BOOKS I HAVE READ: EVANGELICALS AND SOCIAL ACTION

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A short review of a very good book indeed.
Category: Observations

What can I say? Evangelicals and Social Action: From John Wesley to John Stott, by Ian Shaw was published last month, I just wish it had appeared while I was doing the literature review for my PhD, it would have saved me a lot of work.

The book is a paperback of just over 300 pages, including a decent index. The style is semi-academic, that is it is not a difficult read, but there is a good selection of footnotes for those who want to follow things up in more depth. It will set you back about Â£15 for a hard copy and about half of that for the Kindle version. In either case, it is a very good buy.

The book starts with a clear conviction summed up in a quote from Stanley Mooneyham:

> *There are two mandates in the New Testament. One is witness, the other is service. To ignore either of them is to seriously cripple the church . . . to engage in evangelism of soul without recognition that those souls also have bodies is foolish and unreal . . . love which is demonstrated in tangible acts of Christian caring is irresistible.*
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> *p. 1*

Beyond a brief introduction which considers some of the evangelical objections to this position, Shaw does not set out to defend this position theologically. In stead he argues from the point of view of history.

The first chapter takes a broad sweep, covering gospel proclamation and social action from the early church to the Reformation and then considering the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

This then sets the scene for the second and much larger section of the book which consists of in depth studies of particular issues coupled with relevant character studies. These 18 chapters (which are further subdivided into broad themes) consider a range of topics such as the care for the poor, education, care for children at risk, care for the elderly and prison reform. Each chapter gives an overview of the way in which evangelicals addressed the issue under consideration during the period from the 18th to the early mid 20th century and then follows this treatment with a pertinent character study. The studies range from famous evangelical leaders such as Wesley and Spurgeon, through politicians (Wilberforce) to industrialists (Titus Salt) and on to missionaries (Amy Carmichael).

The book closes with a short conclusion, drawing together some of the threads.

The device of alternating a general treatment with specific character studies works very well and helps to anchor the issues being discussed in human experience.

The bottom line is that this is a very good book indeed, but let me make a few bullet point comments.

- The breadth of evangelical involvement in social issues during the time covered is staggering, as is the wide range of people involved in them. I was familiar with some of the issues, but I don't think many people will have the sort of breadth that this book provides.
- It seems inconceivable to me that evangelicals could have ever argued (and some still do) that we should not engage in social issues. It slightly amuses me that these arguments tend to emerge from the conservative side of the fold, from people who often argue that we need to know more church history. Yes, we do need to know more of our own history, and this book is a great place to start.
- I was heartened to read the extent to which involvement with social action was integral to the early mission movement. It didn't surprise me, but it is always good to have your perceptions confirmed.
- On a slightly less positive note, the shear amount of information and people covered did become a little overwhelming. That being said, this was probably a function of the way I read the book. I would advise taking it in small chunks, rather than sitting down and reading the whole thing in two sittings as I did.

So who should read this? I can think of three broad categories of people who might be interested. Firstly, students of mission and church history should be familiar with it, it will become a standard text for some aspects of their field. I'd also encourage those who work with deprived communities (in the UK or elsewhere) to get to grips with this book, they will find inspiration for the journey in the lives of those who have trod the same path. However, while I think that this book has a good deal to offer to the specialist, it also provides a great read for any general reader who wants to know a bit more about the subject.

As always, here are a few quotes to give an idea of the contents:

> *One statement appearing to question the connection between gospel proc- lamation and social concern, â€˜Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words,â€™ is frequently*

attributed to Francis of Assisi (c.1181â€“1226). This is problematic for two reasons. The first is that Francis never said it. In chapter 17 of his Regula non-Bullata (1221) he did say, â€˜let all the brothers preach by their deedsâ€™, but the phrase was not included in the Rule of Francis itself. The second reason is that Francis was convinced that words were necessary. Indeed, the same chapter urges preachers to promote the â€˜utility and edification of the people, by announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and gloryâ€™, albeit with â€˜brevity of speechâ€™.

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Puritan theologians remained convinced that the evidence of a personâ€™s changed relationship with God would be apparent in moral transformation and active social concern.Â

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In a speech to the Social Science Congress in Liverpool in 1858, Shaftesbury explained how he was regularly told that spiritual remedies for the problems of society were sufficient, and that he laboured too much for the body, which was only perishable. Against this, he argued how difficult a purely spiritual approach was when faced by disease, deprivation, starvation, unsanitary living conditions and scenes where crime and immorality flourished. He reminded his hearers that â€˜the same God who made the soul made the bodyâ€™. The body was created for â€˜fitness for His serviceâ€™, and the Christianâ€™s â€˜great objectâ€™ was to do every- thing possible to remove obstructions to this great purpose: â€˜our bodies, the temples of the Holy Ghost, ought not to be corrupted by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for His service by unnecessary sufferingâ€™.

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Disaster relief also became a significant part of the ministry of evangelical missionaries in the late nineteenth century, especially in China, which became the focus of considerable mission efforts. Timothy Richard (1845â€“1919), a Welshman who had experienced a personal awakening to faith during the 1859 revival, was in 1869 accepted by the Baptist Missionary Society. He served in the Shantung and Shanxi provinces. Richard pushed mission into new avenues when a devastating famine was experienced in northern China in 1876â€“9, which cost some 9.5 million lives. He used the famine to call people to repent- ance and to turn to

God, but also disseminated news of the devastation in wealthy areas of China, and overseas. Richard and the North American Pres- byterian John Nevius took a lead in distributing relief in the winter of 1876â€“7, but tens of thousands were dying. Timothy Richard, and David Hill of the English Wesleyan mission (see the character study below), thereafter became the key figures in distributing relief funds. Such compassionate activity won the gratitude of many Chinese towards the mission: for some the first contact they had with Christians was through their role in disaster relief. It was a decisive moment in the developing missionary consciousness, making emer- gency relief a continuing concern of overseas mission.

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Salt also supported the campaign for establishing Saturday as a half-day holiday, to allow people time for recreation and shopping so they could attend churches on Sunday. Saltâ€™s wider pastoral concern for his workers included the tradition of an annual works outing to the Yorkshire Dales, started in 1849. The Bradford Observer hailed this as a demonstration of â€˜Practical Christianityâ€™. He was also environmentally conscious, and fitted special burners to his mill chimneys to reduce the emissions of sulphur.

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Sunday schools proved to be a significant educational success. Between 1780 and 1830, when the population of England increased by 100 per cent, the numbers of those able to read increased by 500 per cent.Â

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Evangelical Nonconformist missionaries were again accused of being complicit in the rising. In the choice between loyalty to the state establishment and the white planters, and support for the slaves who appealed to the missionaries as their allies, they sided with the slaves, demanding the free- dom to preach and teach them. As a result, fourteen Baptist chapels and six Methodist chapels were demolished and others were closed. The reports the missionaries sent back to Britain helped sway public opinion in favour of immediate emancipation.

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I am very grateful to the publishers, IVP for providing me with an electronic review copy of this book. I have attempted not to allow this generosity to influence my review. If it was a stinker, I'd have said so.