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With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism (Book Review)

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WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR WHOM? THE RECENT
EVANGELICAL DEBATE OVER CAPITALISM. By Clark M. Gay.
William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1991.

Those who for scholarly or journalistic convenience aggregate hundreds of Christian denominations into four or five “movements” put the radical Christian pacifist Jim Wallis (of *Sojourners* magazine) and Dr. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, in one theological category. They are both evangelicals, heirs of Calvinism and the Radical Reformation, both practitioners of “conservative Protestant orthodoxy,” both believers in the fundamental authority of the Bible.

And, because both of them, and thousands of Christians who follow one or both of them, are trying to respond to the criticism that evangelicalism (or “fundamentalism”) neglects social and economic issues, they are in an ugly debate over the moral value of American capitalism.

The “vociferous evangelical left” of sit-ins and nuclear freezes on one side and proponents of “compassionate free enterprise” on the other do not agree on economic, political, or social issues, but neither wants to smother disagreement, as their forebears may have done, by saying that personal salvation is the only thing that is important for biblical faith.

Clark Gay, who says he is also an evangelical, teaches at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. In this thorough and carefully researched study, he describes the evangelical disagreement over social issues and traces it through historic quarrels between Carl McIntire on the right and Carl F.H. Henry on the left, to the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and the resistance it attracted from revival-meeting preachers, to what both sides in the modern debate regard as the good old days—the early nineteenth century, when Christians flourished in cohesive communities of family, town, and church, and the government left them alone.

The “key symbolic issue” is capitalism. The evangelical left wants to abolish it in the name of scriptural justice; the right canonizes it in the name of liberty. Gay argues that both sides, for all of their talk about scripture, take their inspiration from secular sources: Those who argue social issues within evangelical groups are “a chaplaincy for competing class interests,” the left arguing collectivism in the name of community, the right arguing Enlightenment individualism in the name of freedom.

Both sides have been tricked into supporting what Gay calls "secular consciousness," that is, "intense individuation . . . a problem-solving orientation . . . materialism . . . deep-seated insecurity and an acute sense of alienation." Both sides trade their scriptural tradition for the illusion of being relevant in a political debate that has no interest in describing Christian life.

"Both left and right have brought extrabiblical sources to bear on social and economic questions, and in an increasingly authoritative fashion. . . . [T]hose . . . on the left . . . employ neo-Marxist analysis to assess the world-historical situation. . . . [T]hose on the right . . . tend to augment the biblical record . . . by reading it through a classical-liberal grid."

Gay invokes Peter Berger's theory of the New Class as a way to explain the history of this corrupted theological debate. The left proclaims radical obedience to scripture and sides with the New Class—educators and those in government who administer welfare programs. The right says that such radical obedience to scripture is nothing but moral irresponsibility and sides with the remnant of the old commercial middle class who distrust government and resent being taxed to maintain the welfare state.

Both sides neglect what H. Richard Niebuhr defined as the two basic questions in any ethical debate among Jews and Christians: (i) What is going on? (ii) What is God doing in the world? The evangelical left, Gay says, mistakenly blames capitalism for the effects of technology, urban growth, and bureaucracy. The conservatives "neglect the fact that modern capitalism . . . helps to create . . . the very coercive statism they protest."

What socially conscious evangelicals should do, in Gay's assessment, is to rediscover their theological commonality, unite in trying to describe what is going on in America, put social issues in a prominent second place in their concern for the church, and practice humility in the way they debate with one another. This would mean a recognition that, for those who argue social issues in the open (and what evangelical quarrel is ever conducted anywhere else?), "the pressure to appear socially relevant" has become "as important as actually contending with social problems." The cure for the secular distraction of relevance is to identify social solutions as less than ultimate:

"[T]he gospel of Jesus Christ must never be entirely collapsed into the quest for political-economic justice, for this quest itself stands in need of redemption and must ultimately be overcome by love. Those on both the left and the right who imply that the gospel is principally

a matter of establishing a particular kind of social order are gravely mistaken, even when they herald this order under that banner of justice.”

The manner of political argument among Christians should, he says (using Glenn Tinder’s phrase), become “a polity of imperfection”: “An evangelical economic ethic must exhibit a kind of prescriptive humility. It must resist the temptation to attach the name of Christ to particular political-economic programs, for he stands above all of them in judgment.”

The model for a scriptural method in discourse on social issues is the Sabbath, “a sharp distinction between God’s creative activity and mankind’s, the people of Israel . . . prophetically urged . . . to put aside their own goals and projects, and to rest instead in their knowledge of God’s goals and projects for them.” The ferment that has been a temptation for both sides in the debate in the church about justice reminds Gay of Martin Luther’s drunken peasant. The poor man is helped to get on one side of his horse, only to fall off the other. Like the peasant, any worldly economic order “oscillates continually between an individualism which destroys community, and a collectivism which destroys freedom.”

Thomas L. Shaffer