

The Tower of Babel revisited:

the Calvin Conference on Christianity and Politics

by Gordon Spykman

In 1963 Harry Blamires published a book, *The Christian Mind*, lamenting the absence of it. "That is to say," as he put it, "no vital Christian mind plays fruitfully, as a coherent and recognizable influence, upon our social, political, or cultural life."

Evangelical leaders proved that point at the third annual "Conference on Christianity and Politics" held at Calvin College in April of 1975. Well over two hundred politically minded Christians gathered for two days of presentations and discussions. Now, in retrospect, all we are left with is a motley array of divergent viewpoints.

During the past decade a revitalized social consciousness has emerged among evangelical Christians on the North American scene. There are indeed hopeful signs on the horizon. But the better voices, calling for biblical reformation, came to only muffled expression at this conference.

The conference host offered a wide-open forum for people in political science, economics, and social service, for researchers and theoreticians, for practicing politicians and spokesmen/women from a broad spectrum of activist organizations to speak out. But, on balance, it was like the Tower of Babel revisited. The biblical counterpart to Babel, the Pentecostal outpouring of the re-unifying and liberating power of the Spirit, was largely absent.

After some solid groundwork laid at the two previous conferences, this one was disappointing. There was little evidence of growing together in christian political conviction. Even on fundamental issues, like "How to state the case," consensus was lacking. Shall we speak of "christian faith and worldly politics"? Or "the Christian in secular politics"? Or "doing christian politics"? Evangelical Christians look much like a gathering army of recruits without strong leadership or clearly understood marching orders. Four of the nearly twenty participants listed on the program did, however, manage to stimulate serious reflection on our christian political task.

Rich and Poor

In his brief introductory comments to the session on moral and social responsibility in economics, George De Vries of Northwestern College reminded the conferees that "the poor are

poor because the rich are so rich." Yet many are ready to accept this state of affairs: "After all, this is the name of the game!" Backed by hard statistics, De Vries pointed to our "structured system of inequity," which overlooks "distributive justice," which in turn poses an urgent challenge to Christians to "speak prophetically and act accordingly."

Creational Resources

John Olthuis of the Committee on Justice and Liberty, the only Canadian panelist on the roster, emphasized "doing love politically," namely "doing justice." He introduced the CJL as a center for christian political reflection and action, for hammering out positions on contemporary issues and seeking channels for joining discussion. As citizens of wealthy nations, we may not adopt an attitude of "we're rich, tough for the rest of you." For we are trustees of our creational resources, called to meet human needs. Since the United States and Canada are now rivalling each other in per capita consumption of petroleum, CJL is advocating an end to the exportation of Canadian oil to the United States, since "it is not good stewardship to offer a fifth of Scotch to an alcoholic if one is himself also an alcoholic."

Pluralist Politics

Stephen Monsma, state representative in the Michigan legislature, argued in a major address that "pluralist politics is to be preferred over unitary politics." The latter "views society as being fundamentally one." At present this unitary view "lies at the heart of the popularly held conception of politics in the United States." It holds that "the majority may rule and the minority must submit because ... it is assumed that the majority will usually be right." Thus "a mistaken minority is required to do what is actually in its own best interests." The pluralist, on the other hand, "sees society more as a patchwork quilt than as a seamless piece of cloth." He "sees the political process as a matter of allocating both advantages and disadvantages, of balancing the discordant cacophony of rival claims arising from society's innumerable groups so that a balance is struck which rewards some, rejects others, and —most commonly — gives part of what is wanted to yet others. These balances are struck through a process of bargaining and negotiating which usually ends in compromise."

While recognizing that "there is something about the bargaining-compromising character of pluralist politics and the concepts underlying it which tends to trouble the evangelical Christian determined to proclaim God's righteousness and justice," Monsma believes that there are "persistent factors which argue that the Christian can act and work within the framework of pluralist politics." For "dissent is likely to be tolerated, and uncomfortable, irritating minorities are likely to be able to have an impact." Given such pluralist politics, "there are three alternative approaches which evangelical Christian politics can take: the separate political party, the

individual, and the association approaches." Monsma advocates the third approach, "organized political action in the form of an association dedicated to promoting Christian political involvement and achieving public policies more closely reflecting the justice God intends for his world."

Culture Values and Mind-Sets

John Perkins of "Voice of Calvary," an association dedicated to doing pioneer work in black christian community development, gave a hard-hitting and moving talk on evangelism, social action, and political encounter. Short on time, he dropped his prepared speech in favour of a biographical account of his growing involvement in the Mendenhall Ministry, Jackson, Mississippi. Perkins grew up, as he said, "without religion," but with a deep awareness of the political and economic injustices of Mississippi society. To him the white church was not a viable option; for it was allied with the agents of oppression. The black church too was irrelevant, absorbed as it was in emotional experiences which left the problems untouched. But then came his conversion. Having abandoned Mississippi in 1947, he then returned around 1960, not as a "radio evangelist" with nothing but words, nor as a liberal with merely activistic deeds, but with a gospel designed to "mobilize black Christians around their own economic structures." "I am happy," he said, "to see evangelical churches in America getting involved." But meaningful change demands a fourfold recognition:

- 1) "That the war we wage today is against problems so great and so deep that traditional problem-solving techniques will fail."
- 2) "That traditional christian strategies will not work because they have relied too much on cultural values and mind-sets."
- 3) "That the only strategy which will work is a comprehensive, biblical strategy of community development."
- 4) "That there is a need today to break with our cultural biases and dedicate our lives to christian community development."

Perkins went on to say: "I am convinced that Christians, although sadly retarded during the last decades of withdrawal from social involvement, may be the only ones able to provide leadership in the development of a strategy for community development, because in order to make the necessary breaks with the present system and its mind-set, a person will have to experience a deep repentance, a thoroughgoing transformation of his mind through the power of God, and an openness to biblical strategies of human development."

Political Conscience

In the opening address Sherwood Wirt of *Decision* magazine put his finger on the problem: "Here we are in Grand Rapids, all evangelicals, one in Christ, yet our political bases are miles

apart. And when we leave this conference we shall probably return home believing what we did when we came, only more so." We all agree, he said, that christian involvement in the political arena must be biblical. "But there our agreement ends, for the Bible's politics are quite complex. In fact, under the umbrella of Scripture, Christians, have paraded the centuries with a spectrum of political banners ranging from the red of anarchistic radicalism to the purple of entrenched conservatism ... Within our own memory we have been confronted with evangelicals for Hitler, evangelicals for Ho Chi Minh, evangelicals for Strom Thurmond, and evangelicals for McGovern." The results are clear. "Each year is showing less evidence of christian leavening in Western culture." We believe that Jesus Christ is the only answer, but as Tom Skinner says, "We're not always sure what the questions are."

What was Wirt's answer? This: decision! The decisions will differ. Nevertheless, decision is what matters. "One person decides to plunge into politics, another to leave politics. Both are Christians, both act in faith believing, and God honors both. The one person he does not honor is the person who can not make up his mind ... If only someone would decide something, would commit himself! But the only real decision-makers in the political world today seem to be the Communists."

For himself Wirt then decided in favor of the "supernatural power" -of the gospel, which is "the only thing that will save mankind, not political power." Though John Wesley held that "we are to do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can," Wirt argued that this "is not what Jesus Christ commissioned and sent us into the world to do. He did not leave heaven to sprinkle holy water on our politics." Quoting Schlink, he said, "We do not preach the gospel in order to bring about earthly justice. On the contrary, we try to establish justice in order that we may preach the gospel." In parting Wirt warned against "copping out." He advocated "evangelism" and "good works." But what difference this would make for christian politics was not clear.

A Mixed Bag

The rest was a series of discordant notes.

Marvin Kusters of the White House Economic Policy Board spoke on the moral dimensions of economic choice, developing a threefold norm for such decision-making, namely service, fairness, and efficiency. The overall impact was this: Don't look for easy answers. Economics is just too complex. The only critical analysis offered was from within the system, little on the system itself.

Thomas Watson of IBM stood by the maxim that the central purpose of the corporation is still to "maximize profits." "I have seen corporations at their worst," he said, but they are still "fundamentally good." To turn them into "do-gooder organizations" is to undercut them. Despite their shortcomings, U.S. corporations have brought us the highest standard of living in the world. He therefore cautioned against tinkering with the system too much, lest we destroy it. Perhaps the system has "gone too far too fast"; for "the system we're harnessed to may just be too good."

Comments on the Run

Lucille Sider Dayton of the Daughters of Sarah and the Evangelical Women's Caucus: as a feminist fellowship for christian caring and sharing, we are concerned to eliminate sexist discrimination from everyday language, legislation, Bible translations, and Sunday School materials.

Leda Hartwell of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship: since it would prove impossible to convict most lawyers as christian, because of lack of evidence, if is our objective to establish obedience to the laws of God and man, and to create fellowship among christian lawyers.

Roger Kraat of the Christian Studies Center: our aim is to develop a christian mind for the restoration, renewal, and healing of society. We are therefore seeking to work out christian alternatives for political action, asking "how can we achieve politically the most acceptable society possible?"

Jane Muldoon of the Michigan Right -to-Life movement emphasized hope as the alternative to abortion, with this organization working for a constitutional amendment to assure human rights.

Herschell Turner of the Baxter Community Center (Grand Rapids): We are "trying to make the love of Christ manifest to needy people." In support of this, "social action is important." But "the common-denominator politics of the christian community, that is the problem."

John Strickland of the Christian Life Commission, Southern Baptist Conference, outlined his group's program as open lobbying, forming coalitions, encouraging people to run for office, organizing prayer breakfasts, and bringing constituency pressure to bear upon legislators.

Sharon Hess, representative from the State of Kansas: christian politics is not a matter of taking a stand on issues, but fostering love relationships among people in government, going to church

together, and engaging in deeds of compassion. The most effective public servants are "those who get along best with their colleagues." Christian citizens can support christian legislators best by keeping the "love letters" coming.

Paul Hess, Kansas senator and husband of Sharon, often faces the questions: "Is the system relevant?" "Are all parties and candidates alike?" "Do I vote my conscience or my constituency?" "How do I go about compromising?" Still, he sees himself basically as "the Keith Miller of evangelical politics."

James Johnson of the National Governor's Conference argues that christian politics is not concerned with principles and issues, but with personal relationships and practical manoeuvres. Since all political systems are revealed in the Bible, the christian community can support practicing politicians by engaging in Bible study, demonstrating how biblical personalities functioned politically — Mordecai as a campaign manager, Moses as a frustrated administrator, and David as a ruler who stooped to dirty politics.

Garrett Hagedorn of the New Jersey Senate urged "all Christians to get involved in government at all levels," for "every confessing Christian has the responsibility to see that the sovereignty of God and the kingship of Jesus Christ is respected in public life."

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