

Soundings

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Evangelical social irresponsibility

by Rod Benson

Recently *Soundings* [published](#) “The Philadelphia Statement,” prepared by participants of a mini-consultation on faith, providence and political involvement held on 31 July at Palmer Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA. The consultation was conducted by the [Theological Commission](#) of the World Evangelical Alliance, which described the document as “a brief summary of the discussion.”

Though brief, the Statement is biblically grounded and rich in theological reflection, as one would expect of a document arising from an international convocation of evangelical theologians. There is strong emphasis on the kingdom of God, and collaboration with God in the realisation of God’s mission in the world.

Surprisingly for a non-Catholic statement, there are two references to pursuing “the common good.” First, in relation to the providence of God, and common grace, the Statement cautions against “undue pessimism concerning the moral future of the world” (perhaps a warning shot across the bows of Tim La Haye’s *Left Behind* coracle/dreadnought), and urges social and political consensus “with all who seek peace and the common good.” This is arguably the most ambitious and demanding sentence of the entire document. The process of arriving at such consensus is, of course, as difficult as herding cats – especially when evangelicals themselves often eschew consensus in favour of divisive party or personality allegiances.

Second, the document states that “individuals, groups, congregations and national alliances are all called to participate in actions and programs which aim at overcoming social evil and which enhance the common good.” On the surface this sounds splendid, but individuals and groups will find it difficult to agree on what constitutes, or does not constitute, “social evil” and “the common good.”

For example, does “social evil” include late-term abortion, physician-assisted suicide, legal prostitution, income tax cuts that hurt the poor, government reliance on gambling revenue to fund budget shortfalls, and [Australian Workplace Agreements](#)? And in regard to “the common good,” how wide is the circle of inclusion? Whose good is being served or promoted? Whose definition of the good is in mind? I welcome evangelical discussion and application of the classical idea of “the common good,” but I hasten to add that in a postmodern liberal democratic culture such ideas are highly contested and (too) easily dismissed.

One general strength of the Philadelphia Statement is especially noteworthy. In parallel with many evangelical statements, the present Statement makes strong claims for the integration of word and deed, evangelism and social justice, personal regeneration and social transformation. Taken together, these claims constitute a clarion call to forsake any vestige of the so-called “Great Reversal” of twentieth-century evangelicalism, and a passionate plea for holistic mission within a confident evangelical framework. The relevant sections of the Philadelphia Statement are as follows:

- (a) “The Lordship of Christ provides the fundamental reason for Christian involvement in social, civic and political affairs. Consequently, both evangelism and social action are essential dimensions of the gospel of Jesus Christ”;
- (b) “[The church ought to] bear witness in life, word and action to the power of the gospel to transform lives and societies”;
- (c) “The notion of a purely privatized faith in which the gospel only affects individual, personal or family life but has no wider implications for society must be rejected as inadequate”; and
- (d) “We must commit ourselves to the common life of faith and action which will lead to a transformation of the world in which we live.”

Yet even this strength has its dark side. I don't mean that the pursuit of this vision will inevitably (or probably) lead to a diminution of the classic evangelical call to salvation by grace alone, to faith alone, to Scripture alone. I don't mean that missionary enterprise will increasingly give ground to political activism (in personnel, in funding, or in the allocation of time). I don't mean that future generations of evangelicals will think of evangelism as digging wells in Malawi, or replace biblical preaching with focus groups on foreign aid or employment policy.

What I mean is best framed as a broad question: Why do peak evangelical gatherings issue so many consensus statements¹ challenging fellow travellers to pursue integral (or holistic) mission?

Many answers could be given to this question. Here, briefly, are three that spring readily to mind. First, there are so many calls for evangelicals to hold word and deed together because evangelical Christians are so very unfaithful to the biblical witness, and to generations of eminent and godly pastors and theologians who have sought to clarify and expound and apply the biblical teaching on this matter.

Second, evangelicals are often guilty of promoting radical individualism and pragmatism at the expense of communitarianism and a serious commitment to radical discipleship. Taken to extremes, these two ideologies become cancers that threaten the integrity and viability of biblically-based ministry and mission. There is evidence of their influence in many areas of evangelical life, from our consumerist attitude toward public worship and the way we design our church buildings, to the methods we employ in making spiritual decisions and the choices we make at the political ballot box.

Third, evangelicals have often failed to find effective ways of engaging and addressing the political process. So often, in my experience, the articulation of public policy options leads to disagreement and conflict, which tend to degenerate into undignified slanging matches, stony silences or embarrassing standoffs.

The reality is that the Christian Gospel is captive to neither the political or religious "Right" or "Left"; Jesus advanced neither liberal or conservative tendencies in his dealings with political power and public policy. Although we live in a very different political and socio-economic environment, it is possible to discern and apply the general lines of the approach advocated by Jesus and the biblical writers, notably Paul.

We evangelicals need to rise above our petty differences and preoccupations, and become theologically, philosophically and politically more aware. We need to take seriously the biblical teaching, and the voices of Christian scholars and practitioners through the centuries, and the witness of recent evangelical statements calling the church to action on the ground of social justice. And we need to find better methods for processing ideological and cultural differences within our faith communities in the context of biblical-theological reflection and praxis.

Until we acknowledge these key weaknesses and address the critical issues they raise, evangelicals will continue to be criticised as socially irresponsible, and will need to be reminded in various ways by evangelical theologians and scholars of the radical and holistic nature of the gospel – and how far we still have to go to measure up to the Christian principles and practices we ought to affirm as part of our evangelical heritage.

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Reference

1. I have in mind the [Lausanne Covenant](#) (specifically section 5); the [Wheaton Statement](#) (1983, also known as "Transformation: The Church in Response to Human Need"); the [Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics](#) (1990); the [Manila Manifesto](#) (1991); the Villars Statement on Relief and Development (1991); and the [Micah Declaration](#) (2001). The Villars Statement was published in *Stewardship Journal* 1 (1), Winter 1991, pp. 3-5, and reproduced in Max L. Stackhouse et al (eds), *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 470-472.

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