

**Christian Participation in Social Amelioration:
For The Sake of the World**

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March 19, 2016

An admirable mark of evangelicalism is the requirement of theological justification for engaging in social action. We see this fundamental need for the justification of actions in Bebbington's identification of *biblicism* as a defining feature of evangelicalism. Biblicism, for evangelicals, is the presupposition that Scripture plays an authoritative role in informing all that the evangelical does.ⁱ However, Scripture is not the only factor in the construction of such evangelical theological justification. Indeed, the way that Scripture plays its authoritative role varies from evangelical to evangelical.ⁱⁱ Basic to evangelical practical theology, or theologies of action, are the themes and narratives that are preferred by evangelicals as interpretive frameworks for constructing their theological justifications of social action.

In his critique of evangelical social action, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Carl Henry boldly draws our attention to the helpful theme of the eschatological reign of God (Kingdom) as just such an interpretative framework. This paper will begin with Henry's radical call for evangelical participation in the work of social amelioration. This paper will then trace out some of the strengths and weaknesses of employing an eschatological framework for constructing theological justification of Christian participation in social amelioration. Finally this paper will propose, with Henry, that a theology of participation with God in the amelioration of the world is a crucial task for evangelicals.

Carl Henry's Radical Proposal

Henry writes as a Fundamentalist at a time when most evangelicals would self-identify as Fundamentalists. Fundamentalism emerged in North America at the turn of the twentieth century as an effort to clearly define the evangelical faith over against changes in society, changes in academia, and even the influence of theologically liberal thought on Protestant theology. The increasing secularity of society coupled with the influx of Roman Catholic immigrants

threatened the historically privileged social role of the evangelicals. Universities founded by evangelical traditions to train ministers were evolving into liberal arts schools and as a result scholarship is no longer comfortably tied to theological concerns. Additionally the rise of Social Gospel theologies seem to co-opt the theological language of evangelicals while placing the emphasis on social action over gospel communication. These changes, and others, were seen as a threat to the preservation of the fundamentals of evangelical Christianity. Henry writes out of his concern that in their effort to preserve their evangelical orthodoxy, the Fundamentalists abandoned their evangelical heritage of social action, left their historical universities, and allowed the Kingdom theme be taken over by the Social Gospel movement. It is this retreat from the language of Kingdom that is centrally important to my presentation today.

Henry's call was radical not only in taking its lead from the notion of Kingdom, but also in its focus on the world as a place of participation with God's work and with the works of justice initiated by those concerned citizens not necessarily animated by evangelical Christian faith. Henry's driving interest in *Uneasy Conscience* is the capacity for effective evangelical witness. In abandoning social activism, Henry felt that evangelicals forfeit an important aspect of their Christian witness. By the 1930s the public perception of the Fundamentalist movement was tarnished by its separatist tendencies and its seeming lack of relevance to society as a whole. Later Fundamentalists, like Henry, will lament this loss of social relevance seeing it as a barrier to effectively communicating the good news of the gospel to those outside of their churches. Henry will chart a way back to a more robust public Christian witness by reclaiming the notion of God's eschatological reign as a theological justification for evangelical participation in social amelioration.

Eschatology is important to any evangelical theological justification. Eschatology is the study of ultimate things such as the end of history. For many evangelicals eschatology is predominantly understood to be what Paul Boyer calls ‘prophecy belief’. Prophecy belief is the idea “that the course of history, and the sequence of events that will herald the end of the world, are foretold in the Bible.”ⁱⁱⁱ Eschatology, understood as ‘prophecy belief’, is used to interpret everything from wars to the environmental crisis as if such events and issues are simply part of a preordained historical trajectory leading towards an impending return of a God of judgment and wrath.^{iv} However, a broader understanding of eschatology takes as its subject all things that are final or ultimate, such as death, dying, judgment, eternity, heaven, and even hell. Rather than focusing on a speculative timetable for the future, a broader engagement with the subject allows us, among other things, to examine how eschatological narratives, including those which speculate about world events, orient individuals towards the future. In this paper I will follow this broader usage of eschatology as a way of assessing the capacity of eschatological narratives for justifying the presence or absence of evangelicals in projects of social amelioration.

Insisting that eschatological narratives help orient us toward the future allows us to qualify such narratives as being either pessimistic or optimistic towards their imagined futures. Eschatologies are always framed within narratives which depict our world and its future by delineating the role that humanity will take in the anticipated future and in bringing that future about. Pessimistic orientations often regard human action, earth history, or both, as ultimately irrelevant. In this paper I will examine premillennial dispensationalism as one such pessimistic eschatological narrative, popular with the Fundamentalist movement.^v Optimistic orientations have the opposite tendency, they often regard human action and earth history as the site of eschatological fulfilment. In this paper I will examine the Social Gospel as having an optimistic

eschatological narrative which depicts humanity as builders of God's Kingdom. Finally, Henry will offer us an alternative eschatological narrative, one that marries optimism for the future and the call for participation with the supernatural and sovereign work of God. It is this final eschatological narrative that inspires the works of the heirs of Henry's *Uneasy Conscience*.

Historically Pessimistic Eschatological Narratives

Fundamentalists overwhelmingly adopted pessimistic eschatological narratives as a response to their discomfort with the loss of their privileged social role in North America. North American society follows a liberal or progressive trajectory which includes a secular outlook regarding society. In this secular outlook, religion, especially as it is formulated with personal and individualistic language, is relegated to the private lives of individuals. Increasingly, this privatized religion is excluded from the important conversations about our socio-political reality sometimes called the public sphere. The Fundamentalists' adoption of pessimistic eschatological narratives was strategic as it allowed them to theologically justify their retreat from participation in the amelioration of society.

Premillennial dispensationalism became the preferred eschatological narrative for Fundamentalists. This particular narrative lends itself to 'prophecy belief', as it intentionally views history as a sequence of events heralding the anticipated end (eschaton). Yet, the value of human participation in these events is minimized. Premillennial dispensationalists are encouraged to participate in promoting only those events that match their favoured eschatological timetables. For example, adoption of premillennial dispensationalism led many Fundamentalists to embrace Zionism, which is an uncritical and often zealous support for establishing an Israeli state in Palestine with little regard for the just treatment of displaced Palestinians let alone the well-being of the Israeli occupants. The animating concern of

premillennial dispensationalism's promotion of social engagement is not social betterment, but, rather social annihilation as the eschaton is ushered in through helping along the historical fulfilment of an eschatological timetable. Although all eschatological narratives animate some form of social engagement, the character of that engagement is informed by the outlook of pessimism or optimism engendered by the narrative. The pessimism premillennial dispensationalism incites is readily extended to the realm of society. As a result, society is most often vilified as a hardship to be endured until a future time when God will return to bring about the end. Additionally, society is predicted to decline continually until this future return of God in which a faithful few will escape the evils of this age.^{vi}

While the pessimism of premillennial dispensationalism is problematic in terms of animating social amelioration it is important to recognize what Fundamentalists were attempting to safeguard in terms of their theology. Fundamentalists are so named because they rally around a set of fundamental theological identifiers. Not the least of which is the sovereignty of God in human affairs. For the Fundamentalist a core belief is that ultimately the future is in God's hands. Despite the deterministic and fatalistic tendencies inherent in many Fundamentalists' formulations of God's sovereignty, it is important to recognize that for the evangelical God is always the primary actor in the narrative of history. Henry will note that how Fundamentalists do this is to relegate the language of Kingdom to the eschatological future, disconnected from present history, and that this leads to an inability to talk about Kingdom.^{vii} Which, as I will now argue, is a direct response to the way that the Social Gospel movement takes up the language of Kingdom.

Historically Optimistic Eschatological Narratives

The Fundamentalists' adoption of premillennial dispensationalism is, at least in part, a reaction to the theology of the Social Gospel movement. At its best, the Social Gospel represented a growing awareness among Protestant Christians of the inadequacy of their "understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and [their] share in the sins of all individuals within it."^{viii} The Social Gospel asserts that theologies which narrowly focus on the individualistic or the private dimension of religion are unable to inspire adequate works of social amelioration.^{ix} As an alternative to individualistic religion, the Social Gospel imagines religion as a corporate participation in building a better society and it achieves this re-imagined role of religion through a particular eschatological narrative. The view of the end promoted by the Social Gospel is one in which humanity actively and intentionally builds the Kingdom of God.

The Social Gospel's eschatological narrative of building the Kingdom is both historically and socially optimistic. It imagines not only a future of social betterment, it insists that the primary actors in creating that future are those people who take part in this project of building the reign of God. The intention of these Social Gospel proponents is to restore an emphasis on the immanence of God. As Walter Rauschenbusch insists "[t]he social gospel is concerned about a progressive social incarnation of God."^x This progressive social incarnation is a way of saying that the immanence of God is expressed through the actions of humanity. Even though Rauschenbusch carefully situates this notion of social incarnation as participation with God's activity in history, later proponents of the Social Gospel do not always share his theological sensitivities. The Social Gospel's understanding of the Kingdom reign of God is less about an eschatological reality and more about an immanent human project.

Carl Henry expressed concerns over the Social Gospel's potential to reduce Christianity to a social works exercise. Henry charges that for the Social Gospel "social sensitivity still runs

far deeper than theological sensitivity.”^{xi} And while the Social Gospel does emphasise an imperative for participation in social amelioration its social vision lacks an adequate emphasis on God’s “works in history as well as above history.”^{xii} Henry offers a corrective view of the Kingdom as not something that we build, but something that we participate with. This view maintains God’s sovereignty while calling for the human response of participation. Henry calls this approach a supernatural participation in social amelioration. So named supernatural in that this participation is responsive to God as the primary actor in and above history.

In their efforts to differentiate themselves from the Social Gospel proponents, Fundamentalists reject important insights from Social Gospel theologies. Henry expresses this concern in terms of an evangelical orthodoxy that comes at the expense of an evangelical social imperative.^{xiii} This is but one dimension of an unfortunate narrowing of evangelical concerns. To differentiate itself over against the emphasis on the social nature of sin, Fundamentalists narrow their understanding of sin to a personal, transactional reality. In order to avoid the Social Gospel emphasis on works from devaluing the individual’s need for salvation, Fundamentalists abandon social justice works in favour of separation and community protection in order to safeguard their message of personal salvation.^{xiv} Finally, to correct for the Social Gospel’s overemphasis on an optimistic eschatology, Fundamentalists retreat into an overly futurist and pessimistic eschatology that is unable to inspire adequate works of social amelioration. All of the changes wrought by differentiation adversely affect the Fundamentalist’s public witness.

Witness as an Evangelical Concern

Witness is always a driving concern for evangelical theologies. Witness consists of both a content and a capacity or a means to communicate that content effectively.^{xv} For the Fundamentalists there is an emphasis on the content of witness being protected in the form of an

evangelical orthodoxy. However, this particular emphasis on content comes at the expense of the Fundamentalists' capacity to effectively communicate their message (content) publically. Central to Henry's *Uneasy Conscience* is this concern for a lack of capacity to effectively communicate or witness to those outside of the Fundamentalists' churches. In the remainder of this paper I argue that Henry proposes an alternative theological justification for social engagement that maintains the essentials of evangelical orthodoxy while refusing to retreat into a pessimistic eschatology. Henry's proposal ultimately renews the capacity for an evangelical public Christian witness.

Henry's Proposed Theological Justification for Evangelical Social Engagement

Although in *Uneasy Conscience* Henry is hesitant to promote a specific eschatological narrative, it is evident that he favours an inaugurated-enacted premillennial eschatology.^{xvi} Russell Moore notes that not only did this form of eschatology animate Henry's concerns over evangelical social engagement it also gains popularity among the growing movement of neo-evangelicals which emerge through the work of Henry and his contemporaries.^{xvii} This eschatological narrative simultaneously depicts history as waiting, even longing for, the final consummation of the Kingdom in the coming eschaton and, at the same time, depicts history as the site where this future reign of God is already inaugurated and continues to be enacted. To use Ladd's imagery, in present history we experience tastes of the Kingdom of God because it really is the future Kingdom we are tasting.^{xviii} Yet those tastes are not the result of human works projects, rather they are the foretastes of the awaited eschatological future reign of God. An inaugurated-enacted eschatology maintains the sovereign future of God without restricting God from active involvement in the present: God "works in history as well as above history."

The inaugurated-enacted eschatology is optimistic in affirming both God's capacity and God's desire for social betterment. This optimism is not the optimism of the Social Gospel which insists that human effort can and will eventually create a just and right world. Rather, the optimism of the inaugurated-enacted eschatology is that God does not abandon humanity to history. God is actively and proleptically at work in our experience of history. Not only did God break into history in the incarnation of the person of Jesus the Christ, but the future has broken into history through Jesus' resurrection. Such an eschatological view maintains Jesus as God's answer to all that is unjust and not right in this world.

In addition to being socially optimistic the inaugurated-enacted eschatology is invitational, calling for us to participate with the God who is already at work through the inbreaking of God's future reign. Henry is right to lament the Fundamentalist abandonment of their social imperative. In the Fundamentalist abandonment of their social justice legacy, they redefine God's relationship to the world. Their overly futurist eschatologies relegate God to the heavens.^{xix} Such a God has little or no interest in contemporary socio-political concerns and even less ability to animate meaningful engagement with these same socio-political concerns.^{xx} Additionally a disinterested and distant God seems antithetical to the God that John the gospeller describes as so loving the whole created world (cosmos). Henry's response to the deficient Fundamentalist understanding of God is to employ the term supernatural in reference to our participation in social amelioration.

Henry's use of supernatural is not overtly interventionist, although it certainly does not rule out the possibility of divine intervention. A central idea in an inaugurated-enacted eschatology is that we live in a moment of tension: the future has come but is still coming, the Kingdom is something we can experience now, but it is also something we longingly await to

come at the end of time. Because the Kingdom belongs to the future reign of God it is essentially above nature and above history. So even when we do experience the inbreaking of this future reign we are simultaneously reminded that the object of our longing is always for more of the fullness of this future Kingdom to come. When we do not experience the inbreaking of the Kingdom our longing for the future is likewise intensified. It is this tension that is the theological justification for our participation. As we gain a vision of the Kingdom, what the world could be in the fullness of God's reign, we are oriented to the work of participating with God in bringing about that future.

The example par excellence of this supernatural tension is the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Ladd will insist that the event of the resurrection is not historical but eschatological.^{xxi} Even though the resurrection is experienced in a historical moment, it is not actually a natural possibility of history but rather the resurrection is the inauguration of the future resurrection in which all Christians hope one day to share. If resurrection collapses into history then it becomes just another natural possibility of history. By insisting that the resurrection is an eschatological event it is imbued with all the possibilities of the future. The eschatological event of Jesus' resurrection is supernatural in that it opens up the possibility of further irruptions of the future into the present.

Strongly identifying our participation with the supernatural category highlights a difference between the optimism of Social Gospel's eschatology compared with the optimism of an inaugurated-enacted eschatology. The Social Gospel reduces the Kingdom to just another historical force and is optimistic that participating will bring about a historical reality that is just and good. Through an inaugurated-enacted eschatology the Kingdom is understood as an eschatological force that breaks into history according to God's sovereign action. The Kingdom

is supernatural, outside of history, breaking in from the future. Therefore our participation with this eschatological reign is not bound by the contingencies of history, rather it is oriented towards the end of history when God's future will overtake and swallow up all of history. Both paradigms work towards social amelioration, but only the inaugurated-enacted approach maintains God as the primary actor in and above history.

Henry's Concern for Evangelical Public Witness

Henry's corrective is ultimately about renewing the Fundamentalists' public witness. This renewal of witness is a perennial concern for Christianity, and for evangelicals in particular. Today we have many movements that are attempting to focus on deficiencies in public witness by modifying their methods, just as the Social Gospel movement does. And just like the Social Gospel these attempts to re-imagine witness contain many important insights. They also contain the same potential to lose important aspects of the content of evangelical Christianity. Opposed to these movements are those which see this potential danger and in their alarm repeat the mistake of the Fundamentalists, entrenching their evangelical orthodoxy at the expense of their witness. In a world of new apologetics, emerging, and missional theologies we need a Carl Henry to remind us what we stand to lose if we focus on content at the expense of capacity for witness or capacity at the expense of content.

Finally we need to hear Henry remind us that the eschatological story we tell is always important. It is the story that orients us not only towards the future but also towards the world we live in today. Our eschatology can empower us and encourage us to participate in the betterment of this world, or it can convince us such activity is simply futile. Eschatology is the source of the theological justification for any evangelical participation in social amelioration. Eschatology is also an integral part of our witness, because how we act or fail to act in our world effects our

capacity to communicate effectively to the people with whom we share our world. It is through our eschatological narratives that we can hear that great prayer of our Lord's, "let your Kingdom come, let your will be done" and understand these words to be a call to join with God's supernatural work of making the world a better place.

ⁱ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993.), 2-3.

ⁱⁱ See David Kelsey's *Proving Doctrine: The Use of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) where Kelsey traces seven distinct understandings of biblical authority.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press, 1992), ix.

^{iv} Job Y. Jindo, "On Myth and History in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology," *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 3 (2005): 414.

^v Randall Balmer, *Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 5.

^{vi} Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, reprint, 1996 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 158–59; Russell Moore, *Kingdom of Christ The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 69; John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 199.

^{vii} Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), 42-43.

^{viii} Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1945), 5; Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 166.

^{ix} Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 5, 21.

^x Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 148.

^{xi} Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 21.

^{xii} Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 84.

^{xiii} Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 22.

^{xiv} One could argue that the whole enterprise of Fundamentalist apologetics was really about community protection and purity more than actually attempting a form of evangelism.

^{xv} Leonard Sweet discusses these categories as a perennial concern for Christians using the categories of "message" and "method" in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 18ff.

^{xvi} Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 46. This form of eschatology was popularized among evangelicals by fellow Fuller scholar George Eldon Ladd.

^{xvii} Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 31, 38, 58.

^{xviii} George Eldon Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, reprint, 1959 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 41.

^{xix} It should not make us wonder that Fundamentalists were also cessationists, believing that God's interventions were largely a thing of the past.

^{xx} Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 42; Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics: Some Basic Questions* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 89.

^{xxi} George Eldon Ladd, "Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 6, no. 3 (1963): 86.