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CULTURAL ELITES: The Next Unreached People Group

by ERIC METAXAS

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Eric Metaxas is an author, speaker, cultural commentator, humorist, and founder and host of Socrates in the City, a speaker's series on "life, God, and other small topics." He is the author of the acclaimed best-seller *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce & the Campaign to End Slavery, Everything You Always Wanted to Know About God (but were afraid to ask)* and thirty children's books. His essays, reviews, poems, and humorous writing have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *First Things*, *Christianity Today*, and *Books&Culture*. Eric has written for VeggieTales and is the voice of the narrator on their Esther video. His Rabbit Ears scripts have garnered three Grammy nominations for Best Children's Recording. Eric speaks widely and often appears on CNN and FoxNews, discussing issues of faith and culture. He lives in Manhattan with his wife and daughter.

Does God want us to change the world? And if so, how? If you're in a hurry, let me cut to the chase: a) *yes* – and b) *by doing what the Clapham Circle did: proving their faith through works, mostly among the poor and powerless, and working among the rich and powerful*. There's a little more to it, but if you must run, there's the nuance-free answer which, like a sack lunch, you may take with you.

If you can stay, I'll begin by telling you about the night talkshow host Dick Cavett and I went to see Mickey Rooney perform. This is not a joke. Before the show I got to meet Mickey, along with the photographer Richard Avedon. It was a trip. But the point of this is what happened later that evening, in a Park Avenue bistro, where Cavett and I bumped into a Catholic priest friend of mine. Suddenly, as though it had been eating at him for years, Cavett asked the priest where the Golden Rule came from. The priest, knowing Cavett to be brilliant and well-educated, reached way back and came up with the actual Hebrew passage from the Old Testament, which Jesus would have been referring to when he so famously spoke it in the New Testament. But that's not what Cavett was after. He didn't know Jesus had given us the Golden Rule. That's what he was asking! It was an odd moment watching the priest and the pundit missing each other, and realizing that my favorite smartguy didn't know what most American fifth-graders know. Why? Because for the last fifty years he had been living among the intellectual and cultural elites of Manhattan – folks like Woody Allen and Susan Sontag and Pauline Kael, people so secular when compared to the rest of the country that they wouldn't have known it was Jesus either. And if they had, they wouldn't have brought it up at George Plimpton's cocktail party or at Paloma Picasso's opening. *Get it?*

What does this have to do with changing the world? Everything. Because, for good or for ill, it is the cultural elites who determine much of what goes on in the rest of the culture, who can set the tone and content of the cultural conversation. They can determine what we sneer at and what we *ooh* at and *ahh* at. Not that they are trying to do this. It's just the way things are. They tend to have the tv pulpits and the Conde Nast photo spreads. And the folks in Topeka who watch them... don't. You've heard of trickle-down economics? Let me introduce you to trickle-down culture.

This is nothing new. Two hundred years ago, when the great reformer and abolitionist William Wilberforce was alive, the situation was the same. In fact, it was worse. In our own country today, secularism is still generally confined to the cultural elites, who are few in number and mostly live in a

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few metropolitan areas. But the overwhelming percentage of Americans across the country – 84 percent by a recent Gallup poll – self-identify as Christians, with about half of them “serious” about their faith. So most of us still remember where the Golden Rule came from. Though the tide is rising, we have not yet been completely swamped by secularism.

But in Wilberforce’s England, they had. The secularism of the elites had over the course of the 18th century quite overrun the country, and though most people still went to church, almost no one really believed the Bible or the basic tenets of the faith. Most of the clergy didn’t believe it themselves, and from their pulpits were chirruping mainly about Enlightenment deism and rationalism, and “preaching” a tepid status-quo moralism. And the culture, having drawn back from anything resembling a robust Christian faith, was suffering terribly. The elites set the extraordinarily low cultural standards, being as hedonistic and selfish as anything we can imagine outside Versailles; they gave nothing to the poor and did nothing to help them. As far as they were concerned, the poor deserved to be poor, and they deserved to be rich. End of discussion. The effect of this was incalculable, and throughout the whole of the 18th century extreme poverty and social chaos held sway, complete with public displays of animal cruelty, epidemic alcoholism among all classes, and every other kind of social horror. One contemporary statistic paints the grim picture: 25 percent of all single women in London were prostitutes. Their average age was sixteen.

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Still, despite these longest of odds Wilberforce and his devout friends – what we today call the Clapham Circle – somehow succeeded in radically changing the cultural conversation and climate over a few decades. By Wilberforce’s death in 1833, they had managed to bring a Christian worldview into the cultural mainstream for the first time in modern history. To say that it was miraculous is merely to know the details. And they did it, as we have said, by showing their faith through works, and by moving principally in culturally elite circles, as we shall see. But first some background.

WILBERFORCE AND THE CLAPHAM CIRCLE

“They changed the world!” It’s a phrase we’ve heard so often that it’s lost all meaning, as anything does when worn down by over-handling to the bald nub of cliché. But if anyone ever changed the world, Wilberforce and the Clapham Circle did. Wilberforce is, of course, most famous for leading the Parliamentary battle to end the slave trade in the British Empire. That alone was an utterly heroic effort of twenty years, culminating in the great victory of 1807, whose bicentennial we celebrate this year. But what few know is that what Wilberforce and the Clapham Circle accomplished went far beyond that historic triumph of 1807. For one thing, Wilberforce’s efforts led to the British abolition of slavery itself 26 years later, and inspired the

abolitionist cause across Europe and in the United States, too. Years later, Lincoln and Frederick Douglas hailed him as their hero.

But more amazing, and harder to fathom, was that far beyond abolition, Wilberforce and his friends had a monumental impact on the wider British culture, and on the world beyond Britain, because they succeeded not only in ending the slave trade and slavery, but in changing the entire mindset of the culture. What had been an effectively pagan worldview, where slavery and the abuse of human beings was accepted as inevitable and normative, became an effectively biblical worldview, in which human beings were seen as created in the image of God. The idea that one should love one's neighbor was brought into the cultural mainstream for the first time in history, and the world has never been the same.

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What began as a war against the slave trade became a war against every other social ill: from the treatment of prisoners, to child labor, to caring for orphans, to epidemic alcoholism, to prostitution, to illiteracy among the poor, to public spectacles of animal cruelty, and everything in between. When Wilberforce began his career in Parliament, the idea of helping the poor was virtually unheard of, but a few decades later he and his friends had effectively launched the Victorian era, a time when helping the poor and fighting social injustice were the cultural norm, as they are today. By the time he died in 1833, Wilberforce's goal "to make goodness fashionable" had succeeded beyond anything he could have dreamt. The fashion leapt across the Atlantic, too, and just as in Britain, societies to do good bloomed across America and have flourished ever since. To do: Change the world. *Check.*

HOW THEY DID IT

FAITH AND WORKS

As we have said, the first aspect of their success has to do with their theological view that one must prove one's faith through one's works, that the two cannot be separated. Wilberforce and his friends lived at a time when there was no false division between faith and works, or between evangelism and social outreach. These were simply two sides of the coin that was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The great 17th century evangelist George Whitfield spent as much time establishing orphanages as preaching – and he preached 18,000 sermons. Caring for widows and orphans, feeding the hungry, and helping the poor were all explicitly and exclusively Christian ideas, so atheists, agnostics, and nominal Christians were neither involved in them, nor in abolition. The idea of a social conscience simply didn't exist in that culture, except among serious Christians, who were scorned by the wider culture as "Methodists", because many had been converted through the "Methodist" movement of Charles and John Wesley.

Today, of course, thanks to Wilberforce and his friends, most everyone has a social conscience. The idea of “making goodness fashionable” had so succeeded that Christian morality became the standard in public life throughout the 19th century, so much so that we laugh at “Victorian values” today. But because doing good to one’s fellow man had become so popular, it eventually became unmoored from its explicitly Christian roots. Something called the “Social Gospel” came into being, where some jettisoned the theology of Jesus’ divinity and miracles, and decided that “doing good” was all the Christianity they needed. In reaction to this – tragically – many Christians decided, around 1920, to focus almost exclusively on evangelism and on theological fundamentals, calling themselves “Fundamentalists”. Since then, many Christians have inherited this strange, ironic situation, where those behind social outreach in the first place stepped back and let non-Christians take the lead. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Suffice it to say that Wilberforce and the people of the Clapham Circle existed before this strange and tragic split. For them, as we have said, working to alleviate suffering and to fight social injustices went hand in hand with evangelism and a high view of Scripture. They fought hard to win souls to Christ, and just as hard to fight suffering and poverty and injustice in Christ’s name. And they realized that to be successful in either of these, they needed to be deeply devoted to Christ as well as fully engaged in the culture around them. In a way we’ve not seen since, they were remarkably successful in striking the balance that is meant by the phrase “in the world, but not of it”. While they spent much time together and prayed much, they knew God had not called them only to fellowship and endless prayer meetings, but to go out and to do His work outside those meetings, in the marketplace. That was the model and the mandate of the One who had sent them out, and they took it very seriously. Who was it who said: I come not to heal those that are well, but the sick? *Hint*: it wasn’t Dorothy Parker.

The people of Clapham also evinced an extraordinary ecumenism. Suffering and injustice – and, oh yes, Satan – were their real enemies, not other Christians who differed with them on some minor points of theology. Most in the Clapham Circle were members of the Church of England, but among their number were “Dissenters” such as Quakers, Moravians, and Baptists. They welcomed any serious Christians to work with them on abolition of the slave trade or the other cause to which they gave themselves. To work together in a culture hostile to their faith they were obliged to renounce denominational squabbles and turf wars. Religious pride was deflated, and the Gospel flourished.

More extraordinary was their canny willingness to work with non-Christians, if possible. For example, Wilberforce made common cause with Charles Fox, another member of Parliament who was one of the

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most publicly immoral men of his day. But Wilberforce didn't do this to be seen as “bipartisan” or to lessen criticisms of himself as a prude or religious fanatic, for that itself would have been prideful. He did it because he reckoned ending the slave trade more important than taking a public stand against the dizzying debaucheries of Mr. Fox.

When their fellow citizens saw that the efforts of these Christians were improving society in general – crime was reduced, for one thing – attitudes changed, giving their evangelistic efforts greater credibility too. Advocates of Enlightenment ideas such as atheism and Deism were writing angry pamphlets, but the men and women of Clapham were rolling up their sleeves and actually doing good to and for their fellow man. So perhaps this serious Christianity of Mr. Wilberforce was not so terrible after all. Wilberforce became the “moral conscience” of the nation, and he and his Clapham friends slowly but surely called the nation back to its Christian roots, reminding Britons that if they called themselves Christians, they must help the poor and suffering.

THE ELITE STRATEGY

Like Wilberforce, most of those in the Clapham Circle occupied high positions in society and were wealthy, so they had great influence and leverage, and the means to do much with that influence and leverage. Babington, Macauley, Charles Grant, and others – like Wilberforce – were members of Parliament. Hannah More was one of the chief literary figures of her day, being close friends with the famous Dr. Johnson, the actor David Garrick, and the artist Joshua Reynolds. Her friends, Lord and Lady Middleton, were also well-connected in the London world of Arts and Letters, and Lord Middleton eventually became First Lord of the Admiralty. James Stephen and Granville Sharp were lawyers; Isaac Milner was a world-class academic; Henry Venn and Thomas Gisborne were wealthy clergymen. The list goes on. They were a veritable pantheon of bigshots, all connected in their evangelical faith and their zeal to improve the culture of their nation. But without their societal stature, the causes they championed simply could not have succeeded.

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But the Clapham Circle were not mere culture warriors, trying to climb over the ramparts to take control, but rather were already insiders who knew how to behave like insiders, and who would do their best to change things from within. They knew how to move in their high circles of influence; knew the unspoken language of those circles; and knew when to push and when not to push and whom to ask about this or that, and whom not to ask. They looked and behaved like everyone else, except for their deep faith, so they were simultaneously insiders and outsiders. As we have said, they may well be the most “in the world, but not of it” network of people who ever lived. As “not-of-the-world” outsiders, it was vital they spend time together, encouraging and praying with each other.

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to maintain their places of power and influence, so long as it advanced the Gospel, because their ultimate allegiances were not to the “world” in which they moved, but to the “not-of-the-world” Kingdom, whose King they served.

They were aware that they were also God’s ambassadors and missionaries within the elite culture of their day, much as Joseph and Daniel in theirs. The Clapham Circle did all they could to maintain their places of power and influence, so long as it advanced the Gospel, because their ultimate allegiances were not to the “world” in which they moved, but to the “not-of-the-world” Kingdom, whose King they served.

The Clapham Circle were so named because many of them lived in Clapham, then an idyllic village in the “country”, four miles from Parliament. A few of them, including Wilberforce, lived in three adjoining Georgian mansions on Clapham Common, but many others lived in London, Bath, Cambridge, and elsewhere, visiting from time to time as schedules permitted, or occasion demanded. But Clapham was their center. The historic concentration of elite evangelicals there did not occur by happenstance. It was the brainchild of Henry Thornton, a tremendously wealthy man who was Wilberforce’s closest friend. He thought coaxing Wilberforce to join him in his twelve-bedroom mansion in Clapham might attract others of serious Christian faith to the neighborhood, and perhaps something good would come of it. The house soon became a magnet for like-minded friends, who visited and stayed for days or weeks at a time, as was the custom in those days among the wealthy. Thornton soon added two wings, bringing the number of bedrooms to thirty-four, then built another home next door, and another. Before you could say “birds of a feather” Clapham had become a buzzing community of Christians in the highest branches of society, all passionately intent on using their resources of money, influence, talents, and social connections to improve things in British society, and around the world.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE WILBERFORCE?

Wilberforce and his network of friends are a model of how Christians can and should engage culture. But since his time – alas – serious Christians have fallen far from that high-water mark of cultural engagement. So how has this happened? And how might we return?

First of all, how we got to where we are today has everything to do with the split that we have already mentioned, when the fed-up and embattled Christian “Fundamentalists” of the 1920s split from those who were advocates of the theologically liberal “Social Gospel”. Since then, tragically, the rift has grown, further feeding the unbiblical tendency of serious Christians to be anti-cultural, anti-intellectual, and anti-elitist.

ANTI-CULTURAL

Christians have always struggled with how much they should be separate from the wider culture. It’s a crucial balance to strike. It’s tempting to mock those who today or in the past have separated themselves entirely, but often they’ve done so with good reasons, such

as a desire to preserve their faith, to keep the secular or pagan culture from destroying it. Of course that's why God called the Israelites to be separate from the pagan cultures around them. Another good reason has to do with wanting to protect one's children from harm. Nonetheless, in the last century, Christians on the whole have pulled back too much from the wider culture, retreating when they ought to have advanced, or at the least, held their ground and fought.

As we've said, Wilberforce struck the balance between engaging culture and being separate from it particularly well. He was ardently evangelistic, always thinking of ways to bring those he knew to think about the state of their souls, and he wrote a bestselling book whose sole purpose was evangelistic. He spent endless hours reading Scriptures and praying, and led his family in devotions twice daily. But he never came across as a dour moralist; all who met him thought him winsome and full of joy. There was a great wit behind his eyes, as his friends knew best, and a creative engagement with people that did not reduce those people to ciphers, nor their eternal salvation to a dull project. Madame de Stael, who was probably the most esteemed society hostess of her time wanted desperately to meet Wilberforce and worked hard at finally getting him to accept an invitation to one of her parties. Afterward she reckoned him not only the most religious man in all of Europe, but the wittiest. But Wilberforce was not indiscriminate in mixing socially, and shortly after he came to faith he resigned – in one day – from his five social clubs. And he spent most of his time with Claphamite friends.

It would be wise to look to him as a model, because the similarities between his world and ours today are striking. Wilberforce shows us that we mustn't buy into the silly Hobson's choice of being either "in the world" or "not of the world". Christians with integrity need to figure out how to be both simultaneously. We cannot escape God's command that we be holy, even as He is holy. Being hip may not by itself lead those we meet closer to Jesus. We may have to be authentic and courageous, too, and may have to take stands against things in our culture, risking unpopularity. Striking the right balance may be even more difficult than deciding whether to shave our heads or use mousse.

Of course in recent decades we've seen plenty of the opposite problem, of serious Christians – sometimes with hideous haircuts – being overly *anti*-cultural. Often we have engaged the culture – if it can be called that – only for the purposes of evangelism. We've sometimes acted as though "getting everyone saved" was the only real project we should be involved in, as though that would solve all of the other, larger cultural issues. Perhaps if we led enough people to faith – the upside-down *McCulture*, like a flipped kayak, would at some point suddenly right itself with a single Super-sized *McSplash*. But often we have not even cared about the culture at all. Many of us have thought that since

the Lord would be returning around the year 1994–2000 at the *latest* – what did it matter if everything was going to Sheol in a handbasket? This is the standard *Dude-it’s-all-gonna-burn theology*, which permits complaining about the culture, but not doing anything about it – besides, of course, rescuing people *from* it before it all burns.

This tack has the double disadvantage of being unbiblical *and* not working. Indeed, it has backfired badly, because without Christians involved in it, the culture only got worse. We demonized Jerry Lee Lewis and then watched him morph into Mick Jagger and then Johnny Rotten and then Marilyn Manson, who made us wish for the quaint days of Jerry Lee Lewis again. But at some point – perhaps just after the Rapture failed to occur on schedule in 2000 – some Christians got to thinking that maybe we *should* be involved in the culture, instead of, say, breeding red heifers, or trying to figure out the Hebrew spelling of Ahkmadinejad. So there is hope.

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan where I live has long preached that New York Christians should love the city and its culture – because they are a part of it. They ought to be good stewards of it, citizens who make it a better place. Wilberforce and his friends had this attitude toward London. They knew it was not their true home, but they did what good they could there because ignoring their culture meant ignoring those trapped within it, including the suffering and the poor. God’s commands to them wouldn’t permit that. And somehow, by being a part of the mainstream culture of their day, and by being forced to live and work cheek-by-jowl with those who did not share their faith, their faith itself became more robust, relevant, and real. It had to be so, since the reforms they were trying to effect depended on their making their case in the public sphere. They had to be able to effectively communicate with those who didn’t initially share their views. If they had come across as merely odd religious fanatics, their success would have been seriously hurt.

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It’s usually the case that Christians somehow become better Christians when they are engaged with the culture around them. We are forced to see ourselves as others see us, and to care about how others see us, since they are people to whom we wish to share the Gospel, among other things. But when we hide in a separate Christian subculture, with its own celebrities and music and “literature” and “Paintings” of Light™, we often lose the ability to communicate effectively with those who are outside. We begin speaking to ourselves, often with kitschy inside-the-camp aphorisms (“Commission: Possible!”) – and become less and less able to speak to those who are different from us. That, of course, is the enemy of evangelism. We grow more and more fearful and suspicious of those outside the camp, until we slowly begin to think of them as a hostile “other” whom we must destroy,

rather than broken and exiled parts of our own selves, whom we are commanded by God to heal and restore. Within the plastic palisades of Fort Churchianity™, we will care little if the world outside perishes. We've put in our stock of Slim Jims and water purification tablets, and are content to wait for the Rapture, perhaps even gleefully wondering what all those fools who didn't listen to us will say once they realize we were right and they were wrong. But what is that but a nerd's revenge fantasy cast in religious imagery? *Schadenfreude* and love don't mix. Could Jesus be gleeful to lose those he created to be with him for eternity? If we live among the lost, it's harder for us to think of them cavalierly. It's harder to demonize them, because if we live in the same culture that they do, they will look an awful lot like us. They will talk like us and dress like us, and but for God's grace, they *are* us.

Finally, having an us vs. them attitude toward the wider culture is unbiblical. Paul quoted pagan poets and philosophers to put his points across. He didn't advocate their worldviews, but he took from them what was valuable, what was universally true, and he used it to point to the one who is Truth. And of course missionaries do the same, humbling themselves to learn languages and cultural folkways and customs, all that they might communicate the love of Jesus more effectively.

ANTI-ELITISM AND ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

In the last century, many serious Christians have fallen into the trap of striking an anti-elitist attitude, and often an anti-intellectual attitude, too. We can see how this happened; after all, it was the educated elites who, in the late 19th century, undermined the Scriptures, embraced Darwin, and soon thereafter came to champion a social Gospel at the expense of true biblical theology. Many Christians felt themselves besieged and, in reaction, retreated into a kind of defiant, populist stance, one that had its dukes up, as it were, and was often prideful, rather than humble. In this process, many of the most theologically serious Christians abandoned the mainstream culture to the secular elites, who were now alone on the cultural field, with no real opposition. So, of course, the culture got worse, as we have said, and the unchallenged secular ideas of the elites and intellectuals came to dominate more and more, flowering, one might say, in the Sixties, in whose secular and socially liberal "Boomer" shadow we all still live. Which, of course, made serious Christians yet further hostile to the mainstream culture, and certainly to the elites and intellectuals who dominated it.

One result of this hostility to mainstream culture, and to the secular elites who dominated it, is that Christians more and more abandoned "worldly" centers of cultural influence, taking their salt and light with them like peeved children taking their marbles and going home. So the cultural centers like New York City only slid farther into secularism,

and farther from the values of the rest of the country. And because of the rise of the media culture in the last fifty years, the influence of these increasingly secular cultural centers only *increased*. People who thought they could hide in small towns far from places like New York – found that their children were going upstairs to watch their own tv’s, and getting the values of New York and Hollywood elites anyway.

So Christians have become particularly hostile to cultural elites, whose unchallenged ideas were destroying the culture. And we have often behaved as though we somehow had God’s permission to hate these elites, because not only were they especially wicked, but also wealthy and powerful and famous. We have little difficulty bringing the love of the Gospel to exotic people groups, but elites are something else. Whom does Jesus love less? Which deserves hell more? Or is it that, like the Prodigal son’s elder brother, and like Jonah, it is God’s grace that we most fear? Have we seen the Pharisee, and is he us? If that’s true, then it turns out we are sinners, too, in need of God’s grace. Or did we think we could get to heaven simply by not watching HBO?

Of course Christians aren’t alone in their anti-elitism. Hating elites is as American as George Washington. The idea that they might hold the ideological keys to our culture is as distasteful as paying taxes to King George III. But scholars like James Hunter at the University of Virginia have shown it to be true, and the example of Wilberforce has proven it true at least once. But saying it’s true today is lonely and difficult, something like being a westbound ibex trapped in an endless herd of eastbound sheep. “The little people of history have been forgotten and stepped on and overlooked,” they bleat, “and it is their voice that must be heard! History has been written by the powerful few, and that must be changed!” And so we applaud Ben Franklin, the precocious candlestickmaker’s son who through sheer Yankee ingenuity rose to become an international celebrity and helped found this country. But we forget that only after he had risen was he able to help those who had not risen along with him.

Our history of anti-elitism explains much of why we’ve had little difficulty ministering to down-and-outers – or our own social equals – via evangelism, but have sneered at the elites who sneer at us, and at engaging the culture over which they have so much sway. But we should stop and ask ourselves what the world would be like if Wilberforce had done that. Among the most crucial moments in history was when Wilberforce, newly converted, went to talk with his old friend, John Newton, the slave trader turned pastor. Wilberforce was sure that becoming a Christian necessitated retreating from the world, and his elite circles. He knew that his friends in high society and politics would now mock him and his beliefs, and he knew that the temptations of the world were powerful, too, and would be easier

to avoid if he retreated from the world. But Newton famously told him not to do this. Newton suggested that perhaps God would use him in politics and high society. Perhaps God had given him his talents and position for that reason. Wilberforce's assent to Newton's advice led to all that followed, led to the Clapham Circle, and to the end of the slave trade and slavery, and to the improvement of life among the poor, not just in Britain, but around the world. The social conscience we think of as a given among most people in Western societies can be traced back, in large part, to that conversation and that decision.

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To reprise our cultural trickle-down theory, the worst thing about the anti-elitist approach is that it most hurts those at the bottom of the social ladder. By giving in to our pride and abandoning the elite culture of places like New York City Christians have hurt the rest of the culture by allowing a secular worldview to dominate the whole culture, just as it did in England before. Surely a God who would have us humble ourselves and pray for demon-worshiping cannibals would have us humble ourselves and reach out to pro-choice television anchors, too.

That is simply good missiology and would further the Gospel. In their way, the cultural elites of Manhattan and Hollywood are an untouched people group no less in need of hearing the Gospel than the cannibals of Irian-Jaya or the Auca Indians of Ecuador were just a few decades ago. As brave and diligent souls have over the last two millennia risked their lives and lost their lives, and have studied obscure grammars and translated the Gospel of John into the dialects of these and other vanishing tribes, so too we today ought to humbly set ourselves to the noble task of bringing the Gospel to these elites. We should think and pray about moving to those places where they gather, and we should try to communicate with them and learn their folkways and cultural shibboleths with the same diligence we have applied to obscure tribes. And if the Lord has not called us to live in those places, or to work in those industries, which are the front-lines in the struggle for the heart and soul of our culture, then we should pray about whether we ought to send money to help the ministries of those who have been called. And we all should know that we have certainly been called to support them in prayer.

Finally, we cannot delude ourselves into thinking that, simply because they live in America and speak English, these cultural elites have heard the Gospel already, and have rejected it. If the Gospel has not been translated into a language that they understand, and if it has not been brought to them by people with whom they have some cultural affinity, they have *not* heard it. These people do not speak the same language as thatched-haired evangelists on tv, nor do they know anyone who knows anyone who speaks that language. It is a foreign tongue, and they are deaf to it. Incredibly, some of them are even unaware of the Golden Rule and Who spoke it. But we cannot, like Jonah, decide they

are not worth our trouble. That is not our call to make. What they do and what they know and don't know affects our culture, affects us and our families and neighbors. We are part of that culture, like it or not, so let's not escape it – since we cannot escape it anyway – but let us love it and help it as best we can.

CLAPHAM TODAY

There are a number of New York-based ventures taking the aforementioned culture-loving tack, and I've had the great privilege to know most of them. It bears underscoring that, generally, merely being in a place like New York is to take that tack. So Redeemer Presbyterian Church, where Tim Keller has preached and modeled it, deserves first mention. Not only has Redeemer served – since 1988 – as a magnet for thousands of New York professionals turned-off by other approaches, it has also spawned innumerable other similarly culture-loving efforts, such as the Geneva School, a pre-K through Eighth private Christian school that makes it possible for called and committed Christians to raise families in Manhattan, something of singular importance.

Another institution that courageously established itself in Manhattan – in the iconic Empire State building, no less – is the King's College, a four-year school whose mission is to attract and educate cultural leaders with a biblical worldview. The synergy between King's and other Christian institutions in Manhattan begins to approach something like the Clapham network, though of course on a very different scale. But part of what Clapham made possible for those who were a part of it was a sense of belonging to something where one's beliefs were encouraged rather than attacked or scorned or dismissed. All of these ventures, individually, but especially in concert, do much the same thing, and without some of the attributes of Clapham – a healthy ecumenicism, for one thing – that simply wouldn't be possible.

One venture I am particularly close to is the New Canaan Society, which began in 1995 as a small men's group in a New York suburb. Its founder, Jim Lane, knew there had to be more meaning to life than what he had experienced as a partner at Goldman Sachs – and more to God than the standard guilt-trippy men's accountability groups that met in church basements and featured Entenmann's, Yuban, and Cremora. In a few years, NCS has spawned chapters around the country, and our last annual retreat drew 600 men. We believe that by speaking the language of the culture – which includes not being “religious” in away that is off-putting, but being honest and transparent; and by having a *lot* of fun and laughs – we have struck a nerve. Businessmen who longed for what Jim longed for have come out of the boardroom woodwork, and are still coming.

Finally, a venture close to my heart is Socrates in the City, a speakers series I founded in 2000 that engages Manhattan elites on the “big questions” – what we call “life, God, and other small topics.” Socrates said the “unexamined life is not worth living,” so why not create an evening of “Conversations on the Examined Life” where Manhattanites could enjoy themselves and hear some of the best minds of our time? Over the last seven years we’ve heard from a murderer’s row of intellectuals, including world-renowned physicist Sir John Polkinghorne on “Can a Scientist Pray?”; Boston College Philosophy Professor Peter Kreeft on “How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?”; and Os Guinness on the dangers of globalization, and how different worldviews approach the subject of evil. Other speakers have included N.T. Wright, former *Time* editor David Aikman, NYU Psychology Professor Paul Vitz, former ABC science correspondent Michael Guillen, *First Things* editor Father Richard John Neuhaus, and Baroness Caroline Cox.

SITC goes out of its way to create an atmosphere that is fun, engaging, and attractive. We hold our events in gorgeous rooms in Manhattan’s private clubs, and begin with a wine and hors d’oeuvres reception and piano music. And, lest the intellectualism tend to stuffiness, our august speakers are garrulously and inanely introduced by the author of this essay, who on one occasion quoted the lyrics to the Smokey and the Bandit theme song, and on another compared our speaker Chuck Colson with the singer Chaka Khan, who was not our speaker.

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Though most of our speakers come from a biblical worldview, we honor different points of view, and want to create a comfortable place for people trying to think more deeply about the big questions. We don’t push Christianity, and certainly don’t conclude with comment cards asking people to “make a decision”. To do that would be to destroy the trust we have built up with the people who come to our events. We want to respect them, to let them have a safe atmosphere to question and think without fearing an uncomfortably “religious” atmosphere. I’ve called Socrates in the City a “soup kitchen for the mind”, because soup kitchens aren’t a means to an end. Loving and serving others is itself the Gospel, and we are commanded to do it. I hope that by bringing a higher level of cultural conversation to New York City, in a small but significant way, we are blessing the city and the culture and those within it – these elites who have education and wealth and power and influence, but many of whom have never seen or heard this wonderful Gospel that some of us have had the infinite privilege to have seen and heard and accepted. By sharing it with these in a way that humbly attempts to communicate in a language they might understand – and by risking their scorn – we hope to honor the One who risked our scorn when he humbled Himself to communicate it to us. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no other. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A major premise of this essay is that cultural elites significantly influence society as a whole. Do you agree? Why or why not?

What are your opinions on top-down culture shifts vs. bottom-up grassroots movements? What are the differences in the two strategies? What examples can you think of that prove the effectiveness of each? How might both strategies work together to effect significant change?

Being “in the world but not of the world” may be the most difficult assignment we have as Christians. What principles, ideas, and examples do you take from the life of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Circle that you could integrate into your life? What is the biggest struggle you personally have with being “in the world, but not of the world”?

Have you ever considered the importance of cultural influence as an important strategy in the long-term vision of serving the poorest communities of your city? Do you think that is a need in your community?

If you were going to try to recreate a Clapham circle in your community, who would you invite to “make goodness fashionable?” Are you friends with those people or would you need to begin some new relationships? How would you do this?

To continue this discussion with a group, invite some friends over to watch the movie *Amazing Grace*. Use these questions to provoke conversation as well as action.

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