

A History of Christian Cultural Engagement

The following is based on a lecture I gave as part of a mini-lecture series, in partnership with Dr Dan Strange and the Crosslands Forum.

Introduction

Church history is a constant source of encouragement and challenge to us today. Learning from past successes and failures serves us well. The book of Proverbs talks about the value of 'old paths' and the Prophet Habakkuk is inspired by God's mighty deeds in history as he pleads with the Lord to renew them in his own day.

God's dealings with his people can be traced from so many different angles. From the revivals in different countries around the world, to the remarkable way his people have coped in times of rampant persecution. Throughout history the church of Jesus Christ has engaged with its culture.

That really is the purpose of this article – to take a birds-eye sweep of history to listen and learn from our past. Firstly, I aim to show that historically, in different generations, Christians have engaged in culture. Secondly, I want to encourage us that this engagement has made a genuine and positive difference in society. Thirdly, I want to bring out some of the theological impulses behind this engagement.

To do this, we will sweep through five key sections of church history, from the early church to the Reformation, the period of revivals followed by a decline in engagement and finally, the more recent recovery of a theology of cultural engagement.

The Early Church

Let us start by going right back to the period just after the Apostolic Age. As ever, context is of paramount importance. In 64AD, the Emperor Nero began persecuting the church. For the next 250 years it continued in different forms until 312AD when Constantine became a follower of Jesus. During this time of persecution, Christians were burned alive, crucified, fed to the lions and treated in the most unimaginably awful ways. More broadly, it was also a time when the people of the Roman Empire were very vulnerable to plagues and food supply crises.

This context helps us appreciate why, in the writing of the theologians of the time, you find great stress on the antithesis between followers of Christ and those of the world. One ancient theologian, Tertullian (155-220AD) talked about Christians as a 'third race' distinct from Gentiles and Jews.

Later, the North African theologian, Augustine (354-430AD) wrote *The City of God* which developed the antithesis idea further. There is, said Augustine, the city of the world and the city of God – the two are separate and distinct. While Christians are in the city of the world, their true belonging is to the city of God.

Based on this, you might think the early church fathers primarily taught that Christians should withdraw from the world. But a closer inspection of what they said and the picture that emerges is quite different.

Firstly, the early church fathers saw the power of human beings as culture makers. Here is Augustine:

Has not the genius of man invented and applied countless astonishing arts, partly the result of necessity, partly the result of exuberant invention, so that this vigour of mind... betokens an inexhaustible wealth in the human nature which can invent, learn, or employ such arts. What wonderful – one might say stupefying – advances has human industry made in the arts of weaving and building, or agriculture and navigation! What skill has been attained in measures and numbers! With what sagacity have the movements and connections of the stars been discovered! [And all this is due to the] unspeakable blessing that God has conferred upon his creation – a rational nature.

For Augustine, he never lost sight of the fact creation was originally good. And yes, while sin has distorted both human beings and the physical world, in Christ, we are restored to create culture as never before.

Secondly, the early church saw that part of its duty is to seek the welfare of the city.

Historian Bruce Winter argues that one key characteristic of the early church was that the Christian community required all its citizens, whatever their financial resources, to contribute to the welfare of the city even in the face of persecution.

Winter concludes that the Christian social ethic ‘...was an unprecedented social revolution of the ancient benefaction tradition. Every Christian had an obligation to promote the welfare of the city and help the poor, even without the rewards that were traditionally accorded the benefactor.’ In other words, you were to do so, no matter the cost to you. This was a sharp contrast to the benevolence of the Roman Empire which was often only done to receive an award. Aristides, writing in 150AD summed it up:

They labour to do good to their enemies. They despise not the widow and grieve not the orphan. He that has, distributes liberally to he that has not. If there is a man among them that is poor and needy and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they might supply the needy.

Thirdly, this was in part because the church fathers understood that while Christians are different, we share much in common with the world around us. Tertullian writes:

We sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce... We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your trafficking's – even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit.

Alongside these theological examples, there is also the practical evidence of the sheer impact Christianity had on the ancient world. Consider the following as just a few examples:

Firstly, Christianity gave proper dignity to women and girls. It was thanks to Christian influence that in 374AD, the notorious *Patria Potestas* (which gave absolute rights to the husband and father over the lives of his family) was repealed. Secondly, Basil of Caesarea's concern for victims of prostitution led to Imperial legislation to eliminate the practice.

Thirdly, church theologians made an immense contribution in the realm of education. Augustine passionately believed in the importance of education for all. He famously said most Christian women he knew were better educated than pagan philosophers! He also wrote textbooks to further the education of the people.

Fourthly, in the realm of healthcare, it was a Christian noblewoman, Fabia, who founded and ran a hospital for the sick and the destitute. Prior to this, the only hospitals were reserved for the Roman army. Basil of Caesarea built the *Basileias*, the first Christian hospital for the care of the sick, the poor and the dying.

This was of course an era when the state was not as involved as it is today in the lives of citizens. The early church, by its obedience to Christ, and further motivated by the teachings of various church fathers, was engaged and active in culture. And under the grace of God, they made a difference.

The Reformation

The sacred/secular divide grew very strong following the days of the early church. Various human made doctrines crept in to keep people from gaining access to God – the doctrines of purgatory and baptismal regeneration and the growing power and authority of the priesthood. The Middle Ages was largely a time of darkness.

Amidst the gloom, however, gospel light still shone in various places. We often focus our minds on the Reformation in Germany, Switzerland and later in the UK. But I was astonished to discover, in the 13th Century the Reformation began much earlier in what is now the Czech Republic. Under the leadership of Jans Milic, the Czech people experienced reformation which included a willingness to engage in culture. For example, in Prague, the ‘New Jerusalem’ was established which was the very opposite of a monastery because it provided a haven for converted prostitutes.

Later, once Luther realised the righteousness of God in Romans 1 referred to God’s gift of righteousness through faith in the Lord Jesus, gospel light began to flood the continent. The important thing to note, however, is that the Reformation was more than just a recovery of core gospel truths. It was a recovery also of a transformative, engaged Christianity where God’s people were called and commanded to be engaged at every level of society.

To help us see this, let me summarise several key theological truths that the Reformation helped bring to light:

Firstly, the dignity of work. The rediscovery of this element of the Christian life had a profound effect on how Christians saw their jobs, no matter how ‘menial’. J.K.Smith writes:

By refusing a kind of two-tiered view of the Christian life, these late medieval Reform movements emphasized what he calls ‘the sanctification of ordinary life’: that those engaged in the nitty-gritty of domestic life – having families and raising children and making horseshoes and tilling the earth – live their lives just as much coram Deo (“before the face of God”) as those who renounced domestic, “earthly” life (monks, priests, nuns). There is no all-star team in the Christian life; we are all called to holiness and we can pursue holiness in any and all of our earthly vocations. In a sense, then, the Reformation recovered a more affirmative theology of creation, creaturehood, and so-called “earthly” work.

Luther would encourage Christians to go to work thinking: ‘Today, I serve the Lord’. Later, John Calvin took this further, emphasising the dignity of work and the importance of Christians helping transform the social order. Calvin believed Christians should work to improve institutions and practices around them, from education to the administration of justice.

Secondly, the Reformation helped to shape the doctrine of God’s common grace. Theologian John Murray defined common grace as: ‘Every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.’

Practically, this means that Christians can learn from and work alongside non-Christians in pursuit of common goals and culture making. We do so recognising the differences, but unafraid to be co-belligerents in pursuit of truth. Here is Calvin: 'If the Lord has willed be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use their assistance.'

Thirdly, the Reformation taught the absolute authority of the word of God. This authority extended beyond the Christian's life and the worship and pattern of the church. Every aspect of social life was to be brought under the word of God. This is what Calvin attempted in Geneva, the creation of a Christian Commonwealth where the many different nationalities that resided there due to wars across the continent would live in a city where God's word held sway.

Finally, the Reformation saw an emphasis on the lordship of Christ. One historian said that for Calvin, the church was the intermediary between the exalted, risen Lord Jesus and the secular order.

This link drove Calvin to describe Christians in this way:

*Common sense, indeed, pronounces, that the wealth of the world is naturally intended for our use; but, since dominion over the world was taken from us in Adam, everything that we touch of the gifts of God is defiled by our pollution; and, on the other hand, it is unclean to us, till **God graciously come to our aid, and by ingrafting us into his Son, constitutes us anew to be lords of the world, that we may lawfully use as our own all the wealth with which he supplies us.***

All of the theological impulses outlined above helped transform the church's attitude towards culture. The impact was astonishing. Here is Garry Williams:

*As we read about our family history, one thing becomes very clear: our Christian predecessors themselves engaged with their culture at every level. **The Reformation was a gospel movement with political, legal, economic, educational, and artistic outworking's. These usually occurred without the Christians' anxiously wringing their hands and debating how engaged they should be (another difference from our era).** They occurred quite simply because Christians obeyed the Great Commission: they preached the gospel and then sought to live obedient lives. As they did that, they served as magistrates or lawyers or teachers or artists or farmers who sought to serve as though serving Christ (Col. 3:23), and thus, through their faithful obedience and without displacing the proclamation of the gospel, they inevitably formed Christian cultures. If they had not done so, it is unlikely that we would even have heard of them, since the wider impact of a disengaged, privatized faith would have been so minimal.*

It is a fascinating question for us to ask: do we wring our hands, debate, discuss and tie ourselves in knots over cultural engagement? If so, why? As Williams suggests, it seems previous generations simply did cultural engagement, out of an obedience and love to God.

Time of Revivals

Moving on from the Reformation, we enter the period of revivals across the UK. From Cambuslang in Scotland to Belfast in Northern Ireland to parts of England and Wales, the 18th-19th centuries was a period where God revived his work time and again.

It was also an era where Christianity's hold over the nation grew very strong, with institutions being formed which were built on elements of historic Christian teaching.

The best way to grasp the impact of Christians on culture during this time is to highlight just a few amazing individuals:

John Wesley (1703-1791) was a great social reformer, as concerned by the moral state of society as in preaching the gospel:

Wesley practiced what he preached. He campaigned against the slave trade, agitated for prison and labour reform (including child labour), set up loan funds for the poor, opened a dispensary to distribute medicines to the poor, worked to solve unemployment, and gave away considerable sums of his personal money to people in need.

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was an undisputed hero of those who loved Christians to be socially engaged. His output was truly remarkable and his organisational abilities and seemingly indefatigable energies led to some amazing initiatives, including:

- Being a member of at least 69 different benevolent societies.
- Founding a Christian newspaper
- Founding the RSPCA
- Being a founding member of Britain's Royal Institution which was dedicated to scientific research.
- Working for education reform, prison reform, for improved conditions in factories, and for shorter working days and public health initiatives.

The Clapham Sect: Wilberforce's companions who lived and worked in the same area of London. Hannah Moore, for example, was a passionate advocate of education for women and girls.

Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) showed remarkable devotion to prison reform. She introduced education, discipline and bible teaching to women prisoners in halfway houses. She established a night shelter and formed societies to minister to vagrant families.

Lord Shaftsbury (1801-1885) was an evangelical, committed Christian. His Lodging House Act 1851 ensured the licensing and inspection of lodgings. Charles Dickens called it the best piece of legislation that ever proceeded from the English Parliament. He promoted care for people with mental illnesses. He championed education for children and was, for 40 years, the chair of the Ragged Schools Union.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) was committed to a living, working faith. Founded 66 parachurch organisations, including orphanages, shelters for victims of domestic abuse, ministries for London's police.

Revival and awakening strengthened the church and saw many saved and was also a trigger for huge social engagement. One evidence of the Spirit's work is when his people engage and work towards a better world. Francis Schaeffer writes:

The great moments of church history have come when these two restorations have simultaneously come into action so that the church has returned to pure doctrine and the lives of the Christians in the church have known the power of the Holy Spirit. There cannot be true revival unless there has been reformation; and reformation is not complete without revival.

Decline

In the late 19th Century, a decline set in and over the decades, the church began to withdraw from culture and society. Why?

For one, there was the rise of the social gospel – the emphasis here moved away from the finished work of Christ towards ‘self-improvement’. In the minds of evangelicals, it was linked to theological liberalism. The answer for many was to pull up the drawbridge and to disengage for fear of being seen as on the wrong side.

Then there was sweeping institutional change. Christianity’s influence began to wane thanks to the rise of scientism, modernism, the Enlightenment and Darwin’s alternative theories about the creation of the world which all weakened Christianity’s grip on culture.

The unparalleled hardships experienced by many during both World Wars paved the way for a huge expansion of the state into people’s lives as a new social contract was formed between Government and the people. Many of the ministries of the church were replaced by those of the state.

There was also a spiritual aspect to the decline. Here is what Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: ‘The Church became polished and polite and dignified, and the supposed worshippers were unconsciously occupied with themselves and forgetful that they were in communion with the living God.’

Recovery

From the 1970s onwards, there has been a recovery of the sort of social-transformative Christianity which has been seen throughout history.

One catalyst for this was Francis Schaeffer. He wrote: ‘... Christians should prepare to take the lead in giving direction to cultural change.’ And this renewal, would come through the church: ‘I tell you in the name of God He will judge our culture unless there is a return to a Christian base for the culture – and that begins with true repentance and renewal in the church.’

In September 1971, meanwhile, the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFoL) happened. This saw tens of thousands of Christians come together in Trafalgar Square to take a stand and speak out against the great moral changes sweeping the nation. In time, the work of the NFoL switched to helping draft and shape legislation and from this ministry, the work of Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) was born in 1983.

Then, in 1974, John Stott began to call on evangelicals to take evangelism and social action seriously. In the mission statement that emerged from the famous Lausanne Conference, evangelism and social action were brought back together.

We must repudiate as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action.” Secondly, and positively, we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. (Lausanne Covenant)

Since then, there has been far greater interest, broadly speaking, among conservative evangelicals for a robust, public square presence and witness. While disagreement remains about legitimate expectations for social change, few would disagree that Christians should get involved in culture, with a desire to bring glory to God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The final word is from Don Carson who wrote this:

Sometimes a disease can be knocked out; sometimes sex-traffic can be significantly reduced; sometimes slavery can be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws can foster justice and reduce corruption.... In these and countless other ways cultural change is possible. More importantly, doing good to the city, doing good to all people (even if we have a special responsibility for the household of faith), is part of our responsibility as God's redeemed people.

James Mildred is Chief Communications Officer at CARE