

What is Distinctive about the *Reality Bites* Approach to Schools Work?

I. Telling the Stories of Culture-Transforming Christians

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Introduction

At a church leaders conference, the convenor asked the assembled participants what was the greatest problem in their countries. Almost all included bribery and corruption, often as the most serious problem they faced. The convenor responded as follows:

“If corruption is the major problem, then why are we preparing our young people only to be pastors and evangelists? Why aren’t we training them to be the godly entrepreneurs, economists, policemen, judges and politicians that our countries so desperately need?”

Traditional ways of doing School’s Work tend to be dualistic. The stories we tell are about individual moral or evangelistic successes and failures. They leave untouched huge areas of human life. They are unlikely to stir passion for change or advance the kingdom of God. This is a great shame. Too often Christians do not engage with the world outside the boundaries of their church and its programmes.

We believe that effective engagement with young people today must include the stories of culture-shaping Christians.

Case Study 1 – The Chocolate King, George Cadbury

George Cadbury is an outstanding example of a culture-transforming Christian. He was born in Edgbaston near Birmingham in 1839. His father, John Cadbury, was a tea and coffee dealer. The Cadburys were members of the Society of Friends and they sent George to the local Quaker School. His childhood was spent in a loving and deeply religious family.

At the age of 22 George and his elder brother, Richard, took over the family business and in 1873 they stopped selling tea and coffee and focused exclusively on chocolate. Their name is now a byword for the excellent confectionary that many of us consume on a weekly/daily basis.

George and Richard were not just concerned about the quality and profitability of their chocolate. As Christians both men believed that the happiness and well-being of their employees was one of the chief aims of the business. They were profit-sensitive without being profit-driven.

Both of the Cadbury boys loved sport. George was passionate about football, cricket, tennis, swimming and golf. George admitted late in life that the first thing he turned to in his daily paper was the cricket news. He was keen on early morning cold baths and he relished swimming in freezing-cold rivers. He was an eccentric in every sense of the word.

What was it like to work in the Cadbury chocolate factory? Well each day began with Bible readings and prayers for all. The working day was considerably shorter than many other factories of the time. George and Richard introduced half-days on Saturdays and bank holiday closing.

In 1878, when the premises became too small, the brothers decided to build a factory in the country. They called this new site "Bournville". On this site the brothers provided football and cricket fields, a huge playground for children, swings and even an open air swimming pool. Utterly unheard of at the time.

Employees were encouraged to have fun and the sporting and recreational facilities were first-rate. Sometimes George would tell his employees to knock off early and everyone would enjoy playing and watching a cracking game of cricket. On one occasion the brothers took all ten wickets in a match. George once bought his employees a bicycle of the bone-shaker type, which they used to learn to ride on during the lunch-break. Sometimes half a dozen employees would be presented with a football and instructed to go and enjoy a 'kick around' in the local park!

Writing in 1871, George's sister recorded in her diary that George and Richard took the girls from the factory rambling over the Lickey Hills. Happy and exhausted the ramblers returned to the Cadbury mansion for tea and cakes.

Inside the factory there were warm cloakrooms for drying wet clothes and kitchen facilities for cooking food. The brothers also built superb houses for their employees. Every house had a spacious garden for growing vegetables. Fruit trees were planted and the garden dug over before each new owner moved in. Trees were planted along the wide roads. Later George built schools and a shopping area for his employees. Cadbury campaigned for old-age pensions and fought against the brutal 'commodification' of so many working people. He even paid £60,000 of his own money into pension funds for his employees!

On his estate he had a special building constructed and each year thousands of deprived children found in the spacious grounds every delight that could appeal to them – swings and cricket, races and games and above all the open-air swimming pool.

When George died in 1922, his funeral was attended by over 16,000 people.

George Cadbury's life challenges a narrow dualistic form of Christianity which reduces Christian discipleship to church attendance, Bible Study and evangelism. His Christian faith was expressed in his everyday work and Monday to Friday activities. His chocolate factory was a signpost of the kingdom of God.

Case Study 2 – The Army Mother, Catherine Booth

Catherine Booth is another outstanding example of a culture-transforming Christian. She is most famous as the co-founder of the Salvation Army with her husband William.

It was while working with the poor and needy that Catherine discovered that many women and children were working painfully long hours for miserable wages. In the tenements of London, Catherine was horrified to find exhausted, red-eyed women sewing and stitching for eleven hours a day. These women were only being paid 9d. a day, whereas men doing the same work in a factory were receiving over 3s. 6d. Catherine and her husband William attempted to shame employers into paying better wages. They also struggled to improve the working conditions of these exploited 'cockneys'.

Catherine Booth was particularly concerned about the women who were employed by match factories. 'Match girls' were only earning 1s. 4d. for a sixteen hour day. They were also risking their health when they dipped the match-heads in the yellow phosphorus supplied by manufacturers such as Bryant & May. A large number of these women suffered from 'Phossy Jaw' (necrosis of the bone) caused by the toxic fumes of the yellow phosphorus. The whole side of the face turned green and then black, discharging foul-smelling pus and then the 'match girls' died.

Catherine Booth led a campaign against the use of yellow phosphorus. She pointed out that most other European countries produced matches tipped with harmless red phosphorus. Bryant & May responded that these matches were more expensive and that consumers would be unwilling to pay these higher prices. In other words profits were more important than 'disposable' working class cockney sparrows.

Catherine, along with other evangelicals like Josephine Butler and William Stead, was also appalled by the "white slave trade", a Victorian euphemism for child prostitution. Wicked people would kidnap and force destitute girls into a life of prostitution that was nearly impossible to escape. Catherine and her husband exposed the white slave trade in England. Three hundred and ninety-six thousand signatures later, they saw the practice outlawed. The Booths believed that this kind of political activity was an essential part of their Christian witness.

Catherine died of cancer in October 1890. The campaigns that were started by Catherine were not abandoned. William Booth was determined to force match companies to abandon the use of yellow phosphorus. In 1891 the Salvation Army opened its own match-factory in Old Ford, East London. Only using harmless red phosphorus, the workers were soon producing six million boxes a year. Whereas Bryant & May paid their workers just over twopence a gross (144 boxes), the Salvation Army paid their employees twice this amount.

William Booth encouraged MPs and journalists to visit this 'model' factory. He also took them to the homes of those "sweated workers" who were working eleven and twelve hours a day producing matches for companies like Bryant & May. The bad publicity that Bryant & May received forced the company to reconsider its actions. In 1901, Gilbert Bartholomew, managing director of Bryant & May, announced that the firm had stopped using yellow phosphorus. Catherine's hard work had had a transforming impact upon British factories.

The work of Catherine and William Booth is a challenge to narrow, dualistic forms of Christianity. Just like George Cadbury they established a life-affirming business which embodied the gospel of Christ. The Booths' evangelization of working class Londoners was highly effective because their approach to mission was holistic and culture-transforming.

Case Study 3 – Investing in the Poor, Bob Lavelle

Robert Lavelle was an African-American estate agent in the 1950's but he wanted to help his customers to secure mortgages so he took over a Pittsburgh bank in 1957. It had assets of \$67,000. Lavelle was determined to lend money in a Christian way. He wanted the bank to be a blessing to the poorest people in the neighbourhood. The bank spurned the normal banking prejudices by lending money to people who are 'high risk' at the lowest practical rate of interest.

The mission of this merciful bank is to approach people respectfully and through warm encouragement and patient financial counselling, to help them become good risks. It is inspired by the belief in home ownership. Lavelle's mission is to help poor and needy people to own their own homes. He believes that this will bring huge social benefits to disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In other words glimpses of the kingdom of God. Here is a typical story which illustrates the day to day business of Christian banking.

Mrs. Edith Potter was living in a house and was paying \$175 a month in rent. Edith is a poor black woman who has five children. The owner of the house wanted to sell the house for \$12,000. Edith was understandably distressed. Where would she go? The estate agent suggested that she try to buy the house. But this seemed impossible; funds for a deposit were completely lacking.

Lavelle's *Dwelling House* was then approached and asked to arrange a mortgage. A generous gift was made by a local Christian and *Dwelling House* agreed to a 7-1/2% interest rate in a 14% market. In the financial climate at this time this was an extremely generous mortgage arrangement. Mrs. Potter and her 5 children became the owners of the newly repaired house with a mortgage payment of \$162 a month including principal, interest, taxes and insurance -- \$13.00 less than she had paid to rent it! Mrs. Potter paid her mortgage in advance each month and has now completely paid off her mortgage. Edith was no longer distressed; she was 'over the moon'.

In the tough Hill Street area of Pittsburgh where Edith lives, there are many drug dealers and members of the criminal fraternity and almost all the shops and businesses have menacing metal grilles to protect them from thieves, vagabonds and ne'er-dowells. Lavelle refuses to have one. He believes that this will send out the wrong message. He is more than happy to make himself vulnerable to his neighbours. His bank has been broken into 15 times. It has been robbed at gun point 8 times. Lavelle has even been known to evangelise robbers while they are holding a gun to his head! Some burglars have even telephoned him in order to apologise for their unseemly conduct.

Lavelle's passion is to empower poor people to become good stewards of their homes and neighbourhoods. He knows most of his clients by name and often visits them to help them with their finances. If a client lacks financial acumen he will sit them down and explain the

finer points of fiscal responsibility. This kind of banking care and compassion is most unusual.

If Bob were to sell the bank tomorrow he would be a rich man. Since its inception the bank has seen its working capital increase from \$67,000 in 1957 to almost \$21 million in 2004. Curiously he started this unusual bank many years before he became a Christian. He says that he only really became a Christian at the age of 47.

Why are there so few banks like this? Normal, secular economics encourages people and banks to maximise their profits. Lavelle's approach to banking challenges a consumerist way of life. His work is also a challenge to a narrow, dualistic understanding of the Christian faith.

Robert Lavelle is working full time for Jesus in his 'secular' work. He refuses to privatise and spiritualise his faith. He has no desire to get out of banking in order to serve God. Quite the contrary he has stayed in the world of finance in order to bear witness to the coming of the King – Christ Jesus.

Case Study 4 – Changing the Culture, William Carey

William Carey was born in the village of Paulerspury, 10 miles south of Northampton, on the 7th August 1761. He was one of the most amazing Englishmen ever to have lived. William Carey is sometimes called the 'father of modern missions' but this can be misleading. He had a passion to bring the kingdom of God into every area of life. Carey was in many ways the supreme illustration of a culture-transforming Christian.

As a young man he earned his living as a cobbler but he loved books and he spent time studying the New Testament. He was converted at the age of 18 after long discussions with a fellow apprentice. Carey was now developing a deep longing to become a missionary and in 1793, he set sail for India with his wife and four children. He never returned to England.

What was it like to live in India at the end of the 18th century? Traditional Hindu society was very conservative. There was a rigid caste system and Brahmin men were worshipped as gods. At the very bottom of the caste system were the 'untouchables'. These were men, women and children who were cursed from birth. Their immoral conduct in previous lives was the explanation for their misery, slavery and oppression. This is the Hindu doctrine of karma.

Indian babies were sometimes sacrificed to the gods. Every winter at the place where the sea and the River Hooghly meet, children were pushed down the mud-banks into the sea to be either drowned or devoured by crocodiles. Their mothers had made vows to the Hindu gods. Lepers were often buried or burned alive. Hindu belief asserted that a violent death would guarantee a better rebirth. Widows were subjected to a terrible plight. They were either burned to death (sati) or buried alive. Some Hindus asserted that their bad karma had brought about the deaths of their husbands. We must also add that Carey was horrified to see that three-fifths of the country had been allowed to become an uncultivated jungle abandoned to tigers, killer bees and snakes. There was also widespread usury (high rates of interest - between 36 and 72 per cent).

And into this darkness, William Carey brought the good news of the kingdom of God. Carey had studied his Bible carefully. He knew that Jesus had a tremendous love for widows, lepers and children. Carey dedicated his life to bringing the good news to the whole creation (Mark 16:15). He had a holistic understanding of the gospel. He struggled against sati and the hatred of women. Thanks to him, sati was abolished in 1829. Thanks to his younger co-workers women were legally allowed to remarry in 1856. Eventually child marriage was outlawed in 1929.

Carey set up many Christian schools that educated girls and untouchables. This was unheard of in 19th century India! He introduced the idea of low interest savings banks to India, to fight the all-pervasive evil of usury and he campaigned for the humane treatment of lepers. He struggled against human sacrifice and prevented the murder of many innocent children.

Carey founded India's Agri-Horticultural Society in the 1820's, thirty years before the Royal Agricultural Society was established in England. He wrote some of the earliest essays on forest management and conservation. He wrote concerning this – "If the Gospel flourishes in India, the wilderness will, in every respect, become a fruitful field."

He introduced the study of astronomy to India. He was deeply opposed to the fatalism and superstitious fear caused by the Hindu addiction to astrology. He developed a wonderful arboretum in his garden and encouraged the study of Botany. Carey contended that the world has been declared very good by God (*Genesis* 1:31). It is not an illusion to be shunned, but a subject worthy of human inquiry. He frequently lectured on science and he emphasised that even humble insects are not prisons for souls in bondage, but creatures worthy of our attention. Carey was also passionate about poetry. It is extraordinary that he wrote poems in the Bengali language. Fancy that – the father of missions busy in the crafting of imaginative literature. Whatever next?

The cobbler turned missionary also introduced the steam engine to India and was a pioneer of the Protestant church in India and the translator and/or publisher of the Bible into forty different Indian languages.

Carey was a culture transformer. He delighted in the rich blessings of science, art and literature. He spurned the dualist conviction that such activities distract us from the Christian life. When he died in 1834, many Hindus acclaimed him and celebrated the many positive contributions that Carey had made to public life. The 'father of modern missions' was in no sense at all a dualist. He refused to divide life into spiritual and sacred. He embodied the Biblical vision that all of life can be transformed by the Lordship of Christ.

Conclusion

These heroes and heroines advanced the Gospel and kingdom of God because they were such ‘all-of-life’ Christians. When we marinate in the lives of these four culture transforming Christians, we discover something very liberating. We do not have to choose between God and His creation (dualism). We can challenge corruption, make chocolate, play cricket, do politics, lend money, study astronomy and write poetry to the glory of God. The kingdom of God does not snatch us away from the creation; rather it restores us to be, once more, God’s friends who bring glory to Christ in all our many creaturely activities. This really is good news.

We believe that these four inspiring stories are just the tip of the iceberg. We don’t have time and space to tell the stories of Elizabeth Fry, Josephine Butler, Amanda Burdett-Coutts, William Sleeman, Jaime Jaramillo, Richard Oastler, James Chalmers, George Muller, Amy Carmichael and many, many others who have transformed the world for the better. These exciting stories re-enchant the world and give us wonderful glimpses of the coming of the King.

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