

Introduction

'What is this babbler trying to say?'
Athenian philosophers, Acts 17:18

In the Spring of 1954, the American evangelist Billy Graham touched down in the UK for his first Haringey Crusade. Night after night, the thirty-six-year-old packed out Haringey Arena as hundreds of thousands came to hear the good news of Jesus. He preached direct, uncomplicated, biblical messages of sin, salvation and repentance, and in response, thousands of Brits publicly committed to following Jesus. Graham went on to inspire a generation of evangelists and Christian laypeople to boldly hold out the good news of Jesus to a spiritually hungry culture. The harvest was plentiful. Maurice Wood, former bishop of Norwich, once said in an interview: 'When I was Principal of Oak Hill Theological College in 1961 I would ask how many newcomers to the College had come to faith following Billy's crusades and there were never less than 10 per cent.'¹

However, half a century on, the tectonic plates of culture have shifted. As I write this in 2022, our culture in the UK now typically sees the Church less as an open family of love and

Christ and the Culture Wars

acceptance, and more as a fortress of patriarchy and repression. Christian morality is often seen less as a framework for wisdom and purity, and more as a regime of narrow-mindedness and a cover for discrimination. And the gospel of Jesus is seen by many less as good news for all humanity, and more as the bigoted edicts of a bygone era.

Furthermore, today's culture is now defined by words and phrases that would have been a foreign language to the young Billy Graham. We live in times marked by 'cancel culture,' 'social justice campaigns,' 'intersectionality' and the 'culture wars.' (We will be returning to all these terms later on and a glossary can also be found at the end of the book for reference). In short, we live in a world shaped by 'identity politics.'

Identity politics is the modern phenomenon by which people have begun to move away from the traditional political divisions of 'left versus right wing,' or 'conservative versus liberal,' and have begun instead to coalesce around identity groups, such as race, sexuality, gender and age. These identity groups have gone on to form the foundations of 'social justice movements' that have radically altered the face of our society in the span of a few years. They have done this, in part, through the telling of a united, powerful and universalisable cultural narrative of the oppressed identity groups waking up to their oppression, and then rising up to overthrow their societal oppressors.

But Christians have found themselves on the wrong side of this cultural revolution. In this cultural story, the Church in general, and the Evangelical Church in particular, is on the side of the oppressors. Christian faith is viewed not as a harmless personal life-choice, or unintellectual fairy tale for the naïve, but as a bastion of oppression that needs to be deconstructed and overthrown.

So what now for evangelism? How can we speak for Jesus in this new and thorny world of identity politics?

The Terrain Ahead

Part 1 of this book explores the stories of the revolution. In Chapters 1-4, we will trace the stories of four of the biggest social justice movements: feminism, racial justice, gay pride and the trans rights movement. We will see how all of these movements began with campaigns for legal equality and against discrimination. But, in recent years, these movements have started calling for broader and more wide-reaching change, sometimes culminating in the overturning of society as we know it. In Chapter 5, we will then pull the strands together to look at the grand over-arching narrative of identity politics. Although all these movements are diverse and sometimes conflicting, they are all united by the overarching story of the oppressed groups rising up to fight against their societal oppressors. However, in this grand narrative Christians have found themselves labelled as the oppressors: the villains of the plotline who need to be overthrown.

In Part 2, we will unpack three common Christian responses to being labelled as the oppressors in the identity politics narrative: mirror, argue and ignore. In Chapter 6 we will see that some (typically white, middle-class, conservative) Christians have tried to *mirror* the identity politics movements, by hunkering down into their own identity groups and fighting for their own rights and liberties that they perceive to be under attack. This has undoubtedly contributed to the polarisation of public political discourse and the rise of the so-called ‘culture wars.’ In Chapter 7 we will see how some Christians have sought to *argue* with and debate the ideas and ideologies of identity politics. After all, there are many legitimate debates to be had, for example: ‘are puberty blockers safe to be given to children?’ or ‘is positive discrimination really fair?’ However, debaters soon run into so-called ‘cancel culture,’ in which those holding ‘politically incorrect’ views risk being de-platformed, blocked on Twitter, labelled as a bigot and then ignored. Then in Chapter 8, we will

explore what seems to be the most common Christian response to the identity politics revolution: just *ignore* it. Many Christians simply bury their heads in the sand, whilst their churches continue running the same events and preaching the same Billy Graham-style evangelistic sermons that they have been doing for decades. It is becoming increasingly recognised however, that our traditional evangelistic messages are not landing like they used to. We cannot keep on ignoring the revolution happening around us.

Part 3 begins to sketch out a possible better way to speak for Jesus in this world of identity politics. In Chapters 9 and 10 we will look at the power of storytelling and consider whether we can re-capture hearts in our culture by telling a more powerful counter-narrative. This may not be as difficult as it appears, because, as we will explore in these chapters, many of the ideas and principles that drive identity politics have deeply Christian historic foundations. In Chapter 11, we will dive deeper into the message of the cross to look at the language we ought to use when preaching salvation in a world of identity politics. We will see that the gospel resonates with a culture when it speaks the language of the culture, and so perhaps we need to re-think how our language frames the good news of Jesus. Finally, in Chapter 12, we will explore how we should *live* as Christians in a world of identity politics. Throughout the biblical narrative, God's people are commanded to live out their redemption, by living redemptively towards others. Today, this may be one of the least discussed parts of Christian living, and yet it seems to be what our culture urgently needs. Our society needs a Church that can not only speak of a redemptive gospel, but live it too.

The topics ahead of us are vast and complex, and so in this relatively short book, there will be many stones left unturned and depths left unexplored. This book is far from a comprehensive sociological analysis of identity politics, or a systematic theology of evangelism and apologetics. Rather, I hope that the following

pages act as an interesting introduction that whets appetites and inspires Christians to read and think more about what is happening in our modern culture, and how to speak into it for Jesus.

The Call to Double Listening

Throughout this book we will be trying to engage in what theologian John Stott calls ‘double listening.’ In *The Contemporary Christian*, Stott implores his readers to listen vigilantly and earnestly to the modern world in all its depth and complexity, and also to listen humbly, submissively and carefully to the Word of God.² As Stott concludes, it is only when we have done both that we can then start building a bridge from the Word to the world.²

Throughout this book, we will endeavour to do just that. We will be listening intently to what is happening in our culture, as we traverse the worlds of politics, social media, activism, entertainment, education, law, and healthcare, to name just a few. And we will be diving reasonably deeply into the philosophies, ideologies and histories that have fuelled the identity politics movements. But most importantly, we shall be trying to listen carefully and humbly to the Bible, taking it as God’s inerrant and authoritative Word that should shape and challenge our minds, hearts and lives. Furthermore, we will be seeking to submit to the Bible as the ultimate grand narrative of reality into which all our stories fit.

Before We Go On...

If it hasn’t become apparent already, I am writing this book as a Christian who believes that the gospel is, in the words of the angel at the birth of Jesus, ‘good news that will cause great joy for all the people’ (Luke 2:10). I also write from the theological position of generally holding to a traditional biblical view on ethical matters, some of which we will be touching on in the

following chapters. The purpose of this book is not to give a thorough defence of the authority of Scripture, nor to build detailed cases in favour of the traditional biblical views on particular ethical issues. This book is also not primarily intended to be a thesis on what the 'Christian view' should be on all of the policies and campaigns of the social justice movements. Rather our discussion will be largely focussed on exploring what is going on in our culture and how Christians can bring the good news of the gospel to those around us.

My guess is that most readers of this book will be Christian. However, I do not assume all will be, and I certainly do not assume that all will agree with my positions on the various topics we will be exploring. But whatever your background, I would like to begin by asking for grace. The topics in the following chapters are controversial, sensitive and sometimes explosive. Moreover, there will inevitably be some readers who have been personally affected by subjects covered in this book. These issues are not theoretical concepts to toss around the philosophers' playground; they are personal, practical, and sometimes painful struggles that require compassion before critique. In the pages that follow, I have tried my utmost to be as sensitive, careful, objective and balanced as possible. But where I may have fallen short, I unreservedly ask for grace and forgiveness.

So with some trepidation, let us begin our journey by looking first at the stories of the identity politics revolution.