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A table of contents for *Christian Graduate* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-graduate_01.php

CHANGING MORAL STANDARDS IN SOCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL LIFE¹

By ARNOLD ALDIS, F.R.C.S.

Chief Assistant to the Surgical Unit, Cardiff Royal Infirmary

CHANGES in moral standards and in social customs are seldom cataclysmic. They are almost always gradual and insidious and, as such, are apt to pass unnoticed. If a copy is made of a picture and then the copy is copied and the process continued, it is not very long before the latest painted picture appears to have very little resemblance to the original master. Each individual copy differs but little from its predecessor, and, if you merely compare it with the one before, you may not be conscious of the change. But the change is immediately apparent if you compare one of the later pictures with the original master. If as Christians we compare the standards around us with the original Master-picture presented to us in Christ and His teaching, then the difference is marked. But apart from such a stark contrast as this, if we look back a few years, it is clear that change is occurring, slowly at times, more rapidly at others, in the moral standards of our land. It is to be seen in the standards pertaining in marriage and the family; it is to be seen in industrial life in the attitude towards labour and work; and it is to be seen on all hands in the lowering of the principles of truth and integrity both in work and in words.

It is easy to give examples of this sort of thing again and again, multiplied many times, and there can be very little doubt in anybody's mind that the change is real. Of course, we must always be cautious not to confuse mere differences of custom with changes in moral standards, for customs do alter from one period of history to another. But, making all due allowance for that possibility, I think that there can be no doubt about the reality of the change and that the change is for the worse.

THE CHRISTIAN'S DUTY

It is my particular task to consider what our attitude as Christians should be towards the changing moral standards around us. What should the Christian do?

Now to ask that question is, perhaps, to invite an immediate answer from a company of Evangelicals. It is simple. We must keep ourselves unspotted from the world. We must see to it, by every means in our power, that we do not succumb to the sultry atmosphere which prevails around us and that the keen edge of our own moral behaviour is preserved intact.

This is the instinctive reaction towards the question. It is a very right and a very proper attitude when we are thinking purely in personal terms; that is, being responsible only for our own lives. But is it the right one? I want rather to put before you the claim for a response which is far more corporate than this, which, while taking the utmost care to preserve ourselves from slipping, shows a corporate responsibility for the standards of the world around us. For we must recognize the fact that the world around us is not something detached from us, it is not something that we can stand aside from and watch. It is something of which we form an integral part, for, at least in some way, we all of us contribute, either

¹ The substance of a talk given at the Christian Medical Fellowship Conference on May 19th 1957.

negatively or positively, towards the moral standards which prevail today. We have a responsibility to society at large, to the world in general, and to our fellow-men who are non-Christians. We need to recognize that in a very real sense we are our brother's keeper, the keeper of his conscience, and the keeper of his standards as well as of our own.

If we read the Gospels seriously we will realize that we have the strongest possible reason for pursuing such a course. The very pictures that our Lord uses in the Sermon on the Mount for His children are such as would suggest that our function is to influence and to mould the standards that prevail round about us. We are to be the light of the world and we are to be salt to preserve from corruption and decay in the world in which we live, and if we are to fulfil our function as salt it is obvious that we must be brought closely into contact with that which we seek to preserve. Salt is of no value when it is kept apart. We have no command to sit down and say, 'Alas, this evil and wicked world is going the wrong way. We can do nothing about it.' There is something that we can do.

But to do anything we must surely place ourselves in such positions that our voices can be heard, that our light can shine, and that our preserving action can have its effect in the councils of men and in the places where public opinion is moulded and made.

A DANGEROUS COURSE OF ACTION ?

It is possible that this suggestion that the Christian make his influence felt in the world will invite suspicion, or even concern and alarm, in the minds of some. Somebody maybe will say, 'He is preaching us a social gospel. He is trying to tell us that we ought to give our energies towards social improvements, towards governments, towards the accepted order of things in the world today, and that we should withdraw ourselves from the specific evangelical work of proclaiming the Evangel.' But the matter needs to be thought out carefully, for it is one of the faults in the evangelical world today that we have left aside this great responsibility that we possess towards our neighbour, towards the world in general, and towards the society of which we form a part.

Christians will defend themselves by saying that they are fully concerned and sufficiently occupied with the evangelization of the world, with the preaching of the Good News, and that they have no time for social work, or for trying to change the moral climate of our day and for entering into the affairs of the world. It is a very common point of view and there are three reasons for it.

THE EASY WAY

Firstly it is much the easier way. It is easy to get aside in our little company of Christians, in our church, our chapel or our assembly, and there, in the company of fellow believers, to nourish our own souls, and have a wonderful time of fellowship together, and, indeed, to produce a bright and scintillating light. But this light, unfortunately, cannot get any further than the four walls of the building in which it is generated; it can hardly be seen by the world because it is all seen by men who are saints rather than sinners. This is a bit of a caricature, possibly, but it indicates a danger that we need to guard against.

The evangelical Christian is salt, it is true, but he may be like the salt in a packet of potato crisps. That is, in a little packet safely protected in case it should be upset. The salt is good but it must get amongst those whom it is to preserve and influence if it is to be of any use at all. To go into the world and to try and influence it is very difficult. It is more

difficult personally, because it means that I shall very largely cut myself off from this happy fellowship which keeps me going. It may be that I shall have to attend fewer religious meetings, in order to give myself to committees, to go on a Marriage Guidance Council, to enter places where the evangelical influence is badly needed and where an evangelical voice is seldom heard. It is more difficult because it means that I shall find myself rubbing shoulders and working with people with whom I have little natural affinity. It is very much easier not to do these things. And, of course, we can easily justify such inaction by a false exegesis of scriptural verses. The Scripture says, 'Come out from among them and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing.' The Scripture says, 'The whole world lies in the wicked one,' and we have nothing to do with such a world. The Scripture says, 'Our citizenship is in heaven,' and we have nothing to do with the government and citizenship of this world. And the Scripture says all sorts of things, and we make them the reasons for not carrying out our duty to our neighbours.

But, of course, when the Scripture says, 'the whole world lies in the wicked one,' it is no reason why we should leave it lying there. It is true that the world organizations are under the dominion of the 'Prince of the power of the air', but there is no reason for us to leave it like that. It is true that 'our citizenship is in heaven' and it is gloriously true that already, here and now in this life, we begin to enjoy the privileges of free men and free women of the City of God. But it is also equally true that we have not yet been translated and we have to live out this life in the context of this present evil world.

TOO BUSY

The second reason that Evangelicals have for contracting out of their responsibility is that, by and large, they are very busy. They are busy doing Christian work. They are so busy running Crusader classes and spreading the Evangel that they can easily say, and say with very real right, that they have no time for these things. They can say, 'I have a great work on hand. I have no time to undertake the other things. My time is utterly and completely filled.' This may be a good reason in some respects, but have we not a duty to make time for this wider application of the Christian faith to the world around us? We can fill our whole time in spreading the Evangel to those who will come within the sound of it but, after all, there are not a great many who will come within the sound of it in our churches and places of meeting: those who are outside hardly hear it. And I think we have got to give more thought to spreading it in a practical way in the very climate in which we live, in the moral atmosphere of today. Being too busy can be the line of least resistance and a method of evading our duty.

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

The third reason is the one that I have touched upon already, that to take an interest in social improvement and social welfare, to take an interest in the things which may modify the moral climate, to throw ourselves into the places where public opinion is formed is, to many Evangelicals, a betrayal of the evangelical faith. To them, somehow or other, this is a declension from the free gospel of grace, and a going back into the world to live the law, by replacing the gospel with something else. We have a natural fear of departing from the highest truth. If some keen Christian is appointed to the local council, is it not a temptation immediately to begin to think: 'He is slipping. He was such a fine chap when he was in the Christ-

ian Union. Poor fellow, he is getting side-tracked'? It is an instinctive feeling to think that his activities will prevent him from doing the work that really counts most — spreading the gospel.

Now, unfortunately, social work, the work of moral reformation, in the last few generations has very largely been in the hands of those who do, in fact, preach the social gospel. Here, there is often a substitution of the free gospel of the grace of God by moral righteousness and moral reformation. This is, in fact, a proclamation that the kingdom of God can be built on earth by moral improvement and social work of this sort or that. But I think it must be quite clear that such an association is not a necessary one at all. It is fortuitous. It is the evangelical Christian who should be at the forefront of social change and who should be the pioneer in altering the moral climate of the day.

It is a very great pity that we should have reached our present position because there is no reason at all why it should be so. For the Evangelical, when he takes up such work, does not do so as a substitute for the gospel. He is not proclaiming social reform as a way into the kingdom of God, but he is merely recognizing that those who are born into the kingdom have a social responsibility. They have something else that they must do. It is incumbent upon them that their righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. They are called upon to live amongst men and to influence men. The liberal theologian, the preacher of the social gospel, makes his mistake just here; he is proffering social reform instead of an Evangel. He is seeking a candlestick, but having found one he has no light to shine from it. The evangelical Christian, on the other hand, has the light but he shuns the candlestick, he keeps it hidden. He does not look out for a candlestick where he can shine amongst men. He has a light, but he does not let it shine in places where it can really count in changing the climate of opinion in the world.

AN EXAMPLE FROM HISTORY

We have only to look back a little way into history to realize that our present attitude of the Christian keeping himself to himself is wrong. In the closing years of the eighteenth century there was a little company of men, who were nicknamed the Clapham Sect. They were called the Clapham Sect because they lived in Clapham, which at that time was just outside London — a village of 2,000 inhabitants. But amongst those 2,000 inhabitants were some remarkable men, Evangelicals all of them. There was John Venn, the vicar, a fervent Evangelical, a follower of the Wesley Revival. There was John Thornton, the banker and the financier, the son of Henry Thornton, one of the wealthiest men that Great Britain had at that time, who was 'born again' in a revival and gave away his time and his substance. Next door to John Thornton lived Wilberforce. A little further down the road was Charles Grant, the Chairman of the East India Company. Zackery Macauley was a little further away. These men had the fervour of the Evangelical; they had the light and they were the salt. But they were prepared to go into the world and to bring about a change such as this country has never seen before, in the moral climate of their day. Slavery was accepted by all as the natural thing. Evangelicals might easily have said, 'Ah, this wicked world considers slavery its natural. We cannot do anything about it.' But not Wilberforce. Wilberforce once said, 'My business is in the world. I must move in the assemblies of men or quit the part which Providence seems to have assigned to me.' And acquit himself he did, and right nobly. It was not easy. It took twenty years for Wilberforce to change public opinion. And how did he do it? By pamphlets, by publications, by petitions, by bringing in Bill after Bill

into Parliament to be defeated again and again and again. For twenty years he stuck at it. He was determined to change this blot upon the moral attitude of our country at that time. And change it he did by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a practical way, as a Member of Parliament, that gay Member for Yorkshire. Ultimately, after twenty years of struggle and endeavour, he brought in that Bill, which was passed by the House of Commons by 283 votes to 16 and, as the historian Lecky puts it, produced one of the three or four completely virtuous acts in history, when the slave trade was declared illegal.

Take the next generation. Buxton followed up Wilberforce's work and ultimately brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It took twelve years for him to do that. Or consider the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, Lord Ashley. It took him seventeen years to get his factories acts passed, but he went at it again and again. He changed the moral climate, the public opinion, of this country. And who shall say how much we owe to those men today? They had the Evangel; they were busy about the Evangel; they were Evangelicals as much and perhaps more so than we are. Shaftesbury said of himself at the end, 'I am an Evangelical of Evangelicals' — and so he was. But he saw that he had a double responsibility not only to proclaim the Evangel, but to be salt and to be light in the midst of a perverse and crooked generation and to do something about making it less crooked and less perverse.

THREE MORE REASONS FOR ACTION

Three further reasons may be added to drive home our argument. Our Lord said, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.' There is no question of parading our Christianity before men, or of our receiving the glory. We have got every right to let our light shine wherever it can shine, if only it is to bring honour to the name of our God.

Secondly, if we take this path, we will discover that it will bring very little glory to us. The path of the reformer is seldom easy. He seldom gets praise of men. And those of that Clapham Sect and in the subsequent generation certainly found it to be true. Lord Nelson said that the West Indian colonies and dependencies would never lack someone to speak for their cause while he had an arm to fight or a tongue to speak against the damnable doctrines of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies. To speak for God in the assemblies of men will win no praise from them, but by persistence something will be changed.

Thirdly, if we are called to be a public witness, it does not preclude us at the same time working in secret. The Clapham Sect were wealthy men. They entertained lavishly. They kept up big establishments, and somebody wrote cynically about them that the flesh-pots of Egypt were nothing compared with the flesh-pots of Clapham Common. They did it because they knew that they had to do it. If they were going to make their voice heard in the circles in which they moved, in the circles in which God had placed them, they had to get in touch with people. But they did something in secret. John Thornton's accounts were found after he had died and, in one year, it was found that he gave secretly £7,000 to charity; on all other expenses he paid £2,000.

And so there is no reason why we should not, as a fellowship and as evangelical Christians, seek to make our voices heard more vigorously in places where they can really count in forming public opinion. The secret lies here. We must have the evangelical faith. We must have the Christ, and remember that the closer we walk to the world the closer we need to keep to Christ. But, having that, I can see no reason why we, as Evan-

gelicals — if God give us the gift in this direction and the ability and the opportunity — should not make our influence felt in the councils of the world, and at the head of our professions in administration. If we have the faith and we can keep that firm in our hearts, there is no reason why you and I should not pick out the biggest and the shiniest and the most strategic candlestick we can find, and set ourselves there for the light to shine.

GOOD WORKS

A STUDY OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

By DONALD GUTHRIE, B.A., M.Th.

Tutor in New Testament Language and Literature, London Bible College

THE New Testament has much to say about this subject which is basic to the larger field of Christian Ethics. It will only be possible in this study to examine the use of 'work' or 'works' as applied to the Christian. There is no specific New Testament definition of 'good works' but at least the general meaning of the term is clear enough. It would seem to describe the practical outworking of the Christian's life, both in holy living and in the affairs of the contemporary world.

THE TEACHING OF OUR LORD

Our Lord's impatience with mere profession without action is often seen in the Gospel narratives. His severest condemnations were reserved for the Scribes and Pharisees, whom He regarded as notorious representatives of those whose words and works did not agree. No doubt these men thought their works were worthy of imitation (Mt. xxiii. 3) and it must have come as a shock to them to discover that Jesus could take such a poor view of their efforts. But the Lord's estimate of their religious works serves to emphasize that the major element in the Christian doctrine of works is motive rather than impressiveness.

It was when John the Baptist heard about the 'works of Christ' (Mt. xi. 2) that he wished to know more about His claim to be the Messiah. These works were clearly of a most practical nature for they involved restoration of sight to the blind, the power to walk to the lame, cleansing to lepers, hearing to the deaf and the preaching of the gospel to the poor: it will be seen that all have social implications.

The attitude of our Lord towards good works is of the utmost importance in rightly understanding the teaching of the apostles, and we have a very clear indication of His mind in the Fourth Gospel. On many occasions He made statements to show that the works which He Himself did were the Father's works (Jn. v. 36, ix. 4, x. 25, 32, xiv. 10), bringing out the necessity for the divine endorsement on all works claiming to be good. If He considered it imperative to do the works of His Father (Jn. ix. 4) a similar compulsion should compel every believer.

Even more striking is the Lord's appeal to the value of good works as evidence. In the Sermon on the Mount He exhorted His hearers to let their lights so shine before men 'that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven' (Mt. v. 16). The good works are obviously of such a tangible and practical character that men may not only be arrested by them but be led to ponder over their supernatural origin. When men