

God's People in God's World: Biblical Motives for Social Involvement¹

John Gladwin is an ordained Anglican priest and a former professor in the U.K. He is presently serving as the Director of the Shaftesbury Project, an organization that aims to help British Christians think through their Christian social responsibility. Though it was written basically with the British situation in mind, the InterVarsity folk correctly felt that it has enough food for thought for the North American reader to warrant publication in his territory.

Gladwin has set out “to think from the fundamental convictions of our Christian faith towards the social order.” He has sought “to provide a framework of convictions which will help to undergird the task of practical involvement in society.” Though he does address himself to a number of practical social issues, his main aim is not to suggest concrete ways in which such issues might be resolved. Rather, his goal is to provide a framework, a basic perspective, within which issues can be resolved. Such is a laudable goal, for it can free Christians from the shackles of pragmatism that so often dictate the direction in which they seek solutions. I judge that Gladwin does a basically commendable job.

How does a Christian involve himself in society? – that is Gladwin’s basic concern. He is quite aware of the traditional answers given to this question by Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans and Anabaptists. The Roman Catholic tradition is, unfortunately, ignored – unless one would wish to argue that Augustine was a Roman Catholic.

The discussion takes us through a number of Biblical themes that invariably lead to a sense of social responsibility, but often from a somewhat different angle. The first of these themes is that “God has acted in our history.” God has not spurned ordinary life in favour of more “spiritual” elements. The Bible, for example, is not a product of simple dictation, but God has spoken “to us in and through the

¹Review of John Gladwin, *God's People in God's World: Biblical Motives for Social Involvement*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980. Reviewed Aug/1981.

thought and style and experiences of His people.” God’s acts in history are “not super-spiritual events which set our own historical experience to one side. God’s actions do not run parallel to our politics and experiences. They take place within the context of the developing history of the world.” Gladwin is, it must be understood, not talking here of the wide universal sweep of God’s activity, but only in so far as God is busy with the *human* community. The conclusion drawn from this is that “the stuff of our political, social and material living is the proper context for obedient witness to God’s kingdom. Attempts to bypass these things fail to do justice to God’s own way of coming to us.” The Christian religion is incarnational. The Bible is not merely

a sort of extended tract on our personal walk with the Lord. It is about what God has done for His people in the midst of their history. It is full of politics, the proper ordering of religious and national communities, justice for individuals and nations, the meaning of oppression and suffering, and the outworking in all human relationships of the knowledge of God as Saviour and Lord.

Gladwin’s concern here is to undermine “the unhappy combination ... of personal pietism with social and political naiveté.” The Bible is “not a means of religious escapism in which personal fears and inadequacies are pandered to in a life of pious self-indulgence. It is a radical challenge of maturity and growth ... expressed outwardly in all our social, political and personal relationships.” It is not possible “to cut out of Christian life certain areas of experience as being dangerous or evil for Christian people,” for doing so would amount to setting the Christian life in opposition to God’s own way with the world.” The “test of faith ... is not so much right religious activity, as obedience to the new vision and understanding of human life given to us in the Word.” Divorcing spiritual reality from the world around us has caused us “to repeat the great truths of our faith with impeccable orthodoxy while at the same time conforming to the patterns of injustice and exploitation, of power and position in our world today. The radically transforming power of Jesus Christ is lost on us.”

The same emphasis continues in the chapter entitled “Made for Man.” Christians ought to pursue ethical and political matters because of their importance in today’s world. Though love and charity are not to be despised as ineffective, these must take on the structural dislocations of society. To get at the roots of problems, we must engage in “a penetrating analysis of the structural reasons for poverty and its allies.” Sin’s effects are not only felt in the individual, but also in the corporate structures we have built. We sin together, corporately. Furthermore, Christ reconciles not only the individual, but all things, including corporate affairs.

In the discussion on the effects of the Fall, we are told that the world and its structures are never neutral. They were not neutral when and to the extent that they can be said to have been created – “God provided them for man’s good” – and they are far from neutral after the Fall. Affected as they are by sin, the structures can “militate against God’s plan for fully human life in the world. They can oppose and hinder the work of the kingdom of God. Certainly it is man who creates social institutions. Yet once created they can become the context in which even good people can do harmful things to their neighbours” without realizing it. Since my dissertation, *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context*, could be described as a case study of good Christians doing *some* harmful things to their neighbours without being aware of it, I can only strongly assent vigorously to Gladwin’s analysis here. Thus, solutions that stop with the individual will fail, since they do not take all of reality into consideration.

Evangelicals, our author affirms, have traditionally been slow to appreciate the corporate aspect of evil. Though they have turned many individuals to Christ – and Gladwin deeply appreciates this --, they have not always understood how corruption seeps into the “power structures and cultural norms of society.” To put it in a different way, Evangelicals “have been good at responding compassionately to human need on an individual level, but bad at considering some of the structural roots of the problems themselves.” Here he provides three examples of Christians not understanding the structural issues: Lutherans with their two-kingdom theory could not resist the Nazi system; Christians in South Africa support the structures of apartheid; Evangelicals in the American Bible Belt

undergird racist structures. Though I accept Gladwin's argumentation here I doubt that apartheid is an expression of this particular problem. There are other sinister factors at work here.

One point stressed frequently is Gladwin's aversion to Christian organizations or to "baptizing" any structure or order. He thus criticizes Harvey Cox for baptizing the "marks of secularization" of the city. The urban structure is also affected by sin. We must criticize existing structures and we can posit limits outside of which we do not wish to go, but we cannot draw up blueprints for a perfect society or structure. Fixed or static conceptions are out, for we must respond to each situation with the totality of Biblical vision.

Gladwin, I repeat, is unhappy with any attempt at Christian organization, including Kuyperian versions. The very idea of a "Christian" structure repels him, for structures are too amenable to derailment. Though he adheres to a radical view with respect to the unity of life and religion, he does not feel that the Scriptures present a sufficiently clear and somewhat fixed conception upon which such organizations would have to build. The Christian is a great refuser, he rejects, he is "wary of ..." He does not present a blueprint, but is forever responding to changing situations. Being a true Anglican, Gladwin insists on retaining one's membership in the structures and reforming them from within, but then in quite a radical manner. He dislikes any approach that smells of what he dubs "separatism," a term covering a wide variety of movements, including Toronto's Kuyperian versions.

Gladwin's rejection of the latter is partially caused by a misunderstanding, I think. He lumps together a number of attempts at Christian separatism that are driven by different theologies and motives and alleges a common assumption for all of them. I submit, however, that his assumption does not hold for Kuyperian organizations. Neither are the "two main practical problems" Gladwin attributes to "separatist" organizations applicable to them. And if Gladwin's assessment of Kuyperian organization is so lacking in understanding, one cannot escape becoming equally dubious about his analysis of other separatist movements.

Furthermore, there is a contradiction in the book. Gladwin emphasized that no organization should be called “Christian,” for it is always subject to the effects of sin. Nevertheless, he speaks of the “Christian church.” Now that is also an organization, equally human and thus equally subject to sin. I think I understand Gladwin’s slip-up at this point.

One way in which one can describe Gladwin’s study is that it represents a radical rejection of all traditional Evangelical dualisms. I am extremely grateful for this largely successful attempt and I congratulate the brother. However, the radical vision of unity has not yet penetrated his conception of the organization called “church.” Here, apparently, there is one area where all his objections to Christian organizations do not hold. I suspect that Gladwin would not wish to be understood in that way, for it would go contrary to his view of the unity of life and religion. I would rather chalk it up to an as yet unfinished journey. The effects of Gladwin’s unified vision have not yet fully penetrated the area of the church.

I have by no means exhausted the topics treated in this book. There are sections on the Decalogue in which all sorts of issues come up for treatment: work, sex, family, property and others. Throughout the work there are discussions of political life, some quite extensive. Some of his views are quite radical, but that is to be expected once one marries the Gospel as closely to life as Gladwin does. There are a number of points that could stand further clarification while others call for some disagreement, but on the whole this is a commendable study.

I am grateful for this book as another indication that the Evangelicals are waking up. Little of what Gladwin advances is new to Reformed readers interested in social thought, but I have not before read such a radical approach coming out of the Evangelical movement. (I have not yet had the chance to read Allan Storkey’s.) Most of what I read of Evangelical social concern remains couched in dualistic terms. Here is one serious effort to overcome that severe restriction and one that should therefore be hailed by the Reformed community. I am beginning to believe that the Evangelical movement does have within its bosom seeds of true reform.

Do read it.