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John Stott: Four Ways Christians Can Influence the World

How we can be salt and light.

JOHN R. W. STOTT / POSTED OCTOBER 20, 2011



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Alienation was originally a Marxist word, and Karl Marx meant by it the alienation of the worker from the product of his labors. When what he produces is sold by the factory owner, he is alienated from the fruits of his work. But nowadays the word *alienation* has a much broader meaning of powerlessness. Whenever you feel politically or economically powerless, you are feeling alienated.

Jimmy Reid, the well-known Marxist counselor in Glasgow and leader of the Clydeside Ship Workers, when he was rector of Glasgow University, said, "Alienation is the cry of men who feel themselves to be the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. Alienation is the frustration of ordinary people who are excluded from the processes of decision-making." Have we any influence? Have we any power? That's the question.

The word *influence* can sometimes be used for a self-centered thirst for power, like in Dale Carnegie's famous book *How to Make Friends and Influence People*. But it can also be used in an unselfish way of the desire of Christians who refuse to acquiesce to the status quo, who are determined to see things changed in society and long to have some influence for Jesus Christ. Are we powerless? Is the quest for social change hopeless before we begin? Or can Christians exert some influence for Jesus Christ?

There is a great deal of pessimism around today that grips and even paralyzes people. They wring their hands in a holy kind of dismay. Society is rotten to the core, they say. Everything is hopeless; there is no hope but the

return of Jesus Christ. As Edward Norman, dean of Peter-house in Cambridge, once said in a radio interview, "People are rubbish."

People are not rubbish. People are made in the image of God. Indeed they are fallen, but the image of God has not been destroyed. Are they capable of doing no good?

But people are not rubbish. People are men and women made in the image of God. Indeed they are fallen, but the image of God has not been destroyed. Are they capable of doing no good? The doctrine of total depravity, which means that every part of our human being has been tainted by the Fall, does not mean that we're incapable of doing any good. Jesus himself said that although you are evil, you are able to do good things and give good gifts to your children. Now, of course we believe in the Fall. We believe that when Christ comes again he is going to put things right. If you develop a Christian mind, you don't concentrate exclusively on the fall of man and the return of Christ. You also think about the creation and about the redemption through Jesus Christ. And we have to allow the creation to be, as it were, qualified by

the Fall, and the Fall by the Redemption, and the Redemption by the Consummation. And the Christian mind thinks in terms of this total purpose of God, which includes the Creation, the Fall, the Redemption, and the Consummation.

If we are pessimists and think we are capable of doing nothing in human society today, I venture to say that we are theologically extremely unbalanced, if not actually heretical and harmful. It's ludicrous to say Christians can have no influence in society. It's biblically and historically mistaken. Christianity has had an enormous influence on society down through its long and checkered history. Look at this conclusion of Kenneth Latourette in his seven-volume work on the history of the expansion of Christianity:

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

Christ and his church have had an enormous influence. And if only we were out and out for Jesus Christ in the fullness of our commitment, then we would have far more influence than we do.

So, away with pessimism, and away also with blind optimism, as if we thought utopia was around the corner. No, Christians are sober-minded, biblical realists, who have a balanced doctrine of creation for redemption and consummation. We are not powerless. I'm afraid what we are, rather, is often lazy and shortsighted and unbelieving and disobedient to the commission of Jesus.

Beyond Mere Survival

To many of us, the verses of Matthew 5 are becoming increasingly familiar. We see their great importance today, and we begin to look at them again. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims, in verse 13: "You are the salt of the earth." Verse 14: "You are the light of the world." Verse 16: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father, which is in heaven" (ERV).

In both these metaphors of the salt and the light, Jesus teaches about the responsibility of Christians in a non-Christian, or sub-Christian, or post-Christian society. He emphasizes the difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world, and he emphasizes the influences Christians ought to have on the non-Christian environment. The distinction between the two is clear. The world, he says, is like rotting meat. But you are to be the world's salt. The world is like a dark night, but you are to be the world's light. This is the fundamental difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, the church and the world.

Then he goes on from the distinction to the influence. Like salt in putrefying meat, Christians are to hinder social decay. Like light in the prevailing darkness, Christians are to illumine society and show it a better way. It's very important to grasp these two stages in the teaching of Jesus. Most Christians accept that there is a distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian, between the church and the world. God's new society, the church, is as different from the old society as salt from rotting meat and as light from darkness.

But there are too many people who stop there; too many people whose whole preoccupation is with survival—that is, maintaining the distinction. The salt must retain its saltiness, they say. It must not become contaminated. The light must retain its brightness. It must not be smothered by the darkness. That is true. But that is merely survival. Salt and light are not just a bit different from their environment. They are to have a powerful influence on their environment. The salt is to be rubbed into the meat in order to stop the rot. The light is to shine into the darkness. It is to be set upon a lamp stand, and it is to give light to the environment. That is an influence on the environment quite different from mere survival.

Four Powers

What is the nature of this influence? Let me suggest to you a few ways in which we Christians have power.

First, there is power in prayer. I beg you not to dismiss this as a pious platitude. It isn't. There are some Christians who are such social activists that they never stop to pray. They are wrong, are they not? Prayer is an indispensable part of the Christian's life and of the church's life. And the church's first duty toward society and its leaders is to pray for them. "I urge, then, first of all," writes Paul in his first letter to Timothy, "that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

If there is more violence in the community than peace, more indecency than modesty, more oppression than justice, more secularism than godliness, is the reason that the church is not praying as it should? I believe that in our normal services, we should take with increasing seriousness the five or ten minutes of intercession in which, as a congregation, we bow down before God and bring to him the world and its leaders, and cry to him to intervene. And the same is true in our prayer gatherings, in our fellowship groups, and in our private prayers. I think most of us, myself included, are more parochial than global in our prayers. But are we not

global Christians? Do we not share the global concerns of our global God? We should express these concerns in our prayers.

Second, there is the power of truth. All of us believe in the power of the truth of the gospel. We love to say, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). We are convinced of the power of the gospel in evangelism—that it brings salvation and redemption to those who respond and believe in Jesus. But it isn't only the gospel that is powerful. All God's truth is powerful. God's truth of whatever kind is much more powerful than the Devil's lies. Do you believe that, or are you a pessimist? Do you think the Devil is stronger than God? Do you think lies are stronger than the truth? The Christian believes that truth is stronger than lies, and God is stronger than the Devil. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 13:8, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." As John said in his prologue to the fourth gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Of course it cannot; that light is the truth of God.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the legendary Soviet dissident, believed in the power of truth over lies. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize in literature, he gave a speech called "One Word of Truth." Writers, he says, "haven't got any rockets to blast off. We ... don't even trundle the most insignificant auxiliary vehicle. We haven't got any military might. So what can literature do in the face of the merciless onslaught of open violence?" Solzhenitsyn doesn't say we haven't got any power. He says, "One word of truth outweighs the whole world." If anybody should believe that, it's Christians. It's true. Truth is much more powerful than bombs and tanks and weapons.

How are we going to see the power of truth at work? Persuasion by argument. Just as we need doctrinal apologists in evangelism to argue the truth of the gospel, so we need ethical apologists in social action to argue the truth and the goodness of the moral law of God. We need more Christian thinkers who will use their minds for Jesus Christ, who will speak and write and broadcast and televise in order to influence public opinion.

I'll give you one quick example. You cannot force people to go to church by legislation. You can't force them to rest on Sundays. Nor can we simply quote from the Bible as if that settles the matter. But we can put forward our best arguments. We can argue that, psychologically and physically, human beings need one day's rest in seven, and that socially it's good for families who are separated during the week to have a day together on Sunday. We can argue for legislation that protects workers from being compelled to work and encourages family life. In this example, we're neither imposing our Christian views, nor leaving non-Christians alone in their own views, nor quoting the Bible dogmatically. We are simply using every argument—physical, psychological, sociological—in order to commend the wisdom and truth of biblical teaching. Why? Because we believe in the power of truth.

If you doubt the power of secular forms of argument to illuminate biblical truth, then consider an article appearing in the American magazine *Seventeen* in 1977 called "The Case against Living Together." It's an interview with Nancy Moore Clatworthy, a sociologist at The Ohio State University. For ten years, Clatworthy had been studying the phenomenon of unmarried couples living together. When she began, she was predisposed towards the custom. "Young people," she said, "have told us it was quite wonderful." And she said she believed them. It seemed to her to be a sensible arrangement, a useful step in courtship in which couples

get to know one another. But her research, involving the testing of hundreds of couples, married and unmarried, led her to change her mind. And she concluded that living together was not doing the things the couples expected it to do, especially with girls. She found them uptight, fearful, looking past the rhetoric to the possible pain and agony.

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Clatworthy makes two points: In the areas of happiness, respect, and adjustment, "Couples who live together before they're married have more problems than couples who marry first." In every area, the couples who lived together before marriage disagreed more often than the couples who hadn't. Living together, she concludes, doesn't solve your problems.

Her second point was about commitment, the expectation a person has about the outcome of a relationship. Commitment is what makes marriage and living together work. But here's the problem: "Knowing that something is temporary, like living together unmarried, affects the degree of commitment to it. So unmarried couples are less than wholehearted in working to sustain and protect their relationship. And, consequently, 75 percent of them break up. And especially the girls are badly hurt." She concludes, "Statistically you are much better off marrying than living together, because for people who are in love, anything less than a full commitment is a cop-out."

Now, I don't think that Clatworthy is a Christian. Her appeal is not to the authority of Scripture but to the findings of sociology. And yet her sociological research vindicates the wisdom of Christian ethics as it applies to the institution of marriage. It reminds us that God's truth has power, in both its biblical and non-biblical guises.

Our third power as Christians is the power of example. Truth is powerful when it's argued. It's more powerful when it's exhibited. People need not only to understand the argument. They need to see the benefits of the argument with their own eyes. It's hard to exaggerate the power for good that a thoroughly Christian family can exert, for instance, in a public housing development. The whole community can see the husband and wife loving and honoring one another, devoted and faithful to one another, and finding fulfillment in one another. They see the children growing up in the security of a loving and disciplined home. They see a family not turned in on itself, but turned outward—entertaining strangers, welcoming, keeping an open home, seeking to get involved in the concerns of the community. One Christian nurse in a hospital; one Christian teacher in a school; one Christian in a shop, in a factory, or in an office—we will all make a difference, for good or for ill.

Christians are marked people. The world is watching. And God's major way of changing the old society is to implant within it his new society, with its different values, different standards, different joys, and different goals. Our hope is that the watching world will see these differences, and find them attractive, that they "may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Fourth, Christians have the power of group solidarity—the power of a dedicated minority. According to the American sociologist Robert Bellah, at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, “We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision.”

That was the way of Jesus. He began with a small group of only 12 dedicated people. Within a few years, Roman officials complained they were turning the world upside down. There is a great need for dedicated Christian groups committed to one another, committed to a vision of justice, committed to Christ; groups that will pray together, think together, formulate policies together, and get to work together in the community.

Do you want to see your national life made more pleasing to God? Do you have a vision of a new godliness, a new justice, a new freedom, a new righteousness, a new compassion? Do you wish to repent of sub-Christian pessimism? Will you reaffirm your confidence in the power of God, in the power of prayer, of truth, of example, of group commitment—and of the gospel? Let’s offer ourselves to God, as instruments in his hands—as salt and light in the community. The church could have an enormous influence for good, in every nation on earth, if it would commit itself totally to Christ. Let’s give ourselves to him, who gave himself for us.

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