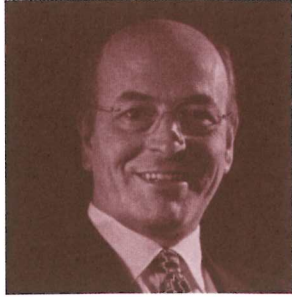


A NEW CURRENCY FOR PUBLIC LIFE

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IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A DRAMATIC REASSESSMENT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LIFE IN BRITAIN OVER THE LAST 200 YEARS.

Consequently, there has been a growing awareness that the foundations for a vital and necessary cultural and social renewal, in which Christians led the way, were laid in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Central to that Christian impetus was the generation of a new biblical currency for national life, the inspiration for which led to the founding of Bible Society.

The scholar Herbert Schlossberg records some of the decline experienced by the established church in the eighteenth century: "Bishop Butler of Hereford compared Church attendance in his diocese in 1792 with the numbers from 1747 and found a substantial decline. In 1800 evangelical clergy from England's largest diocese, Lincoln, found that of 15,000 persons in seventy-nine parishes, fewer than 5,000 were known to attend Church, of these only 1,800 were communicants. Many of the non-attenders had gone over to Dissent, but there was still a very low level of religious participation. In 1799, Bishop Cleaver of Chester, a highly industrial region, discovered a parish of 40,000 in which nobody attended religious services of any kind."¹

The revivals associated with Wesley and Whitefield began in 1739 and continued in localised expressions for a generation. Why, then, did these revivals, so fondly regarded by later evangelicals and seen by many as a model to which the contemporary Church should look, seem to Christian leaders at the end of the eighteenth century to have had such little impact? Two factors seem to be important.

First, the numbers involved in the revivals were not as great as we might popularly imagine. There were insufficient conversions to make a dramatic impact on society. It is very difficult to discover precise figures, but the romanticised impression of the revivals sweeping through the country, with the whole nation feeling the impact, seems to be an exaggeration. Wesley's diaries are instructive in this respect because he often wrote about unreceptive towns and situations.

Can we know anything about the numbers impacted? It is hard to estimate how many evangelicals remained in the Church of England. We can say with some degree of accuracy that the number of Anglican clergy who were identified as evangelical prior to 1780 was probably less than 100 in number. Neither can we be

sure of how many were touched by the revivals and remained as members of the various Nonconformist churches. The only accurate figures we have relate to those who were members of the various Methodist Societies. Other statistics, from 1775, fully 35 years after the first outbreak of revival, give us some information – Particular Baptists, 9,000; Congregational, 22,000; Methodists, 30,000 – but we need to take certain factors into account. First, it was unlikely that many impacted by the revival found their way into the Particular Baptists, although some may have joined the Congregational churches. Second, there were rigorous criteria for membership of these denominations. There would, therefore, have been some who were influenced by the revival, but who were not recorded in the above figures. So, the figure of 30,000 Methodists does not represent the kind of widespread growth – even when the population of Britain at the time was approximately one sixth of what it is today – which is sometimes imagined by evangelicals of a later generation.

The second factor is more critical: evangelicals or enthusiasts (as they were sometimes called) were at the margins of society. It was not just a matter of social class, although that must have played its part; evangelicals also suffered from what we might call today a seriously bad press.

It does not require a great deal of exposure to Wesley's journals to discover that his normative experience consisted more of hostile encounters rather than experiences of revival joy. Three illustrations give something of the flavour of this perspective. –

First, the historian Mary Heimann says this of the Methodists: "Methodists, who harangued from the pulpit or met in open fields to proclaim the gospel, like Jansenists, who writhed convulsively at the Saint-Medard cemetery, seemed to be wild, unpredictable folk, rabble-rousers and hysterics who, as often as not, were drawn from the most dangerous ranks of society – those who had least to lose by its overthrow. It is therefore not altogether surprising that the 'religion of the mob' which they seemed to represent was generally attacked with satire rather than with reasoned debate and treated to loathing rather than to measured criticisms, even by those who prided themselves on their universality, toleration and advocacy of open debate."²

Second, it is abundantly clear that it was not just the religious mob that faced loathing. The evangelical

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message itself faced ridicule, particularly in the face of what we call today the “chattering classes”. Paul Johnson makes the following observation: “The first Evangelical in Parliament, Sir Richard Hill, was lovingly described by the Reverend Edward Sidney, his biographer, as ‘a model of a Christian gentleman and an upright senator’. Hill quoted the Bible to the Commons to ‘prolonged roars of laughter’.”³

Third, the assessment of the state of the nation by those such as William Wilberforce was profoundly pessimistic. Writing in 1797, he commented: “If the representations contained in the preceding chapters, of the state of Christianity among the bulk of professed Christians, be not very erroneous, they may well excite serious apprehension in the mind of every reader, when considered merely in a political view. And this apprehension would be increased, if there should appear reason to believe that, for some time past, Religion has been on the decline among us, and that it continues to decline at the present moment.”⁴

These quotations, together with many other pages of assessment and comment, paint a picture of a Church that was still in deep difficulty even after many years of revival activity. Some openly predicted that the Church would not survive the nineteenth century.

Evangelicals were excluded from national life by social pressure. They were regarded as narrow-minded, bigoted, lacking in humour, devoid of imagination, incapable of understanding the real world and occupying a subculture which normal people would not wish to enter. Those who were enticed into their circle were regarded as having met with an unfortunate accident and no respectable family would willingly allow their offspring to be influenced in this way.

Clearly, it would be difficult to impact society from such a position. Although few, if any, living at that time would have thought of it in this way, the basic interaction between the evangelical movement and society had to be changed.

CHANGING THE NATURE OF THE INTERACTION

The critical factor in the transformation of the relationship between evangelicals and the wider society flowed from the work of a group of evangelicals in national life who later became known as the Clapham Sect. William Wilberforce, the then MP for Hull, was the most notable member of the group.

Wilberforce was best known for the central campaign of his life, the campaign to abolish slavery. He, more than

anyone else, came to be associated with this cause. However, his concerns were far wider than this single issue. He was said to have been involved in at least sixty-nine different causes, either as central campaigner or as a patron in some capacity. Although diverse, the campaigns had a number of commonalities. In general, they were dedicated to improving the lot of the poor and disadvantaged. They formed part of a comprehensive view of society that essentially flowed from a biblical vision of society.

For this reason, it is not surprising that Wilberforce was a founding father of the British and Foreign Bible Society. There is a sense in which this was the central jewel in a single vision of a society that was deeply influenced by the Christian message. The biblical narrative offered an inspiring vision of justice and of the basis for sound human relationships.

Wilberforce understood that it was not just a matter of working for legislative change in particular areas. First, public sentiment had to be shifted. The core assumptions of society needed to be challenged.

The campaign against slavery acutely illustrated the need for such a shift. When Wilberforce first argued against such an evil, he was met with an all too familiar response. In effect, his opponents were saying to him, if your conscience does not allow you to be involved with the slave trade, that is fine, you do not have to be involved; but make no mistake, others will take the place of any who drop out. In other words, the market rules and you cannot buck it.

The notion of the invisible hand of the market was a fashionable idea. After all, it had first been popularised in 1776 by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. There was, however, another force at work that pushed thinking in such a direction. The pernicious influence of groups like the Hell Fire Club to which so many of society’s opinion formers belonged; they tended to encourage a deep cynicism in public life. The idea that those in public life were only really concerned to line their own pockets had gained a huge currency in the years prior to Wilberforce’s involvement in political life. To some extent, this cynicism originated with Robert Walpole, who succeeded over a period of forty years in shaping modern politics through the creation of the Whig party, which became the natural party of government and self-interest throughout the middle of the eighteenth century.

NOTES

1 Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), p. 25.

2 Mary Heimann writing in *A World History of Christianity* (ed. Adrian Hastings; London: Cassell, 1999), p. 475.

3 Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (London: Simon & Schuster), 1995, p. 370.

4 William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity* (ed. KC Belmonte; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 191.

5 W Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Revd Charles Simeon MA* (London, 1847), p. 536.

6 See Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New mission Frontier* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991)

7 The case made by Schlossberg in *Silent Revolution* is that the foundations of Victorian England and the Victorian Church were laid in the period 1780 to 1820.

8 Schlossberg, *Silent Revolution*, p. 26f.

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► According to Wilberforce, these forces of self-interest meant that there was a new hypocrisy in the land. The hypocrisy was such that men had to pretend to be more evil than they actually were in order to gain credence. What a situation!

Wilberforce saw that a deeper change was needed than the mere passage of legislation. There was a need to change the whole political climate in which politicians and society operated. He needed to campaign to make goodness fashionable. Such a change in political sentiment would make it more possible to change legislation. Without a fundamental shift of cultural and social vision it was unlikely that any of his plans for reform would succeed. In modern terms, he needed to redefine the notion of political correctness so that it could be informed by a truly Christian vision of society.

The judgement of Wilberforce’s contemporaries certainly indicates a recognition that fundamental change was taking place in the attitudes of society and that this change was having a huge impact on receptivity to the gospel. The leading evangelical, the Revd Charles Simeon, writing to a friend in 1820, the Revd Thomas Truebody, made this comment: “The numbers of pious clergy (i.e. Evangelical Anglican clergy) are greatly on the increase; how it is I know not for I do not think that either myself, or any other minister in the church is very successful in converting souls to Christ. In my mind I ascribe it,

1. To God’s secret blessings on the nation, on account of the attempts which are made to honour him in Britain.
2. To the influence of the Bible Society, which has given a kind of currency to gospel truths.”⁵

It is clear then that something significant changed in the early years of the nineteenth century that was sufficiently important to bring hundreds of thousands into the churches. It was not the revival as such. It is as if the interaction between religious institutions and the nature of their social environment was somehow altered so that the surrounding culture changed its view of the value of the church.⁶ That fundamental shift in the attitude of society to the Church laid the foundations for the astonishing growth of the Church in nineteenth-century Britain.⁷

The nineteenth-century British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, commented on the contrast between the success of the Church in the nineteenth century and its profound failure in the eighteenth:

“Riding in a stagecoach, a traveler [sic] heard this fragment of a conversation: ‘Well, what is the Church of England?’ ‘The Church of England,’ came reply, ‘is a damn big building with an organ inside.’ That is the way William Gladstone remembered the conversation and the way he told it at innumerable dinner parties for the remainder of his life. And that is the way English people tended to regard their Establishment in the waning years of the eighteenth century and for some time afterwards, which is the point Gladstone was making.”⁸

Another way of thinking about that fundamental shift is to claim that the Church formed by the revivals began to think primarily in terms of mission. That mission was directed towards winning individuals to faith and, just as importantly, with the transformation of society, such was the vision of the kingdom of God. This preoccupation with mission shaped the Church and it thus became an effective influence, a genuine people movement that helped transform both individuals and society. No one engaged in a campaign to abolish slavery in order to boost Church attendance, yet, paradoxically, by engaging first and foremost in mission, the fortunes of the Church were transformed. ■