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The Hope For Europe (HFE) Working Group

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DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN IMPACT ON SOCIETY

By Dr John Stott

One of the most important questions facing Christians in every age and every place is, what values or standards will dominate our national cultures? Most countries today are increasingly pluralistic, both racially and religiously. Christianity, secularism, hedonism, materialism, Marxism, ancient religions, modern cults and New Age are all competing for the soul of our countries. Which is going to win? For Christians this is first and foremost an evangelistic question. Will Jesus Christ be given the honour and the glory which are due to his name? But it is also a social or cultural question. Will Christians be able to influence their country so that the values and standards of Jesus permeate the national culture?

The national culture includes such things as: its consensus on moral questions; the equal regard that it pays to men, women and children; its defence of marriage and the family; its respect for the sanctity of human life including that of the unborn, the handicapped and the senile; its administration of justice and conduct of business; the education of youth; recognition of human rights; its concern for the homeless, the unemployed and for people trapped in a cycle of deprivation and poverty; its attitude to dissidents and its treatment of criminals; its stewardship of the natural environment and its use of power. All of these are part of what we call the national culture.

Jesus Christ desires his values, his standards, his ideals to prevail. Because he loves righteousness, he hates evil wherever it may be found. So he sends his people out into the world, into secular society, not only to preach the gospel and make disciples, but also to sweeten the whole community and make it more pleasing in the sight of God.

What is the biblical basis for that? What are the implications of it? In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, verses 13 to 16, we read about the metaphors of salt and light, two of the most common of all household commodities. They are found in every home in every culture throughout the world. Certainly everybody used them in the Palestine of Jesus' day. Before refrigeration was invented, salt was used mainly for preservative and antiseptic, rather than flavouring purposes. So Mary will have rubbed the salt into the meat and into the fish, or

left them to soak in salty water, and she will have lit the lamps when the sun went down. So Jesus was familiar with salt and light from birth onwards.

These are the images or the models he deliberately employed to indicate the impact his followers should make on society. There were only a dozen of them at the time but they were the nucleus of his new community. They were to be the salt and the light of the world. What can we legitimately deduce from his deliberate choice of salt and light as models of his new society? I suggest that he intended four truths about his followers.

1. Christians are radically different from non-Christians. Both images, salt and light, set the two communities in contrast with each other. On the one hand there is the world, which with all its evil is like a dark place. On the other are the followers who are to be the dark world's light. The same is true when he is speaking about salt. On the one hand there is the world, which is like rotting meat and decaying fish, and on the other there are his followers who are to be salt to this rotten society. Christians are to be as different as light from darkness, and as salt from decay.

A major theme of the whole Bible from beginning to end is that God is calling out of the unredeemed, the fallen community, a people for his possession and for his own glory. The vocation of this people is to be holy as He is holy. Holy means different. We are called out of the wider world in order to be different.

In the Old Testament, in Leviticus chapter 18, God says to his people through Moses when they were newly delivered from their bondage in Egypt: You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you used to live. and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan into which I am bringing you. No, you must not follow their precepts or statutes; you must follow my precepts and my laws for I am the Lord your God.

So they were not to be like the Egyptians or the Canaanites. They were to operate by different rules and different standards.

The New Testament equivalent of this passage is in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 6, verse 8: Do not be like them. Five monosyllables! There are the Pharisees, the hypocrites: do not be like them. There are the pagans with their mechanical prayer wheels: do not be like them. It's a call to be different from the world around us. This is clearly a major implication of Jesus' choice of the salt and the light metaphor. Christians are, or ought to be, radically different from non-Christians!

2. Christians must penetrate non-Christian society. Although spiritually and morally distinct, Christians are not to be socially segregated. Do not light your lamp, Jesus said, and put it under a bowl, a bucket or a bed. On the contrary, put it on a lamp-stand and let it shine into the house. In other words, let the good news of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, spread throughout society both by your words and your deeds. Similarly, salt has to be rubbed into the meat or it does no good. A lamp is no good if you stick it in a cupboard. Salt does no good if it stays in the saltcellar. No, the light must shine into the darkness and the salt must soak into the meat.

Yet too many of us Christians hide away in our dark little cupboards where we stay snug in our elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars. We are called to get out into society to penetrate, infiltrate, permeate non-Christian society for Christ.

The Fabian Society was founded in 1884 in Britain to make Britain socialist, not by revolution, but by a policy of infiltration with socialist ideas. But later, one founding member, H. G. Wells, pronounced their infiltration policy a failure: "(They) have succeeded in permeating English society with their reputed socialism about as much or as little as a mouse may be said to permeate a cat!". Instead of permeating it, they had been swallowed by it! That's often true of Christians. We permeate society about as effectively as a mouse permeates a cat.

We must avoid a false pyramid of vocations. It is not enough for us to go into so-called Christian full-time vocations, as missionaries, theologians and pastors. It is important to have

Christians as politicians, television scriptwriters, educators, lawyers and in local government, in order to penetrate these areas of society with Christian truth, righteousness and values.

3. Christians can influence and change non-Christian society. Both salt and light are effective commodities: they change their environment. When salt is introduced into meat or fish, something happens. Bacterial decay is hindered, if not actually arrested. When you switch on the light, something happens. The darkness is dispelled. Moreover, salt and light have complementary effects. The influence of salt is largely negative: it hinders bacterial decay. The effects of light are positive: it illuminates the darkness. Likewise the impact of Christians is intended by Jesus to be both negative and positive: negative, hindering the spread of evil in the community; positive, promoting the spread of truth and goodness and, of course, the gospel.

So why do we Christians not make a greater impact on society? We look at the prevailing trends of our society and see social injustice, increasing violence and hooliganism. We see much selfish materialism, corruption in high places, sexual promiscuity, the breakdown of marriage and the family, disregard for human life and its sanctity, and so on. Who is to blame for the breakdown in society? Our habit is to blame everybody except ourselves.

But it is our fault more than anybody else's! If the house is dark at night, do not blame the house for its darkness. That is what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is, where is the light? Similarly, if the meat goes bad and becomes inedible, don't blame the meat for its decay. That is what happens when the bacteria are left free to breed. The question to ask is, where is the salt? Similarly, if society becomes corrupt like a dark night or stinking fish, there is no sense in blaming society for its corruption. That is what happens when human evil is unchecked. The question to ask is, where is the church? Where is the salt and the light of Jesus, and why is it not having a greater effect both negative and positive?

It is hypocritical of us to raise our eyebrows, shrug our shoulders, wring our hands in despair. Jesus told us to be the salt and the light of the world. So if darkness and rottenness abound, it is to some degree at least our fault. We must accept a large measure of the blame. We must also accept the role Jesus Christ has given us to be the salt and light of the community. It is not only individuals that can be changed. Societies can also be changed.

Now, do not misunderstand me. It is not possible for us to perfect society. Christians are not utopians. We are persuaded that not until Christ comes again and there is a new heaven and a new earth will there be a perfect society in which righteousness, love and peace reign. But meanwhile history is full of examples of social improvements. For example, rising standards of health and hygiene, greater availability of literacy and education, the emancipation of women, better conditions in mine, factory and prison, the care of the natural environment, human rights, the abolition of slavery and of the slave trade. All these things are not entirely due to Christian influence, but Christians have had an enormous influence on the development of human society.

In the conclusion to his seven-volume History of the Expansion of Christianity, Professor K.S. Latourette writes:

No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men and nations as that of Jesus Christ. 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 to the human race. It has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse. It has emancipated millions of chattels from chattel slavery and millions of others from ...it has protected tens of millions from exploitation by their fellows, and 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.

Yes, there is a great deal more that we could and should have done. Nevertheless, as we read history, we find that Jesus Christ has had through his followers an enormous influence for good.

How then does social change take place?

Six weapons make up the Christian's armoury.

i. Prayer. Do not dismiss this as a pious platitude. It's nothing of the kind! We Christians believe that God both hears and answers prayer. Especially when they are the prayers not only of individuals, but of churches corporately. We are commanded as a matter of priority in 1 Timothy 2 to pray for our national leaders so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness. We are told to pray for our leaders and our countries, but when I visit some churches there are no pastoral prayers directed to the needs of the world. I sometimes wonder if the slow progress both to world evangelisation, and to world justice and peace is due more than anything else to the prayerlessness of the people of God. When President Marcos was toppled from power in 1986, Filipino Christians attributed this to prayer power rather than people power. There is power in the prayers of the people of God. So we should take the task of public intercession much more seriously. If congregations all over the world bowed before the Living God and put their confidence in Him in their prayers for these world needs, what might God not be free to do in answer to His people's prayers?

Prayer is where we begin in social change.

ii. Evangelism. Evangelism has an indispensable part to play in social change because Christian social responsibility depends on socially responsible Christians, and socially responsible Christians are the fruit of evangelism. When the Holy Spirit changes us, we begin to have a bad conscience about the social status quo, and we gain the vision and the courage to seek to change our society.

In a review of the book *Calcutta* by Geoffrey Moorehouse, Bishop John V. Taylor wrote in the early 1970's:

'Invariably what tips the balance from despair to faith is the person who rises above the situation. Moorehouse's book is full of such persons: William Carey, Mother Teresa and others. They are neither trapped in the city, nor have they escaped from the city. They have transcended the situation. Salvation, he wrote, is not the same as solution. It precedes it and makes it a possibility. Personal salvation is still the way in; it is the key that unlocks the door of determinism.'

We must not despise the place of evangelism in social change.

iii. Example. Human beings are imitative by nature. There is great power in human example. A single Christian who takes an uncompromising stand for Jesus Christ and for righteousness encourages others to follow. One Christian home can influence a whole neighbourhood. A dedicated Christian group in a hospital, university, factory, or office can change its atmosphere and its accepted values. The local church is meant by God to be a sign of the Kingdom; that is to say, a model of what human community looks like when it comes under the rule of God. The Christian community is meant to be an attractive alternative society or way of life.

iv. Argument. In the end unjust social structures can be changed only by legislation. Legislation cannot make bad people good; only the gospel can do that. But it can reduce the level of evil in society and it can make society more pleasing to God. Martin Luther King understood this distinction very well. He said: 'Morality cannot be legislated but behaviour can be regulated. Judicial decrees (laws) may not change the heart but they can restrict the heart; they can restrain the heartless. The law cannot make an employer love me but it can keep him from refusing to hire me because of the colour of my skin.'

That is the distinction between the place of the gospel and the influence of law. In a democracy, legislation depends on consent, and consent depends on consensus, i.e. public opinion. Public opinion depends on argument. So we need to pray that God will raise up more

Christian social and ethical apologists who will not simply climb Mt Sinai and proclaim the Ten Commandments, but who will argue and demonstrate that God's standards are for the well-being of society. And we need those ethical apologists. It is possible to bring arguments to bear on the situation to show that God's laws are for the common good. Indeed all of us have a responsibility to enter the public debate, the public discussion of contemporary issues is part of the very essence of democracy. But we cannot engage in this kind of public debate unless we are willing to do our homework. Unless we are willing to study the issue, probably in company of other people. We Christians have a tendency to pontificate on questions of public policy from positions of ignorance. That does no credit to Christ or to the gospel. If we are to develop a Christian impact on society, we must first develop a Christian mind. We must learn to think Christianly about the issues, and we would be wise to do it together in Christian study and action groups. In this way we can help each other to think straight and then go beyond thought into concerted action.

v. Action. Socio-political action. Some may say, 'but surely Christians should steer clear of politics'. There are at least two definitions of 'politics'. The narrow definition is that politics is the science and art of government, the framing of laws to embody the principles and values of society. The broad definition comes from the Greek word, polis, meaning city; politics is thus life in the secular city, the art of living together in a community. It is important to keep distinct from one another the narrow and the broad understandings of politics. In the narrow sense, politics is for the politicians. It is their vocation to develop these policies and programmes with a view to legislative change. It does not do any good for us who have had not had training or experience in politics to try to turn ourselves into amateur politicians. But in the broad sense, politics is not for the politicians, but for everybody. All Christians have a responsibility in this area because Jesus sends us out into the world as his witnesses and his servants.

Politicians could never succeed without a ground swell of public support from the constituency. So we have a responsibility to be conscientious citizens and to exercise our democratic rights not only to vote ourselves but to seek to influence other peoples' votes, to speak up and be willing to talk and argue and write on current issues. These are the ways of seeking to influence the public debate, winning the argument that God's standards are for the common good.

vi. Suffering. Willingness to suffer for what we say we believe in is a test of our authenticity as Christian men and women. Both the gospel of Christ on the one hand and the moral standards of Christ on the other are not popular in a non-Christian society. They challenge human selfishness and human self-indulgence. So those who defend either God's law on the one hand as being good for the community, or God's gospel on the other hand are bound to suffer for their uncompromising stand.

'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,' said Robert Bellah, a Christian American sociologist best known for the book, Habits of the Heart, in an interview with Psychology Today. 'The quality of a culture may be changed when two per cent of its people have a new vision.'

In most of our European countries we are many more than two per cent.

4. Christians must retain their Christian distinctives

The salt must retain its saltiness, otherwise it is useless and it is only material for footpaths to be trampled underfoot. The light must retain its brightness otherwise it can never dispel the darkness. So if Christians are ever to influence non-Christian society, we must both penetrate and challenge it, refusing to conform to its standards. We have to retain our Christian convictions without compromise, our Christian values, ideals, standards and lifestyle. We need the courage to stand out and be different. We have to take our stand uncompromisingly for Jesus Christ.

So what are our Christian distinctives? What is the light that is to shine? What is the salt that is to soak into the meat and the fish?

The simple answer is to be found in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Here we have Jesus' portrait of Jesus' people. Here Jesus describes the citizens of the Kingdom of God and what the members of his new community look like. Let's look at three distinctions of this new community.

a. Christ calls us to a greater righteousness

'Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees you will not even enter the Kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard that they must have been utterly amazed and even dumbfounded, because the scribes and the Pharisees were the most righteous people on earth. The Mosaic law consisted of 248 commandments, 365 prohibitions, making 613 rules and regulations altogether and they said, 'we have kept them all, every one of them'. Now Jesus says that unless you are more righteous than the most righteous people on earth you cannot even enter the Kingdom of God, let alone be great in it! Has the Master lost his reason? How could he possibly expect us to be more righteous than the most righteous people on earth?

Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees were only interested in external conformity in word and deed to the requirements of the law. But Jesus is concerned for an internal conformity of heart and mind and motive. He said, 'so you heard it was said you shall not commit adultery, and you shall not commit murder, but I say unto you, whoever lusts after a woman has committed adultery in his heart.' So the Pharisees said, 'but I have never been to bed with anyone but my wife!' or again, 'I have never killed anybody.' Jesus said, 'but you have broken both commandments in your heart and probably all the other ones as well.' So he calls us to this righteousness of the heart, a greater deeper righteousness.

b. Christ calls us to a wider love .

Verse 43: You have heard that it was said by the men of old, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. That is a scandalous misquotation of scripture! Scripture does not tell us to hate our enemy and only love our neighbour. No, the law said, love your neighbour as yourself. So the Jews reasoned, my neighbour is my fellow Jew, my fellow co-religionist. He's the only person I have to love, and then of course I am given freedom to hate my enemy. But Jesus said, no, on the contrary, your neighbour includes your enemy. 'And I say unto you,' he went on, 'love your enemies, pray for those who hate you, do good to those who persecute you, and then you will be the authentic children of your heavenly father.' If you only love those who love you, you are no better than pagans. Love is not restricted to the Christian community. Only when we love our enemy are we doing something altogether unique, because that is what God does. Jesus went on, 'God sends his rain on the just and on the unjust; he causes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good.' His love is extended to his enemy. So if you want to be authentic children of God, your love has got to extend to your enemy as well. Otherwise you will be like the world instead of being like God.

c. Christ calls us to a nobler ambition

All human beings are ambitious. Ambition is the desire to succeed, to get on. It is what we seek, that to which we are devoting our lives. Jesus uses this language at the end of Matthew 6. Our Lord indicates there are only two possibilities. One is to be ambitious for ourselves, our own welfare, comfort and self-indulgence; or we will be ambitious for God, his Kingdom and his righteousness. Jesus said, if you are preoccupied with the questions, 'what shall I eat?', 'what shall I drink?', 'what shall I wear?', you are preoccupied with your body, like the pagans. But you are to seek first God's kingdom, God's righteousness, and then these material things will be added unto you.

When we say the Lord's prayer we adopt the perspective of Jesus: 'Heavenly Father, it's your name I want to see honoured; it is your kingdom I want to see come; it is your will I want to see done. By the way, do not forget that I need my daily bread and deliverance from evil...'

The priority in the Lord's prayer is that we should be engrossed in, obsessed with the name of God, the Kingdom of God, the will of God, the glory of God and his righteousness.

This is to be our ambition, a nobler ambition than that of men and women in the world. Christians must maintain their Christian distinctives if they are to do any good in terms of social change. Only then will our salt retain its saltiness, will our light retain its brightness. Only then will we truly be salt and light to society.

Conclusion: In response to that clear clarion call of Jesus Christ, we need to engage in a double repentance.

a. We need to repent of our compromises. We lack integrity if we call the world to repentance and have not really repented ourselves. Or if we campaign against social injustice in the world while tolerating it in the church. Or again if we preach the good news of peace while the church is rent asunder by discord. Our evangelism and our social action will be credible only if we ourselves are manifestly the new and redeemed and liberated people of God. So we have to give up our compromises.

b. We need to repent of our pessimism. If Christian hypocrisy is horrid, Christian pessimism is more horrid still! Christians have no business to be pessimists. Faith and pessimism are mutually incompatible. No, we are not starry eyed idealists. We are down to earth realists. We know sin is ingrained in human nature and in human society. We do not expect to build utopia on earth. But that does not mean we cannot improve society. The gospel has transforming power and God's purpose is that his people should be salt and light to the community making a difference.

So let us repent of our compromise and of our pessimism. Let us offer ourselves to God as agents of change, his new community in the midst of the old, his salt to hinder decay and his light to dispel the darkness.

I am only one, but I am one.

I can not do everything but I can do something

and what I can do I ought to do

and what I ought to do, by the grace of God, I will do.

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30-Days – Calling all Christians to pray for all Muslims.