



Issachar Comments Papers

Expounding biblical concepts on the world scene today

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THE NONCONFORMITY OF MARGARET THATCHER

Faith at Work

Millions of words have been written about Margaret Thatcher since her death but few commentators have recognised the significance of her Nonconformist Christianity. Many have focused on her impact upon the social structure of Britain and her economic and political policies, but there has been little acknowledgment of the true source of her convictions which lay in her Methodist upbringing.

Protestant Ethic

"If there was one thing Margaret Thatcher never lacked it was self belief" said a report in *The Independent*. But this "self belief" was not so much a belief in "self" as an expression of the biblically-based principles which came from her upbringing in the strict Wesleyan tradition of Methodism where her father was a local preacher. She fully embraced the Protestant work ethic and was tireless in driving herself to use every moment of the day, usually working late into the night and restricting her sleep, often to only four hours, before getting back to her desk. It is reported that she found the annual visit to Balmoral tedious because the Queen insisted on an 11:15 pm curfew. On the first occasion she is said to have remarked to Dennis, "Bed! Whatever shall we do?"

Social and economic commentators in the brave new world of 21st century secular humanism fail to appreciate the contribution that biblically-based Nonconformity has made to the history of Britain. Indeed, it is only 'nonconformity' in one shape or another that challenges the status quo and brings creative change. It was the biblical beliefs of Christian Nonconformists in the 18th-century that inspired them to challenge the social structures of their day and campaign for the abolition of slavery, stopping women and children being sent down the mines and children working 14 hours a day in unsavoury and unsafe factories and mills. Many of these campaigners, like Wilberforce, remained in the Anglican Church but it was the biblical convictions of Nonconformity from Wesley and Whitfield that motivated them.

Nonconformist Conscience

Margaret Thatcher stood in this tradition. But it was not only the work ethic that came from her Methodist background; her Nonconformist conscience shaped her desire for the 'brotherhood of man' and the breaking down of entrenched social class divisions. In the 1950 General Election she unsuccessfully stood as a candidate in Dartford where her election address stated, "We are going into one of the biggest battles this country has ever known - a battle between two ways of life, one which leads inevitably to slavery and the other to freedom. Our opponents like to try and make you believe that Conservatism is a privilege of the few. But Conservatism conserves all that is great and best in our national heritage. What is one of the first tenets of Conservatism? It is that of national unity. We say one nation, not one class against another. You cannot build a great nation or a brotherhood of man by spreading envy or hatred."

It was this freedom of each individual to exercise their gifts and abilities that was a major driving force in her political policies. It generated her determination to help the "aspirational classes" who eagerly bought shares in privatised companies and became homeowners. They became the drivers in the new economy that aimed to pull Britain out of the 1970s doldrums as the "sick man of Europe" afflicted by wildcat strikes, football hooliganism, three-day weeks, power shutdowns, a stock market crash, going with the begging bowl to the IMF and facing the threat of hyperinflation. Reversing Britain's long-term economic decline was the daunting task Margaret Thatcher set herself when she arrived in Downing Street in May 1979 at the end of a traumatic decade which had culminated in the 'winter of discontent'.

Opposition

Of course, there were many who hated her policies, especially those who lost their jobs in the mining industry and the heavy manufacturing industries and there is truth in the assertions that her industrial reforms went too far too quickly and did not take sufficient account of the devastating social effects of unemployment that devastated many industrial towns and villages. Nevertheless, some of the accusations levelled against her were unfair. Harold Wilson closed down more state-owned pits than Margaret Thatcher did.

Social Transformation

Her expectation was that in closing down state support for uneconomic industries such as British Leyland and breaking the power of union bosses that was crippling production, this would lead to an expansion of the kind of individual inventive entrepreneurship that had made Britain the leading industrial nation of the 19th century.

Clearly, something had to be done to change the socio-economic fabric of 1970s Britain where, in 1979, 29 million working days were lost due to strike action, but her medicine was not equally applied across the economic spectrum. She did not touch the banks and big financial corporations in the City of London who seized upon deregulation to expand their stock market gambling with the results that individual greed and corruption negatively transformed the City where "a man's word was his bond" and truth and integrity had earned worldwide respect. This lack of even-handed application of her biblical principles of social equality to both rich and poor certainly opened the door to the corruption of the banking sector that has shocked and disgusted the public in our day, although it would be grossly unfair to lay all the blame at Margaret Thatcher's door.

Uneven Approach

Nevertheless this uneven approach to the social-economy despite her declared intention of breaking down class warfare and creating a nationwide "brotherhood of man" by raising standards of living generated intense hatred in working-class industrial communities. That strong emotion was publicly exposed with street parties celebrating the announcement of her death and muted demonstrations at the time of her funeral.

Many of those who fiercely opposed her policies also felt grudging respect for her immense willpower and unbreakable determination. The satirists who thrived during the Thatcher years unwittingly enhanced the reputation they were mocking. A famous 'Spitting Image' sketch showed the PM at dinner with her Cabinet ministers. Approached by the waiter, she ordered steak. "And what about the vegetables?" she was asked, to which she replied: "They'll have the same." Jokes such as this only reinforced her image as a strong leader. She also benefited from the ineptitude and unpopularity of those who opposed her - the Kremlin, Argentina's General Galtieri, and the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, all unwittingly aided her success.

History will record the socially transforming effect she had upon the nation and will no doubt give a mixed verdict upon her achievements according to their own predetermined social philosophies. Any true assessment should not only take account of the social and economic plight she inherited, but should also unpick the faith element which was an integral part of her character.

Stewardship

The belief that we are each accountable before God for our "stewardship" of personal resources is an essential part of her Methodist Reformation theology. It was foundational in the preaching of John Wesley and the hymns of his brother Charles which were formative in Margaret Thatcher's childhood and teenage life. These same values, which she used in her personal household management, she applied to her public policy and her Nonconformist heritage provided the creative impetus to challenge the status quo which as Prime Minister she inherited.

It was these biblically-based values of individual responsibility and accountability before God which she aimed to establish in the life of the nation which she loved and served with total dedication. It is to be hoped that secular humanism will not blind future historians from a true assessment of one of the great Nonconformist Transformers, who didn't always get it right, but was never lacking in her convictions.

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Moggerhanger Park, Park Road, Moggerhanger, Bedford, MK44 3RW Telephone: 01767 641006 ext 221 Fax: 01767 641515

Website: www.issacharministries.co.uk E-mail: info@issacharministries.co.uk