

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Christians who Changed the Nation – Paper Three

Wesleyan Revival

Any social historian who researches the Georgian and early Victorian period of English history cannot fail to be struck by the radical change in the national moral code during that period. Most historians follow Halevy in ascribing this change to the influence of the Methodist revival from the 1730s. But a careful examination of the data leads to a different conclusion. It was not the Methodist revival that changed the course of history, but a small group of Anglican Evangelicals based in Clapham, South London.

After 30 years of Wesley and Whitfield's preaching when the first Methodist figures were recorded in 1767 there were only 22,000 adherents. That number grew to 88,000 by the end of the century, but the real growth was in the early 19th century, and by 1830 there were 232,000 Methodists.

Although during much of John Wesley's lifetime the Methodists were still associated with the Church of England, by the time of his death in 1791 they were classified as Dissenters. The latter were mostly Evangelicals such as Baptists and Independents, later known as Congregationalists. The Dissenters also included Presbyterians, Quakers and Unitarians who were not Evangelicals. Numbers of Evangelicals, including the Anglicans, grew at a considerable rate in the 50 years from 1780 to 1830. In fact, the House of Lords became so worried at the growth of dissent and the threat to the Establishment that in 1811 they ordered the bishops to carry out a survey of all towns in England with a population of more than 1,000. They reported that they found just over 2,500 Anglican churches but almost 3,500 chapels or dissenting places of worship.

Another significant fact about this period of English social history is the remarkable change in the moral state of the nation. In the 100 years from the restoration of the monarchy after the death of Cromwell, that is, from 1660 to 1760, crime, violence, immorality and debauchery were major social characteristics, but in the next 100 years there was a total change. Crime rates fell dramatically, births outside marriage were rare in all social classes, drunkenness and debauchery disappeared completely from many areas while attendance at church and chapel increased dramatically.

Wilberforce and the Evangelicals

What was it that caused such an incredible change in the moral, spiritual and social scene in the 19th century? The answer quite simply is the influence of the Clapham group of Evangelicals led by William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton, John Venn, Charles Grant, Granville Sharp, James Stephen, John Shore who later became Lord Teignmouth, and Zachary Macaulay, all of whom lived in houses around Clapham Common where John Venn was the vicar.

There were several others who were active members of the Clapham group who didn't live locally such as Charles Simeon of Cambridge and Hannah More who lived in Somerset who set up schools for poor children in and around Bristol. She was the most prolific writer of the group, publishing many books and tracts as well as being a prime mover in the weekly newspaper *The Christian Record* that

Directors: Rev Dr Clifford Hill, Monica Hill

PA: Ruth Addington

Staff: Esther McLaughlan, Ros Turner

Researcher: Rodney Curtis

Trustees: Martyn Cooper, Rev Peter Dye, Rev Kevin Fitzgibbon, Rev Bob Hunt,
Rev John Job (chair), Keith Lilley, Rev Gillian Orpin, Rev Brian Trudgian, Ken Wallace

played such a significant part in influencing public opinion and communicating biblical values into the great debates on social reform and moral and spiritual issues.

Changing the Nation

Together this small group of Evangelicals had more influence in changing the nation than any other group in history. They have been criticised for not getting involved in the big theological debates between Calvinists and Armenians and for not getting more directly involved in changing the social and political structures of their day. But they were highly focused on changing the moral and spiritual values of the nation. Their work has to be seen in the context of what was happening both in the nation and internationally. The Industrial Revolution was rapidly changing the economy of the country with factories and mills springing up in many regions and drawing families away from the countryside into the burgeoning towns and cities. At the same time there was war with America and the French Revolution was raging across the Channel creating fears that any unrest among workers in Britain would produce a similar bloody revolution here.

Commitment

It was the Clapham group of Evangelicals who not only worked tirelessly to improve the condition of workers and to help the poor, but who also helped to steady the nation in a time of great anxiety and rapid social and economic change. They were totally committed to the gospel and saw their mission primarily as bringing biblical principles to bear upon every aspect of national life. They used their skills and experience and professional positions to witness fearlessly to the great causes of justice, morality and spiritual integrity to which they were committed. They endured scorn and ridicule, ostracism and persecution all for the sake of their Lord and Master whose name they honoured and upheld.

Comparison with Today

It is interesting to compare the condition of England when this group began to be formed in the 1780s with today. Of course, there is no comparison between the standard of living of the average citizen in 18th century Britain and the twenty-first century. Living conditions for workers in the newly mechanised industries would be intolerable even in many developing nations today. But not only were social and economic conditions far worse than those of today, but so too were moral conditions.

Moral Standards

The moral and spiritual life of the nation had been in steep decline for more than 100 years. Following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 there was a strong reaction against the severe Puritanism of Cromwell and the Parliamentarians. Charles II presided over a court that openly threw away all moral restraint and indulged in excesses of feasting, drunkenness, gambling, immorality and every kind of debauchery, an example that rapidly spread across the nation. The Dissenters and other Evangelicals were persecuted, scorned and subjected to every kind of State limitation.

Even after the Act of Toleration in 1689, the Dissenters were still banned from University education or from holding office under the Crown and when Wesley began preaching a gospel of salvation in the 1730s he was hounded out of the church and forced to preach in churchyards, market squares, farmyards or barns or anywhere he could draw a crowd. He and Whitfield and other evangelical itinerant preachers were often abused and assaulted, but it was not the ordinary people who were against them, it was usually mobs stirred up by the local clergy or the local squire who hated to have the gospel preached in their parishes.

This was the condition of England in 1730 when the Wesley brothers began their ministry. But it was not the Methodist revival that changed the course of history in the 18th century. It was the work of the Clapham group of Evangelicals who laid the foundation for the great days of Victorian England. To be fair to Wesley and Whitfield, it was their inspired and devoted preaching of the gospel that

prepared the way for the Clapham Evangelicals most of whom, like Wilberforce himself, came to faith through Wesley and the Methodists.

The Clapham Sect

The great change in the moral and spiritual life of the nation and the huge increase in church attendance came about as a direct result of the work of the Clapham Sect. It would, nevertheless, be fair to say that if the Clapham Sect sowed the seed for the great spiritual harvest that was reaped in the Victorian era, that it was the Wesleys who supplied the seed.

Their example not only drew a huge following around them, in Parliament and in the country, but many young men felt called to the ministry and swelled the ranks of evangelical clergy in the Church of England as well as among the Dissenters. When the Clapham group began there were hardly any evangelical ministers in the Church of England but by the middle of the 19th-century evangelical Anglican clergy accounted for almost a third of the total and they were exercising an influence far beyond their numerical strength.

The Evangelicals also formed numerous societies, overseas missionary societies and home missions and they planted churches throughout the land. There were many areas in Britain that were not only said to be practically crime free, but even the language in the mills and factories was said to be no longer coarse and profane. The ponies down the Welsh mines were said to be confused because the miners no longer swore at them.

How Did It Happen?

This whole movement of moral and spiritual renewal that changed the nation began with this small group of committed believers who were not church leaders. Only Venn and Simeon were clergy and they had a rough time with bishops and with Establishment figures. The rest were businessmen, bankers, lawyers, journalists, Members of Parliament and others drawn from different occupations but with a common faith and a consuming passion for the gospel. They grieved over the state of the nation and covenanted together to do all within their power under the direction of the Holy Spirit to use the resources God had given them to change the nation.

It must have seemed an impossible task at that time. Fierce opposition came from those in high places. All the powers of Mammon conspired to try to stop them, especially in their campaign to abolish slavery in the Empire and to stop the exploitation of workers in the mines and mills and factories of Britain. But their trust was in the Lord. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and through them an unstoppable force to change the nation was released into the land.

It happened then. It can happen again today in the 21st century!

*This paper is part of a series of concept papers under the heading **Community Transformation** – see web site or request separate list*

*A **Position Paper** on the work of Clapham Connections is available as well as a **Mission and Strategy** paper outlining a strategy for a movement of social transformation.*