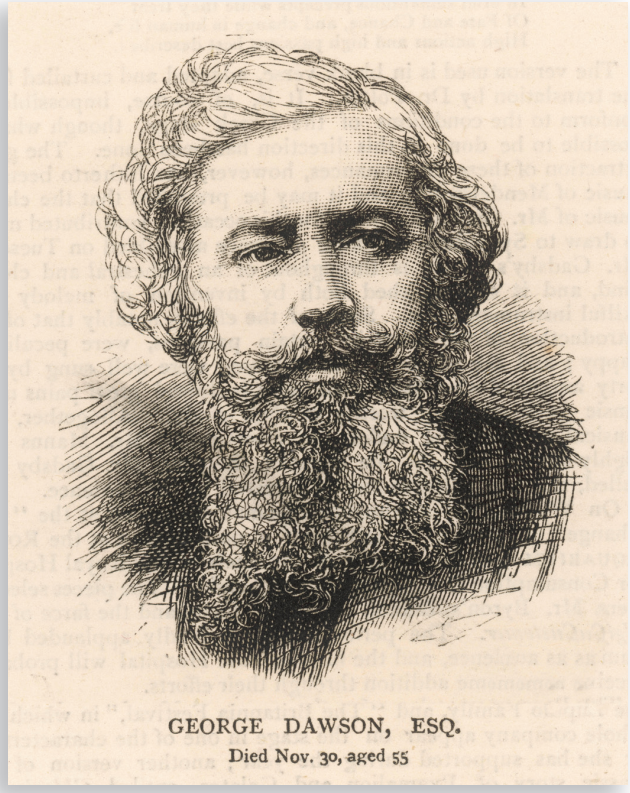
BIRMINGHAM'S CIVIC GOSPEL

Guy Sjögren

Writing to his brother in the summer of 1824, the essayist Thomas Carlyle described Birmingham as a 'pitiful' town: 'a mean congerie of bricks ... streets ill-built and ill-paved ... torrents of thick smoke issuing from a thousand funnels'. By the 1860s, little had been done to alleviate the squalor in which Carlyle's 'sooty artisans' and their families lived and worked. The system of civic administration was largely ineffective in coping with a population of some 340,000 crammed into a warren of workshops and dwellings covering some five square miles.

The town council was in the hands of what has been called a 'shopocracy': men of an unprogressive tradesmen class who, whilst worthy in their way, lacked ideas and were filled with alarm at the prospect of large-scale spending. Indeed, between 1853 and 1858, council expenditure decreased by a third. However, during this sterile period of local administration, the seeds of a new civic philosophy began to take root. This was known as the 'civic gospel', and responsibility for the development and implementation of the civic gospel in Birmingham lay in the hands of a closely linked triumvirate of non-conformist preachers, local politicians, and artists and architects.



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George Dawson, together with his religious contemporaries H.W. Crosskey and Robert Dale, championed the cause of municipal improvement in Victorian Birmingham.

George Dawson, H.W. Crosskey and Robert Dale

The concept of a civic gospel had first truly manifested itself in Glasgow in the 1830s when leading evangelicals had gained a majority on the town council and set about improving the town's water supply. The growth in municipal activity that followed inspired two non-conformist ministers, both of whom left Scotland for Birmingham.

George Dawson established his Unitarian Church of the Saviour in Edwards Street in 1847, and Dr H.W. Crosskey arrived in 1869 to become minister of the Broad Street Unitarian Church of the Messiah. They, along with Congregationalist Dr Robert Dale of the Carrs Lane Chapel, proclaimed the civic gospel.

Dawson asserted that a town council should be responsible for the welfare of all within and subject to its authority just as Parliament was for the well-being of the nation as a whole. Dale endorsed this creed of practical Christianity by saying that 'the eleventh commandment is that thou shalt keep a balance sheet'. Whilst the three ministers might have disagreed about elements of religious doctrine, they were united in the belief that the municipal authority had a God-given responsibility to 'prevent tens of thousands of children from becoming orphans; to do much to improve those miserable homes which are fatal not only to health, but to decency and morality'; and to 'give to the poor the enjoyment of pleasant parks and gardens, and the intellectual cultivation and refinement of public galleries and galleries of art'.

Politics and the Civic Gospel

The Birmingham civic gospel was in essence an entrepreneurial gospel – a gospel that demanded change, initiative and a fair dose of boldness. It was a gospel that held appeal to Birmingham's business community, many of whom sat weekly in the pews of the town's non-conformist churches. H.W. Crosskey's congregation alone included the champion of the civic gospel, Joseph Chamberlain (screws), his brother Arthur (brass), his brother-in-law William Kenrick (hollow-ware), and R. F. Martineau.

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The distinctive style of John Henry Chamberlain, favoured architect of the Birmingham 'civic gospel', remains evident in many of the city's Victorian municipal buildings, including the 1885 School of Art.

Echoing the religious concepts of the civic gospel, Joseph Chamberlain linked the gospel to the world of business. 'The leading idea of the English system of municipal government', he wrote, 'might be that of a joint-stock or co-operative enterprise in which every citizen is a shareholder and of which the dividends are received in the improved health and the increase in the comfort and happiness of the community.'

Joseph Chamberlain's selection as mayor of Birmingham in 1873 by a reform-minded council marked the beginning of substantial efforts to put the principles of the civic gospel into practice. Within a few months Chamberlain was involved in negotiating the takeover by the council of the town's gas supply. This was followed by the municipalisation of Birmingham's water supply.

A Medical Officer of Health had been appointed in 1872 and the first borough Health Committee was established in 1875. In the same year, the Birmingham Improvement Scheme was launched, and this was to be Chamberlain's crowning achievement as mayor. The scheme involved the clearance of ninety-three acres of slum dwellings to the east of New Street and the construction of a new road of shops and offices, Corporation Street.

Architecture and the Arts

The third element of the triumvirate responsible for promoting the civic gospel comprised architects and artists. It has been argued that, however much the politicians were inspired by Dawson's high moral principles, the changes they talked about would not have been realised without the committed involvement of local artists and designers. Roy Hartnell has written: 'The concept of the civic gospel required visual expression and in Birmingham there was a group of artists, architects and designers uniquely placed to provide the political revolution with the symbolic images and icons it required.'

Joseph Chamberlain believed that every new building was an opportunity to enrich and to inform the lives of all who saw it and used it. And it was his namesake, architect John Henry Chamberlain, who would translate ideas into reality – 'the projection of values into space and stone'. J. H. Chamberlain was a close friend of both George Dawson and Joseph Chamberlain, and shared the latter's political beliefs; and, through his design of new municipal buildings - libraries, baths, pumping stations, hospitals, markets and schools - gave powerful expression to the civic gospel.

Importance

The civic gospel was a combination of moral philosophy, politics and architectural design and, by the 1890s, led to Birmingham being accorded the titles of 'the best-governed city in the World' and 'perhaps the most artistic town in England'. Of course, it was not without its critics: some suggested that the council was only implementing reforms already made by other local authorities; others that the Improvement Scheme was motivated by commercial interest rather than social ideals. Nevertheless, Joseph Chamberlain and his tight knot of allies in Birmingham had created what King Edward VII later referred to as 'the home of the best traditions of municipal life'. ●

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Further Reading

Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harper & Row, 1965), Chapter 5.

Roy Hartnell, 'Art and civic culture in Birmingham in the late nineteenth century', *Urban History* Vol. 22 (2), August 1995, pp 229 – 237.

Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).