

THE INDIVIDUAL GOSPEL

By Bernard Zylstra

PART ONE

For the purpose of this article, "the individual gospel" is sufficiently described as the view (a) which holds that man is first and foremost an individual being whose humanity lies in an identity separate from other men; and (b) which looks upon the Gospel of Christ mainly as a power for the salvation of the souls of individuals.

Will the social gospel do?

In subjecting the individual gospel to a critique it must be clear at the outset that my alternative does not lie in the social gospel, which (a) holds that man is first of all a social being whose humanity lies in his relations to his fellow-men; and (b) which looks upon the Gospel as the source of inspiration for improving and restructuring these relations. The error of the social gospel is not that it sees man constantly interacting with his fellowmen in the execution of his tasks in culture and society. We also acknowledge that. For the very notion of mankind as a community brings us to that conclusion. However, the uniqueness of Biblical revelation on this score lies herein, that this community is founded on mankind's covenantal bond with the Creator. For this reason the first and great commandment of the Christian religion is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." The implication of this is that man is not first of all a social being; he is a religious being whose life is service of God. This service includes obedience to the second commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love to God demands love to neighbor. But the motivation for love to neigh-

bor does not lie in the first place in our neighbor himself but in God Who reveals that our neighbor is a fellow-creature whom we must respect and honour in his creatureliness. The interpersonal love requires a supra-personal reference-point and norm. That, I take it, is what we must learn from the first letter of the apostle John, summed up in these words: "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (4:11) For this reason humanitarian concern for our neighbor is not to be equated with love to God. That is the error of the social gospel. Biblically based social action is not identical with social philanthropy. The lasting impact of any Christian social endeavour lies in the implementation of the Biblical conception of a genuinely open society whose members are imagers of God and whose final point of reference lies beyond the social-horizontal relationships in Christ Jesus, to Whom all power belongs. A conception of society whose final point of reference is either autonomous individual man or autonomous humanity cannot provide a lasting foundation for an open society: its horizon is too limited. And the absolutization of limited horizons is idolatry: service of the creature rather than the Creator. (Rom. 1:23-25)

Is conversion necessary?

Yes, conversion is necessary. The difficulty with the individual gospel does not lie in its emphasis on personal repentance from sin, conversion and regeneration and commitment to the Lord in the joy of faith. The scriptures make it quite clear how men, broken-hearted because of sin and idolatry, can again become members of the spiritual community which is the Body of Christ. They must surrenderingly pray with David: "Create in me a clean heart, O God.... Take not they Holy Spirit from me." (Ps. 86:11f)

But why is personal conversion so important? Because the Kingdom of Christ can only enter human life and society via the avenue of radi-

cally changed heart commitments. The heart is the motor from which are the issues of life. It must be regenerated, filled with the new life of the Holy Spirit, before a person can acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord. Nicodemus, a fine representative of doctrinal purity and moral uprightness in the church, had to be told by Christ: unless one is born anew he cannot see the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3) Paul makes it very explicit: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:3)

This brings into clearer focus the real problem of the individual gospel and the aims and strategies of its adherents. For the latter have not sufficiently understood that conversion from a life of sin must lead to a new life of Kingdom service. They have not fully seen the context of repentance since they tend to sever the link between individual rebirth and the totality of God's Kingdom plan for the entirety of creation, culture and society, where the Father wants to establish His gracious, sovereign, and loving rule. They neglect to notice, at least in part, that the motive for rebirth is the coming of the Kingdom, as Christ so clearly stated throughout His entire ministry: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 4:17; cf Mark 1:14)

PART TWO

CAUSES and CONSEQUENCES

Over against the Biblical motive of regeneration and conversion as a first step in a life of sanctification, that is, a life of integral discipleship and service to the glory of God, the individual gospel posits the motive of the salvation of individual souls. In the Scriptures, the soul is the life of the body in all of its earthly activities. How are we to understand the loss of the vision of the Kingdom of God and the reformation theme of soli deo gloria - to God alone be the glory? When did

this vision and this Scriptural theme become narrowed down to the salvation of man's soul?

John Locke and individualism

In order to answer this question we will have to look at some of the conceptions of a great British philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704). We can only highlight a few basic points.

Locke developed a conception of society which supplied both elements of the individual gospel as described above. To begin with, he maintained that society is a collection of individual beings whose humanity lies in an identity separate from other men. In defending this position, Locke in effect opposed the Scriptural revelation that God created mankind as a spiritual community which is restored through the reconciling work of Christ, the Head of the Body of believers. The foundation of society in Locke is no longer Jesus Christ but the will of the individual.

The will of individual man is the key to Locke's conception of society since only through its expression can human needs and interests be met. There are all kinds of human interests and needs, but they fall into two basic categories. Man has earthy needs, since man has a body. He has heavenly needs, since he also has a soul.

The acquisition of soul salvation

Man's heavenly needs concern the salvation of the individual soul. Souls must get to heaven. Religion and the church must meet this human interest in salvation. A man's soul can be saved only by the proper expression of a man's individual will. In Locke's famous Letter concerning Toleration (1689) he writes: "The care... of every man's soul belongs unto himself, and is to be left unto himself... Nay, God Himself will not save men against their wills." A person

does not become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit but by the voluntary expression of his human will. He should be able to choose any sect that suits him best since there are "several paths that are in the same road" to heaven. Religion in Locke has been largely reduced to the man-centered search for salvation. Very little is left of the Scriptural view that religion is man's loving service of Christ, Saviour and Lord.

The acquisition of private property

Man does not only have a soul. He also has a body. That body, too, must be taken care of. How can one best meet the needs and interests of the body? It is highly significant to note that the answer Locke gives to this question runs parallel to the answer concerning soul salvation. In both cases the answer lies in an expression of the individual will. The individual person, in trying to meet the needs of the body, must learn to shift for himself by acquiring private property. If you've got something you can call your own you can begin to take care of your earthy needs.

The Bible teaches certain basic principles about "property". Some of these are: (1) man belongs to the Lord Who created him; (2) the earth belongs to the Lord; and (3) man's use of the earth is a matter of stewardship over a possession inherited from the gracious heavenly Father. Man's use of the earth, in agriculture, industry, and trade, is placed in the context of the covenant between God and man which provides the conditions of responsibility within which man may utilize the resources of creation for the welfare of those who are in need: the orphan, the widow, the alien, and the poor. In this covenantal setting the notion of absolute private property is absent.

Locke rejects this Biblical normative setting. In the chapter on property in the Second

Treatise on Government, he teaches (1) that man has a property in his own person; (2) that he has a property in the labour of his hands; and (3) that the fruit of the earth can only fulfill a person's needs if it belongs to him, that is, it must be "a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it."

On reading these passages it is not surprising that several modern scholars have called attention to the relation between religion and the rise of capitalism. As a matter of fact, for many the founders of Protestantism -- Luther and especially Calvin -- are supposedly the real originators of today's acquisitive society. I believe that this is a gross error. The roots of modern society cannot, I think, be properly understood unless one makes a clear distinction between the early reformers of the sixteenth century and the later seventeenth-century developments in which the spirit of an un-Biblical individualism twisted Christian thought and action into a direction foreign to the Gospel itself. The Gospel does not know an unfettered individual who can rely on individual will and reason to shift for himself in the acquisition of soul salvation - neo-Pelagianism and traditional Arminianism - and the acquisition of absolute private property - capitalistic liberalism. John Locke was not a Calvinist. His friends in England and Holland were not the divines of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. His friends were the rationalists among the Arminians, the forerunners of the later enlightened deists and the modern liberals - in theology and politics!

Separation of religion and politics

There is another matter on which Locke exercised an immense influence. It is the relation between religion and politics. Having neatly divided human interests between heavenly and earthly because of the "separation" between soul and body, Locke found a way of keeping

religion out of politics. "The church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable." In this way Locke could find a foundation for the secular state of classic liberalism which exists to preserve private property. Locke is the founder of the religion of absolute private property. He is the father of laissez-faire doctrines not so much in the sense of keeping politics out of property questions (the state exists to protect property relations) but in the sense of keeping God and the Bible out of property relations.

Intolerant toleration

Having thus limited religion to matters of soul salvation, having cut the body out of Biblical religion, Locke can readily propose toleration between the various sects of Christendom: private religious opinions should not in any way affect the affairs of society. Society could be established on the basis of rational agreement between individuals pursuing the same end: property. Since most men are endowed with a spark of reason, toleration and consensus can readily be achieved. Persons not so rationally enlightened are permitted to find a basis for social morality in private religion. That kind of a basis is better than no basis at all. In other words, besides serving as the avenue of soul salvation, Christianity could also function as a civil religion, as the support of a particular political order after that order had been secularized, severed from the fountain of life in Christ Jesus.

However, Locke made it very clear that the political order had to determine the range of influence of the Christian religion; for only in that way could toleration be maintained. Here toleration becomes intolerant: if the Christian religion would come into conflict with the political system, the Christian religion had to surrender. In this way Locke formulated the

essential ingredients of the relation between the social-political order and the Christian faith that we find today in Canada and the United States: "no opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society, are to be tolerated by the magistrate."

The individual gospel as civil religion

The results of the conception hastily sketched here are these:

- a. The polite totalitarianism of liberal rationalism reduced the catholic claims of the Gospel of Christ to matters literally out-of-this-world. The sweet reasonableness of this totalitarianism determines the decision-making process in education, the trade unions, the political parties, and most professional organizations.
- b. American and Canadian Christians, also those in the orthodox churches, have grown more and more accustomed to this reduction of Christ's Lordship over life. The wall of partition between religion and the state, established by the enlightened deists of the eighteenth century (Voltaire, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, etc.), has now become a bulward of mainline orthodoxy itself. Behind that bulward the churches and "sects" were allowed to pursue their programs. What was accomplished must not be despised. But the thrust of these accomplishments, in revivals, in missions, in evangelism, in Sunday Schools, was largely limited to the salvation of individual souls and the well-being of the isolated and fragmented denominations.
- c. The individual gospel, implicitly or explicitly, proceeds from the assumption that the individual person or at least the individual soul can somehow be lifted out of the context of God's creation. That context is then left to itself, neutralized, or avoided as the devil's domain. But what do we see in recent decades?

The proponents of the individual gospel become proponents of an individualistic social order as well. And their methodology of "social action" is a methodology of "individual witness and action". This is not surprising since human life is indeed of one piece. A basic conception defended in one area of life will soon influence one's thinking in remaining areas. Careful commentators have indeed correctly concluded that it is precisely the religion of individual soul salvation that is now becoming the civil religion of the United States. Billy Graham and Richard Nixon are fast friends.

The Christian religion, without the wide horizons of Christ's redeeming Kingship over men and nations, narrowed down to man-centered soul-salvation, has become for many the moral justification for nationalism, the "American way of life," and all that it stands for in the world today.

Precisely here we must listen to Christ Himself: "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18: 36) Or to the Apostle John: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5: 21)