

# The courage the church needs today



**As the church today is increasingly under pressure to conform to cultural change, Nick Tucker draws inspiration from an earlier generation of the church which stood firm against the sins of its culture**

On Harvest Sunday this year, an old technology made its absence felt in our church. In general, the congregation appreciates the flexibility that a video projector gives and we don't miss our hymn books all that much.

At Harvest, though, as we concluded by singing Henry Alford's 'Come ye thankful people come', the organ continued into a fourth verse while the PowerPoint operator, only having three to show, put up the screen for the end of the service. Cue a congregation lustily bellowing, to the tune of St George's Windsor, 'Please do join us in the foyer for coffee'. Try it, it doesn't even scan.

This was, I suppose, one of those situations in which it becomes pretty clear why sheep are a preferred biblical metaphor for people. Such behaviour is often harmless and even benign, but not always. It is still uncomfortable to watch old film footage of the cheering crowds which greeted the dismantling of democracy in Germany in the spring of 1933. It is chilling that, in a modern, technologically advanced, well educated European nation, books should be so jubilantly burned, and truth so willingly suppressed.

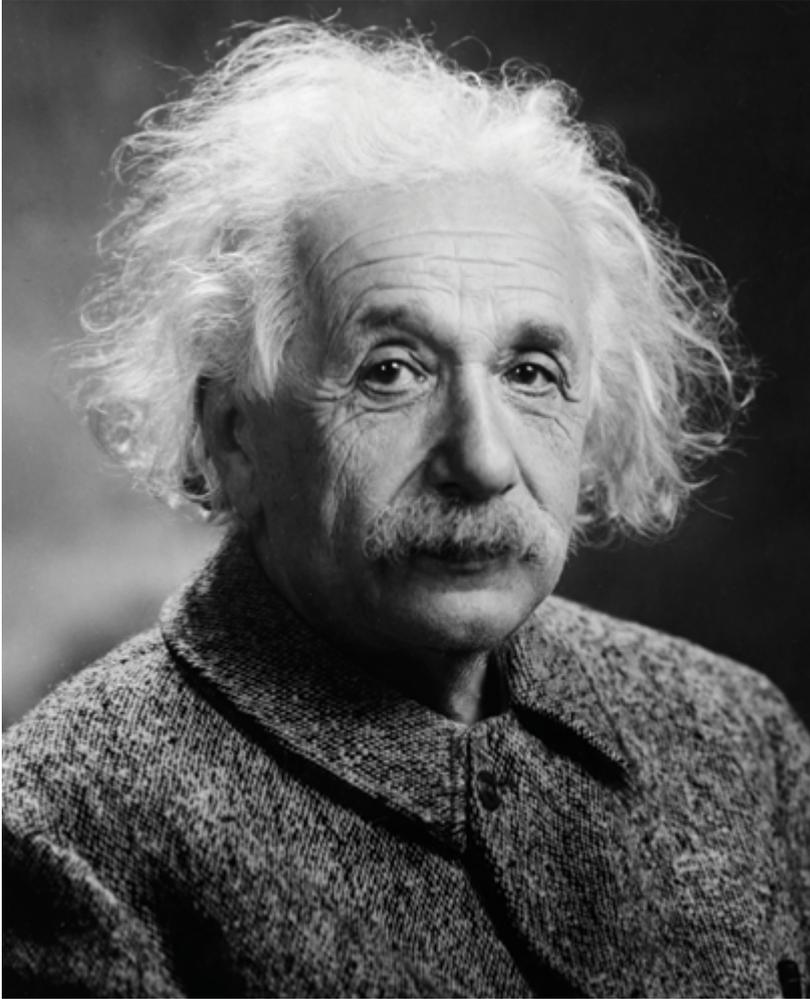
Having lived through that period, French philosopher Simone Weil observed that: 'Evil when we are in its power is

not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty.' What Weil points out highlights an existential and apologetic problem for the church in every generation: that what seems natural and good to a society and what God defines as good in scripture may not entirely overlap.

What happened under Hitler is an extreme, hideous and (thanks to God's common grace) rare illustration of this, but if God really does get to define good, then any deviation from his definition must in some way be evil.

This is something that has been masked in Britain by a deep-rooted Christian heritage. We can easily forget just how much impact the Bible had on our forebears, especially during the 19th century. In that sense we have been what some people call a 'cut flower' civilisation for some time. The roots which nourished the shared set of values we held have been severed, but for a time the flowers continued to bloom. For some, I suspect, the inevitable withering has happened amazingly fast.

To change the metaphor, watching public moral discourse in the UK has been akin to observing the demolition of a group of buildings. For days, weeks even, as the roof tiles are removed and fixtures and fittings stripped out, nothing



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Albert Einstein**

*Photo: Orren Jack Turner /  
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reject is called good. Such a situation is bewildering and brings with it great pressure to ‘get with the programme’ or ‘join the 21st century’. That is where the example and testimony of those who lived through the horrors of the Second World War in Germany is so encouraging and enlightening.

In the midst of the horrors of that time, the church in Germany was not caught up in the sins of her culture. Instead, she shone out like a beacon: not swept along,

but standing firm against a monstrous tide. So impressive and unique was her testimony that it forced Albert Einstein to extoll her virtues.

We are not, perhaps, all that accustomed to hearing tales of the church’s heroism from the luminaries of science, but Einstein, lamenting the silence of the universities and the press, ‘whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom’, wrote from exile:

much changes. But then suddenly the buildings vanish in a matter of hours as the walls come down. Soon there is nothing left but rubble.

How can the church respond to a situation that is changing so fast? Where once she shared, at least to some extent, a system of values with the surrounding culture, now much of what she stands for is understood to be not only questionable, but wicked, and what she is bound to

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This praise was for the so-called Confessing Church, which on 31 May 1934 issued the Barmen Declaration, stating graciously but firmly that they must obey God rather than human powers. In doing so, they followed in the footsteps of Martin Luther who, when he appeared before the Imperial Diet (literally in German, ReichsTag) of his day, declared:

*Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning – and my conscience is captive to the Word of God – then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience.*

For the Confessing Church and for Luther it was better to face possible death at the hands of the political authorities than risk disobeying the God who has spoken.

In Germany in the 30s, the distinction between God and the creation had become blurred and broken down. God was seen as a being who was developing along with human culture. What the writers of the Barmen declaration recognised was that, in the end, this view fatally undermines the Christian faith. The church's identity and message, as they understood it, came from God and could not be changed at will. 'We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions' (Article 3).

It was widely believed then, as it is now, that if the church was to survive she would need to keep up with social and intellectual 'progress'. That belief was profoundly mistaken. In the end, the church survived as the church because she refused to change her basic identity.

The fundamental question for the church in the 21st century is, do we still believe in God? That is, do we

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believe in God as expressed in the creeds and our various historic formularies? To take Anglicans as an example, the 39 Articles begin: 'There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.'

This is the view of God that underpins a willingness to speak prophetically to a broken world and not just be swept along. Fundamental to the courage displayed at Barmen, and the courage needed by the church today, is the unshakeable belief that God is right when he says: 'I am God and there is no other' (Isaiah 46:9). He defines the church and is supreme over culture, not vice versa. Now as then, the church cannot, must not, capitulate to a way of thinking which recasts God in the image of contemporary culture.

The God in whose service the Confessing Church was able to stand against the ideology that had befuddled the consciences of those around them, is a God who names himself 'I Am'. This God cannot and will not be defined by anyone else. This God claims a right to define himself and everything else.

It should not surprise us if our culture increasingly feels uncomfortable with his 'god complex'. But this is the God who alone is worthy of our worship, and who can give today's church the courage to be the church and not some dreary shadow of itself.

*This is a longer version of an article that first appeared in the Church of England Newspaper on behalf of Latimer Trust. Nick Tucker is a Research Fellow at Oak Hill College*