

6 Christians Who Changed the World

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The following is adapted from a talk given at the 2014 Summit Adult Conference by Dr. Glenn Sunshine, professor of history at the Central Connecticut State University and faculty member of the Chuck Colson Fellows Program (formerly the Centurions Program) of the Colson Centre, the worldview training ministry of Prison Fellowship Ministries.

There are many Christians throughout history who made an enormous impact in the world that we never hear of, yet we're living with the results of their work. I want to put a spotlight on people that we may not think of — people we might not even have heard of — and focus particularly on people who had an impact on freedom. I want to give you sketches of the careers of a number of people who developed our ideas of freedom, and some people who applied those ideas practically.

When we talk about freedom, what is it that we mean? What is freedom? I would argue that freedom is, at least in part, the ability to live out our God-given human rights. We have to think about freedom in connection with the idea of the image of God, the Imago Dei. This is critically important for us to understand because it is the foundation for human dignity, human worth, and human rights. Additionally, in Galatians 3:28, Paul writes "that in Christ, there are no distinctions between people." There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, no male or female. No distinctions. We're all spiritually and morally equal before God, and that spiritual and moral equality is critical to the development of the idea of human rights. These are going to be the themes that run throughout these examples. The right to life is one of the most fundamental rights we have. Very early on, the Jews and Christians both recognised that the right to life is something that is given by God that cannot be arbitrarily taken away.

This is anchored in the image of God. We see this in the story of Noah. After the flood, God says to Noah, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed because man is made in the image of God." An attack on a human being is the equivalent of an attack on God, onto His image man was made in. As a result of this, Jews recognised very early on the right to life. Now, to us, it may seem like common sense that people have a right to live,

but in many cultures not influenced by Judaism and Christianity, that's not the case. Think about feudal Japan, for example. If a peasant so much as brushed up against the scabbard of a Samurai sword, he could be cut down. No recourse. This was considered just and normal. In Judaism and in Christianity, though, life was considered a gift from God.

#1. Telemachus

That idea was embodied by a monk named Telemachus. We don't know when Telemachus was born, but we know he died on January 1, 404 AD, because on January 1, 404 AD, there was a gladiatorial match taking place. Now, Christians usually avoided these gladiatorial matches, but Telemachus' conscience was so bothered that this match was going on after Rome had converted to Christianity that he went to the gladiatorial match. In the middle of it, he jumped down into the arena and separated the gladiators and said, "Don't do this. Don't kill each other. You can't do this. This is murder." There are different variations of the story, but the earliest account we have says that "the crowd was so incensed that he interrupted their entertainment that they stoned him to death." He gave up his life to prevent murder in the arena, and he was killed by the audience.

When the emperor heard about this, his conscience was so affected by it that he issued an immediate ban on all gladiatorial combat, and there was never another gladiatorial match in Rome — because of Telemachus. A monk put his life on the line. His example and his courage in standing up for the truth, for the idea that human beings have a right to live and murder therefore is wrong, changed an aspect of Roman culture that had existed for hundreds of years.

#2. Olaudah Equiano

When we talk about the ancient world, we have to remember that for them, freedom was a status. If you were free, it meant you weren't a slave. That leads us to the battle over slavery. For that, let's look at a man by the name of Olaudah Equiano. Equiano was born in Southern Nigeria to the Igbo people. He was taken as a boy into slavery, sold to one master, sold to another, and eventually ended up in the hands of a British sea captain. He worked with the British sea captain onboard the ship and became well-trained as a mariner. The captain in turn was so impressed with Equiano that he couldn't keep him, and sold him to a Quaker ship captain for 25 pounds. The Quaker told Equiano, "OK. You work for me and you earn your 25 pounds

and pay me and I will set you free. Just reimburse me for my expenses.” He did, and the Quaker ship captain was good to his word and set him free. Equiano then made it to England.

Eventually, Olaudah Equiano runs into British Evangelical Christians, and he converts to Evangelical Christianity and becomes immersed in the world surrounding the Wesleys and the Clapham Circle. He begins dedicating his life to the work of the abolition of the slave trade. The Quaker ship captain had taught him to read and write, so he writes a book called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* to expose the horrors of the practice of slavery and the slave trade to the English people. It was written by someone who lived through those horrors, and it couldn't be easily dismissed. This narrative has an enormous impact on shaping public opinion in England and shifting it away from slavery. We all know William Wilberforce, who led the parliamentary fight for the abolition of slavery, but there were a lot of other people active in the abolitionist cause who created the public support and the public pressure that moved parliament and then enabled Wilberforce's efforts to bear fruit. Equiano is one of those key people. That's the right to liberty.

#3. John Witherspoon

When we talk about liberty in this country, we often think first of the Founding Fathers. John Witherspoon was an Evangelical Presbyterian Minister in Scotland who is invited to become the president of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. He revamped the curriculum to put a tremendous amount of emphasis on ideas of civic virtue and public morality developed out of natural law, but anchored in a private morality that comes from Christianity. Witherspoon believed firmly that a republic must be founded on the basis of virtue. So he'd use natural law arguments for public morality and public virtue while at the same time emphasizing the importance of Christianity to govern private life and the role of Christianity as a public religion to reinforce public virtue. Witherspoon operated in an environment with a mindset that says that we can use natural arguments that are accessible to everyone plus revelation in concert to create a culture of virtue that would enable a republic to flourish.

When the Continental Congress was established, Witherspoon was sent as a delegate from New Jersey. To say he was active is an understatement. He was involved in over 100 different committees and he signed the Declaration of

Independence. After the war, he was one of the principal drafters of the Articles of Confederation, the document that predated our constitution. When that proved to be unworkable, he championed the adoption of the constitution. He was very much involved in the founding of our country, and he believed that America as a country, guided by Christian leaders in the Christian religion, combined with natural virtues and republican sense of government, could become the most Protestant, the most Christian, the most free, and therefore the most noble nation in the world. To him, the idea of virtue, public morality, Christianity, and the republic worked together. And if you hold these things together, you will create the greatest nation the world has ever seen. That's Witherspoon's vision.

#4. Benjamin Rush

Witherspoon was supported in his vision by people like Benjamin Rush. Rush was a physician, signed the Declaration of Independence, and was involved in adapting the constitution. He was very much an ardent patriot. He too insisted consistently on the importance of virtue for the Republic. He said, "A republic cannot stand without virtue, and further, the kinds of virtues that are needed in a republic are the very things that are taught in Christianity." In fact, he goes so far as to argue that a true Christian who actually understands this today cannot help but support a republican form of government because the kinds of virtues and values taught by Christianity always lead to a republican government. He also believed that it was essential to teach these ideas in the school systems. He said: "The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments." By the way, Benjamin Rush is considered to be the father of the American public-school system.

By the way, you will note that the founders rarely used the word "freedom." They used the word "liberty." The difference between the two is this: Our 'freedom' encompasses two 18th-century words. One of them is liberty, the other is license. Liberty, in essence, is the freedom to pursue a life of virtue. License is the freedom to pursue a life of vice. The founders insisted that we have a natural right to liberty. They would adamantly reject the idea that we had a natural right to license. It's our loss of the distinction between the two that is getting us into trouble now.

#5. William Carey

William Carey is known as the father of modern missions. He was brought up and trained as a cobbler. While he was training as a cobbler and later when he ran his own cobbler shop, he taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Dutch, and Italian. After that, he decided that God was calling him to become a Baptist minister, and calling him to go to the British Colony of India. William Carey goes to India with a group of friends and they get to work. Carey was what I like to refer to as an entrepreneurial minister. Entrepreneurs are people who look at the world around of them and say, “What are the needs around me and what can I do to meet them?” That’s what entrepreneurs do.

When Carey landed, he must have considered it a target-rich environment. Along with the evangelistic work Carey did, he began schools. He started educating women. He started educating all casts, not just the Brahmans. He started the first college in Asia at Serampore. He also got to work on the human right issues. He worked to ban Sati, the practice of burning widows to death under husbands’ funeral pyres. He pushes for medical treatment for lepers. He pushes for an end of the cast system for converts, so that if you convert to Christianity, your cast doesn’t matter, because in Christ, there is no distinction. He learned multiple languages and helped unify many different dialects into a discrete number of literary languages, and for all practical purposes, he created the language Bengali out of a mish-mash of local dialects. He created type phases for all of these languages and writing systems. He translated all or parts of the Bible into 44 different Indian languages. He produced the first translation of classical Indian literature into English and the first Sanskrit dictionary. Along with that, he also started teaching astronomy there because he wanted to break the hold of astrology, with the fatalism that goes with it, on the Indian population. He also made significant advancements in botany, taught agriculture and forestry, brought the first printing press to India, brought the first steam engine to India, the first banking system in Asia. In the midst of all of this, there was a fire that burned down his printing house, destroyed all of his dictionaries and all of his work. And he went back and started over and did it again. He did a tremendous amount more to create possibilities and bring freedom.

#6. Chiune Sugihara

Finally, Chiune Sugihara. Sugihara became a Christian as a young man. He began working for the Japanese Foreign Ministry in Manchuria during the time it was a Japanese colony, but resigned because he was upset at how badly the Japanese

were treating the native Chinese. He spent time in Harbin in China, during which time he converted specifically to the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1939, he was sent to Kaunas, Lithuania. While he was in Kaunas, he was shopping one day at a gourmet food store run by a Jewish woman. The woman's nephew came in, a kid by the name of Solly Ganor. Now, this was after the German invasion of Poland. There were many Jewish refugees fleeing. Young Solly had given his whole allowance to help Jewish refugees. But a "Laurel and Hardy" movie had arrived in town and he wanted to see it. So, he wanted to get his aunt to give him money to go see the movie. And Sugihara pulled the money and gave it to him. Solly said, "I can't take this from you. I don't know you." And Sugihara said, "Well, you can consider me your uncle. And since we're family, you can take it from me." Solly said, "If you're family, you need to come to Hanukkah dinner." He looked at the auntie and shrugged and nodded and he said, "OK, I'll come. Where and when?" So, he got the information. He goes to Hanukkah dinner with his wife. The rest of his life, they talked about that Hanukkah dinner and particularly the desserts.

While at dinner, Sugihara met a man named Rosenblat who was a refugee from Poland who talked about the Nazi invasion in Poland. He talked about how the Germans bombed his house and killed his wife and children. And Sugihara was horrified by this. He knew that the Germans weren't going to stop at Poland. And he went back and immediately telegraphed Japan looking for permission to start giving transit visas to Jews to travel from Lithuania through Japan to another location. And Japan refused. They said, "No, you can't give them exit visas unless they have a destination visa. We're not going to let you do that because they can get here and stop."

In the summer of 1940, things got considerably worse. Hitler was on the move. There were refugees flooding into Kaunas, desperately looking for a way out, literally pounding on the doors of the Japanese embassy. He telegraphed three times to Japan and kept getting the same answer. At that point, he told his wife, "I may have to disobey my government but if I do not, I will be disobeying God. I know I should follow my conscience." He began handwriting exit visas, approximately 10,000 of them in a space of a few months. Then he was pulled out. He got up and he said — he got on the platform as he was getting on the train — he said, "I'm sorry, I have done everything I can." They said, "We're never going to forget you." He got on the train and started signing pieces of paper and throwing them out of the window for people to fill out their own exit visas.

He got back, and was then sent to a posting in Eastern Europe. He was captured and spent 18 months in a Russian prison before being repatriated to Japan. When he got to Japan, the Foreign Ministry fired him because of the incident in Lithuania. He had no way of making a living. He literally made his living selling light bulbs door to door. Eventually, his knowledge of Russian enabled him to get a job as a trade representative for a Japanese Company in Moscow. He lived in Moscow and visited his family maybe once a year. And he did this for years. And over all of this time, he did not know if a single person had survived.

We make a big deal of Schindler for saving 300 people by putting them to work in his factory to make him money. Current estimates are Sugihara saved somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 people with anywhere from 40,000 to 80,000 descendants alive today. They were busy looking for him. The Japanese Foreign Ministry disavowed any knowledge of him. Eventually, in 1968, they found him, 23 years after the war. And his comment was, "You know, if even one person had survived, it would have been worth it." He was made an Israeli citizen. His children are given permanent Israeli citizenship, and yet we know nothing about this man. And he did it explicitly because of his Christian faith.

What do they have in common?

There's a saying: "If two people are agreeing on everything, one of them is unnecessary." If two people are trying to do exactly the same thing, one of them is unnecessary. God has given each of us a unique constellation of gifts, abilities, experiences, and opportunities. Not everyone needs to be a William Carey, but we do all need to learn from his example.

What do these men have in common? First, they had a strong faith and walked closely with their Saviour. Second, they understood that Jesus is Lord of all and brought the gospel into every area of their lives. They understood the Bible and the implications it has for all of life. Then, they looked out around them and said, "How can I live the gospel out here, where I am, in this time and place?"

Ask yourself that question. What are the needs in my community? What are the opportunities that are there to minister? How can I help? How can I demonstrate by my actions the love of Christ for all in the world?

<https://www.summit.org/resources/articles/6-christians-who-changed-the-world/> (accessed 13/05/2020)