Part 1

Social reform high on the Christian’s agenda

Baron Donald Soper is remembered for his London Hyde Park and Tower Hill soap-box campaign for a social gospel and his claim that Christians neglected the poor and needy. Whether this claim was just or not, Christians always need to be reminded that social responsibilities go hand in hand with practical religion. As James says (1:27), spotless saints are social workers. Seen from a brighter point of view, since the days of Ulrich Zwingli and Henry Bullinger, whose preaching served to ban poverty in their cantons, Reformed Christians have emphasised their social responsibilities to a high, but not over-balanced, degree. Indeed. from the sixteenth century to our present day evangelical Christians have shown what true religion is according to James, producing such social reformers as Hannah More, William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Herman August Franke, George Müller, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Lord Shaftsbury and William Gadsby. It is, moreover, plain to see that where Christianity thrives, social reforms are high on the agenda. This explains why, in the great awakenings of the eighteenth century, national and public care for the under-privileged improved by leaps and bounds. One of the most successful but most humble of these eighteenth century social reformers was John Howard, famous for his world-wide prison reforms.

Howard’s scanty education

John Howard was born in Enfield, London on 2 September, 1726 to John and Anne Howard who were in the upholstery and carpet trade. Mrs Howard had already given birth to a daughter, Anne, in 1723 and after John bore no more children. Little is known of John’s childhood apart from the fact that his mother died in 1731 at the age of thirty-eight when John was only five years of age. His father seems to have been a godly man as after recording the fact of his wife’s death, he added the words, ”Good God prepare me to follow her.”

At the age of six, John was sent to a Hertford school under the tutorship of an Independent minister, Mr Worsley, a learned man who sadly could not teach. Howard’s future literary work shows that he remained deficient in
grammar and spelling. However, he became a brilliant student of foreign languages and could inspect the prisons of Europe, excluding Russia, without the use of an interpreter. His French was so good that he passed as a Frenchman in areas where he would have been imprisoned himself if known to be an Englishman. Whilst his son was at Hertford, John Howard Sen. married Ann Nesbit, a minister’s daughter who died two years later.

In 1739, Howard entered Moorfields Dissenting Academy, London and though he showed interest in science, medicine and meteorology, he made little academic progress. This led his father, now a wealthy man, to remove John from the school in 1741 and apprentice him to a wholesale grocer. Nevertheless, Howard kept up his medicinal studies and applied the knowledge gained with great success in his prison and hospital work. His research into a cure for gaol-fever eventually enabled him to eradicate the disease in prisons both at home and abroad. Meanwhile, John’s father was in trouble because of his Dissenting faith. On being appointed sheriff, he refused the post not being willing to take communion in the Church of England. For this ‘outrage’, he was fined £500, a huge sum in those days.

John Howard Sen. died in 1742, leaving his son a substantial fortune. John, who was in poor health, immediately bought himself out of his apprentice contract and embarked on a two-year grand tour of Germany, France and Italy. It appears that during this tour, Howard came to a deeper understanding of his own sin and salvation and began to trust in Christ for his future. He returned to England and became a member of the Congregational Church at Stoke Newington, obtaining rooms at the house of Sarah Lardeau, a widow. Howard now became seriously ill and was nursed faithfully by his new landlady for several years though she was in very poor health herself. On recovering, Howard felt deeply indebted to the lady who had sacrificed her own health through looking after him. Though he was only twenty-seven and Mrs Lardeau fifty-three, Howard surprisingly proposed marriage to her and the couple were wed on 15 October, 1753.

First impressions of prison life

Sarah Howard died two years later. Partly to get over the loss and partly to give help to the needy, Howard visited earth-quake stricken Lisbon which had recently suffered 2,000 casualties. On his way to Portugal on The Hanover, the boat was captured by a French privateer and the passengers, including Howard, were thrown into a filthy dungeon and kept for days without food and water. Then, on occasions, a mutton joint was thrown to them which they had to gnaw in turns for want of a knife. The death rate amongst the prisoners was extremely high but in spite of his poor health and lack of food and sanitation, Howard survived the ordeal and was eventually placed on parole. A kind-hearted Frenchman gave him accommodation, clothing and money throughout the following two months, after which Howard was exchanged for a French officer imprisoned in England. Once back home, Howard hastened to the office of the
Commissioners of Sick and Wounded Seamen and informed them of the terrible hardships of British prisoners in French prisons. The British government made a strong protest which led to the release of British naval prisoners in Brest, Morlais and Dinan where Howard had been imprisoned.

The social reformer at home

Howard took over his father’s property in Cardington, Bedfordshire and appalled by the poverty and squalor, began to clean up the village, building new homes for the poor inhabitants and providing work on a model farm he established. Many of the rented cottages were situated in unhealthy marshlands so Howard built new low-rent, modern dwellings on higher ground, providing each cottager with a garden and a vegetable plot. He also made sure his cottagers had medical care and built schools where children of all confessions could be educated. No public houses, gambling, cockpits or prize-fighting were allowed. Like Cowper and Newton who kept themselves informed of Howard’s activities, Howard only gave aid to the so-called ‘deserving poor’ which excluded drunkards, gamblers and evil-livers. In May 1756, Howard was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. Two years later, Howard married a distant cousin, Henrietta Leeds, of Croxton but not before informing her of how he expected her to behave in married life. Henrietta was to give up her life of entertainment (from Howard’s very strict point of view) and prevent any quarrels by promising to obey her husband without question. Henrietta agreed, sold all her jewels, gave the proceeds to the poor, and never gainsaid her husband. To assist her husband in finding employment for the poor, Henrietta had all her linen and clothing spun and woven by the neighbouring cottagers. Sadly, Henrietta’s health was poor and she died on giving birth to the Howards’ only child, John. The sorrowing husband and father wrote in his diary:

John my son was born about four o’clock 27 March, 1765. Sabbath evening 31 March, 1765, died the dear mother. Unaffected piety, meekness and goodness ran through her whole life. O God, sanctify the dear memorial! Thy grace imparting the same temper and mind; that we both, by Thine unbounded goodness in and through Jesus Christ, may be followers of her faith and patience, and be for ever with the Lord … oh glorious day!

During late 1769, Howard received the urge to travel once more and after placing his son in the care of a schoolmistress travelled throughout Europe. Italy now disgusted Howard as it had a fanatical display of religious ceremonies on its eighty-three holy days but "allowed every species of wickedness at little Cabarets on the Sabbath days." Howard’s health began to fail again and he returned to Cardington, requesting the Congregational Church there to pray for him in his sickness and depression. For a short time Howard was in fellowship with the ‘open’ congregation in the Bunyan Meeting House in Bedford and his contribution to the building’s restoration
included providing a new pulpit to replace that formerly used by Bunyan. When the minister Joshua Symonds, declared that he would no longer baptise the children of his members, Howard and several others set up a new church on the old basis regarding baptism. Though Howard provided £400 towards the new church building, he remained on the best of terms with Symonds and continued to support the Bunyan Meeting House with funds.

Inspecting the country’s prisons

In 1772, Howard was elected High Sheriff of Bedford. He accepted communion with the Church of England as a practical necessity as he believed the Lord’s Supper was for all believers and ought not to be restricted to denominational members. Howard’s new office was a most important step in the reformation of the prison system as the majority of England’s prisons were under the supervision of local sheriffs but greatly neglected. Prisoners were expected to pay for their board and keep and no matter how light were their offences or great their innocence, they would only be released on payment of prison ‘fees’, leaving many with little hope of release. Torture, including thumbscrews, was allowed in cases where the prisoner refused to plead and the death penalty was given to those who stole goods to the value of a shilling. Men, women and children were crowded together in the same cells. Windows and ventilation were almost unheard of in prisons, water was seldom available and often there was no form of heating in the winter. Gaol-fever (typhus) was common as open sewers often ran through the cells. Jailors kept their farm animals in the prisoners’ quarters and used the courtyards for their dung heaps. Prisoners were pinned to the floor with iron rods and iron collars and left unable to defend themselves from the rats. Howard decided early to use all his influence by God’s grace to see that prisoners were given a fair deal and that speedy and fair trials should follow arrests. As soon as he was made sheriff, he attacked the evil custom of imprisoning innocents in order to extract ‘detention fees’. He insisted that jailors should be salaried by the county authorities and such ‘extra perks’ be abolished. The judges’ bench at Bedford agreed on condition that Howard produced a precedent. Howard thus made a tour of the countries’ prisons but found the same conditions wherever he went. Happily, he found an ally in an MP by the name of Popham and together they gained the ear of other MPs and formed a select committee in support of Howard’s reforms. This led to Howard’s receiving permission to speak before the House of Commons. Parliament immediately passed bills providing for the immediate freedom of those in prison who had no prosecutors. Jailors were to be paid from county rates. Cells were to be scraped and white-washed at least once a year, properly ventilated and regularly swept out. Free medical care and adequate clothing and washing facilities was to be provided. So that these governmental provisions could be made available to all and sundry, Howard had the bills printed at his own expense and distributed throughout the country. Realising that a bill was one thing and keeping to its demands was another, Howard toured the country’s prisons again to make sure that the bills were
implemented. He now added Scotland and Ireland to his tour of inspection and was welcomed with open arms by the former country and given the freedom of the city of Glasgow. Howard was becoming something of a people's hero.

Prison life on the European Continent

Howard discovered that prisons in Continental Western Europe were, on the whole, better run, more disciplined, more hygienic and more humane than in England and prison food was far better. Dutch and Swiss prisons especially received high recommendation. Howard found, however, that torture was more widespread on the Continent than in England and that prisoners were often detained for years without trials. Before he became well-known abroad, the methods Howard used to smuggle himself into the prisons to speak with the prisoners and the way his studies of local law helped him, would serve as a film-script for the most thrilling Hollywood film. He even succeeded in storming the Bastille. Once, when Howard was forced, under an armed guard, to leave the Bastille, a major newspaper reported that Howard was the first in four hundred years to leave the prison reluctantly. Happily, when hearing that Howard was prepared to distribute money and provide material aid for the prisoners, many prison doors on the Continent were opened to him. Howard was most impressed by the way prisoners on the Continent were employed and paid according to the motto ‘Make them diligent and they will become honest’. He also welcomed the Continental idea of prison inspectors who made sure that general standards were reached and kept. So, too, religious instruction played a prominent part in rehabilitating the prisoners. Howard was most interested to note that prisons in Reformed areas of the Continent had fewer prisoners. Indeed in the Genevan territories, Howard found only five prisoners in all, none of them being kept in irons. The idea of rehabilitation so prominent on the Continent made Howard determined to introduce these positive aspects into British prisons.

Part 2

The State of Prisons in England and Wales

Back in England in 1777, Howard published his major work The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, with preliminary observations, and an account of some foreign prisons, covering 500 quarto pages and including tables, illustrations and plans for new prison buildings. Although the book is highly technical, Howard does not hesitate to advise his readers not to despise the prisoners. But for the grace of God they could well land in such a position themselves. They should rather strive to imitate God’s goodness to themselves by showing benevolence to the needy. Quoting 1 Corinthians 10:12, Howard tells his readers "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” The book’s effect on the nation was enormous and everywhere prisoners began to receive better food and clothing, sanitary conveniences, medical care and, in places, employment.
Jailors were forbidden to keep their animals in the prisoners’ cells and were no longer allowed to sell strong drink to the prisoners. Prison chaplains were employed and Howard insisted that these should be sound gospel men. First offenders should be separated from habitual criminals. Each criminal should be able to sleep alone. Petty criminals should not be classified with murderers regarding the death penalty.

England was in the mood for such reforms and soon national newspapers and magazines were hailing Howard as a hero, quoting from him at great length and demanding that statues should be erected to his honour. The latter demand was a great grievance to Howard who lived as simply and humbly as the prisoners under his care. He refused to make any profit from his books and devoted all his capital for the benefit of others. His wife had left behind a substantial fortune but this Howard placed in trust until their son was of an age to be able to use it wisely. Indeed, Howard had spent so much money on aiding others that 1777 found him almost bankrupt and he ceased to travel, not accepting a penny from his generous supporters in the cause. His sister Anne died in 1777 and left Howard £15,000 and a house in Great Ormond Street, London. This was all used to further the work of village and prison reforms.

Working for Christ drives away depression

After placing his son in the Dissenting Academy at Daventry in 1778, Howard embarked on an extended tour of the Continent’s prisons. His fame had gone before him and he received all possible aid from both British and foreign diplomats. The American war depressed Howard who felt it was ruining England’s economy and international reputation and wrote "Never hardly was known such a time, nobody will part with any money; the American war, unjust and cruel, has brought the nation into contempt, and many individuals into poverty and misery." He was also still in low spirits through the loss of his wife and admitted that this was one of the reasons why he, in spite of his poor health, worked unceasingly. This work was stopped abruptly in Amsterdam when Howard was badly bruised by a bolting horse, leaving him in great pain for many weeks and suffering from fever. On his recovery, Howard left for Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Italy and France, sleeping in his coach on the way to save hotel expenses. He fed himself on local bread and tea brewed in a small travelling kettle but always allowed his servant Thomasson a substantial meal. Alarmed by his fame, Howard strove to visit prisons incognito so as to find them as they really were. In Vienna, Howard could not avoid being treated as a guest of honour by Queen Maria Theresa and the English Ambassador, Sir Robert Murray Keith. At the Ambassador’s home, Howard was provoked by a German guest to criticise the Emperor’s prison policy and was scolded by Sir Robert who knew that the criticism would reach Imperial ears. Howard rejected this attempt to silence him and replied, "What! Shall my tongue be tied from speaking truth by any king or emperor in the world? I repeat what I said and maintain its veracity."
In 1778, France was at war with England and Howard determined to inspect the conditions of English prisoners-of-war in French prisons, relying on his fluency in French to avoid detection. At Dunkirk, where most of the English prisoners were kept, Howard clothed many a prisoner at his own expense but came under suspicion when he persuaded the English not to join the French navy so as to escape imprisonment.

Now, aged 53, Howard returned to England in January 1779 after a year’s tour of 4,636 miles but immediately began touring Britain again, adding over 6,000 miles in six months. Happily, he found that through his reforms, new prisons had been built, inspectors and commissioners appointed, gaol fever had disappeared, the prisoners were better fed and clothed and many had one-bed cells for the night. Petty criminals were separated from the more brutal kind. Now Howard published his 200 paged Appendix to his The State of Prisons and the same year issued a cheap edition of all his reports with new illustrations. He also published reports on the Bastille which he had smuggled out of France. The Gentleman’s Magazine wrote highly in praise of ‘this favourite of philanthropy’ but Howard assured his supporters that he was only a plodder who gathered material for men of genius. One setback to Howard’s plans was caused by the American War as transportation of prisoners to the colonies was now impossible and the English prisons were filled to bursting point. For these prisoners, Howard designed factory prisons on Belgian and Dutch models which were profitable to both the community and the prisoners and campaigned for a swifter release of petty criminals who had reformed.

Pan-European wars hinder Howard’s work

In 1781, Howard was back on the Continent though the French war had spread to Spain and Holland. Holland welcomed Howard with open arms and the Germans showed him how much his reforms had influenced their own country. Denmark’s prisons shocked Howard but he found Sweden’s jails clean, tidy and well managed. Howard visited Russia’s prisons incognito and on foot but Empress Catherine discovered his whereabouts and insisted that Howard should visit her. The reformer replied bluntly by saying that he was in Russia to visit the prisons and had no time for other things. Howard then visited the chief executioner and heard from his own lips that he was ordered to whip certain prisoners until the flesh was removed from their ribs and they died. So, too, Howard found Poland’s prison in a most inhumane condition.
Back in England, he found that the British were dealing with Dutch prisoners as he had been dealt with by the French years before. The surgeon in Shrewsbury had raised money to clothe them but the Commission of Sick and Wounded Seamen refused to allow the prisoners aid so that they might bully them into joining the English navy. Howard, burning with righteous anger produced papers to prove his authority, called all the prisoners together and distributed the clothing with the equally angry agent standing helpless at his side.

A brief retirement from public life

After a further tour of 8,165 miles at home, Howard returned to Spain, Italy and Portugal to inquire into the dire conditions of the Inquisition’s prisons. Perhaps due to the war, Howard found even the Austrian Dutch prisons in a worse state than previously. Howard’s reputation was now so high that even though the Emperor had forbidden visitors, the prison authorities told him that he was an exception to every rule. Then Howard became seriously ill again and returned to England. He found that John, now aged seventeen, had finished his schooling and was prepared to accompany his father on his next inspections of Ireland and England. Howard then matriculated John at Edinburgh University for the 1783 winter term. During this period, the dark side of Thomasson’s character gained power over him and unknown to Howard he and John began to visit taverns and brothels. John continued to live a most profligate life with occasional bouts of remorse but because Howard was a public figure, his son’s behaviour reached public notice. Weary of his constant travelling and heart-broken by his son’s conduct, Howard decided to retire from public life early in 1784. At Edinburgh, John, still in his teens, plunged deeper into dissolute living and contracted venereal disease. His father was compelled to withdraw him from the Edinburgh environment, placing him in St. John’s College, Cambridge under the care of Baptist Minister Robert Robinson. Now John’s mind deteriorated with his character and it was obvious that he was suffering from dementia syphilitic. Howard’s funds ran out and he had to sell off property, thus limiting his social involvement. He blamed himself bitterly for his son’s state.

Combating the plague

Howard’s retirement from public life was short-lived. He had begun to examine the state of the nation’s schools, workhouses and hospitals and the onslaught of the plague in Europe. He sold his Hackney estate and embarked on a new European tour. His first aim was to visit the Lazaretto in Paris and canvassed the assistance of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Carmarthen. The nobleman told Howard that if he entered France, he would be put in the Bastille! Nevertheless Howard went ahead with his plans and escaped arrest merely because the Prefect had a day off at the time. On travelling to Leghorn in Italy, Howard found their hospitals the best in Europe and praised the efforts of their Grand Duke Leopold II ‘the true father and friend of his country’. Malta’s case was far different. The
island’s hospitals were under the ‘care’ of the Roman Catholic Grand Master whom Howard quickly took to task because of their disgusting condition. After Malta, Howard left for Smyrna and Constantinople to visit Turkey’s hospitals and prisons. Patients and inmates lived under despicable conditions yet the Turks built elegant asylums for their cats. In order to gain first-hand knowledge of the plague, Howard now boarded a ship bound for Venice so that he would be put in quarantine himself. The plague was on board and Howard was asked to serve as ship’s doctor.

Once in Venice, Howard was quarantined under the most filthy conditions imaginable. His many attempts to scrub the floor, walls and ceiling of his room could not remove the stench. These hardships for Howard increased when he heard that the English newspapers and magazines were permanently full of articles and letters in his praise and that collections were being made to erect a monument in his honour. Howard wrote to all those in authority whom he knew, begging them to stop the project. So, too, news of his son’s behaviour became more and more shocking and it was now obvious that young John was mentally deranged. Meanwhile, Emperor Joseph II of Austria had been persistent but unsuccessful in inviting Howard to his palace. Finally, Joseph sent his Chancellor to Howard and begged him for an interview when and where he liked. A meeting was arranged for nine on the following morning and Joseph begged Howard to speak freely. On complaining of the Austrian prisons, the Emperor retorted that the English hanged people for petty crimes. Howard admitted this but replied that two wrongs do not make a right. He pointed out that conditions had become worse in Austria’s territories during Joseph’s reign. The Emperor departed from Howard by shaking his hand and afterwards told the English ambassador, "In truth, the little Englishman is without ceremony or compliment, but I like him the better for it."

The final journey

Back in England, Howard published further works on the state of hospitals and prisons in Europe and the British Isles and campaigned for school reforms. The condition of his son wore him down and his depressions forced him to think of a new tour so that he would be better occupied and doing something useful. He was also sick of the eulogies which he was continually compelled to hear or read. Convinced that this would be a journey of no return, Howard made his will, leaving his remaining estates to near and distant relatives and left substantial pensions for those he employed. Even Thomasson was left ten pounds per annum. Thomasson begged Howard not to dismiss him and was able to persuade his master to take him on his planned tour of Germany and Russian. Berlin welcomed Howard as a VIP and gave him free access to their prisons. Howard had heard that 70,000 recruits had died in a year in military hospitals in Russia, so he speeded to that country loaded with Dr James’s powders and other medicines against the plague and gaol fever. On his way, he rejoiced to hear that the Bastille had fallen and was destroyed. In the Ukraine, Howard found 2,000 sick and wounded casualties of the Russo-Turkish war.
abandoned to their fate. He laid the blame at the feet of the soldiers’ officers to whom he complained. At Kherson where the officers had organised parties and balls to celebrate a cease-fire, the plague struck and Howard was asked to attend the sick. On his third visit, early in January, Howard found a young lady whom he had previously attended now dying and Howard stayed by her side until death occurred on the following day. Immediately, Howard became ill himself and was bed-bound with fever. He took the medicine he had given to others and Prince Potemkin sent Howard his court doctor but told him not to interfere with Howard’s self-treatment. On 12 January, Howard’s face turned black and he fell senseless to the floor. On recovering somewhat, Howard entered into his diary that he was only a pilgrim in this world and trusted in God’s grace that he would soon join his departed friends to be ever with the Lord. When friends strove to turn Howard from thoughts of death, he told them that death was not a morbid subject for him but a friend void of terrors whom he found cheerful and pleasing. The subject left him more grateful to God than any other. He told Admiral Priestman, an Englishman serving the Russian forces, that he wished to be buried at Stepanovka on the property of a French friend there and there should be no pomp and procession and no grave-stone save for a small sundial. Priestman should conduct the service himself according to Church of England rites, not wanting the Orthodox priests to touch him. "Then let me be forgotten", was Howard’s final wish. The last news brought to Howard cheered the dying man. His friend Whitbread had written to say that John Howard was improving in health. "Is not this comfort for a dying father?" Howard asked. Soon after, Howard’s condition deteriorated. A doctor was sent for but Howard died before he arrived. At eight o’clock on the morning of 20 January, 1790, Howard had departed to be for ever with his Lord.

Howard had asked for no pomp but his popularity was high in Russia. Nobility and the great of the land followed his bier drawn by six horses. The entire garrison attended the parade, joined by a mounted cavalry regiment. A crowd of between two to three thousand joined the dignitaries in following Howard to his grave. Prince Potemkin had two plaster casts made of Howard’s death-mask, one for the English and one for the Russians. Evangelical John Bacon (1740-1799), a member of the Royal Academy and the only lay-member of the Eclectic Society founded by John Newton was commissioned to erect a monument at Kherson for which he solicited William Cowper’s help. The friends’ inscription declared that Howard "united in his character many virtues, each worthy of a memorial. All springing from the Faith and animated by the Charity of a Christian."

The news of Howard’s home-call reached England quickly and the newspapers announced Howard’s death in columns reserved for announcements concerning royalty. Sermons were preached in remembrance of Howard’s fine Christian work all over England and many a writer honoured Howard in poetry and prose. A full length statue of Howard sculptured by Bacon was placed in St Paul’s Cathedral. It was the first ever set up there. Other monuments were erected in the country. None
of this would have pleased Howard. Another friend and fellow social reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1744-1832), commented that Howard did what no other could have done and no man would do, adding, "His was the truly Christian choice; the lot in which is to be found the least of that which selfish nature covets, and the most of what it shrinks from. His kingdom was of a better world: he died a martyr after living an apostle."

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