

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (18)

The Missionary Church (1789-1914) – Challenged by Society

A. Introduction

1. The Missionary Church was the period of church history between the start of the French Revolution in 1789 and the start of the Great War in 1914.

It tells the story of how the church responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by the progress in society brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

2. The Industrial Revolution of the mid-eighteenth century brought dramatic changes to the world, especially in Europe and America.

It was the best of times with wonderful advances in travel, agriculture, industry, medicine, communication and science.

It was the worst of times too, with the growth of the cities and industry bringing with it, poor working conditions, slums, pollution, and increased injustices and suffering.

For the church it was a particularly challenging time.

3. One challenge came from the discoveries made in science.

With new finds of fossils and geological evidence, people began to question the Bible's teaching about the age of the earth.

Also, the widespread promotion of Charles Darwin's thoughts on evolution, contained in his books *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), brought doubts about the Bible's teaching about the creation of humans in the image of God.

4. The church needed to respond to these doubts people were having, and it did so in three main ways.

Firstly, some in the church saw the need for the Faith to be redefined.

This became known as the rise of liberalism, which aimed to make it possible for a man *"to be both an intelligent modern and a serious Christian."*

Leading the way in liberal theology were a number of German scholars who rejected the supernatural aspects of Scripture, with an emphasis placed on ethics over and against doctrine.

Secondly, some in the church saw the need for the Faith to be revived.

On both sides of the Atlantic, people began to set aside days to pray that God would rescue their nation from darkness and unbelief.

Wonderfully in a number of places, many people were saved in a period known as the Second Great Awakening.

Sadly, when this began to fizzle out, there were some including Charles Finney who sought to recapture it in a rather artificial way, and revival became revivalism.

Thirdly, some in the church saw the need for the Faith to be reaffirmed.

In the face of the new questions caused by science, and concerns about both liberalism and the negative effects of revivalism in the church, God raised up men to defend the historic faith, such as the Princeton theologians.

The concern these men and others had, was that as well sharing the faith, the church also needed to keep the faith.

5. Another big challenge especially for the church in the UK, was also an opportunity for them.

It was to do with 'the worst of times' caused by the Industrial Revolution.

The rise of factories required people to work in them, leading to a mass movement of people from the countryside into cities.

With the growth of cities came problems to do with the living and working conditions of those who lived there.

There was a social crisis.

6. How would the church respond to this challenge?

A lot of the response would have to come from outside the Church of England (the Established, National church).

The Parish System it had adopted was woefully inadequate to keep up the shift of a huge amount of the population from rural to urban areas.

For a new parish to form in the now heavily populated industrial towns and cities, an Act of Parliament was required, that was both costly and time-consuming.

So many of the efforts came from, though not exclusively, evangelicals outside of the Church of England, concerned that not only was the gospel preached, but that the poor and needy were helped.

There was one area that those who were part of the Church of England were able to have a prominent role in.

B. Reforming Society

1. The Clapham Sect.

The Clapham Sect was a group of prominent and wealthy evangelical Anglicans who met in Clapham Common to discuss how each member could best influence society for Christ.

Members had learned the two basics of politics in a democracy: 1) How to create public opinion; 2) How to bring the pressure of that opinion to bear on the government.

A particular concern they had was for the abolition of slavery.

Though there was not a huge number of domestic slaves in Britain at the time, Liverpool and Bristol remained major points in a triangle between West Africa and the British Colonies in the Caribbean, and many aristocrats were making their fortunes from slavery and the sugar trade.

The Clapham Sect produced abolitionist literature and campaigned against slavery.

One of the members, William Wilberforce, an MP from 1784-1825, and a good friend of the Prime Minister William Pitt, worked hard to put pressure on the government.

Eventually their efforts were rewarded with the Slave Trade Act in 1807 which banned the trade of slaves throughout the British Empire, and after many more years of campaigning, The Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 which liberated all British slaves.

This group also worked tirelessly to encourage Britain to use its influence to eradicate slavery throughout the world.

2. Lord Shaftesbury.

Antony Ashley-Cooper (1801-1885), 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, was another evangelical Anglican who was influential as a politician in campaigning in Parliament for legislation improving a number of living and working conditions.

"When people say we should think more of the soul and less of the body, my answer is that the same God who made the soul made the body also... I maintain that God is worshipped not only by the spiritual but by the material creation. Our bodies, the temple of the Holy Ghost, ought not to be corrupted by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for his service by unnecessary suffering."

Lunacy Laws: for the regulation of lunatic asylums and for the better care and treatment of lunatics.

Ten Hour Act and Factory Act: preventing the abuse of child labour.

Miners and Collieries Act: outlawing the employment of women and children underground in coal mines.

Chimney Sweepers Act: prohibiting boys being employed as chimney sweeps.

One of his biographers wrote of him, that *"No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery or to add to the sum total of human happiness."*

3. Elizabeth Fry.

After visiting Newgate Prison in 1813, Elizabeth Fry (a Quaker) began an unpopular campaign for reforming the prisons.

She became the first woman to present evidence in Parliament, appearing to a House of Commons committee to speak about the conditions inside prisons in 1818.

C. Relieving Society

1. A number of Christian societies were established to relieve the suffering of the poor.

City Missions were started to provide both physical and spiritual help to those in need: Glasgow (1826); Edinburgh (1832); London (1835).

Orphanages for abandoned children were opened. For example, those by George Mueller in Bristol, and Dr Barnardo and Charles Spurgeon in London.

The YMCA was founded in 1844 to improve the spiritual lives of young men by offering Bible classes, prayer meetings, and lectures on how to improve their condition. The YWCA followed in 1855.

Ragged schools sprang up providing free education for destitute children.

2. The Salvation Army.

William Booth was a Methodist minister who increasingly became concerned about the poor people of East London.

This led to him resigning from his post to preach to them and offer practical help.

He planned to send the people he ministered to, to local churches, but concluded that this would not work because the pew tax would exclude them.

In 1865 he started a church with his wife Catherine for new Christians called the East London Christian Mission, which would later be renamed the Salvation Army in 1878.

He organised members as a military force of soldiers of Christ who were sent out to preach the gospel and minister to those in need, especially those on the edges of society.

By 1878 it had 30 stations in various locations in the UK.

3. The concern of the various social reformers was not just to bring reform and relief to society.

They wanted to see people saved and so accompanying their social action was a commitment to evangelism.

Sadly, as time went on, some involved in this good work allowed their emphasis on social reform and relief to overwhelm their concern to preach the gospel.

This tendency led to what has become known as the social gospel.

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. It is right and proper for the church to express its faith in Jesus by having a concern and seeking to meet people's earthly needs as well as eternal needs.

God commands His people to love their neighbour and to take up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor.

"Jesus replied: 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
(Matthew 22:37-40)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice: show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'" (Zechariah 7:10-11)

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17)

"It is unthinkable that we could truly love an individual and not want both to share the gospel as well as to meet the person's basic human needs." (Tim Keller)

2. A real danger that the church faces, is reducing the gospel to social action.

The priority of the local church is to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.

Reforming and relieving society must never be done at the expense of or instead of evangelism.