

'Cities and Societies'

- *Revolution and change in the 19th century*

'THE GREAT CENTURY' ¹

Revolution in the air

The church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, has referred to the nineteenth century as 'the great century' of the Christian church. As we shall see, these were days of unparalleled geographical expansion of the gospel 'into all the world'. Events for the church take on truly global perspective, alongside a renewed inner vitality within the faith.

Everywhere it is revolution that was in the air; in politics, industry, society and the church. So many of the ideas and structures that had been held sacred and established for centuries are suddenly being overthrown. The desire for expansion and freedom was everywhere; but its pursuit did not mean that it was always found. There are many examples of how one person's freedom becomes another person's tyranny.

Nevertheless, God is on the move. There is blessing and there is also frustration. A new era has dawned and the stage is also being set for the times in which we live.

POLITICAL REVOLUTION

French Revolution

The year 1789 heralds a new era. This was the year that the world was shaken by the news of the French revolution. The same year saw the Bill of Rights published in North America, which guaranteed freedom of speech, assembly and religion to the colonists who had declared independence from Britain in their revolution of 1776.

France, under king Louis XVI, experienced great injustice. The clergy or nobility owned most of the land while 95 per cent of the population were peasants who were ruthlessly exploited. The writings of Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau fuelled the discontent by arguing for radical change on the basis of science and reason; in the event the powerful human forces erupted. In 1789 the 'Declaration of Human Rights' was published, and on July 14th the Bastille was stormed and the French revolution was on. The church handed over its wealth and control to the revolution. The days between September 1793 and July 1794 saw the 'Reign of Terror'; with Louis and numerous others being guillotined, republican calendar instituted, many religious buildings destroyed and a woman of doubtful morals was enthroned in Notre Dame cathedral as 'the goddess of Reason'. While the execution of Robespierre brought the excesses to a halt, France remained ungovernable until Napoleon took control in 1795; crowning himself as Emperor in 1804. From 1793 France

¹ It is a matter of interesting discussion as to when we should consider the 19th century begins! There are three options:

- In the year 1800 which is the logical chronological point to begin;
- In the year 1789 when the turbulent events of the French Revolution inaugurated a new era;
- In the year 1815 when Napoleon was defeated and the climate for Europe in the 19th century was established;

We take 1789 as the most significant point to begin.



was almost continuously at war with other European powers; England, Netherlands, Prussia, Austria and Spain, until Napoleon was defeated in 1815.

Politics and the Church

The French revolution and its aftermath has left an indelible mark on both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its overthrow of the establishment and appeal to reason remained an inspiration to many. The monarchies of Europe, threatened by the ideas of the Terror and the aggression of Napoleon, reacted by asserting the divine right of kings and the authority of the church. The Catholic church, being less flexible and adaptable, suffered more from the political and ideological struggles of the age than did the Protestant communities. The surging of political revolution meant that the pope was losing ever more secular power, this led to a papal emphasis on ecclesiastical power; for example in 1870 papal infallibility on matters of faith and morals is declared.

Between 1815-1914 there was a century of relative peace and mounting prosperity. There were wars; the Crimea (1854-1856), the Franco-German (1870-1871) and the American Civil War (1861-1865). There were wars of expansion against; native Americans, India, Burma, Indochina, China, New Zealand Maoris, Boers in South Africa and between Russia and Japan. However, none of these conflicts threatened the Christian faith as the conflicts in the past had done and would do in the future.

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Machine and manufacture

Ever since the mid seventeenth century there had been a gradual process of innovation and technological development in many industries. This brought about the most important change in history since the development of cities and agriculture. It took place in Britain and brought huge changes within society and the world; the churches had to do their best to cope with a wholly different way of life.

The single most important break through was the steam engine. It gave the manufacturer power independent of the weather or the season, freeing them from sole dependence upon wind and water. Added to this there was the development and expansion of canal, railway and road networks; increasing logistics. Factory owners had to invest in expensive equipment, with the result that they demanded 'efficiency', 'minimum production levels', 'return on investment'; these were all new concepts. For the first time we find capital, power and labour all under one roof. Here was innovation, mass production and growing markets in an expanding population.

Social impact

All the advantages of this industrial society carried a curse with them as well; long hours, poor wages, urban slums, women and children working. These in themselves were not new, they had already existed before; what was new was the way in which people were linked to the relentless rhythm of a machine rather than the more natural rhythm of the day and the seasons. Now the clock replaced the sun as timekeeper, the factory whistle rather than dawn and dusk. The machine continued unyielding once fed with fuel. There was a



birth of the new values like 'precision', 'care', and the 'avoidance of waste'; these began to shape a new morality with an economic base.

Society and church

A new social map of Britain was being drawn. In 1700 there were few great towns apart from London; those that there were had been ports and market centres for centuries. There was also the centuries old concentration of wealth and population in the southeast. From 1800 there was a dramatic shift to the north, with towns growing up around factories sited for the convenience of raw materials or transport. All this brought a remarkable change to British society, both in their distribution around the country and in the balance of occupation between agriculture and manufacture. Drawn from the countryside in search of work, huge urban slums grew in the shadow of the factories, and gave birth to what General Booth was to call 'darkest England' because of their poverty and squalor.

This dramatic change presented a huge challenge to the church. The Church of England was slowest to respond, for several reasons; it often was 'the Tory party at prayer' with little concern for society, added to which creating new parishes needed cumbersome and expensive legal procedures, so changes took time. Methodism was far better suited to meet the needs of the urban poor, but along with the Presbyterians, time and comfort had tended to make them 'middle class'. Catherine Booth said, "You can't get at the masses from the chapels". It was the Baptists ('Tabernacles') and the Primitive Methodists ('Bethels') who were largely working class; but others were to join them.

The task of evangelising the working class was a continual problem, because once they were saved they tended to become middle class; adopting temperance, thrift, self improvement and an emphasis on family life. The phenomenon of 'redemption and lift' was clearly obvious. Even in the dark alleyways of the slums there was a clear distinction between the 'chapel' working class and the 'brute' working class. There were many different attempts to meet the needs of the working class people.

The PSA Movement

The 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon' movement endeavored to reach workingmen in particular, they felt especially alienated from the Church and often too embarrassed to attend because of their poor clothing. The movement created an environment where they could feel comfortable and hear the gospel. It had as its motto, 'bright, brief and brotherly'.

Labour movement

There was hesitation about Methodists becoming involved in politics at the beginning of the century, but as time progressed many Methodists, as well as other Christians, became in the struggle for just working conditions. The Methodist encouragement for men and women to preach, to be involved in chapel affairs and to read and study, gave them the confidence to speak out for the work force, argue clearly and challenge the status quo. They could step easily from pulpit to strike platform. There were involved in the emergence of trade unions, produced some of the early Chartists and Labour members of Parliament.



SOCIAL REVOLUTION

The Salvation Army

William Booth (1829-1912) was apprentice to a pawnbroker. Converted in 1844, in a Wesleyan chapel, he soon becomes an itinerant evangelist. He marries Catherine, but they leave the Methodists in 1865 to open their 'Christian Mission' in a tent on some waste ground in London's notorious Whitechapel district. By 1878, in order to give the work energy and identity among the 'heathen masses' they called it 'The Salvation Army'. From the beginning they faced hostility from street mobs, often supported by tavern owners; their early music bands were a challenge to hostility. They were also strongly opposed by the Christian establishment; even Shaftesbury said it was "a trick of the devil to make Christianity look ridiculous". Booth was active for social reform but clearly said that changed hearts would only change physical conditions, nevertheless he would never preach to a starving person. The Salvation Army was probably the only movement to really be on the wavelength of the masses in the nineteenth century; 'it was a force to which they could identify, a task to which they could be committed'. In 1890 Booth publishes his book, 'Darkest England and the way out' showed that the submerged tenth of the British nation were in as much slavery as certain African tribes. While Booth chose to be authoritarian in order to achieve results he constantly inspired his followers by his own example and selfless lifestyle and pithy sayings like, "Go for sinners and go for the worst!"

- In 1885 the campaign against the 'white slavery' of teenage prostitution;
- In 1888 the first 'Food and Shelter' outreach;
- In 1891 the pioneer 'safety-match' factory opens in east London;
- In his life Booth travelled 5,000,000 miles and preached 60,000 sermons;
- In all, seven of the Booth's eight children became preachers and leaders;
- At Booth's death there were 9,415 Salvation Army corps and 15,988 officers worldwide; currently there are over 25,000 officers in 91 countries helping 2.5 million people at 10,000 centers annually.

There were in fact numerous Christian men and women, throughout the nineteenth century, who worked to bring about changes in different areas of society in the name of Jesus, highlighting different causes. We can only mention a few as examples of the others.

Slavery

Britain controlled more than half the volume of the world slave trade. It was the Quakers, evangelicals like Thomas Clarkson, and members of the 'Clapham Sect' with Granville Sharp and their Parliamentary spokesman William Wilberforce, who turned the tide of opinion against 'that odious traffic in human flesh'. For more than twenty years Wilberforce brought the issue regularly before Parliament, until they finally changed the law just before his death in 1833. It has been said of him, 'few people have achieved more for the benefit of mankind'.

Prisons

John Howard did early pioneering work on prison reform in the eighteenth century. Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) the Quaker, began her welfare work in Newgate prison in 1813. She would visit, teach and read the Bible to them. She worked for segregating the sexes in



prison, classifying criminals, and women warders for women and education for prisoners. She also worked for the care and rehabilitation of discharged prisoners. Her maxim was, "Charity to the soul is the soul of charity".

Factories

The challenge to the terrible working conditions for women and children, labouring in the Industrial Revolution, found their focus in Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885) He fought tirelessly to improve conditions in the factories, mines, collieries, and for chimney sweeps, and those in the millinery industry. He did this by detailed research into the facts, which were then used to help pass various acts of Parliament. He also worked in the slums, supported the 'Ragged Schools', training ships and numerous other causes.

Children

The plight of waif and orphan children was the concern of a number of evangelicals during the century; George Muller with his orphanages in Bristol, and Charles Kingsley who wrote the "Water Babies". Thomas Barnardo (1845-1905) was an Irishman who wanted to be a missionary in China. While studying medicine in London he was drawn into work with destitute children in Stepney in 1870, after his encounter with the homeless lad Jim Jarvis. It is estimated that in 35 years some 59,384 children were cared for in his homes and that he materially helped a further 250,000 before he died.

Questions

1. Why do you think Latourette called the 19th century, 'the great century of the Church'?

Reading & Resources

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