

THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RELATIONS: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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God alone knows the future; the future is in His hands. He is the Omnipotent Sovereign of the universe. Yet to a degree He has committed the future to men; the future is in *our* hands as one aspect of our stewardship under God. The future is therefore as bright as the promises and provision of God; paradoxically it is as dark as the sinfulness of man.

As long as this age continues, there will be human beings; as long as these human beings associate with one another directly or indirectly, there will be human relations. Human relations are therefore as broadly distributed as the human race; they will always be with us! Social scientists and evangelical Christians share the goal of improving these human relations, creating and strengthening those patterns which are constructive, functional, and wholesome, and eliminating or alleviating those which are destructive, dysfunctional, and detrimental to the welfare of man.

This common concern for the well-being of man is, however, contributing to intensified conflict between science and religion, for theology and social science possess divergent definitions of good and bad, use contrasting methods of discovering truth, communicate with a different set of concepts and in divergent universes of discourse, rest upon different basic presuppositions and postulates, adhere to separate traditions, and hence arrive at contradictory conclusions for action and contrasting interpretations of the nature of man.

Many elements in the traditional opposition of fundamentalism to developments in the biological and physical sciences are gradually succumbing before the increasingly incontrovertible evidence accumulated by application of the scientific method. Fundamentalist opposition to science is gradually shifting the focus of its attention toward the social sciences, for the theologian often assumes that he knows more about man than the social scientist, while the latter is likely to think that the theologian's cause rests solely upon traditions, superstitions, and myths which are mere cultural survivals from dark ages of the past and have no empirical referent. The way evangelicals handle this problem will help determine the future of their role in human relations.

In a world that is rapidly changing as a result of technological developments and social innovations, evangelicals have a pronounced tendency to cling to old-fashioned philosophies and institutions, attitudes and practices. Non-rational traditional techniques of facing new events and circumstances are sanctified by some evangelical theologians as "God's only plan for coping with the problems of human relations." Reason and the education which develops it by encouraging the examination of numerous and antithetical efforts to solve these problems are held in suspicion by fundamentalists who believe they have *the* truth. Many of them even praise and encourage folly as if it were God's will for the Christian by appealing to such Scriptures as I Cor. 1:17-31. They do not recognize man's intelligence to be a gift from God, an instrument for discharging responsibilities inherent in our stewardship under the Creator who calls us to subdue the earth and have dominion over all living things. The ultimate result of the wedding of fundamentalism with social traditionalism, unless the union is broken, will be the same as that of other powerful religions that have failed to divest themselves of magico-religious formulas inherited from the past and have sanctified the status quo, refusing to adjust to the demands of social change. Lessons from other times and cultures ought to enlighten our conduct today. The future of human relations is as dark as the weaknesses, schisms, and fallacies of

evangelical Christianity, but it is as bright as our willingness and efforts to correct these faults.

The future of human relations is also as dark as the sinfulness of man. To have a bright future, men must deal effectively with the problem of sin. Sinfulness is involved in all of man's social problems. One theological and social perspective finds its solution in building God's Kingdom on earth, interpreted to consist solely of social, economic, and political reformation of man's institutions. It is far too easy to condemn the views of those with whom we disagree; I'm sure you have all had a part in exposing the deficiencies of that perspective. Rather than examine them, let us look at our own involvement in the problems of human relations.

The typical fundamentalist presents Christ as the answer to sin and hence as the answer to social problems. "If we only win souls to Him," he assumes, "we will solve the problems of human relations. Our sole task therefore is evangelism; when people are born again, the patterns of human relations will become ideal."

In our better moments we all know that, unfortunately, mere decisions to accept Christ as Savior do not automatically solve all problems of life in human society. Problems of human relations rear their ugly heads in Christian church congregations, denominations, and institutions. If we who are Christians say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (I John 1:8). Even the apostolic church, which we sometimes unthinkingly hold up as an example of purity and piety, had in it divisions, immorality, and other sins which were definitely not in accord with the will of God (see I Cor., e. g.). Thus today, even in the Christian churches which insist on a regenerate membership, there are self-seekers who foster divisions in their search for power. Many Christians are worldly status-seekers who conform themselves to the society that surrounds them, even using the church itself as an instrument to help them climb the social ladder. Mere convert-winning is insufficient as a solution to problems of human relations. Something more is needed!

Our own sins, the sins of evangelical Christians, hinder our effectiveness for Christ in areas of human relations. We typically emphasize our own virtues and look at the vices only of others; let me stress instead some of *our* sins as I suggest a few areas of human relations which need our prayerful, repentant, Holy Spirit guided attention. We cannot effectively persuade others to follow our Lord until we ourselves are following Him, instead of throwing stones at others while living in brittle glass houses. Honestly facing the sinfulness and flaws of our churches, our personal lives, our social philosophies and policies is a first step, and an essential one, toward overcoming them.

There are many indications that fundamentalists typically show little concern for reforming social injustices, tend to be indifferent toward or to oppose the United Nations and its related agencies, support the patterns of racial discrimination which predominate in their southern or northern communities, subscribe to philosophies of education which lead to authoritarianism, place nationalistic goals above those which seek the welfare of all peoples, treat the American Way of Life as if it were God's blueprint for every society, pursue status and pleasure in much the same ways as non-Christians in our affluent society, are quick to condemn corruption in labor unions but slow to recognize it and reluctant to censure it in big business, spawn and nourish anti-Semitism by insinuating references to Jacob, the Pharisees, and certain other Bible Jews, indiscriminately accept propaganda for their own political party or against Communism and help disseminate it without testing its truth or falsehood, severely criticize the injustices suffered by white businesses when they become victims of "sit-ins" or "freedom riders" but provide no alternative plan to correct three centuries of injustice suffered by American Negroes, and work to support the powerful

vested interests in society without evaluating how this relates to the needs of the poor, the sick and disabled, and the downtrodden underprivileged multitudes for whom Christ showed such great compassion.

Why was a pamphlet entitled "Souls Don't Have Color"* published and circulated by a labor union and not by a group of evangelical Christians? Why are popular magazines, not evangelical Christians, leading the current drive to raise the level of ethics in American business? Why are those who believe the government should carry out the stated purpose of the Constitution "to promote the general Welfare" condemned by many evangelicals as "following the Communist line" or "duped by creeping socialism"? Our Lord Himself spoke of a time when nations will be judged on the basis of whether or not food was given to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, a welcome to the stranger, help to the prisoner (Matthew 26:31-46), but we prefer to shut our eyes to the needs of the multitudes by ensconcing ourselves in "socially respectable neighborhoods" where they won't get in our way. All these are problems of human relations. As we look at our involvement in (yet often detachment from) them, we need indeed to pray the prayer taught by our Lord, "Our Father, which art in heaven, . . . forgive us *our* sins."

All too often we who are evangelicals first reach our conclusions about solutions to political, economic, and social problems on the basis of self-seeking and pride. Having "the solution," we then go to the Bible to hunt for passages which sanction the conclusions we have reached. Like the religious fundamentalists of Jesus' day, we are easily trapped into opposing our Lord under the guise of serving God. Instead of finding rationalizations to support traditional preconceptions or philosophies of men which have come to us through pressure groups using the skillful lying techniques of modern propaganda, we ought to search the Scriptures to find God's will for us. May God give us the grace and courage to seek out His side and to be more concerned about it than about wearing a party tag or other label which alienates us from at least a portion of the truth and makes us insensitive to God's will as members of a democratic society. When we use our political powers as citizens and as influencers of public opinion to perpetuate injustice, hatred, prejudice, and discrimination among men instead of to break down these patterns which violate the dignity of man, we ally ourselves with the powers of darkness and disown our role as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If we profess to teach the Word of God but restrict its application to human relations to a preconceived position, ignoring all contrary evidence, we are false teachers usurping the position of the Holy Spirit.

Such are some of the problems of human relations which are evident among evangelical Christians. Much could be said about numerous other problems, such as the changes in human relationships occurring through the conquest of space, the population explosion, the paraprofessional society now emerging out of capitalism, the continuing but ever-changing Cold War, automation, and the increasing affluence of most American families. It is easy to say that the solution for all these problems lies simply in doing what Jesus would do, but all too often we can only guess at what He would do. It is very hard to determine who and what is for or against Him in the practical problems of politics and other social action. This is precisely where the social sciences enter into our thinking; they can help evangelical Christians answer the question of how Christ is the solution to the problems of human relations.

SOCIAL SCIENCES SERVING EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

There are at least five overlapping ways in which the social sciences can help evangelicals become more effective servants of Jesus Christ.

First of all, they can perform an unmasking function, revealing to us the evasive problems of human relationships, the hidden, unintended, or latent consequences of

personal and group action, the vested interests which bias the positions of those who wish to influence others, the inconsistencies of groups which profess to stand for certain ideals but subvert those ideals with rationalizations to support self-seeking in the struggle for power, the direct and indirect effects of human relations projects and programs, and the tendency of men to put institutions on a pedestal and become their servants instead of remembering that they were made for man, not man for them. The social sciences can help us look beyond what is on the surface of human relations into the hidden social forces which lie beneath them. Unless we use the insights and methods of the social sciences to penetrate far beyond the superficial level of everyday observation, we may oft perpetuate evil when we think we are working for that which is good.

A second function of the social sciences is to help us understand human behavior. The better we understand the socio-psychological motivations, drives, and interests that influence men's actions, the more effective our evangelistic methods can be. The better we comprehend the virtues and vices, the strengths and limitations, of human organizations, the easier it will be to use them to best advantage and to avoid the pitfalls which can cause irreparable damage to the souls of men. Understanding man may even help us to understand God in whose image man is made. Certainly, "God's work of creation is as orderly among men as among the stars."* To promote such understanding involves basic or pure research as well as that which has clear immediate goals. In this as in other areas of scientific endeavor, God makes even ungodly men to praise Him as they help build up the body of social science knowledge. Instead of condemning those brethren who go to "the garbage can of secular sources" for enlightenment about human relations, let us thank God that the children of this age have so much to offer us!

A third function of the social sciences is to explain the nature of the social environment in which man lives. No man lives to himself. The social sciences help us understand the intricate web of social relationships of which we are part. They help us to see that whatever happens to any fellowman has some consequence for our own experience. They help us to realize that when one suffers, all suffer. They teach us that human relations are exceedingly complex. They increase our awareness of the social structures through which we must work in order to influence men for Jesus Christ. To work effectively with men, we must understand the foundations of their lives and character in institutional pressures, social habits, cultural settings, social processes, the authority of tradition, and all the other social forces which operate upon them from the moment of conception until their bones have rotted away in the tomb. Changing institutions changes persons.

A fourth function of the social sciences is to serve as a tool in trouble-shooting and in the solving of practical problems. Although the social sciences are relatively young and undeveloped compared to the physical sciences, methods and instruments for research have been invented which can be applied to determine both the manifest and the latent effects of our church programs and techniques. How often we blindly continue traditional programs, because of the witness of a few persons who testify they have been helped, without recognizing that hundreds may have been harmed and driven away from the life that is in Christ as a result of the self-same activities! Scientific studies can help determine the degree to which ideals and practice, principles and conduct, theory and action, faith and works, coincide in church members. Something more than philosophical and theological analyses based upon personal impressions is needed if we are to keep up with the children of darkness in our competitive struggle for the hearts and lives of men.

A fifth function of the social sciences is to help us plan for the future. A hidden assumption in basic as well as applied social research is that the findings will enable

man to cope more effectively with his circumstances. Some Christians condemn social planning because they fear its possible abuses, but we must admit that all our Christian plans for missionary work, educational institutions, denominational expansion, church extension, religious education, and evangelistic campaigns involve social planning—planning by groups of people. All such planning assumes that men can cooperate with God to change the future, for we take it for granted that without planning we would not be able to accomplish as much nor do it so effectively. The social sciences can help us plan for the future by revealing mistakes of the past, by helping us understand human behavior and social institutions, by teaching us principles of social action, by providing us with specific information about possible costs and consequences of projected programs, and by helping us cope with the various social groups that may either help, oppose, or be indifferent to our plans.

CONDITIONS FOR FRUITFULNESS

But social science can be wedded in a fruitful relationship to evangelical Christianity only if certain conditions are met.

First of all, there must be Christians who are well trained in the social sciences. Human relations need to be taught more and taught more effectively in our colleges, Bible schools, and theological seminaries. This training must be appropriate for those who will become lay and professional leaders in the work of the church and for those who will be led by God to enter more specialized training to prepare themselves for lives of social science teaching and research.

Secondly, evangelical Christians must have a favorable outlook toward the social sciences—an outlook so favorable that they are willing to help pay the costs of such instruction, to finance social science research, to encourage their youth to enter social science as a vocation, and to heed conclusions reached through social research. Cooperation must replace the more-or-less antagonistic perspective that has dominated evangelical thinking about the sciences of man in the past. As a result of past enmity toward the social sciences, it is difficult to find Christians in them who have retained an evangelical faith.

Third, we must emphasize the importance of freedom. The freedom that is in Christ is essential to finding the truth through social science. Truly scientific research is not card-stacking propaganda which lists all the findings one likes and ignores all those which do not fit preconceptions about human relations. True research goes out of the way to seek evidence that is contrary to the scientist's highest wishes. It does not puff itself up in the vain boast that it has the full picture of reality and needs no more. It seeks not its own. It rejoices in the truth, even when the truth is painful.

We who are followers of Him who called Himself "the Truth" need not fear that truth which emerges from scientific research even on our own institutions, practices, attitudes, and relationships. If such research reveals errors and inconsistencies in our faith and conduct, we can correct them in the light of God's Word with the Holy Spirit as our Guide. If it reveals flaws in our conventional interpretations of the Word, we can move that much closer to God's will for us. If it reveals ineffective techniques in our service for God, we can replace them with other techniques which experimentation shows to be more effectual. If it reveals mission fields at home or abroad which we have ignored, we can take steps to evangelize our generation. If it reveals inefficiency in our use of the limited funds entrusted to our churches, we can seek out means of becoming more efficient stewards of God's resources. If it reveals inconsistencies and sins in the lives of God's people, we can repent and take steps to correct them.

Freedom in Christ needs emphasis among evangelical Christians. We must guard that freedom and not be led astray by those who would withdraw it. We must not be led astray by rabble-rousers who would like to have us think that, since Communists criticize our society, any American who criticizes it must be Communist-tainted. We must not be led astray by those who, in the insecurities of this life, fear all change and assume that every departure from the "good old days" is a move toward godless socialism. We must not be led astray by those scientists who would like to have us think that there can be a completely value-free science of human relations. We must not be led astray by those who mistakenly assume that only those who belong to one particular type of social and economic persuasion can be evangelical Christians. We must not be led astray by those who would have us think that GOP means God's Own Party—nor by those who worship its competitor. We must not be led astray by those who let the majority decide what is proper on ethical, religious, and moral issues. We must not be led astray by those who would have us believe human relations can be improved without making sacrifices of cherished values, time, money, and special privileges. We must not be led astray by those who would assume that God's ideal can be confined to one human organization, nation, political or economic system, or technique for ascertaining truth. We must not be led astray by those who would frost over hypocritical pride and self-seeking with a glaze of zeal for soul-winning that covers up the fact that the biblical concept of salvation is one of redeeming the whole person in time as well as for eternity.

CONCLUSION

The search for truth places great demands upon the social scientist. The same empirical scientific method that has produced such wonders in the physical and biological sciences is beginning a period of rapid growth that will produce vast improvements in our understanding of human beings. If the leaven of Christian scholarship is missing from these developments, the future of human relations is dark indeed. But if evangelical Christians help to stimulate its growth and development, they can help to answer significant questions of the basic values for society and they will help to stem the tide of godless materialism ("the worship of man") that now dominates so much of American life. Evangelicals will not be heard unless they prove their competence in true scholarship and scientific research. How can they do this if they receive no support and help from others in the body of Christ? Just as a man must be free if he is to make a true choice of Christ as his Savior, so the scientist must be free to investigate with an open mind that allows him to discover truth, whatever the truth may be.

One of the distressing—yet from some perspectives encouraging and challenging—findings of the social sciences is that human relations are so complex that it is impossible to find clearly unmixed good and evil as defined in Christianity in human acts. This means, among other things, that two equally dedicated Christians, both having a thorough understanding of the Scriptures and knowing the pertinent findings of the social sciences, may reach different conclusions as to how men ought to serve God in certain areas of social action. We must hence allow freedom, recognizing our own sinful tendencies, for those who in Christian commitment reach different conclusions from our own.

God's will for us in all human relations is summed up in the simple words, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Who is my neighbor? Nay, the question is rather, "To whom will I be a neighbor?" The social sciences can increase our recognition of the needs of the world. Upon seeing these needs of the multitudes the world over, we like Christ will be moved with compassion if we are filled with the Holy Spirit. The

social sciences then can enlighten us even more by helping us to understand what true love in action is.

We must address ourselves to current and future problems and trends in human relations in order to become more effective servants of our Lord. We cannot do so without increased attention to the social sciences, the sciences of human relations. The future of human relations is bright if we as scientists and theologians are faithful stewards under God.

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* Available from UAW Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Dept., Solidarity House, 8000 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit 14, Michigan.

* John H. Shope, "Sociology for the Parish," *Theology and Life*, 4:154-164, May 1961. Cf. E. G. Homrighausen, "Towards a Theology of Evangelism," *Theology Today*, 18:96-98, April 1961.