

PUBLIC THEOLOGY SUMMIT

Aberystwyth 2015

- 1. What are we seeing?**
- 2. What are we hearing?**
- 3. What are we doing?**

What are we seeing? ... in the culture, in the church and in the interaction between the two?

As we have seen from Dan and Nick's presentations, the context for engaging our faith in public life is confusing, fluid and often contradictory. We see it as presenting us with a both opportunities and challenges. These are paradoxes – situations that seem illogical because they contain two opposite facts or characteristics.

From the perspective of the advocacy work at the Alliance, these are the main paradoxes we are seeing:

1. CHURCH PARADOX

The death of nominal Christianity (and they cultural assumptions it supported) – and – the developing health and hope of real Christianity.

This paradox is accompanied by:

- i. A strong missional activism with a healthy Stott-framed integrated theology – of works and words – amongst church leaders and young Christians across the country. And also ...
- ii. A general toxicity of evangelicalism as a brand culturally – and – the ironic appeal of the brand to liberal protestants searching for a constituency and public influence.

We see this paradox being accompanied by another paradox of church engagement with society. This is characterised by two extreme modes of enagement: clash or compromise.

Clash – meaning assuming a protest position, making a lot of noise about what's wrong, but not really getting involved or proposing solutions.

Compromise – simply acquiescing to the dominant worldly values and agenda in order to have status and influence.

2. STATE PARADOX

The changing nature of the state – and the PUSH and PULL effects that are being created:

- a. The state is simultaneously extending into many areas of our lives that it has hitherto not been expected to be in [e.g. ‘named guardians’ in Scotland; Ofsted’s ‘modern values’ campaigning, both challenging parental authority] – and withdrawing from many areas of our lives that it has hitherto been expected to be in [e.g. social service provision for the elderly; welfare and pension reforms etc]
 - i. **PUSH:** Because of human rights discourse and forms of increasingly illiberal liberalism, it is seeking to regulate parts of our lives such as our parental authority in the home, our relational norms and priorities, our thoughts and beliefs, and even our theologies... and ...
 - ii. **PULL:** Well beyond cuts, the state is restructuring fundamentally in a way that provides increasing opportunities and responsibilities for churches to meet needs and provide essential services (e.g. localism, subsidiarity etc.

This PUSH and PULL effect was identified in these two parliamentary reports that the Alliance produced:

CLEARING THE GROUND – showing how a secular equalities agenda is establishing new inequalities

<http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/clearing-the-ground.cfm>

FAITH IN THE COMMUNITY – showing how the church is doing loads and doing things well – and often in many of the UKs most deprived areas.

<http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/news/faith-in-the-community.cfm>

As if this situation wasn’t confusing enough ... the UK government then went and (undemocratically) redefined marriage – the implications of which are huge.

The redefinition of marriage has confirmed a new social orthodoxy in which the state is now legally and coercively set against those with dissenting perspectives i.e. Christians with theologically orthodox views of family and sexual ethics.

On a public policy level, the sexuality issues/agenda is now very much at the vanguard of the secularism agenda – gay rights are now being used to challenge religious freedoms. Consequently, with regard to the state, and increasingly so with the population generally, the situation for bible-believing Christians is, and will increasingly be paradoxical. We will be ...

- Included and excluded
- Wooed and booed
- Celebrated and denigrated

... and all at the same time by the same people, bodies, agencies, authorities etc. This is a paradox par excellence.

And we see it with the public policy work of the Alliance in the parliaments and assemblies of the nations of the UK. Time and again, due to religious illiteracy and also hostility to faith, successive governments are buying into two myths to impose a new set of norms:

- The myth of secular neutrality
- The myth of progress

The use of seemingly necessary legislation such as the Counter Terrorism Bill to limit free speech and restrict all religious activities in universities, and the debates around British Values or what Ofsted now call 'values for life in modern Britain' are good examples.

Our response is to strongly defend Freedom of Religion and Belief as a foundational right for all our other human rights. We have also got large projects coming online such as:

- A partnership with LCF to produce resources and events that inform Christians of our many freedoms to share Jesus in public life – and to encourage them to exercise them freedoms.
- A resource to inform Christian parents of their rights and responsibilities in education, and to encourage parents and their church communities to exercise them.
- We are also developing pastoral training programmes and apologetics resources to equip Christians (particularly church leaders and young people) to deal with sexuality issues.
- And we have a developing project here in Wales on the importance of conversion as a human right.
- And much more ...

We are seeing a lot of challenges in all of this, but also a lot of opportunities for Christians to shape the culture.

I think Charles Dickens sums up our paradoxical context well with this famous opening line from *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way

All of which means that, in order to flourish – we need to flourish in disorder.

What are we hearing ... from God?

We pray a lot at the Alliance – and as the prayer of Jesus for unity (in John 17) frames our core work, we have the wonderful privilege of fellowshiping across the breadth of the evangelical community in the UK. From our prayers and discussions and seeking God for guidance, I believe that there are three general things that we are hearing from God about our role in serving the UK church to be more united in mission and more confident and effective in voice.

1. Preach the gospel

This may seem rather obvious, but it's important to emphasise in our generation – if we are to avoid repeating the calamities of the social gospel that ultimately succeeded in reducing the influence of Christianity in public life – I would argue.

CS Lewis once observed that '**A Christian is either a missionary or an imposter**', and as nominal/cultural Christianity continues to fade it's important that we follow Christ's command to proclaim to a lost world that Jesus is Lord and Saviour. This doesn't mean abandoning an integrated theology or works and words (and indeed wonders), but it does mean recognising that there is a sequential priority – with a heart to see the lost saved taking primacy in everything we do.

In his wonderful book *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller makes the point well stating:

‘If we confuse evangelism and social justice we lose what is the single most unique service that Christians can offer the world. Others, alongside believers, can feed the hungry. But Christians have the gospel of Jesus by which men and women can be born again into the certain hope of eternal life. No one else can make such an invitation.’

The recent appointment of Gavin Calver to lead our church and mission work at the Alliance is a sign of what we are hearing from God. His appointment signals that – despite the social pressures to be quieted and for our faith to be relegated to a private pursuit by people in gothic refrigerators whose average age is deceased – if we really love people and really love God – our first priority must be to connect them together. We are hearing this from God.

2. Live the gospel

We need to practically demonstrate the Kingdom of God to every area of public life. Our actions, our lives should be like a trailer to a film – a mini-preview of the main film.

This should not be restricted to what we have come to understand as traditional ‘church’ activities such as preaching, teaching, pastoral care and discipleship etc.

So, on the basis that faith without deeds is useless, living the gospel means carrying the kingdom into every area of public life. This is what it means to be salt and light – and this is what it means to disciple the nations.

And we believe that we have an obligation to act, to speak up.

One reason that this message is important is that the gospel is synonymous with freedom – historically and geographically that fact is borne out ... ergo, if we are not contending for the freedoms for the gospel 24/7 or exercising such freedoms, they will simply become increasingly irrelevant abstract concepts and our public space for the gospel will diminish.

So, on the basis that if we don’t change the culture, the culture will change us – there seems to be a requirement for us to speak up and speak out.

And this brings us to the third thing we believe we are hearing.

3. Lead the change

John Stott once remarked ...

“The gospel has an antiseptic effect on society.”

We believe that God wants us to demonstrate his kingdom – for his glory and our healing.
So how do we do this?

Martin Luther King Jnr. once observed ...

“Most people ... are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority of opinion, not thermostats that transform or regulate the temperature of society.”

I recently watched re-run of the Ian Hislop BBC series called ‘the do-gooders’ – about Edwardian and Victorian social reformers – overwhelmingly Christians, and overwhelmingly evangelicals. These are the people that lead change in public life to such a degree that they renewed civil society. We live today on the benefits of their work – but somewhere between then and now we seemed to have bought into the idea that projects and programmes change cultures – and not people.

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

We see an urgent need to encourage and equip the church to live out the God story in a way that changes culture.

I believe that, before Christ returns (and short of a revival) if we are really serious about seeing His Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, then we need to foster **a culture of Public Leadership in the church across the nations of the UK**. Everything else is just wishful thinking.

What’s the theology behind this?

Isaiah 61 talks about people who ...

... will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.

People who ...

... will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated;

Who will ...

... renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Q: Who are these people? Where are they?

A: They're here. They're us!

Very briefly, the theology of Public Leadership goes like this ...

God the Father has given us a creation mandate that includes the whole of culture (how we live). This means that, made in his image, we are called to govern – to order the priorities of our social relations according to his will.

The Son, being full of grace and truth, provides a dual model of active public leadership that is: of sacrificial service; and courageous engagement – the Lamb and the Lion.

The Holy Spirit (*Parakletos* – Advocate) is the guiding, empowering resource for the church to realise the gospel mission of discipling the nations. We just can't do it without him.

In terms of context and praxis, implicit to this intentional advocacy are: Leslie Newbigin's identification of a 'mission to the West' as a strategic cultural priority; and John Stott's call for evangelicals to actively renew society – with a newspaper in one hand and a bible in the other.

The scope of the work is reflected by observation of Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper who famously said "*There is not a square inch in the whole of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'*"

So, if we believe that this is God's world, we've got to resist the SSD [Sacred-Secular Divide]

And this is a sovereignty issue. When Jesus said "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" he wasn't calling his believers to let the pagans get on with ruling things, he was affirming that God owns the whole show – which makes the whole show a mission field.

Being made in the image of a God who leads, we are called to lead like our creator. If leadership is about accepting the responsibility of power – standing in the gap for others, how do we handle or understand that power?

- Leadership is about authorising things.
- Authority is the exercise of power

- All authority comes from God (you are not in authority, unless you are under authority)
- For God, all authority exists for the purpose of government (the right ordering of our relational priorities)
- For God all government exists for justice
- For God all justice involves judgement AND mercy
 - God is merciful because he is love
 - God judges because he is just
 - God is just AND merciful because he is holy

In terms of practically engaging with secular authorities (and such authorities should certainly consist of Christians as well as others), Paul summarises our relationship in Romans 13:

1. Government has been instituted by God and must conform to God's design;
2. The role of government is to maintain justice in society, and it's entitled to use force to do so;
3. Government can be corrupted by various idolatries;
4. Christians should be model citizens and should honour and respect government, and yet ...
5. Christians can never give uncritical allegiance, since their first loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Until Christ returns, our role in public life is to demonstrate signs of his coming Kingdom – for his glory and for our healing. We should preview the Kingdom like a trailer for a film – demonstrating, showing, describing the 'now, but not yet' kingdom of Jesus. This is living with (and living out) a biblical worldview.

And, for the Evangelical Alliance, public leadership is all about the common good, and it relates to God's instructions to Jeremiah to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' (Jer 29:7). In essence, the focus on positive social engagement accords closely with the command of Jesus to 'Love your Neighbour as yourself.' With love as the guiding principle for advocacy, we speak because we have a responsibility to bless and protect all those made in the image of God – in other words everyone.

And there is also the Old Testament tradition of ‘speaking truth to power’. As well as defending the space of Christians to live authentic and faithful lives (and to have the freedom to proclaim the gospel), this is also about influencing for justice and being a voice for the voiceless. In a complex, plural (and possibly neo-pagan) context such as ours, the task of the church issuing ‘intelligent, prophetic directives’ⁱ to society is primarily a public discipleship issue.

The objective is not theocratic rule – but to see a public squareⁱⁱ in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is maximally proclaimed, experienced and understood – and where the freedom to accept or reject it is secured. As Jesus said:

“... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matt 5:16

And to lead in public life is to speak.

For our words to carry weight, demands the cultivation of prophetic public voices that are rooted in scripture and led by the Holy Spirit. This doesn’t mean standing in the council chamber or the board room and shouting ‘thus sayeth the Lord ...’ It’s about speaking with tact and wisdom like Daniel. The focus upon developing public leadership draws on a historic tradition of Christians being called to be salt and light. Jesus’ instruction to be ‘as shrewd as serpents and as gentle as doves’ provides the *modus operandi* for engagement in our secularised, apathetic and increasingly hostile political and media context. Be sure of this, although God will grant us favour as we speak out, we can be sure that we will also encounter opposition.

And it is Jesus who provides our model for servant leadership. Being full of truth and grace, Jesus is both the sacrificial servant and the courageous warrior. He is not one to the exclusion of the other, and developing public leadership that integrates the Lion and the Lamb is essential. Also, we must overcome any false humility that is uncomfortable with ‘self-promotion’ or ‘developing a profile in politics and the media’ or ‘networking’ - instead deferring leading in public life to ‘anyone but me’. We must earn the right to the microphone.

Leading things changes stuff (great slogan!)

There’s a list of people changing stuff in the Book of Hebrews ... people like ... Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab ...

(11) ³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who

shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was **turned to** strength; and who **became** powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

This cloud of witnesses now includes many big names in the history of evangelical public leadership. People like Wesley, Wilberforce, Newton, Muller, Hannah More, Shaftesbury etc. These are accompanied by innumerable others who have helped to lead change in nations and communities – and the list is being added to today. Motivated by love, they are compelled to serve by leading – and to lead by serving. Where do these people come from? Maybe they're special? Well, they were anointed – yes. They were called – yes. They were gifted to lead – well not really. Not at first. Listen to this:

(1 Cor) ²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”^[d]

It seems that our great Christian leaders were in fact very ordinary people. People just like you and me – but people who by faith attempted the impossible. Their leadership was both caught and taught.

Please note; the Evangelical Alliance is not prescriptive about where people lead – we just want to encourage the activity of leading change in public life as being normative for evangelical Christians. So this is not a silver bullet – or a formula. In the words that Eugene Petersen borrowed for Frederik Nietzsche, it's 'a long obedience in the same direction.'

In recent times, the 'transformation agenda' of the church has had a focus on developing spheres of influence – networking people in politics, arts, media etc. All good, and all necessary, but these spheres require people – people who can lead change.

As the practicalisation of decades of great theological work, we believe that 'leading things change stuff' is where the rubber hits road.

At local and national levels, the Evangelical Alliance is developing resources, running events and fostering networks both within certain spheres – but more importantly across spheres – because that's where big and deep cultural change really happens.

Think of the Clapham Sect, the Bloomsbury Group and even Al Qaeda. Culture doesn't change with grand plans, it changes when small groups of leaders commit themselves to a vision and invest their lives in long-term ... and public leaders who have the Lord God Almighty with them ... well ... the sky's the limit. www.thepublicleader.com

ⁱ The term 'intelligent, prophetic directives' was used in an address by Karl Rahner, a Catholic theologian, to the German Catholic church in the 1970's.

ⁱⁱ 'The term "public square" no longer refers to a physical or literal place on the order of London's Trafalgar Square, Washington's Lafayette Square, or Paris's Place de la Concorde. It is simply a metaphor for all the forums in which citizens can come together to deliberate, debate, and decide the implications of their common life. As such, it covers both the formal expressions of the public square, such as the British Parliament, the American Congress, and the French Assembly, and the informal expressions of the public square, such as the op-ed pages of our newspapers, the radio talk shows, coffee-shop discussions, and the burgeoning Web logs.' From Guinness, O (2011: 14) *The Case for Civility – and why our future depends on it*, New York, Harper Collins