

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

THE CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION TO NATION-BUILDING

John Stott

One of the most important questions facing Christians in every country today is this: What values and standards are going to dominate our national culture? Kenyan society is increasingly pluralistic. Christianity, Traditional African Religion, Islam, Marxism, secularism and new religious cults are all competing for the souls of Kenya.

For Christians this is first and foremost an evangelistic question, namely whether Jesus Christ will be given the honour due to his name. For God has super-exalted him and accorded him the supreme place of dignity and authority in the universe. It is God's will that every knee should bow to him, and that every tongue should confess him lord (Phil. 2:9-11). If this is God's desire, it must be the desire of his people also.

The question, however, has cultural implications also. Will Christians be able so to influence Kenya that the values and standards of Jesus Christ permeate its culture - its consensus on issues of social morality? its legislation? its administration of justice in the law-courts and its conduct of business in the market-place? the education of its young people in school and college? its care of the sick and elderly? its respect for the unborn? the handicapped and the senile? its attitude to dissidents and criminals? and the way of life of its citizens? Will Christ be Lord of Kenyan culture?

There can be no doubt that this is the will of Jesus Christ. He expected his followers to go out into the world, both in order to preach the gospel and make disciples, and in order to make their society more pleasing to God by being its salt and light.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16, NIV).

All of us are very familiar with salt and light. They are two of the commonest household commodities. They are in almost universal use, being found in virtually every home. Certainly everybody used them in the Palestine of Jesus' day. He would have known them since his boyhood in the Nazareth home. He must often have watched his mother use salt in the kitchen. In those days before refrigeration, salt was the best known preservative and antiseptic. It still is, wherever refrigerators are not available. So Mary would have rubbed salt into the fish and meat, or left them to soak in salty water. And she will have lit the lamps when the sun went down.

Now salt and light were the images Jesus used to illustrate the evangelistic and social influence which he intended his followers to exert in the world. He appointed the Twelve as his apostles and as the nucleus of his new society. Yet he called them 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'. What did he mean? A careful study of his statements indicates that he was teaching at least four truths.

Christians are Fundamentally Different from Non-Christians

Both images, salt and light, set the two communities in contrast to each other. On the one hand, there is 'the world' or 'the earth' which, with all its evil and tragedy, is a dark place; on the other hand, there is you who are to be the dark world's light. Again, the world resembles rotting meat or decaying fish, but you are to be its salt. In English idiom we might say that the two communities are as different as 'chalk from cheese' or 'oil from water', but Jesus said they are as different as 'light from darkness' and 'salt from decay'.

This is a major theme of the whole Bible, namely that from the wider human community God is calling out a people for himself, and that the vocation of this people is to be 'holy', that is, 'distinct'. 'Be holy', he says to them, 'because I am holy.' A particularly clear statement of this was made to the Israelites soon after the Exodus.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God"' (Lev. 18:1-4, NIV.)

Thus the people of Israel were to resemble neither the Egyptians nor the Canaanites. They were to resist the pressures of the surrounding culture. They were not to accommodate themselves to the prevailing fashions. They were to follow God's way, not the way of the world. Jesus implied something very similar when he said to his disciples during the Sermon on the Mount 'Do not be like them' (Matt. 6:8). They were to imitate neither the pagans nor the Pharisees around them;

they were to follow his teaching instead.

It is especially important to stress this distinction today because the current theological tendency is to underplay it. It is not uncommon to hear theologians speak of the whole human community as 'the people of God'. Highly desirable as it is that all people should be God's people, it is not, however, compatible with the teaching of the Bible to say that they are. All human beings are indeed God's creatures, even his 'offspring' (Acts 17:28), but 'the people of God' is an expression reserved in Scripture for those whom he has redeemed, and to whom in solemn covenant he has committed himself.

Christians Must Penetrate Non-Christian Society

Although spiritually and morally distinct, the followers of Jesus are not to be socially segregated. On the contrary, the light must shine into the darkness, and the salt must soak into the meat. There is no point in lighting a lamp, Jesus explained, if you then put it under a bowl, a bucket or a bed, or hide it away in a cupboard. The lighted lamp must be put on a lampstand, so that it may fulfill its intended function, namely to give light to the people in the house. Just so, the good news of Jesus Christ (who is himself the light of the world) must spread throughout the community, both verbally and visually, both by the articulation of the gospel in words and by 'your good deeds' which exemplify the gospel and make it credible, and on account of which people will glorify our heavenly Father.

Similarly, the salt has to be rubbed into the meat, or the meat has to be allowed to soak in salty water. There must be a penetration of the one by the other, or the salt will be ineffective. As the lamp does no good if it is kept in the cupboard, so the salt does no good if it stays in the salt-cellar. 'Let your light shine before men', Jesus said. He might equally have said

'let your salt permeate society'. Yet too many Christians hide away in dark cupboards, and too much Christian salt stays snugly in elegant ecclesiastical salt-cellars. In other words, we remain aloof from society. We do not immerse ourselves in the life of our nation, as Jesus' metaphors of salt and light indicate that we should.

An illustration of our evangelical tendency to insulate ourselves from the world is supplied by the traditional advice given to young people who ask 'What shall I do with my life?' At least in former generations our reply was often to construct a pyramid of vocations. Perched at the top of the pyramid has been the cross-cultural missionary. 'If you are really out and out for Christ', we have said, 'you will undoubtedly go to another country and culture as a messenger of the gospel. If, however, you are not as keen as that, you will stay at home and be a pastor. Luke-warm Christians will probably become doctors or teachers, whereas, if you go into politics or into the media you're not far from backsliding'. This pyramid of professions needs to be blown up; it is totally unbiblical. But please do not misunderstand me. It is a wonderful privilege to be a missionary or a pastor, *if God calls you to it*. But we must never give the impression that there is no alternative life-work for fully-committed Christians. The truth is that all Christians are called to ministry. 'Ministry' (*diakonia*) is a generic word. In order to make it specific, we need to add an adjective like 'evangelistic', 'pastoral', 'social' or 'political'. There is an urgent need for more Christian politicians and civil servants, journalists and television producers, business men and women and industrialists, educators, lawyers, playwrights, etc., who will penetrate their particular segment of secular society for Christ, and maintain his standards and values without compromise, even in a hostile environment.

Christians can Influence and Change Non-Christian Society

Both salt and light are *effective* commodities. They never leave their environment unaffected by their presence. On the contrary, they change it. When you switch on the light, the darkness is dispelled. And wherever the salt permeates, the process of decay is decelerated. If therefore Christians let their light shine before men, we should expect the darkness to diminish. And if they act like salt, we should expect social decay to be hindered.

Why is it, then, that human society continues to deteriorate? I cannot speak for Kenya, but I can for England. Materialism abounds. There is increasing racial tension, moral corruption and sexual promiscuity. One in every three marriages ends in divorce. The prisons are so overcrowded that early parole has had to be introduced. And the widespread disregard for the sanctity of human life is evidenced in the two million abortions which have been induced since the 1967 Act legalized them. Who is to blame for this landslide? Let me put it in this way:

If the house is dark at night, there is no sense in blaming the house. That's what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is: Where is the light? Again, if the meat goes bad and becomes inedible, there is no sense in blaming the meat. That's what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed freely. The question to ask is: Where is the salt? So too, if society becomes corrupt (like a dark night or stinking fish), there is no sense in blaming society. That's what happens when fallen human beings are left to themselves and their selfish tendencies are unchecked. The question to ask is: Where is the church? Where is the salt and the light of Jesus? We must therefore ascribe blame where blame is due. It is hypocritical to raise our eyebrows, shrug our shoulders or wring our hands in self-righteous disapproval of the

world. Jesus Christ told us to be society's salt and light. If therefore darkness and rottenness abound, it is *our* fault. We need to accept responsibility and repent.

We must also accept with new determination the role which Jesus has assigned to us. The power of God has not diminished. By it human beings can be changed. So can human society. Not by Marxist revolution, however, but by a deeper and greater revolution, through the gospel of Christ. There are many examples in history of the beneficial social influences of the gospel.

The late Professor K.S. Latourette of Yale University wrote a seven-volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity*. His conclusion includes these words:

No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men (i.e. as the life of Christ through his followers). . . . From that brief life and its apparent frustration has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphal waging of man's long battle than any other ever known by the human race. . . . Through it hundreds of millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance, and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom and of control over their physical environment. It has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse known to man. It has emancipated millions from chattel slavery and millions of others from thralldom to vice. It has protected tens of millions from exploitation by their fellows. It has been the most fruitful source of movements to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and peace.

In claiming this, we do not forget the blemishes which have spoiled Christianity's historical record. Much has been done in the name of Christ of which we are ashamed. Nevertheless, the general effect of the gospel through believers has been enormously constructive.

We must not underestimate the power which even a small minority can have in society.

This is the theme of Tom Sine's book **The Mustard Seed Conspiracy** (1981). It is subtitled 'You can make a difference in tomorrow's troubled world'. He writes:

Jesus let us in on an astonishing secret. God has chosen to change the world through the lowly, the unassuming and the imperceptible [referring to his likening the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed]. This has always been God's strategy - changing the world through the conspiracy of the insignificant. He chose a ragged bunch of Semite slaves to become the insurgents of his new order. . . . He chose an undersized shepherd boy with a slingshot to lead his chosen people. And who would have ever dreamed that God would choose to work through a baby in a cow stall to turn this world right side up. 'God chose the foolish things . . . the weak things . . . the lowly things . . . the things that are not. . . .' It is still God's policy to work through the embarrassingly insignificant to change his world and create his future . . . just as Jesus used that first unlikely bunch of fishermen. . . .

Let me give another example. Robert Bellah is an American sociologist, a specialist in 'civil religion,' who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, and in its Center for Japanese and Korean studies. In an interview published in a journal in 1976 he said:

I think we should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a new vision of a just and gentle world. In Japan a very small minority of Protestant Christians introduced ethics into politics, and has an impact beyond all proportion to their numbers. They were central in beginning the women's movement, labor unions, socialist parties, and virtually every reform movement. The quality of a culture may be changed when 2% of its people have a new vision.

Christians Must Retain Their Christian Distinctives

The salt must retain its saltiness, Jesus said. Otherwise it is useless. It cannot even be put on the compost heap. It has to be thrown away. Similarly, the light must retain its brightness. Otherwise it does little or no good. Just so, we Christians have to fulfill two conditions if we are to influence society for good. First, we must penetrate it, and secondly we must refuse to become conformed to it. We have to be 'in it, but not of it' in Jesus' well-known expression. Some Christians live a very upright life, but remain isolated from human society. Others immerse themselves in the world, but in so doing become assimilated to it. We have to avoid both mistakes. 'Penetration without assimilation' is the principle. Above all, we must maintain our Christian convictions, ideals and standards, and have the courage to be different from the world around us.

What, then, are our Christian distinctives which we must not compromise? What is this Christian 'light' which has to shine, and this Christian 'saltiness' which has to be retained? The rest of the Sermon on the Mount answers these questions. It paints a portrait of the citizens of God's Kingdom. Although there is much detail in it which we could consider, I will seek to draw out just three of its main emphases.

First, Jesus calls us to a *greater righteousness*. 'Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law', he said, 'you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:20). The disciples must have been dumbfounded by this statement. For the Scribes and Pharisees were the most righteous people in the community. From their study of the Old Testament they calculated that it contained 613 rules and regulations (248 commandments and 365 prohibitions), and they claimed to have kept them all. Now Jesus said that entry into the Kingdom was impossible

without a greater righteousness than theirs. It was unbelievable. How could they possibly be more righteous than the most righteous people on earth? He must be joking. He could not be serious. But Jesus was quite serious. Christian righteousness is *greater* than Pharisaic righteousness because it is *deeper*. The Pharisees were content with an external conformity to the law, while Jesus demanded the radical obedience of the heart. 'Blessed are the pure in heart', he said.

He went on to give two illustrations from the prohibitions of murder and adultery. The law said, 'You shall not commit murder', and the Pharisees claimed to have obeyed this commandment, because they limited its application to the deed. But Jesus said that one can commit murder by words of insult and even by unjustified feelings of anger. It was the same with adultery. Jesus insisted that the demands of this prohibition also extended beyond the deed to the eyes of both flesh and fantasy: 'Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matt. 5:28).

So Christian righteousness is heart-righteousness. It includes those deep and secret places of the human personality which nobody sees but God, and which are usually the last fortress to surrender to his authority. Yet without heart-righteousness we cannot enter the kingdom, for heart-righteousness is impossible without a new heart, a new heart depends on a new birth, and new birth is indispensable to Kingdom citizenship.

Secondly, Jesus calls us to a *wider love*. 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy"' (Matt. 5:43). No such words occur in the Old Testament. They are a scandalous misquotation. Leviticus 19:18 said 'Love your neighbor as yourself' and stopped there. But this led the Scribes to ask who their neighbour was and to answer by giving themselves a narrow definition, in order to make the commandment

easier to obey. Their neighbour, according to their evasive casuistry, was their fellow-Jew, their co-religionist, their kith and kin. Therefore, since it was only their neighbour they had to love, they argued, the law left them free to hate their enemy, and even by implication commanded them to do so. They thus manipulated God's law to justify their racial prejudice and hatred.

But Jesus flatly contradicted them. It was not Moses' law (what stood 'written') with which he disagreed, but the scribal distortions of it (what was 'said'). He insisted that the command to love the neighbour had no religious, racial or personal limitations. On the contrary, in the vocabulary of God the 'neighbour' includes the 'enemy', as he was later to illustrate in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a Samaritan did for a Jew what no Jew would have dreamed of doing for a Samaritan. So, Jesus continued, we are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Only then shall we prove ourselves to be authentic children of God, for he gives his good gifts of rain and sunshine to the evil as much as to the righteous. His love is all-embracing, and ours must be too.

In the world outside the Kingdom community people love those who love them. Parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and friends love each other. It is not necessary to be born again to experience that kind of love. 'Even sinners love those who love them' (Lk. 6:32). Reciprocity is the standard of the world. 'You do me a good turn, and I'll do you a good turn; you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.' But it is not a high enough standard for God's Kingdom. If all we can do is love those who love us, we are no better than pagans. 'What are you doing *more* than others?' Jesus asks (Matt. 5:47). Instead of copying the world, we are to copy God. 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (v. 48).

Now our enemy is the person who is after us with a

knife or a gun, or who is resolved to rob us of something more precious than life itself, namely our good name. Our enemy is one who has mounted a smear campaign of lies and slander against us. How are we to respond to his evil? We are to love him, to seek his welfare, to pray for him, and to do him good at the very time when he is seeking to do us harm. As one commentator has expressed it: To return evil for good is the way of the devil; to return good for good and evil for evil is the way of the world; but the way of Christ is to return good for evil.

Thirdly, Jesus calls us to *nobler ambition*. All human beings are ambitious. Ambition is the desire to succeed in something. The little boy dreams of becoming a pilot or even an astronaut, the little girl of being a hospital nurse or a mother, an adult of becoming rich, powerful or famous. Our ambition is what we 'seek', that is, what we make our goal in life, what we set before ourselves as the supreme good to which we devote our lives. In the end, Jesus said, there are only two alternative goals. We can become preoccupied with food, drink and clothing, that is, with ourselves and our own material comfort. We can keep asking 'what shall I eat?' 'What shall I drink?' 'What shall I wear?' But this is what pagans 'seek'. To be sure, God does not forget our bodily needs. He has given us bodies and told us to pray for our daily bread. But an exclusive preoccupation with ourselves and our bodies is a hopelessly inadequate goal for the disciples of Jesus. Instead, we are to 'seek first God's Kingdom and God's righteousness,' and then our material necessities will be given to us as well (Matt. 6:31-33).

Here then is the summons of Jesus. He calls us to a greater righteousness (of the heart), to a wider love (of our enemies) and to a nobler ambition (God's rule and righteousness in the world). In response, we have need of a double repentance.

First, we must repent of our *compromises*. Jesus sets

before us his way and the way of the world, the narrow path which leads to life and the broad road which leads to destruction. And he obliges us to choose. For 'none can serve two masters' (Matt. 6:24), though many of us have a good shot at it. But, he went on, 'You cannot serve both God and Money'. Nor, for that matter, can we share any other idol with the living God. He demands, because he deserves, our exclusive worship.

So let us turn from our half-heartedness, give up our prudential little compromises, and make Jesus Lord of every part and department of our life.

We lack integrity if we call the world to repent, while not repenting ourselves, if we campaign for social justice, while tolerating injustice in the church, or if we preach the gospel of peace, while acquiescing in discord in the Christian community. Both our evangelism and our social action will be credible only if we ourselves are manifestly new, liberated, righteous and fulfilled human beings.

Secondly, we must repent of our *pessimism*. If evangelical hypocrisy is a horrid thing, so is evangelical pessimism. We say we believe in God. Well, faith and pessimism are mutually incompatible. To be sure, we are not starry-eyed idealists. We cherish no foolish dreams of an earthly utopia. For we know well the fallenness of human beings, and that sin is ingrained in human nature and human society. Nevertheless, we also know the transforming power of the gospel and the purpose of God that his people shall be the world's salt and light. It is this that gives us hope.

So, repenting of both compromise and pessimism, we need to offer ourselves humbly to God, to be his new community in the midst of the old, his salt to hinder social decay, and his light to shine in the darkness and dispel it. There is no better way for Christians to contribute to nation-building.