the number of regenerate citizens. Certainly we must seek to instruct and inspire these unregenerate citizens. But let us be honest in our appraisal of the impact which regenerate citizens have made and are likely to make on society. Let us face frankly four factors which render political action imperative.<sup>5</sup>

For one thing, regenerate people are often sadly slothful, selfish, and spineless. They can be slaves of the *status quo*, bound by chains of pride and prejudice. We know this because, while we testify personally to the experience of regeneration, we are doubtless appalled by our own limited sanctification and by the microscopic impact which we have been making on our *milieu*.

For a second thing, bad political and economic structures can prevent regenerate people from doing the good that they otherwise might do.

For a third thing, conversely, good political and economic structures can prevent unregenerate—and sometimes regenerate—people from doing the evil they otherwise might do.

For still another thing, some problems today in our technological, urbanized, more and more depersonalized society are so complicated, so far-reaching, so deep-rooted, so

massive that they baffle the resources of individual action and private charity. They require governmental intervention on a mammoth scale; and this means the use of legislative and administrative apparatus. We must confess that there are frightening evils, persistent needs, and emergency situations which make it impossible for persons to control their own destinies and even provide the essentials of life. Evangelicals today must therefore be directly involved in politics. Why not? John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper, to cite only two examples, saw no incompatibility between proclamation and legislation. Will anyone argue that the Good Samaritan would have abandoned his role of loving neighbor if he had decided to agitate for an augmented police-force on the Jericho Road, or to advocate the installation of electric lights, or to run against the corrupt officials at City Hall who were pocketing the taxes which should have been allotted to pay for more policemen and a better lighting-system? Direct involvement in politics does not mean that one is abandoning the role of the Good Samaritan; it may mean that he is fulfilling that role.

IV. We can and must affirm that political action as a legitimate expression of Christian love is a self-justifying expression of redemptive love. It is not merely a circuitous method of proselytizing, a technique for obtaining some sort of commitment, an activity which Christians must discontinue if it fails to produce decisions. At the risk of misunderstanding, we can and must affirm that social action as an expression of redemptive love is an autonomous activity which does not demand any end beyond itself.

V. We can and must declare that the church *qua* church ought not enter the political arena. Its function is that of instructing

and inspiring its members either individually or unitedly to undertake whatever political activity neighbor-love may demand. We can and must keep on asserting that nobody and no organization is authorized to speak for the church *qua* church. To borrow the words of Paul Ramsey,

Let the church be the church and let the magistrate be the magistrate. Let both keep their distances. May there be less confusion of these roles. Let the president advance policies without playing priest-king to the people in exercising his ruling under God's overruling. Let the churches advise the magistrates under their care in less specific terms, while always renewing in them the perspectives—*all* the perspectives—upon the political order that Christianity affords. And let us pray more for those in authority (not the churches as such) who must shape the future by what they decree, and who in doing so must step creatively into an uncertain future beyond the range of any light that has been or can ever be thrown upon their pathway.<sup>6</sup>

But at the same time we can and must affirm that the Christian pastor is free to express his own considered understanding of social issues as they are illuminated, endorsed, or judged by biblical norms. After all, the pastor is God's prophet and in that role has the responsibility of speaking *against* his people as well as *to* them. In a *Saturday Review* article on "New and Future Clergy," Theodore C. Sorensen reminds us of this all-too-often obscured responsibility.

I have no credentials or desire to argue church structure. But I question whether the minister of any church is simply a hired hand, wholly the creature of his superiors or parishioners,

wholly bound to accept their dictates and doctrines on matters unrelated to dogma, wholly unable to act in accordance with his own conscience and sense of justice.

To be sure, he should not purport to speak for them. He should not deliberately pressure or embarrass them. But surely there is a 2,000-year-old precedent for a preacher's going beyond those good deeds to a direct challenge of both religious and secular authorities, and then going beyond even that direct challenge to enduring imprisonment and violence in order to alter man's ways.

Most men of the cloth, one critic has recently charged, are not competent to deal with such issues. But who among us *is* competent to solve the problems of Vietnam or Watts? The stakes are too great to leave war to the generals, or civil rights to the professionals, or poverty to the social workers. And why should moral battles to right old wrongs in scriptural fashion, be left to the laymen of the church? Clergymen, like all the rest of us, must learn by doing, by involving themselves in the practical problems of men. The Civil Rights Bill of 1964, according to Senator Russell of Georgia, passed because "those damned preachers had got the idea it was a moral issue." Indeed they had—and indeed it was.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, we can and must acknowledge that a local congregation may legitimately voice its corporate judgment on social issues, provided—need it be added?—that any such judgment is reached by a process which allows the achievement of a free, intelligent, and meaningful consensus. And what holds good for a local congregation holds good equally for an entire denomination, provided once again that the consensus

achieved is not manipulated by an ecclesiastical oligarchy but represents the prayerful opinion of the grass-roots majority.

Salutary indeed are the comments of James Daane with respect to the individualism for which he criticizes the praiseworthy book by Sherwood Wirt on *The Social Conscience of an Evangelical*.

I agree with Wirt that the church ought not to speak unless it is confident that it speaks in truth. I share his concern about churches that make social and political announcements on matters on which they know but little. They do often speak more than they know, and in such instances the church would better serve its Lord by humbly putting its hand to its mouth. But the possibility of error ought not to terrorize the church into silence. Protestants, at least, do not believe in an infallible church. The church also commits error in its proclamation of the gospel. The remedy is hardly the discontinuation of preaching. Or does the church do greater mischief when it errs in social and political pronouncements than when it errs in its preaching of the gospel to win the souls of men? . . .

Again, when the individual Christian speaks *as a Christian* to social and public issues, does he not also speak in the name of the Christian faith, and in the name of his Lord? Of course he does. But why should he have the right as an individual to speak to social and political issues in the name of the Christian faith and of the Lord, and the church have no such right unless it echoes the position of all its members? On such a view, the church has no prophetic voice proclaiming the Word of God; it can only echo what its members permit it to say.

Finally, whenever the individual Christian speaks to social and political matters in the name of his Lord and his faith, he does not in fact speak for himself alone. He too speaks *corporately*, for he speaks *as a member* of the Church of Christ. Since all Christians have “one Lord” and “one faith,” any and every Christian speaking to social and political matters involves all other Christians by the simple fact that he speaks in the name of that one Lord and one faith shared by all Christians. No Christian speaking and acting in the name of Christ, which is what one does when he speaks and acts *as a Christian*, speaks as an individual, for himself alone. He always and unavoidably speaks and acts *as a corporate member* of the body of Christ. Why then should any evangelical get hung up on the question of the right of the church to speak as corporate body?

Whether the church speaks on social and public matters or on strictly religious matters, it can speak in no other way than as the corporate body of Christ. This is what the church *is*. The church in all its speaking can no more sound like something other than the corporate voice of the corporate body of Christ than a frog can sound like a canary.<sup>8</sup>

VI. We can and must affirm that great caution be employed in order to prevent the identification of some transient issue with the eternal will of God. Paul Ramsey, to cite him once more, offers just such counsel in his critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference:

It is not the church's business to recommend but only to clarify the grounds upon which the statesman must put forth his own particular decree. Christian political ethics cannot say what should or must be done but only what may be done. It can only try to make sure that false doctrine does not unnecessarily

trammel policy choices or preclude decisions that might better shape and govern events.

In politics the church is only a *theoretician*. The religious communities as such should be concerned with *perspectives* upon politics, with political doctrine, with the direction and structures of the common life, not with specific directives. They should seek to clarify and keep wide open the legitimate options for choice, and thus nurture the moral and political ethos of the nation. Their task is not the determination of policy. Their special orientation upon politics is, in a sense, an exceedingly limited one; yet an exceedingly important one.<sup>9</sup>

VII. We can and must affirm that the concrete application of love calls for competence and know-how as well as disinterested goodwill. In other words, disinterested goodwill, even if it ultimately springs from Calvary, is no substitute for competence and know-how, *expertise* if one prefers that term. More than love is demanded, unless by love we mean, as C. F. Andrews defined it, “an accurate estimate and supply of someone else’s need.” As evangelicals we can borrow approvingly a page from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church adopted by the II Vatican Council.

Laymen should . . . know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. . . . Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, *or even that such is their mission*.<sup>10</sup>

VIII. We can and must affirm that every Christian has his own vocation and so needs to determine before God what



responsibilities and tasks the lordship of his Savior lays upon himself as an obedient disciple. We can and must emphasize the principles set down in the fourteenth chapter of Romans. Vocationally some Christians may be called to political agitation and action; others may be called to a ministry in which politics will figure only incidentally. Hence we can and must guard against judging our brethren. Instead, we can and must urge them to engage heartily in their God-assigned vocations even if their vocations involve not only evangelistic crusades and spiritual retreats but also protest marches and pacifist rallies. We can and must encourage a conscientious diversity of opinion and operation among evangelicals. We can and must urge Christians to heed the balanced warning which Jack Boozer and William A. Beardslee give in their book, *Faith to Act*:

Every citizen is under obligation to involve himself in some way in the effort to achieve justice for all citizens. But every citizen is also under obligation to respect another person in a decision for a course of action different from his own. It is very easy for one to condemn the persons who demonstrate at voting places, restaurants, hotels, swimming pools, just as it is easy for one to condemn a conscientious objector. The fact that one does not himself feel called to that particular position is no warrant to condemn those who do so act. The Christian, then, will not only act, but he will be extremely careful how he speaks of those who act differently. Differences in judgment, in comprehension of an issue, and in courage, are seldom sharp enough to justify the too easy remark that another who acts differently is a communist, a subversive, or one engaging in un-American activities. Indeed, it is un-American to presume one's guilt before he is proved innocent. Thus, while we are called to be vigilant as to the security of our nation, we are also

called to exercise a healthy and flexible reserve in dealing with those with whom we do not agree.<sup>11</sup>

We can and must affirm that it is worse than un-American to condemn a fellow-believer who follows a course of political action different from our own: it is unchristian.

IX. We can and must affirm that the New Testament warns against Utopianism, any romantic illusions about sweeping and permanent reforms. We can and must remind Christian activists that human beings are infested with sinful self-interest, which means that all social structures will be more or less corrupt until the end of history. Hence we can and must counsel Christians to attack specific evils, devoting their energies to specific causes and programs rather than grandiose schemes for the transformation of culture once-for-all. We can and must assert that a tolerable balance of conflicting egoisms is the best man will ever achieve in a fallen world.

X. We can and must affirm that, though blessed with divine revelation, we do not have all the answers, perhaps even many of the answers, to the problems of society. But we can and must refuse to be intimidated into irresponsible passivity by our undeniable ignorance. We can and must urge that evangelicals study, discuss, reflect, think, pray, and act. Yes, we can and must urge that all of us act in keeping with the insight and knowledge we now possess. We can and must urge the policy of direct intervention as well as the policy of direct influence.

In conclusion, then, let us listen to an antagonist of Christianity, Bertrand Russell, who in his *Autobiography* speaks movingly about the master-motives in his career:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.<sup>12</sup>

God forbid that the children of darkness put to shame the children of light!

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<sup>1</sup> Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> George MacLeod, *Only One Way Left* (Glasgow: The Iona Community, 1956), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Rufus B. Spain, *op. cit.*, pp. 213, 214.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lewis B. Smedes, "The Evangelicals and the Social Question," *Reformed Journal* 16, no. 2 (1966): 9-13.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Sorensen, "The New and Future Clergy," *The Saturday Review* 49 (April 30, 1966), p. 25 [24-25].

<sup>8</sup> James Daane, "Who Speaks for the Church?" *Reformed Journal* 18, no. 5 (1968), p. 19 [18-20].

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Boozer and William A. Beardslee, *Faith to Act* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1967),

pp. 3, 4



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Vernon Carl Grounds was born and educated in New Jersey. A *Phi Beta Kappa* graduate, he received a B.A. from Rutgers University. His B.D. was granted by Faith Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Drew University. Wheaton College has awarded him an honorary D.D. and Gordon College an L.H.D. in recognition of his long service as a Christian educator and leader.

For 10 years he pastored the Gospel Tabernacle in Paterson, New Jersey, during which time he taught at the American Seminary of the Bible, the Hawthorne Evening Bible School, and King's College. From 1945 to 1951, he was dean and professor of theology at Baptist Bible Seminary in Johnson City, New York. He joined Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary in 1951 as dean. He became president five years later. After he retired from that position in 1979, he continued to teach in the areas of ethics and counseling and is now the Cauwels Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care and Christian Ethics. In January 1993, he was officially named chancellor of the Seminary.

Dr. Grounds has traveled extensively, preaching in hundreds of churches and lecturing at universities and seminaries in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. He is author of *The Reason for Our Hope, Revolution and the Christian Faith*,

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE *Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics*

In every age, God raises persons who not only have a keener sense of his ideals for life in community than their contemporaries, but who also have the courage and foresight to pursue these ideals for themselves and the ability to lead others to do the same. For more than a generation Vernon Grounds has played such a prophetic and catalytic role in the arena of social ethics within the evangelical community. In doing so, he has established a legacy of Christian witness in the social domain that has been hailed by many as epoch-making and pace-setting.

It is to perpetuate Vernon's legacy of a vigorous Christian engagement in the public domain that the Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics was established at Denver Seminary, where he has given a lifetime of dedicated service.

In embracing this task, and keenly aware of Dr. Ground's lifelong stance, the Institute makes several bedrock commitments. First, it is committed to always anchoring its teaching and position in the Word of God. Second, it will endeavor to remain true to the Christian world view and the evangelical understanding of Christian faith. And, driven by

the passion to see these resources brought to bear on social reality with a view to transforming it for the better, it further commits itself to pursuing an ethical agenda that will seek to be as all embracing as its means allows.

From what has been said so far, it should be clear that VGI's arena of endeavor is social ethics. But it needs to be said that, in laboring that realm its mission is mainly educational. More precisely, what it aims to do is provide an environment, resources, and tools with a view to sensitizing, educating and training Christians in a broad array of ethical issues so that they may be empowered and equipped to fulfill the biblical mandated to be "salt and light" in a morally decadent world (Matt 5:13; Phil.2:16). As used here, the term Christian is meant to embrace several groupings: students in training, Christian leaders, lay persons and the broader Christian community.

In the pursuit of this educational mission, VGI intends to employ a variety of delivery modes, including lectures, workshops, seminars, informal discussions and the printed matters. But, keenly aware of the enormity of the task and of its own limitations, VGI welcomes partnership with others who are also interested in a comprehensive and robust Christian witness in the public square for the glory of God.

*Dieumeme Noelliste*  
*Director of the Vernon Grounds*  
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# Vernon Grounds Institute for Public Ethics Monograph Series 1

Several years ago Dr. Vernon Grounds expressed in his inimitable style the values that he helped establish as the ethos of Denver Seminary:

Here is no unanchored liberalism – freedom to think without commitment.

Here is no encrusted dogmatism – commitment without freedom to think.

Here is a vibrant evangelicalism – commitment with freedom to think within the limits laid down in Scripture.

Early in his ministry and theological journey Dr. Grounds understood that the Scripture demanded that the people of God were called to love the Lord and their neighbor, that to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ required involvement in the social issues of our day. This booklet appeared in 1969, at a time when evangelicals were debating whether social concerns had any place in Christian service. It stands as a bold affirmation of the fact that evangelical action in the world could be a powerful expression of the redemptive love of God. To ignore this mandate, Dr. Grounds asserts, is to turn away from much of what the Bible teaches.

It is fitting that *Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility* is being reissued at the inauguration of the Vernon Grounds Institute for Public Ethics and that it launches the Monograph Series that the Institute hopes to produce on key issues. It is an important part of the legacy of the life and thought of Dr. Grounds. These are the words of a pioneer in evangelical social ethics.



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