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Answering Ron Sider's Question – Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to Change the World?: A Conservative Evangelical Critique of *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*

Review article of Ronald J. Sider's book, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics: Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to Really Change the World?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008) by Jeff Gates, Information Services Librarian, Cedarville University, Cedarville, OH.

Introduction

In the subtitle of Ron Sider's book, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), he asked the question, "Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to Change the World?" This implies that Christians, and particularly Evangelicals, (p.12)¹ are letting an opportunity to change the world pass them by and that they are not changing the world or at least are not being as effective at changing the world as they could be. Sider wrote this book to provide a philosophical framework and implied methods to help Christians take advantage of the opportunities to change the world.

Few Evangelicals would doubt Dr. Sider's sincerity and diligence in writing this book. It is easy to see how *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics* was forty years in the making as the author revealed in his preface. Sider has obviously given much thought to the ideas expressed in this work. The bibliography and notes demonstrate the depth of scholarly support given to this book and are a treasure trove of important books on the topic of Christianity and politics. The author's passion for the topic is clearly felt by anyone who reads this work.

The main areas of criticism concern the philosophical framework and the implied methods that Professor Sider advocated. Since the latter springs from the former, it is Sider's philosophical framework that is examined primarily in this review. His methodology is criticized only as it illustrates the implications of his philosophical framework. In the mind of

¹ The page numbers in parentheses are from *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*.

this writer, there are three important issues that he did not deal with satisfactorily, i.e. building a biblical political philosophy, the role of the state, and the extent of human rights. This review is not an attempt to take away from what Dr. Sider has done, but simply to point out weak areas that need to be addressed. It is one attempt to answer the question, “Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to Change the World?”, from a conservative Evangelical perspective.

Building a biblical political philosophy

Professor Sider is to be commended for his earnest attempt to develop a biblical political philosophy and demonstrate its implications in several relevant areas of civic life, but he failed to acknowledge how difficult it is to build such a philosophy upon which Evangelicals agree. In his first chapter, the author criticized the Evangelical community for engaging in politics without a consistent, biblical political philosophy. In Sider’s second chapter, he proposed a well-argued plan to bring this about. He believed that Christians can build a normative framework by examining all relevant biblical passages, understanding them according to proper principles of exegesis, and forming a summary of all this material. He proposed that believers work within the Christian community to develop a framework for political engagement that is thoroughly grounded upon biblical beliefs about morality and the nature of person and upon systematic analysis of society. Furthermore, he recommended that teams of scholars and activists work together for their solutions, that views be held with humility and tentativeness, and that Christians be clearer about what they disagree are sound.

One important oversight of Dr. Sider was his failure to show that a consistent, biblical political philosophy was even possible. In a recent article, David Weeks contended that there was no biblical political philosophy.

For all its valuable moral teaching, the Bible does not fully address political life; it is not a treatise on political philosophy. Scripture may mandate social involvement, but it does

provide policy prescriptions. Hence, it is a mistake to attempt to ground activism in Scripture; the ground does not support the edifice.²

Sider failed to recognize that there are fundamental differences of opinion among Evangelicals about which biblical passages are “relevant” and which principles of exegesis are “proper.” This failure becomes more apparent as the book unfolds, since the author does not even acknowledge his own lack of objectivity in these two areas. There are places in this volume where his interpretation of the Bible were clearly shaped by ideas he had brought to the biblical text. This is true of every writer, but it is disturbing how little awareness he seems to have of his own biases in this book. For example, he affirmed N.T. Wright’s unusual view that the Old Testament promise of a new heaven and earth symbolized “radical socioeconomic and political changes.” Furthermore, Sider thought the “principalities and powers” of which the Apostle Paul spoke referred to the “structures and social mores of society” and “socioeconomic and cultural structures of the world, including government and the spiritual beings that lie behind these structures.” For him, “Jesus victory on the cross has won a decisive victory over the unjust socioeconomic and political structures of our world....Dramatic change, not just in the church but in the structures of the world outside, is possible because these fallen structures have been conquered at the cross and resurrection.” (pp. 68-70) He wrote that this did not mean that evil was overthrown, but just hindered until Jesus brought the kingdom in its fullness. In the meantime, he wrote that this means that “it is possible for Christians and others of goodwill to move society substantially in the direction of justice and peace.” (p. 71) The author argued that because Christians know what kind of society God will bring to earth, they are motivated to attempt to bring “more justice, peace, and society wholeness now.” (p. 74) However, the

² David L. Weeks. “The Uneasy Politics of Modern Evangelicalism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 30, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 408.

eventual overthrow of evil in society by Jesus does not necessarily imply that Christians should do the same now.

The role of the state

Sider contended that the state has a role to provide for its citizens. He acknowledged that some believe the role of the state is limited to protection from evil, and he attempted to prove his case. But, in this writer's studied opinion, his arguments are unconvincing.

In chapter three, Sider wrote about the limitations of the role of the state. He stated that the spirituality of persons implied that they could choose to change history and defy governments if this interfered with their relationship with God. The author also affirmed that the materiality of persons implied the importance of history, politics, and material well-being of persons, and that having the same Creator meant persons were related and responsible for each other. Sider declared that the entrance of sin into the human race brought broken relationships of persons with God, others, themselves, and the earth. He reasoned that because government is composed of fallen persons, it must be limited and all attempts to bring about a utopia on earth through education and political reform must be rejected. Sider's temporary solution for fallen persons was spiritual transformation, and his solution for corrupted society was political action. Personal spiritual transformation has much biblical support, but attempting to change society through political action is a controversial issue among Evangelicals. Most Evangelicals would agree with the author's statement about the state's limited role and the reasons for this, i.e. 1) all authority came from God, 2) human freedom required a limited state, 3) states were led by fallen persons, and 4) God ordained other institutions beside the state.

In his forth chapters, he also dealt with the role of the state. According to Sider, the state was important for three reasons, i.e. 1) its decisions affect every sector of society, 2) it alone has the authority and power to use coercion to enforce its laws in every area of society, and 3) it has

a central role in providing a framework in which all institutions and persons can both enjoy their own freedom and work together effectively through the writing, implementing, and enforcing of fair laws. Sider declared that the state's ultimate authority comes from God rather than people and that it had two essential tasks, i.e. restrain evil by punishing evildoers and promote the common good of society. Most Evangelicals agree with this first task, but the second task is debatable. He made an honest attempt to provide scriptural support for this second assertion, but as each passage is examined the reader discovers that Sider tried to make some biblical passages say what they do not mean. For example, he used Paul's reference to the state being God's servant for good in Romans 13:4 to support a positive role of the government, but in the context of this verse Paul defined this as restraining evil and punishing evildoers. Sider claimed that the state's positive purpose of promoting the common good was implied by the fact that people needed cooperative effort and leaders to carry out the creation mandate, yet this does not mean that the cooperative effort and leadership should come from the state. Another example is Sider's insistence that 1 Timothy 2:1-3 taught that the Roman government was to support the proclamation of the Gospel by restraining evil and providing roads for easy travel and communication. On the contrary, in this passage Paul was asking Timothy to pray for government officials so that Christians would be left alone to spread the Gospel. A third example was his teaching that some kings of Israel and Israel's ideal king, the Messiah, who defended the poor and oppressed and provided for the needs of their followers, were positive examples of political action for society today. However, applying the examples of kings of the theocratic nation of Israel to other nations is not necessarily valid. In Professor Sider's fourth example, he argued that since the evil principalities and powers of the state were broken by Christ according to Col.2:15, they were now capable of good. From this he assumed that the state was to restrain evil and promote good, but in the opinion of this reviewer this is an

untenable assumption based upon poor biblical exegesis. The implications of this wrong assumption, i.e. the positive role of the state to promote good, can be seen in Sider's suggestion that the state should "build transportation systems that everyone can use,... guarantee that all children have access to quality education, and...ensure that all citizens enjoy an appropriate level of health care." (pp. 92-93)

The extent of human rights

Nothing is emphasized more and understood less in the United States than human rights. There is much confusion about rights and privileges, even among Evangelicals. For many, the right of the "pursuit of happiness" has subtly changed to the right of happiness. Sider is to be commended for his sincere effort to give biblical support for his definition of human rights, but again in the opinion of this reviewer his interpretation of the Bible has been influenced his own ideas about human rights.

The heart of Dr. Sider's book seems to be his fifth chapter entitled, "Justice." He correctly claimed that human rights were based primarily upon two biblical teachings, i.e. the justice of God and the image of God in persons. He wrote that humans were to be like God in their justice. As God is impartial and treats people equally, so people were to treat others as equal with themselves. He also stated that if each person was made in the image of God, each person was equally valuable to God and therefore to be treated as equals by other persons. This is a logical implication, but it is important to remember that human rights are not based upon the intrinsic worth of people but on God. These rights are God-given.

Professor Sider's next step was to make implications from the justice of God and persons being in the image of God. He argued for the accepted three types of justice by "political thinkers." Commutative justice meant treating people fairly, procedural justice referred to the procedures and processes that must be in place to guarantee justice, and distributive justice was

the fair distribution of the material goods of society. He admitted that this third type of justice was controversial, but attempted to support all three types through studies of the use of two Hebrew words, i.e. *mishpat* (justice) and *tsedaqah* (righteousness), and narrative in the Old Testament. Justice and righteousness took place when the situation in which people were treated unjustly was righted. The author claimed that the Bible taught that this righting of injustice was equal to “ending the [needy’s] oppression, setting them back on their feet, giving them a home, and leading them to prosperity and restoration.” (p. 109) For Sider, justice meant guaranteeing food and shelter for the poor and empowering them to be materially productive so that they could actively participate in the community. He insisted that because the poor were not as economically advantaged as the rich, God sought to help them more than the rich. Since God’s justice was the standard for human justice, people were to do the same. This is an interesting idea, but one is hard pressed to demonstrate from the Bible that God helps the poor more than the rich because they are economically unequal. The true basis of God’s special concern for the poor was the tendency of the rich to treat them as objects rather than image-bearers of God. The rich treating the poor as image-bearers of God does not necessarily entail giving them materially. Nor does it inevitably mean “finding mechanisms that offer everyone the opportunity to share in the ownership of these productive resources, guaranteeing in an information society, for example, that every child has genuine opportunity to receive quality education.” (p. 122) Sider’s support is drawn largely from God’s commands to the nation of Israel that may not necessarily apply to other times and cultures. Sider answered this objection by claiming that Israel was to be a witness to the nations and that the same standards were applied to persons and societies outside Israel. He stated that is foolish to try to apply specific commands given to Israelites, and then insisted that the basic paradigm of God’s moral expectations of Israel were normative today. On the contrary, that Israel was to be a witness to the nations does not prove that the standards that

God gave to Israel were normative for those nations. Nor did some examples of God requiring similar behavior of other nations demonstrate that God expected them to meet His moral expectations for Israel. Sider's idea of justice is correct as long as one remembers the focus of God's justice is seeing that each person is treated as His image-bearers, not to see that each person has equal material provisions. Sider's only support from the New Testament, i.e. Acts 2 and Acts 4, was a temporary example of people voluntarily helping others in need and was not necessarily a normative model of distributive justice.

The author claimed that being in the image of God gave persons certain rights. He stated that since God gave each person the freedom to choose Him, the state owed each person the freedom to respond. He reasoned that since God gave every person a mandate to exercise faithful stewardship over the earth and to use its resources to influence society for good, "society owes each person the space, the freedom, and a share in the available resources to exercise this divine mandate." (p. 105) Furthermore, since persons are "unable to be what the Creator intended without a generous sufficiency of material things...[j]ustice therefore demands that every person has the opportunity...to enjoy a generous sufficiency of material necessities." (p. 105) Sider asserted that God's image in persons implied freedom of choice, faithful stewardship over the earth, and the influence of society for good. His only caveat was that there was to be a balance between individual rights and the common good of all. Many Evangelicals agree with some of these implications, but not with all of them. For example, many disagree that these human rights included "a generous sufficiency of material necessities." What people need to reach their potential does not necessarily imply that it is their right to have it.

The author discussed Human Rights, Democracy, and Capitalism in his sixth chapter. Here Dr. Sider made a more explicit connection between rights and justice by his insistence that human rights implied an obligation of people to treat others in a certain way. He insightfully

criticized the secular overemphasis and under emphasis of the individual as a bases of human rights. “Over against radical individualism,” he wrote, “Christians insist on the social nature of persons, the importance of community, and every person’s obligation to contribute to the common good. On the other hand, Christians reject both traditional societies that almost totally subordinate individuals to their family, clan, or tribe and modern totalitarian societies that completely subordinate the individual to the state.” (p. 131) In the next sections of the chapter, the author described two types of human rights that seemed to correspond to commutative and distributive justice, i.e. civil-political rights and social-economic rights. He insisted that both types of rights were equally important because persons were both spiritual beings and material beings. Again, it is debatable if needs implies rights. His examples of civil-political rights included life, religious freedom, freedom of speech, fair courts, and universal suffrage, and his examples of social-economic rights were food, shelter, clothing, productive assets, private property, health care, education, and employment. Few Evangelicals would disagree that the Bible supports the right to life, religious freedom, fair courts, and private property. His argument that freedom of speech was a way to respect the dignity of each person was especially effective. He also argued that free elections better ensured the decentralization of power 1) to allow persons to work with God to create new things and influence history and 2) to keep political powers in check. The second argument is much stronger than the first. He admitted that the right to freedom of speech and vote were not as explicitly supported in the Bible as the other rights. Sider’s basis for the rights to food, shelter, clothing, and health care from the right to life is not valid. The right to life refers to protection from harm, while the other “rights” refer to the promotion of health. The right for people not to be harmed unjustly does not imply that they should be fed or cared for physically. He did qualify this “right to food” with the obligation of people to work for their keep, yet he insisted that even people who failed to meet this obligation

were entitled to “bread and water.” (p. 135) This seems inconsistent, since he claimed that rights were based upon persons being in the image of God rather than their obligation to work. He based the right for productive assets on the creation mandate, but qualified this by writing that the recipients of productive assets were to act responsibly, care for themselves, be dignified members of their communities, exercise their creative gifts, and serve the common good. Again these qualifications seem to remove productive assets from the sphere of human rights. He based the right to education on the implication that this was necessary for persons to be dignified participants in their community and the right to work on the implication that this was necessary for each person to express their unique identities, care for their needs, and serve others. These may be requirements for persons to reach their potentials, but few would agree that they qualify as necessities or as basic human rights. Sider concluded this chapter by contending that the best form of government and economy was democracy and market economics because they supported human rights better than any other political system. It is hard to reconcile this conclusion with all the “rights” that Sider advocated since they would require heavy taxation and take away economic incentives, both actions undermining democracy and market economies.

Conclusion

In Ron Sider’s book, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*, he sought to answer the question expressed in its subtitle, i.e. “Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to Change the World?” His answer was thorough, but hardly one upon which most Evangelicals would agree. This is not so much a criticism of Sider, as recognition of the difficulty of answering the question. Sider perceptibly saw that answering the question required a biblical political philosophy. Those who have read this review will hopefully see that if building a biblical political philosophy is difficult, building one upon which Evangelicals agree is nigh impossible. Before Evangelicals agree on a biblical political philosophy, they must agree on the role of the

state and the extent of human rights. Is the state responsible to protect its citizens from evil only or also to provide for them? Do basic human rights include civil-political rights only or also social-economic rights? In other words, do persons have rights to life, religious freedom, freedom of speech, fair courts, and universal suffrage only, or do they also have rights to food, shelter, clothing, productive assets, private property, health care, education, and a job? Many Evangelicals disagree about how to answer Sider's question because they disagree about these two issues.

This is not to say that Dr. Sider's efforts to build a biblical political philosophy are without merit. Eventually most Evangelicals come to realize that there is a conflict between their faith and the government. Many either ignore the conflict or settle for simple answers to the conflict. Others, like Ron Sider, are deeply aware of this conflict and conscientiously and diligently search for answers in the Bible to resolve it. Dr. Sider has done thinking Evangelicals a service by providing a thorough model for their own search to resolve this conflict.