14. The 1800s: Gospel impact… and long-lasting errors

Introduction

Let's read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and then we'll pray:

"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ…"

Acknowledgements: as previously, much of this session is drawn from Dr Garry Williams unpublished church history survey.

One caveat as we turn to the 1800s: we will largely be focused here on England, purely because of limitations of time.

Let's begin by considering the impact of the revivals on everyday life in England in the 1800s:

1. The impact of the revivals on everyday life in England

The revivals of the 1700s didn't lead to the creation of a Christian England (for, there has never been such a place). But, in God's providence, a huge number of people were converted. And by the end of the 1800s an extraordinary number of people were in church every Sunday.

When people are saved they start to live Christianly! It's a wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. And when large numbers of people are converted they start to live as salt and light in all the places God sovereignly scatters them and a whole society can be changed.

Consider, then, the social impact of the revivals.

(a) The abolition of the slave trade and other reforms

In the early 1700s many Christians in the New World despised the slave trade, but personally still owned slaves. Jonathan Edwards is such an example. But by the end of the 1700s the offense of slavery came home to many Christians.

In 1785 William Wilberforce became a Christian. As a direct result he became involved in the campaign for the abolition of slavery. He campaigned for 20 years, until in 1807 the Slave Trade Act banned the sale and purchase of slaves. This didn't touch slave ownership, and it wasn't until 1833 (shortly before Wilberforce's death) that the Slave Abolition Act began the process of emancipating slaves.

Abolition was a direct result of evangelical revival. Here's what Lord Shaftesbury wrote:
"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 temples of the Holy Ghost, ought not

to be corrupted by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for his service by unnecessary suffering."

During his time in parliament Wilberforce also campaigned for prison reform, improvement of working conditions, restriction of capital punishment, increased access to education, and founded the RSPCA.

Lord Shaftesbury was another great reformer of the same era. As a result of his evangelical convictions he fought for reform in lunatic asylums, and better conditions for factory workers, miners, and chimney sweeps. He established Ragged Schools for destitute children. He was president of the Bible Society and the Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews.

In the 19th century one quarter of all charities were Christian. It is striking that since then the British government has taken over responsibilities that, arguably, Christian people should be exercising (e.g. in education and care).

(b) Social stability and moral transformation

The impact of evangelicalism was huge. It's no exaggeration to say that the growth of the evangelical church led to a reformation of the morals of society. Take away evangelicalism from the first half of the 1800s, and you take away the morality of Britain. Our parents and grandparents may or may not have been converted people. But the moral attributes they broadly shared stem directly from this period.

Evangelicalism brought English society a stability that was strikingly absent in other parts of the world.

Compare England with France. France had experienced revolution. Financial crisis, food shortages and the spirit of the Enlightenment had climaxed in rebellion. The middle class National Assembly took over the government of the nation in 1789. Aristocrats and clergy were marginalised and then persecuted under the Great Terror of the Jacobin party, led by Marat and Robespierre.

The ideology of the revolution was significant. It was a revolt against *all authority* – secular and spiritual. In 1794 a new Cult of the Supreme Being was instituted. Napoleon Bonaparte took control in 1795 and continued to eradicate the influence of Catholicism from the lives of French people.

Why did Britain never have a revolution, such as gripped France (and later Prussia, Italy and Russia). We cannot know for sure. But it is highly likely that evangelicalism saved England from revolution, as the Gospel gripped many lives and the effects of Gospel living overflowed to even more.

Remember, that life in England in the 1800s was not great for a huge number of people. The Industrial Revolution brought about new means of production. In Britain this development began around 1770 as hand labour was replaced by steam-powered machines. Arguably, this impacted more people than any other event in English history.

For many it multiplied suffering and injustice. Industrial areas grew slum housing, with high disease rates and infant mortality. Child labour was a cancer on society. Of course, people had

struggled in life before the industrial revolution. But working and living conditions now accentuated psychological misery.

Population statistics from the time offer a glimpse into extraordinary changes in society:

- Change of occupation: in the late 1600s 20% of people in England were non-agricultural labourers. In the late 1700s it was over 50%. By 1831 it was 70%
- Urbanisation: in 1750 a small minority of people lived in cities of more than 5,000 people. In 1801 it was a third. By 1851 it was half.
- Population growth: in 1818 there 9m people in England. In 1841 there were 16m.

And yet, there was no French Revolution in England, even though many of the conditions for rebellion were present.

What about the church?

2. The Evangelical church in the 1800s

(a) The growth of non-conformism

The Church of England was very slow to respond to the changes in society. It was greatly hampered by the parish system, which required an Act of Parliament to create a new parish.

The Methodists and other non-conformists were able to react more quickly, and grew dramatically.

- In 1851 some 5.25m people attended Church of England Churches. But already the free churches accounted for some 4.5m people.

But there were many, many unreached people – especially in the Cities.

(b) Evangelicalism in the Church of England

In 1785 there were only 100 evangelical clergy in the whole of England. By 1803 this number had risen to 500. And by 1853 some 6,500 evangelical pastors were known – roughly 1/3rd of the total number. There were even a handful of evangelical bishops.

One man who the Lord used to exercise a disproportionate influence was Charles Simeon, who was ordained in 1783 and who served Christ for the rest of his life at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. His influence was magnified for two reasons:

First, Cambridge was one of two places for training Anglican clergy, it was the crucible of both clerical and political life, and Simeon was able to influence and instruct an extraordinary number of young ministers in training.

Second, the Simeon Trust – an ongoing legacy of the man – bought up the “patronage” of many Anglican churches. This gave the Trustees a voice in the appointment of future ministers.

We can learn directly from both these features of Simeon’s work: for the protection of the Gospel and the growth of the church it is critical to control theological training of ministers and their appointment to local churches. When that goes wrong there is, humanly, almost no hope for reformation and revival.

(c) Growth of world missions
Numerous mission societies were established both in the UK and in the USA:
1792 Baptist Missionary Society
1799 the Church Missionary Society
1804 the Bible Society
1865 China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship)

The baptist pastor William Carey drove the early missionary movement. Famously, he preached a great missionary sermon in which he told his hearers to "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God."

Adoniram and Ann Judson served Christ in Burma. After 12 years of painful service they saw 18 converts. But by the time of Adoniram's death there were some 100 churches, 8000 Christians and a Burmese Bible.

Hudson Taylor served Christ in China. He adopted local Chinese dress and grew a pigtail to make it easier for Chinese people to accept him and the gospel message that he brought. By 1900 there were around 2,500 missionaries in China.

Not always did western missionaries get it right. Often they confused "evangelism" with "civilising." In many places colonialism and gospel work went hand in hand. It was a deeply unhelpful confusion.

But, at their best, these men and women understood that Christ's name must be proclaimed to everyone everywhere. Charles Studd is a wonderful example. He was a cricketer, and the greatest English all-rounder in his day. C.T. Studd was born into a wealthy family, and played cricket for Eton, Cambridge and England. Studd was on the losing England team at the Oval in 1882 when the bails were subsequently cremated in memorial to the death of English cricket (i.e. the day that the great "Ashes" competition between England and Australia was inaugurated). Everything changed when his father was converted. Then, on the same day C.T. and both of his older brothers were converted too. Over the next two years he realised he couldn't spend the rest of his life simply playing cricket. He spent the rest of his life serving Christ in China, India and Africa. He died in the Belgian Congo. He wrote:

"How could I spend the best hours of my life in working for myself and for the honour and pleasure of this world while thousands of souls are perishing every day without having heard of the Lord Jesus Christ, going down to Christless and hopeless graves." ["The Cambridge Seven," Pollock, pp66-67]

But even as the Gospel brought transformation to Victorian society and was carried across the globe, various challenges emerged that would greatly tax the evangelical churches. These challenges leave a legacy that endures to this day,

3. Challenges to the church

(a) The challenge of evolution
Darwin's *Origin of the Species* brought the controversy to a head in 1859. In 1860 Bishop Wilberforce confronted T.H. Huxley (who coined the term "agnosticism") in debate at Oxford and was said to have lost.

From the outset Christian opinion was divided. C.H. Spurgeon denounced evolution, while Archbishop Frederick Temple thought it strengthened the argument from design.

Either way, the church did not come out of it well. There needed to be a rigorous intellectual engagement – and the clergy just weren't up to it.

(b) The Oxford Movement / Tractarianism / Anglo-Catholicism

Why should we care about an obscure group of men at Oriel College, Oxford in the 1820s? Because those men – as with others we have seen – left an enduring mark on the church. This influence, however, was a malign one.

The men who founded the Oxford Movement included John Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey and others. What they started is sometimes called Tractarianism (because they wrote a series of influence tracts). We know their legacy as Anglo-Catholicsm, that part of the Church of England which in its doctrine and ceremonial appears virtually indistinguishable from the Roman Catholic church.

They had 4 distinguishing marks.

First, that the Church of England was the purest of all churches: it had apostolic succession (unlike the non-conformists), and had done away with various corruptions (unlike the Roman church).

Second, that the Church of England should have no interference from the state. This was at a time of great nervousness about the established church: laws banning Catholics and non-conformists from public life were repealed, and parliament showed itself very happy to interfere in the affairs of the church.

Third, the Oxford Movement was initially opposed to liberalism. Nowadays, much Anglo-Catholicism is deeply liberal. But initially it fought against liberalism, for example, by publishing ancient texts by Church Fathers as ammunition against the revisionists. It's one reason why several evangelicals crossed over and joined them, including William Wilberforce's son, Robert.

But the fourth and most distinctive theme of the Oxford Movement was its Catholicized theology and heavily ritualised approach to church buildings and gathered worship. In 1841 Newman's infamous Tract 90 argued that the *39 Articles of Religion* can be given a Catholic reading. There was a strong reaction, and eventually Newman left the Church of England and behind a Roman Catholic cardinal.

The Church of England is aboriginally Protestant and Reformed. Anglo-Catholicism and Liberalism are both deviant forms of Anglicanism. But by the end of the 1800s there were now three clear parties within the Church of England: evangelicals, liberals and Anglo-Catholics. Those parties remain to this day.

That's why we can walk into certain local Anglican churches and encounter prayers to Mary and the saints, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the veneration of the host, and related doctrines and practices. This would have utterly appalled Thomas Cranmer and the founders of the Church of England, for in different ways they hide Christ, magnify men, and harm the souls of Christian people.

It is my observation that whilst the overriding doctrine of most of the Church of England is now thoroughly liberal, the accepted "ceremonial" practices of the church are deeply stained by Anglo-Catholicism.

(c) The growing challenge of Liberal Protestantism
We use the term "liberal" quite loosely today, to describe someone in the church who has a low view of the Bible and exalts human reason above it. That's not an unreasonable description.

But we need to remember that the Liberal Protestant theologians of the 19th century actually thought they were *rescuing the church.* They revised Christian teaching to make it more acceptable. Their key principle was – and is – *accommodation to culture.* Liberalism is not ultimately defined by rationalism, but by pursuing this question: "What can we believe that is culturally acceptable?"

And wherever the liberal agenda has sway it destroys the cause of Christ and does immeasurable damage. It truly is a cancer in the church.

What are the origins of 19th century Liberal Protestantism? We should note three influences:

- French Revolutionary ideology rejected all authority, including that of Bible and church. Liberalism endorsed this conclusion.
- Enlightenment Philosophy was key. Kant (d.1804) argued that we can know nothing beyond the material world, so of course we cannot know God. Hegel (d.1831) saw reality as God revealing himself in the processes of history.
- Then along came Romanticism, with its emphasis on the individual and the irrational side of man.

The fathers of liberal theology were Friedrich Schleiermacher (d.1834) and the Tubingen School. God was left unknowable, the miraculous was rejected, human religious activity was the only evidence for God, and increasingly individual preferences were all that mattered. So, revelation is abandoned, there is no sin or saviour, man is good and getting better.

<u>Conclusion</u>
The 1800s were deeply mixed, from a gospel perspective. On the one hand, church and chapel attendance was extraordinarily high. The movement for the evangelisation of the world was underway.

But on the other hand, by the end of the 1800s the Church of England was now firmly outside of the control of evangelicals.

And even faithful evangelical pastors had been guilty of an "anti-intellectualism" – a suspicion of serious study and learning – which meant they were both unwilling and unable to engage in controversy and argument when challenges came along. As a result (for example), liberals and Catholics took over theological education in the Church of England. That's the situation that largely endures to this day.

Our next session will be our last in this little survey of church history. We're already spotting features of modern church life and modern culture in the 1700s and 1800s. But our aim next week will be to bring us through to the 21st century. We're going to try to tackle:

- How US fundamentalism responded to liberalism, both negatively and positively (e.g. in the creation of Westminster Theological Seminary)
- We're going to learn about the birth of Pentecostalism, and what came from it: classic Pentecostals, modern charismatics, Seeker Churches and the Emergent church, HTB, New Wine.
- And we're going to have a little sketch of our tribe, of our tradition: the story of conservative evangelicals in England in the 20th century. How the UCCF made up for the weakness of local churches; how evangelicalism fractured tragically in the middle of the century; and how the Lord rebuilt those relationships, bringing about a rediscovery of expository preaching through the ministry of the Proclamation Trust and churches like St Helen's Bishopsgate and a renaissance in Reformed theology through colleges like Oak Hill.

That's our next session, God-willing!

For now, we remember the sovereignty of God over history, his desire to build his church, and his command to us to take captive every thought in order to obey Christ.