

Gospel Truth in Contemporary Culture

A report on a debate between John Stevens and Joe Boot, 23 June 2015

How should Christians respond to the challenges that face them in today's world?
How should we view ourselves – as resident aliens or as alien residents?
What place should God's law have in the government of the nation?
What is the mission of the church in the world?
What impact can we expect to have and how much can we realistically hope to achieve?

These were some of the questions addressed at a debate organised by Christian Concern and held at the Barbican Centre in central London on Tuesday 23 June.¹ The debate was chaired by Dr Daniel Strange, Lecturer in Culture, Religion and Public Theology at Oak Hill College. In an essay published several years ago, Dr Strange outlined two differing models of social engagement espoused by evangelicals – the 'two kingdoms' approach and the 'transformationist' approach.² Although neither of the participants in the debate used these terms to describe his vision, these were broadly the perspectives espoused respectively by John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches and Dr Joe Boot, founder of the Ezra Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Ontario, Canada.

Each speaker was allowed 30 minutes to set out his position, after which each was permitted a further 10 minutes to respond to the other. The evening concluded with questions submitted by the audience being put to the participants by the chairman.

John Stevens: A modified 'two kingdoms' perspective

John Stevens began by urging Christians to face up to the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves: we live in a post-Christian society which has seen the collapse of Christian belief with the result that Christianity is no longer the foundation of our culture. Over the past 150 years, and particularly during the past half-century, we have witnessed the dismantling of the Christian foundations of our legal system. The recent legislative changes in relation to homosexuality are the inevitable outworking of a train of events set in motion 50 years ago. British churches are increasingly marginalised and powerless, and most campaigns against the erosion of our cultural heritage have been lost.

Stevens argued that we must engage and that the Bible equips us to engage. The Christian faith is a public faith. The Lordship of Christ must impact on every area of life: our family life, our work life and our civic life. There is no place for a privatised Christian faith. By teaching and example, the Bible shows us how to engage with public culture, but it does not provide a single model of engagement. The way that we engage is determined by the context of the challenge we face. At one point in her history, Israel was a nation among the nations; at another she was in exile. Jesus ministered in a Jewish context within a pagan Roman-dominated world, while the apostles laboured firstly in the Roman Empire enjoying the protection of the state, but then increasingly they found themselves persecuted by the state. Different approaches are required in different contexts.

In outlining a theological framework for engagement, Stevens laid down five foundations:

1. The nature of the world

The history of the world is dominated by a fundamental cosmic clash between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The 'world' in the New Testament is represented as a culture in rebellion against God, under the dominion and rule of Satan. Even though God is sovereign over everything and Jesus is Lord, Satan is the one who is ruling over this world, and God is engaged in a cosmic rescue mission. Those who belong to his Kingdom are 'in the world, but not of the world'; they labour in hostile territory. The Kingdom

¹ The debate may be viewed in its entirety online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlLt4Cqf0Mg>

² Daniel Strange, 'Evangelical Public Theology: What on Earth? Why on Earth? How on Earth?' in Chris Green (ed), *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, Apollos, 2008.

may break into this world, but Scripture gives us no grounds for any expectation that this world will be the Kingdom. The world needs to be conquered for the Lord Jesus.

2. The mission of God

The mission of God is to re-establish his Kingdom and his good, just rule. Israel failed in her calling to re-establish God's rule, but through Jesus, the true Israel, God's Kingdom rule is re-established. He is doing this through the election and redemption of his people and the revelation of his will to them. Rather than establishing his Kingdom by redeeming and renewing the culture, God is establishing a replacement culture which will culminate in the new creation. He limits the activity of Satan for the sake of his church, gives common grace to both the wicked and righteous, and grants his people an influence in the world. But, at the same time, God grants people freedom to sin and even hands them over to the ruling power of sin to bring home to them their bondage so that they might turn to Christ for salvation.

3. The role of the law

The law reveals God's holy character and what he demands. It was not given to humanity in general, but to a redeemed people. The law is fulfilled in Christ and is intensified and internalised in him. God has not lowered his standards since the coming of Christ; rather, they have been raised. Virtually all Christians agree that the law cannot be applied directly to the church and the world today. It is necessary to work through which commands carry forward under the New Covenant and which do not.

The law alone cannot restrain sin and bring in God's Kingdom. Indeed, rather than deal with sin, it provokes it. There is no expectation in the New Testament that unbelievers will live under God's law, or that it is the mission of the church to impose it on them. The law was given to a covenant people, and God has not made covenant promises to Britain, the United States or any other nation. The law is to be fulfilled and obeyed in the church. Jesus and the apostles did not see it as their mission to bring the pagans under God's law without their conversion to Christ.

4. The function of civil government

Civil government was established by God as one of the ways in which he restrains wickedness. The New Testament has limited expectations of civil government. The government bears the sword, which refers to the exercise of the death penalty (Romans 13:4), but the great purpose of civil government is to bring about civic peace and provide gospel freedom (1 Timothy 2:1-2). That is what the apostles fought for. There is no expectation in the New Testament that the state is to coercively impose God's moral law in its entirety. British Christians have tended to make an idol of the state and to expect too much of it in terms of promoting social justice and imposing morality. We have accepted the idea that the state is to work by coercion on an unwilling people, which is not in line with the biblical model.

5. The time in which we live

We live in 'the last days' – the period between the ascension and the return of Christ. It is a time of overlap between the kingdom of Satan and the Kingdom of God, when the present evil age overlaps with the age to come. That conflict will continue until Jesus returns. While the gospel will save a great multitude that cannot be numbered, there is no biblical promise that the gospel will triumph in our culture. Our expectations are deeply affected by our eschatology.

Stevens then proceeded to outline the function and role of the church in the world under eight headings:

(a) The primary task of the church is evangelism and discipleship

Our great task is to preach the gospel and then to teach obedience to all of Christ's commands. The New Testament gives priority to the work of the gospel. Much of what today passes for 'cultural engagement' is not found in the New Testament. The way we fulfil the cultural mandate is primarily through fulfilment of the great commission. It is through the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of the Word of God that a rebellious creation is brought into subjection to the rule of God. Unless we grow the Kingdom, our influence on society will be limited. Prayer is a vital component in the work of the church. We need to recognise that we are a small minority. People do not share our values because they do not share our faith.

(b) The church must be a holy community

It is through the church that God's Kingdom breaks into the world. The church is to display life under the rule of the King. But various sections of the professing church in Britain are utterly compromised and not modelling the Kingdom. If we are to challenge society, we need to put our own houses in order. The offences which incurred the death penalty in the Old Testament require excommunication from the church in the New Testament. Many who profess to be Christians but who reject biblical standards frequently undermine our campaigns. There are times when we need to separate.

(c) The church must speak prophetically

The church is to declare the Lordship of Christ, expose the consequences of sin, warn of the coming judgment of God, and remind people that they must give an account to God. In Jesus' preaching the announcement of the Kingdom was linked with a call to repentance because the message of the Kingdom is ultimately a warning of coming judgment. The church must speak holistically about all sin – sexual sin and social sin. We must continue to prophetically declare the truth even if we lose particular battles.

(d) The church must fight for religious freedom

The maintenance of religious freedom is one of the main functions of the state. The apostle Paul appealed for protection under Roman law, and Daniel took a stand for religious freedom. It is right to fight for religious liberty, but in doing so we need to stand for the freedom and liberty of all. The battle for religious freedom should not be a fight for privilege. The Old Testament law does not make provision for a plural society. Only a minority of aliens lived in Israel and they had to conform. Our situation is different and so religious freedom in our society must encompass the reality of different religious groups.

(e) The church must fight for the protection of the powerless

Both the Old and New Testaments show that God has a particular heart for the powerless – for widows, orphans, the poor and aliens. We must speak up on behalf of the unborn, infirm, infants and the incapable. The church is to have a particular concern for those who are powerless and would otherwise be victimised and oppressed. It is part of our prophetic task to speak on their behalf.

(f) Christians must submit to the civil authority as far as possible

Daniel was willing to be educated by the Babylonians and Jesus told his followers to pay taxes to Caesar even though those taxes were not endorsed by the Old Testament law. In the New Testament, slaves are commanded to submit to their masters and not rebel. Believers are urged to give honour and respect to the authorities and pay their taxes. Roman soldiers and civic officials who were converted did not immediately leave their positions. There is a very high measure of submission even to things not commanded under the law. As we engage with our culture, we must obey the law as far as is possible and not to deliberately flout it in order to make a point.

(g) The church must be prepared to practice civil disobedience

Where the law conflicts with the command of God, believers must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29) and follow the example of the Israelite midwives in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. But when we exercise civil disobedience, we can expect to suffer as a result. Suffering should come as no surprise to us. The early Christians rejoiced in the midst of persecution and saw it as an opportunity for witness. The New Testament teaches that one of the primary places in which we shall be called to testify to Christ is in court. It should not shock us when that is the consequence of standing for Christ.

(h) Christians should expect to be excluded

As our society turns away from Christ, it should not surprise us if Christians are excluded from various jobs, offices and opportunities. Increasingly, the gay agenda demands that we not only *tolerate* the civic rights of homosexuals, but that we *affirm* the gay lifestyle. It is not really about toleration at all, but forced acceptance. The equality policies of many companies present challenges to Christians in a wide range of occupations. It would now be unthinkable for an Education Secretary, an Equalities Minister, or an Army General, for example, to say that he or she does not support same-sex marriage. Doctors, midwives and nurses face challenges, as do judges who are required to uphold the law as imposed by the state.

Joe Boot: A 'transformationist' perspective

Joe Boot began by citing instances of believers confronting ungodly rulers and cultures about their sin: Moses confronted Pharaoh, Nathan confronted David, Daniel confronted Nebuchadnezzar, Jonah confronted Nineveh, Amos prophesied against the pagan nations in terms of the standards of God's law, Esther confronted Xerxes, John the Baptist confronted Herod, Peter confronted the Jewish Sanhedrin, Paul confronted the Roman authorities, and Jesus told Pilate that his authority would amount to nothing if he had not received it from above.

The authority of Jesus is set forth in Psalm 2, which concludes with a direct address to the kings of the nations:

*Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish in the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are all those who put their trust in him. (Psalm 2:10-12)*

Christ and his Word are not true only if kings, politicians and magistrates acknowledge their authority. Kings and rulers are not commanded to be neutral to religious claims as if they are entitled to stand in judgment upon God. Rather, they are to submit to the Son. All things are being made subject to Christ. He has taught us to pray, 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.'

Boot then proceeded to address two questions: What is culture? and What is the gospel?

1. What is culture?

The English word 'culture' is derived from a Latin root related to the word 'cultus', referring to worship or cultivation. Culture is the public expression of worship. It is the state of being cultivated by intellectual and moral 'tilling' and forms a type of civilisation. The cultus is always communitarian and not individualistic. It is transmitted through the family, education, law and the other institutions of society. Henry Van Til defined culture as 'religion externalised' – the expression of the religion of the people in terms of which they will cultivate their society. In biblical terms, culture is what we make of God's creation.

Our first parents were set in the garden as royal priests in God's cosmic temple to subdue all things and turn creation into a God-glorifying culture, cultivating all things in terms of his will and purpose as an act of worship. At the beginning, God gave the cultural mandate and gave man dominion over the earth. As Herman Bavinck put it, culture is the purpose for which God made man in his image.

Romans 1 teaches that there are only two basic types of culture: a culture based on the worship of the Creator, or a culture based on the worship of creation. There is no such thing as a neutral culture.

When man exchanges truth for the lie, he autonomously defines truth, law, morality and spirituality outside God's revelation, and an idolatrous cultus follows, together with unrighteous practices. As this progresses, unrighteousness is steadily condoned and approved socially. This is done by wilful suppression of the truth and leads to a downward spiral in which public endorsement of unrighteous practices leads to the further suppression of the truth, promoting yet more unrighteousness, with further demands for affirmation and approval of sin in law, education and every sphere of life. Subsequently, the coercive power of the state codifies the lie that the collective self is not subject to the law of God.

Lordship and sovereignty either belong to Christ, with the law of a transcendent God binding all men, or else they lie within creation itself. G K Chesterton observed:

It is only by believing in God that we can ever criticise the government. Once abolish the God, and the government becomes the God. The fact is written all across human history... Wherever the people do not believe in something beyond the world, they will worship the world. But, above all, they will worship the strongest thing in the world. And, by the... practical working of almost any system, the State will be the strongest thing in the world.

When people choose to worship the creature rather than the Creator, all judgments as to what constitutes moral truth become arbitrary social conventions. We need to ask what criteria we use in determining what is for the common good. Is the common good to be defined by God, or is there some other standard? If creation is worshipped and served, then man is God, and the state becomes the giver and taker of all things. According to Rousseau, 'The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No group, no individual, may exercise authority not emanating from it.'

It is inherent in Paul's teaching that the state is obligated to be Christian, since all men are obligated to repent and believe the gospel. The God-ordained institutions of culture – whether the family or the state – must serve God. When institutions fail to serve God they institute tyranny and advance idolatry. To promote, support, or remain silent with respect to unrighteousness in the social order is to sponsor idolatry. To promote the mythical notion of the 'neutral' state that stands in judgment over God's Word and sponsors religious or moral pluralism is to support the worship of creation.

Christians will always be targeted by a 'neutral' state because, like first century Rome, it will perceive in the declaration of Christ as Lord and King a rival cultus that makes the state subject to God and his Christ.

Christ is not one competitor among many. All social structures are inescapably religious and will discriminate against some worldviews. We cannot support freedom for all without sponsoring idolatry. Is the common good to be defined by God in his Word, or by some other standard?

2. *What is the gospel?*

Adam and Eve were called to rule and subdue the earth, but they rebelled. Thereafter, the promise of the gospel issued to them in Genesis 3:15 is unfolded in the plot-line of Scripture. The seed of the woman represents Christ and his people united to him, and the seed of the serpent stands for those who are united with Satan. This Satan-crushing gospel is the gospel of Christ's Kingdom. The gospel brings deliverance and liberty (Luke 4:16-21) and for centuries multitudes who are not born again have enjoyed its benefits.

The apostle John condemned the practice, promotion or approval of sin as demonic and declared that the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). The works of the devil are seen in such evils as abortion, same-sex marriage, pagan education, prostitution, pornography, slavery, political idolatry and the persecution of Christians. All these are part of what Christ came to destroy, and Romans 16:20 shows that as part of the seed of the woman, Christians are to have a part in that destruction as Satan is crushed under our feet.

Psalm 110:1 teaches that Christ is vanquishing his enemies and subduing all things. The death and resurrection of Christ are about far more than forgiving our personal sins. Christ's work is to crush all his enemies – sin, death, Satan and all his works throughout time. The sweep of redemption is as broad as the sweep of the curse. Believers form a royal priesthood, restored to man's original mandate to subdue all things under the Lordship of Christ. One of the works of the Kingdom is to teach God's law (1 Timothy 1:8-11). Part of the purpose of that law is to restrain evil.

This Satan-crushing gospel produces results that benefit the whole of society. In the establishment of Christian schools, hospitals, universities, and charities, Christ has been crushing Satan. Likewise through legislative changes such as the abolition of slavery and child labour, and through prison reform, and in the work of foreign missions. As believers recapture the arts, science, medicine, education and welfare for the glory of God, Christ is crushing Satan. So too, when families and churches catechise their children, and when laws that promote sin and idolatry are repealed.

The gospel is about far more than keeping souls out of Hell. It is about preaching the reign of Jesus Christ. If culture is the expression of worship, and if the gospel restores man to true worship, then it restores man to true culture. The gospel is a culture and it carries within it its own plausibility structure. If we fail to protect marriage, the family and a right understanding of human sexuality, we destroy the plausibility structure of the gospel of the *Father* who sent his *Son* to redeem for himself a *bride* to whom he would be the *husband*. The public defence of God's creational norms and moral law is therefore gospel work.

In recent decades, Christians have surrendered education, law, charity and medicine to the state in ways that previous generations of evangelicals could never have envisaged. We have retreated into a pietistic bubble and limited Christ's jurisdiction to the institutional church. Freedoms not fought for are soon forfeited. If we truly love our neighbour, culture and public life will be of great importance to us. As C H Spurgeon declared:

I long for the day when the precepts of the Christian religion shall be the rule among all classes of men and all transactions. I often hear it said, 'do not bring religion into politics'. This is precisely where it ought to be brought, and set there in the face of all men as a candlestick. I would have the cabinet and members of Parliament do the work of the nation as before the Lord.

Part of the reason for the decline of Christian influence is that we have retreated from areas of biblical responsibility. When we abandon Christian education and hand education over to the state, we abandon the environment in which faith is nurtured. We need to take back the spheres we have relinquished and return to a fidelity to the Lordship of Christ in every sphere.

Areas of agreement and disagreement

In the ensuing discussion, several points of agreement emerged:

- The priority of evangelism
- Gospel growth leads to transformation
- No one can be coerced into professing Christ and following him
- The Bible envisages a small and limited government
- The law is normative in terms of God's standards
- The state cannot be neutral
- It is the task of the church to expose the inconsistencies of secular humanism

With regard to the size of the government, John Stevens agreed that we have handed over to the state functions that should be performed within the church and the family and suggested that 'most British Christians are worshippers of the state'. Around the beginning of the 20th century, British Christians had abandoned confidence in the gospel and Christian voluntarism and had tended to look to the state as the saviour. Recognising that the state is not neutral, but rather hostile, the question for Stevens is how Christians are to live in a hostile state. He argued that we need to seek as much gospel freedom and opportunity as possible.

Areas of disagreement included:

- The appropriateness of Christians supporting the civic rights of others. For example, should Muslims have religious freedom and be permitted to erect mosques? Should Sharia law be respected and should Jews be permitted to operate their own family courts?
- The extent to which common grace wisdom arguments should be used to build a consensus. Can Christians work as co-belligerents on some issues with Muslims and others with whom they fundamentally disagree on many points?
- The role of the law of God in the state. Does the church have a role in calling for the restoration of Old Testament judicial penalties? Or are we, rather, to see the outworking of God's law in church discipline (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5)?

- A difference in eschatology. Is the postmillennial expectation a type of 'utopianism' or is it encouraged by Scripture?
- How the decline happened. Was it because Christians abandoned the public square or because the church has tried to hold on to laws that reflect Christian morality in a nation that has abandoned the Christian faith?

On the question of the applicability of the law of God to the modern state, Joe Boot noted that the Lord Jesus Christ upheld the law in its entirety in Matthew 5, and that Peter presupposed the continuation of the whole law in Acts 10 and required special revelation to recognise that the ceremonial and dietary laws were no longer binding. Boot argued that we must presume continuity in the absence of a revelation from God showing discontinuity. He viewed God's law as a gift of grace for the government of all nations.

Boot rejected the charge of utopianism, and characterised Stevens' more modest expectations as a form of 'primitivism'. Unlike Stevens, Boot did not view the condition of the early church living in the midst of a hostile world as normative for the entire church age. Rather, he believed that God has ordained progress in history through the power of the gospel.

All in all, it was a most profitable and thought-provoking evening. Christian Concern are to be congratulated for convening the debate. There would be value in further discussions in which iron can further sharpen iron as we all wrestle with the challenge of living in a nation that is systematically dismantling our biblical heritage and seek to respond in a manner that is honouring to God.

Norman Wells

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