

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Social Action and Evangelical Order

John W. Robbins

God is a God of order, and serious Christians have always been concerned with various aspects of God's orderliness. Paul's injunction in *I Corinthians* that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" promptly comes to everyone's mind, but it is far from being the only instance of God's concern with order. Luke wrote because "it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." In the Old Testament, we can see God's concern with order in the detailed instructions given for the construction of the tabernacle, the ceremonial sacrifices, and the dividing of the Promised Land. In fact, there are several types of theological order, and we can mention only a few in the space of this essay.

### *Types of Order in Theology*

God's purposes, his decrees, have provoked considerable discussion among theologians who have attempted to discern the order of God's decrees. This discussion is not about a useless, "ivory-tower" problem, but goes to the very heart of the doctrine of God's rationality. Those who err on the question of decretal order, or those who seek to avoid the question by adopting a truculent stance of

theological know-nothingism, are implicitly impugning the rationality of God.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, theologians have divided into two schools of thought on this question: the infralapsarians and the supralapsarians. Both schools of thought are unsatisfactory, for both fail to understand exactly what type of order is being discussed. Once it is understood that God is rational, that he always acts purposefully, the problem of the order of the decrees resolves itself very neatly: The order of the decrees is the reverse of the order of their execution.<sup>2</sup>

There is another type of order that deserves mention, the order of salvation. While some "practical" men may get disgusted with discussions of decretal order, they had better not get disgusted with the problem of salvational order. Their salvation hinges on a proper belief about the order of salvation. While the dispute between the infralapsarians and supralapsarians is a dispute among Calvinists, here the theologians have divided into many camps: the Calvinists, Arminians, Pelagians, semi-Pelagians, monergists, synergists, and so forth. The problem of the order of salvation

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Rousas Rushdoony, *The Necessity for Systematic Theology*, 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> The only significant progress made on this question of decretal order in recent years has come in the form of a suggestion by Dr. Gordon H. Clark. See *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, edited by Ronald Nash (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 391-398, 478-484.

is central to Christianity, for the religion that says that a person who exercises faith will be born again is quite different from a religion which says that one must be born again in order to exercise faith. Much that passes for Christian evangelism today is not evangelical at all, and has little to do with Christianity. For example, in his column *My Answer* published in March 1979, Billy Graham wrote the following:

Dear Dr. Graham: I have asked God to come into my life many times. Please pray that he will accept me. - P. T.

Dear P. T.: No. The prayer needed is not that Christ may accept you, but rather that you will accept Christ. You do not have to wait for Christ to accept you. He is waiting to see the evidence of your faith in accepting him. The decision is yours, not Christ's. He decided in favor of you when he died for you on the cross. Now you must decide for him.... Christ will not enter your life in opposition to your beliefs. As soon as he sees that you believe in him and trust in his promise, he will enter.... Christ will gradually reveal himself to you as you continue to live in his presence, but the initial step is one of absolute faith on your part.... Christ then rewards your faith by making himself known to you.

This is not the Gospel; and it is not, precisely because Mr. Graham does not know or does not care to teach the correct order of salvation. Strictly speaking, he teaches outright Pelagianism in these paragraphs, and he has misled thousands. The order of salvation is a crucial matter, a life and death matter.

There are other forms of order about which Christians have been and ought to be concerned. There is, for instance, the order of creation. A great deal may be learned by studying the order in which God created the universe. Since God created light before the Sun, John Calvin concluded:

It was proper that the light, by means of which the world was to be adorned with

such excellent beauty, should be first created.... It did not, however, happen from in consideration or by accident, that the light preceded the Sun and the Moon. To nothing are we more prone than to tie down the power of God to those instruments, the agency of which he employs. The Sun and Moon supply us with light and, according to our notions, we so include this power to give light in them, that if they were taken away from the world, it would seem impossible for any light to remain. Therefore, the Lord, by the very order of the creation, bears witness that he holds in his hand the light, which he is able to impart to us without the Sun and Moon.<sup>3</sup>

Decretal, salvational, and creational order are just three of the many aspects of God's orderliness. There are other types of order that have received less attention, and one type, evangelical order, the subject of this essay, has received very little attention.

## *Social Action and Evangelical Order*

Evangelical order is concerned to make a clear and logical presentation of Biblical truth to the world. In making such a presentation, does one begin with discussing civil government, or divorce and marriage, or the details of eschatology? What is proper evangelical order?

Christ's command in the Great Commission is of little help in solving this problem, for he commanded that his disciples teach "all things" that he taught. Now if this command were taken seriously by Christians today, it would revive the church; rather than sticking to "fundamentals" or harping on eschatology, "all things" would be taught. Paul believed himself free of the blood of all men because he had declared the "whole counsel" of God to them. Not many preachers, not many teachers, can say the same in the twentieth century,

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on The First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, chapter 1, verse 4.

for not many teach the whole counsel of God today. Even among the separatist Presbyterian churches, many, if not most, of the preachers suppress portions of the truth by not preaching it. They may not explicitly deny those truths as do the men in the apostate denominations, but they implicitly deny them, and disobey Christ, by their deliberate failure to teach the whole counsel of God. They do not preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Let us assume, however, that a teacher does wish to teach the whole counsel of God. How does he begin? Does he start by bringing the people the good news about divorce and marriage? Does he start with the cultural mandate? Many people in Canada seem to think so. But as Dr. Clark has written:

The world at large holds science in such high regard that some Christians have begun to question the value of preaching the gospel. They have begun to share in the idolatry of science. Since they are professing Christians, reared in evangelical homes, retaining an attachment to Biblical views, these theologian-philosophers have picked out *Gen.1:28*, coined the phrase "cultural mandate," and so emphasized subduing the Earth for man's comfort, that the ministry has actually been downgraded. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the preaching of the Gospel should cease until society has been reconstructed along socialistic lines and thus made ready to accept Christianity. Scripture...approves of arts and sciences. But it does not approve of physical research to the exclusion of other worthy occupations. Approval admits of, and in this case requires, a recognition of degrees of importance. In fact, the Old Testament shows little interest in mathematics and physics, while it assigns a continuing role to the priests and Levites. And in the New Testament, if Paul had considered fulfillment of the cultural mandate a prerequisite for the execution of the "great commission,"

Christianity would never have gone beyond the boundaries of Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

It is this idea of degrees of importance that constitutes the heart of evangelical order. Some people think that economics is more important than, or at least as important as, justification; or "social justice" more important than inerrancy. Take the movement represented by Ronald Sider, for example.<sup>5</sup>

### *Two Errors*

Sider's preoccupation with "social justice," which leads him to disparage personal acts of charity, in itself seems to stem from one or both of two more basic errors. The *first* of these errors is the *failure to teach the whole counsel of God*: the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This error also controls the practice of the fundamentalists, who try to reduce Christianity to half a dozen or so ideas that are not logically connected. The writer of Hebrews had his problems with some early fundamentalists who wanted to "stick to the fundamentals of the faith." He rebuked them sharply by saying, "though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.... Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation...." The writer goes on to list six fundamentals of the faith that the Hebrews were stuck on.

This error, of teaching the truth but not the whole truth, more clearly controls the practice of the fundamentalists than it does of men like Sider. In the case of the social gospelers, their preoccupation with wealth, "social justice," and politics, leads them astray from the truth almost altogether. In his books, Sider says nothing at all about the Satisfaction, inerrancy, the Trinity, the Incarnation, or any other major doctrine. At least the

<sup>4</sup> Gordon H. Clark, "The Limits and Uses of Science," in *Horizons of Science*, Carl F. H. Henry, editor, (Harper and Row, 1978), 259, 260.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Trinity Review*, March/April 1981, "Ronald Sider *Contra Deum*."

fundamentalists have preserved and preached some truths.

It is the *second* basic error that controls the social gospelers: *materialism*. The father of situation ethics, Joseph Fletcher, has expressed a view that is widespread among professing Christians: "Spirit and matter are different 'sides' of one reality, one 'ground' of being.... In non-theological language, we know now that energy is matter and matter is energy.... As somebody said lately, good-bye to all that 'holy gas and gross stuff' dualism."<sup>6</sup>

This, of course, is not the view of the Bible. The Bible's view is that the soul and the body are distinct and separable; that the soul is more important than the body; the mind more important than the belly. Most professing Christians today are materialists, perhaps not so blatantly as Fletcher, but materialists nonetheless. Sometimes this materialism takes the form of what Francis Schaeffer has called "personal peace and affluence"; sometimes it takes the form of a preoccupation with the "cultural mandate" to the neglect of the preaching of the Gospel; and sometimes it assumes the form of socialism, as in Sider's case. Sider is obviously preoccupied with money and wealth, and uninterested in what the Bible regards as of supreme importance: the well being of the soul.

Fundamentalists have taken a lot of deserved criticism for their lack of interest in social matters, and a lot of abuse for their emphasis on the welfare of the soul. But it is the fundamentalists who have preserved the proper emphases of the Bible, which condemns both the man who accumulates wealth and the man who gives away all his wealth when both men trust in their actions for their salvation. The Bible teaches that it is the primary mission of the Church as a whole and of individual Christians to teach the mind, not feed the body.

Those who have shifted their focus from the next world to the present world are infected by this materialism. They make the welfare of the body—or of the "whole man," to use a currently popular phrase—of greater importance than, or at least of

equal importance to the welfare of the soul. They ignore or subordinate that which is not seen to that which is seen. Although it should not be necessary to dissect this error further, it is necessary to do so, because it has influenced not only the social gospelers like Sider, but even the fundamentalists and some professedly Reformed writers.

Let us discuss the fundamentalists first. About ten years ago a movie entitled *A Thief in the Night* was produced and has been widely used by dispensational churches. The message of the movie—and of dispensational churches generally—is that one should be saved in order to avoid the coming world cataclysm, the reign of Antichrist, and the Great Tribulation. The fear of totalitarian government has replaced the doctrine of the last judgment and eternal punishment as the *summum malum* to be avoided. Hell has been immanentized and lasts only seven years. This perversion of the emphasis of Christianity (such as, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Hell"), not to mention the misunderstanding of Scripture involved, indicates the degree to which fundamentalism has been affected by materialism.

As for Reformed Christians, an example taken from a recent issue of the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* will suffice. In the winter 1981 issue, James Jordan writes:

Here we arrive at one of the major errors of historic orthodox Christianity, for the Bible teaches neither a bipartite nor a tripartite view of man.... Man is a spirit in bodily state, not a spirit housed in a body. It is Greek philosophy which teaches that man is a soul or spirit housed in a body.<sup>7</sup>

Now Mr. Jordan believes the idea that man is a soul or spirit housed in a body is a "major error of historic orthodox Christianity." Perhaps we should quote a few more verses to refute this confessedly unorthodox view:

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work* (The Westminster Press, 1967), 207.

<sup>7</sup> James B. Jordan, "God's Hospitality and Holistic Evangelism," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, VII, 2 (Winter 1981), 88.

Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up (*Luke* 8:55).

Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he said this, he breathed his last (*Luke* 23:46).

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (*James* 2:26).

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.... While we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened.... as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.... We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 *Corinthians* 5 [conflated]).

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows (2 *Corinthians* 12:2).

These verses are but the barest sampling of what the Bible has to say about the "bipartite nature" of man, to use Mr. Jordan's phrase. Becoming confused on an elementary point like this betrays the influence of materialism, in addition to an inexcusable ignorance of the Bible and Greek philosophy.<sup>8</sup> It is this sort of baptized materialism that leads to confusion about evangelical order. Those who believe that the body is as important as, or more important than, the soul—or that the body is the soul—are not likely to preach the Gospel. After all, why preach about Heaven, if Heaven is temporary?

Calvin, who was guilty of the "major error" Jordan has detected in orthodox Christianity wrote:

<sup>8</sup> Jordan treats Greek philosophy as though all Greek philosophers thought alike. Which Greek philosopher is he speaking of? Certainly not Aristotle or Democritus. One could more accurately assert that Jordan's view is derived from Greek philosophy. It certainly is not derived from the Bible.

If the soul were not something essential to man distinct from the body, Holy Scripture would not teach that we dwell in houses of clay and through the gate of death travel elsewhere, that we put off what is perishable so that each one of us may receive on the last day his recompense and reward according as he has acted in the flesh. For assuredly these and similar passages which here and there not only make a clear distinction between the soul and the body, but also show, by designating man as a soul, that it is the noblest part of a human being.<sup>9</sup>

In Mr. Jordan's case, some of the consequences of his anthropological views came immediately into view. He wastes no time attacking the primacy of preaching, thereby adopting a position shared by the neo-orthodox, the neo-evangelical, and the Roman Catholic theologians, but repudiated by the Reformers. He rejects the idea that "the most important work of the church is to communicate intellectual information to [the intellect]."<sup>10</sup> He regards the present church as "overly intellectualized."

I do not know which church Mr. Jordan attends, but none that I have attended or read about, in this or any other century, was "overly intellectualized." If anything, today's churches are rabidly anti-intellectual. The fundamentalists are hostile to thought; the neo-evangelicals believe in sanctification by love, not truth; the liberals and neo-orthodox attack the intellect and truth, and passionately embrace paradoxes (the more outrageous the better); the Roman Catholics are sacramentalists; and the social gospellers believe man lives by bread alone. Today's churches are not "overly-intellectualized" at all. They are overly bellyized.

But Mr. Jordan's rejection of the primacy of preaching is not the only consequence of his peculiar view of the nature of man. It also affects

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 15, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Jordan actually uses the words "to the brain." I take this as another evidence of the influence of materialism on his thought.

his gospel. Criticizing those who adhere to the "Greek view" of the soul, he writes: "... the Gospel is reduced to a personal individual decision to accept Jesus into one's 'soul,' and not the adoption of anew lifestyle."<sup>11</sup>

Where in the Bible, one must ask, is the Gospel declared to be "the adoption of a new lifestyle"? Now sanctification, which presumably is what Mr. Jordan means by a "new lifestyle," inexorably follows upon justification, as effect follows cause. But sanctification is not the Gospel. The Gospel is truth; it is propositions presented to the mind about what God has done for his people through Jesus Christ. That is why Christ said he came to preach,<sup>12</sup> and why he commanded his disciples to teach.<sup>13</sup> The primary function of the church is to teach, not perform ceremonies or organize welfare programs. R. J. Coates and J. I. Packer understand this quite well:

When, with the increasing number of converts to the faith, problems of practical pastoral care arose, Peter and the other apostles asked the church to choose others to do their lesser work, since they had to give themselves wholly to the primary tasks of preaching the word of God and of prayer (*Acts* 6:4). Social concern, necessary as it was, and natural as it is where the gospel is preached, as the early chapters of *Acts* testify, was not allowed to interfere with the primary function by which the church lives. Social application of the principles of the gospel must not usurp the primacy of the task of publishing the message of salvation from sin. The apostolic priorities, the word and prayer, have often since those early days been neglected in the interests of the widows and the orphans. Of course, there need not be any conflict between these two concerns; but both will be better fulfilled when the correct order is maintained.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the primacy of preaching does not imply the exclusivity of preaching. The church corporately has—and Christians individually have—a duty to give temporal aid as well as to teach eternal truth. But such aid is always to be given in subordination to teaching. The church is not a hospital, nor a political party, nor a moral rearmament movement, nor a social club, nor a welfare rights organization.

This ordering of priorities may be clearly seen in the life of Christ, who subordinated his miracles of healing to his teaching. Christ, who had power to relieve all hunger and heal all diseases, did not do so. His actions—his "lack of concern" for others—would no doubt be criticized by Sider and his friends, but that is because they have substituted their own ethic of envy for Christ's ethic of benevolence. Christ aided only those whom he taught. He explicitly said that he came to teach, and he gave the same command to teach to his disciples.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that Christian sought to prefer some people before others in their giving, and that there is no general obligation to help everyone. Some people are not to be helped at all. Those of one's household are to be helped before those outside the household. A man who does not provide for his own family is worse than an infidel, even if he gives a graduated tithe to Evangelicals for Social Action or any other group.

After one's own household, the household of faith is next in importance. The famine in Jerusalem must have affected both Christians and non-Christians, but Paul's collection was for "the poor among the saints in Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup> Persons who are able to work but refuse to do so, even though they are Christians, are not to be helped at all. If any would not work, neither should he eat. Younger widows are not to be aided by the church, even though they are Christians, but are commanded to marry.<sup>16</sup> Those widows who were not exemplary were not to be aided, despite their poverty. Paul knows nothing of a "human right to a just living."

<sup>11</sup> Jordan, "God's Hospitality," 110. Emphasis is Mr. Jordan's.

<sup>12</sup> *Mark* 1:38.

<sup>13</sup> *Matthew* 28:20.

<sup>14</sup> J. I. Packer and R. J. Coates, "The Use of Holy Scripture in Public and Private," *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*

(Cornerstone Books, 1980), 67. One might also consult Martyn Lloyd Jones' volume, *The Primacy of Preaching*, 1969, especially the title essay.

<sup>15</sup> *Romans* 15:26.

<sup>16</sup> *1 Timothy* 5:9-16.

As for the fundamentalists, the emergence of the Moral Majority should dispel the myth that the fundamentalists have no social theory. So should the rapid growth of Christian day schools, most of which are started and operated by fundamentalist churches. Both of these developments indicate that not only do they have a social theory, it is sufficiently developed to act as a basis for concrete social action. Whether it is a Biblical social theory is another question, however.

For example, the Moral Majority has stated time and time again—most recently in full-page advertisements in several major newspapers—that it is not a Christian organization. It is an organization to which "moral" people of any religious or philosophical persuasion may repair. In short, this example of fundamentalist social action is not an example of Christian social action. The leadership of the Moral Majority has explicitly repudiated any "narrow" religious position. Their actual words are:

Moral Majority, Inc. is a political organization providing a platform for religious and non-religious Americans.... Members of Moral Majority, Inc. have no common theological premise.... We are Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Mormons, Fundamentalists.... We are committed to pluralism....<sup>17</sup>

Providentially, the other example of fundamentalist social action, Christian day schools, is Biblical, and explicitly so. They are called, after all, Christian schools, not Moral schools. No latitudinarianism there. And because there is none, such schools will have a far greater impact than the Moral Majority.

Since the fundamentalists, and not the social gospelers, have preserved the Biblical emphasis on the primacy of teaching, it is natural that they should also lead in the establishment of Christian schools. But their anti-intellectualism makes it unlikely that they will establish any serious Christian universities. Like the Amish, they tend to believe in education up to a point, but no further.

<sup>17</sup> *The Washington Post*, March 23, 1981, D24.

Nor are they likely to establish hospitals, job programs, or orphanages. As for political action, they have already compromised themselves, failing to obey the command to do all to the glory of God,<sup>18</sup> and in the name of the Lord.<sup>19</sup> The development of institutions such as universities, hospitals, orphanages, and diaconal ministries must await the triumph of a distinctively Christian world and life view. Such a view must consist of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And it must preserve the correct evangelical order, insisting that the soul is more important than the body,<sup>20</sup> Heaven more important than earthly happiness,<sup>21</sup> and the unseen more important than the seen.<sup>22</sup> Without this order, any attempt at social action must quickly apostatize. That is why the reappearance of materialism among the postmillennialists is so ominous.

With a proper sense of order, Christians can once again conquer kingdoms; administer justice; shut the mouths of lions; quench the fury of flames; escape the edge of this sword; rout foreign armies; and face jeers, floggings, and prison. But they can do this only if they reckon themselves aliens and strangers on Earth longing for a better country—a heavenly one.<sup>23</sup> In the classic statement of evangelical order, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

## From the Horror File

Gentlemen:

I received today the second mailing from your organization. Please remove my name from your mailing list. I do not care to read your material, and as a matter of fact, I do not even care to carry it to my home. A child might read it and get the wrong idea.

<sup>18</sup> *1 Corinthians* 10:31.

<sup>19</sup> *Mark* 9:41.

<sup>20</sup> *Matthew* 10:28.

<sup>21</sup> *2 Corinthians* 4:17.

<sup>22</sup> *2 Corinthians* 4:18.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *Hebrews* 11.

While you people are nit-picking about the road to heaven, a lot of people are going to hell for lack of attention to their needs, such as starvation, sickness, war, etc. You can go ahead and war among yourselves, but leave me out of it.

—An Elder of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church