



History: Flawed Reformers

What is flawed people can make a difference?

Michelle wanted her history class to see that early twentieth-century philanthropists, such as the Rockefellers and Andrew Carnegie, were flawed individuals who nevertheless changed the nation.

"John D. Rockefeller and his son, John D. Jr., believed that the wealth they accumulated in the oil business should be used to improve the lives of people throughout the world. They were motivated by a sense that their riches were a trust God had given them for good purposes. Many of their contemporaries questioned the ethics John D. had employed to amass the fortune, despite his mealtime devotions and the fact that he taught Sunday school at the Baptist church he attended.

"Both of them, father and son, became systematic givers who distributed funds to museums, schools, universities and colleges, missionary causes, theological schools, local churches (including the Riverside Church in New York City), and medical research. While they were making these worthy contributions to society, the workers at a mine the family owned in Ludlow, Colorado, staged a fifteen-month-long strike for improved working conditions. On April 20, 1914, when the state national guard attacked a tent settlement in which the strikers' families lived, approximately two dozen individuals, including eleven children, died from a combination of bullet wounds, fire, and asphyxiation.

"After providing this historical background to the students, they researched different Christian philanthropists and reformers, following a prescribed format that required students to look at the philanthropists' and reformers' strengths and weaknesses; they then wrote a short summary of their findings. We talked about the Christian motivation of these people, their achievements, and their mistakes and inconsistencies. We discussed and critiqued Christian belief and action. All of the people researched had blind spots, and I asked the students to reflect for moment on what future generations might say our blind spots were. We, too, are flawed; but by God's grace, we also can make a difference. I ended with a few slides about modern day Christian reformers."

What's going on here?

Michelle saw history as a way of encouraging students by showing them that because of God's grace, flawed people can still hope to make a difference, and also how good intentions can go along with bad choices. She connected history learning to questions of justice.

She engaged students in researching and reflecting on the lives of Christian philanthropists and reformers, discussing their character, and relating this to their own lives and situations.

She reshaped her practice by choosing faith examples and guiding questions, using a presentation to set the focus, choosing tasks that supported the focus (Christian philanthropists and reformers, strengths and weaknesses research), using discussion to connect with faith, and planning time for reflection (our blindspots).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Looking at history in this way doesn't see change as something only heroes do; it says that ordinary, flawed people can all play a part in bringing hope to others by being agents of change with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Bible describes this as "sowing": putting time, love, skill, effort, and money into others (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). Service should distinguish the Christian way of life at work, in the home, in communities, and in relationships in imitation of Christ, the servant. At the same time, this focus emphasizes that faith and love need to be consistently worked out in all of life.

What difference does it make?

Michelle changed the way her students viewed philanthropy. She helped her students see both the positive changes that can be brought about by flawed people, and the pitfalls when charitable intentions in one area of life are not consistently followed through in other aspects of life.

Where could we go from here?

Students can look at other philanthropists and reformers and their motivation. They could also look at Christians whose faith appears to have motivated them to make life worse for some people. This opens up discussion of when and why religion goes wrong, and of ways in which our own lives are characterized by noble motivations in some areas and failings in others.

Digging deeper

Bringing about change often starts as anger over injustice or wrong and wanting to do something about it.


Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are. St. Augustine

The news is often depressing, and it is easy to feel that nothing can be changed. Christians are not immune to this feeling, but the eye of faith sees hope in the midst of the bad news. The Bible states that the decisive battle with evil was won by Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55-56). Evil is still active, but the outcome is not in doubt: evil does not win. The cross is not just about personal faith in Christ and God transforming individuals; it's about hope for the whole world (Colossians 1:15-20, Romans 8:21-22).

Good is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death. Bishop Desmond Tutu

Christians are not called to be agents of change on their own; they are to work together and through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:32-34). It is easy to become discouraged and give up trying to change things, but Christians are called to be encouragers so that change does happen. God is called the "God of all encouragement" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). The Apostle Paul called on people to encourage each other and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Christians are called to serve as a community, drawing on the gifts God has given them. The Bible calls people to work for the well-being of the place where they live (Jeremiah 29:7), fostering love and justice. Christians should be good citizens, ready to do good for others in their community.



The duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life. Abraham Kuyper



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