



Missionaries to Marxists: The rise and fall of SCM

The Student Christian Movement (SCM) began with a vision for “*The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation.*” A century later its membership is made up of those from “any faith or no faith at all.” A case study rich in lessons for any movement tempted to bow to the spirit of the age.

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The Student Christian Movement (SCM) began with a vision for “*The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation.*” A century later its website states its membership is made up of those from “any faith or no faith at all.”¹

Through SCM a new generation heeded the call to world missions. But gradually SCM distanced itself from its evangelical heritage and accommodated its message to the values of the surrounding culture.

A once dynamic movement is facing decline and death. How did this happen? What can we learn from the rise and fall of the Student Christian Movement?

The Cambridge Seven

When seven young Cambridge men volunteered for missionary service in the 1880s it caused a national stir. While prominent evangelicals were willing to support foreign missions it was unusual for them to actually go. The majority of those who volunteered were working-class artisans, shop-boys, labourers and apprentices.

Known as the “Cambridge Seven” these were men of wealth and intellectual and athletic distinction. Studd, who gave away his fortune, had played cricket for England against Australia in the Test match that gave rise to the “Ashes” tradition. In the years to follow, scores of other students from Cambridge and across Britain followed their example.



The Cambridge Seven

In 1882, Cambridge University had been deeply impacted by the visit of the American evangelist, D. L. Moody. Scores of students were converted and now seven of them had enlisted to join the unknown China Inland Mission led by Hudson Taylor.

Throughout the nineteenth century a rich evangelical heritage had been building at Cambridge, beginning with the fifty-four year ministry of [Charles Simeon](#) under whose influence a number of key church leaders had emerged. As a result of David Livingston's visit in 1858 the students had formed a Cambridge Christian Missionary Union. At the same time they established a daily prayer meeting. In 1877, evangelical students formed the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. Similar groups were forming in other colleges.

The Cambridge Seven sailed for China in February 1885. Before their departure, they toured England and Scotland visiting churches and universities and speaking at student rallies. Their tour added momentum to the growing national network of evangelical student groups. Yet the groups were still largely localised and isolated from each other. The arrival of another American changed all that.

Birth of a Movement

In 1883 a young American at Princeton, Robert Wilder had formed a small society among his friends who signed a declaration of purpose committing themselves to become foreign missionaries. In 1891 he arrived in England with the intention of establishing a British version of the Student Volunteers.



Robert Wilder

Wilder was invited to speak to the Cambridge evangelical students and began to tour the universities, gaining the support of local student groups and evangelical patrons. At Wilder's encouragement, the various student bodies met and formed the Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU). Membership was open to any student who could declare his intention to become a foreign missionary.

Eventually, Arthur Polhill-Turner, one of the original Seven who had just returned from China, was employed as a full-time traveling secretary. Polhill-Turner discovered it was easier to recruit "Volunteers" in universities that already had a student-run evangelical body. Existing groups were united in the British Colleges Christian Union (BCCU) and attempts were made to start Christian Unions in colleges in the new north of England. SVMU held its first national conference at Keswick, one week before the main convention. The speakers were drawn from among prominent evangelicals who were to speak at the main convention.

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The SVMU and the BCCU developed together. They shared the same conferences, membership and staff. When the work began to expand into theological colleges the three strands were brought together in 1898 to form the Student Christian Movement. A young Dublin engineering student, Tissington Tatlow, was appointed its first General Secretary, a post he was to hold for almost thirty years.

The student founders of SCM were evangelicals. “They shared the theology and doctrine of the Keswick Convention with its acceptance of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the need for a personal relationship with Christ and the importance of missionary work.”² At the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in 1896, with 2,000 students from many nations, they adopted the watchword—“*The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation.*”

Drift to Doubt

Despite this heritage, the SCM under Tatlow's leadership gradually moved away from its evangelical roots. From its inception, SCM had included students from the Scottish Free Church who were heavily influenced by rationalistic German theology and higher criticism. As the movement expanded, it recruited new constituencies and broadened its doctrinal



WCC Amsterdam 1948

base in the process. The first symbolic indication of the shift was the decision to hold the 1897 conference away from Keswick. SCM continued to broaden its appeal as it expanded into the theological colleges and sought to woo the Anglo-Catholics into the movement.

The movement gradually developed a theological position that was clearly liberal Protestant rather than conservative evangelical. "Emphasis was shifted from making a taken-for-granted faith 'come alive' to making their faith 'reasonable' and intellectually defensible in the modern world." The evangelicals within SCM became deeply concerned about what they perceived as the movement's growing 'intellectualism' and the lack of 'spiritual tone' in its activities. Both students and returning SVMU missionaries raised concerns about the declining evangelical influences in conferences. In 1910, the Cambridge Christian Union (CICCU) was the first evangelical student union to withdraw. Other universities and colleges followed.

The 1913 SCM basis of faith omitted any specific mention of the deity of Christ and shied away from evangelical terms such as 'sin', 'regeneration', 'forgiveness' and 'salvation'. Edward Woods, Chairman of SCM's General Committee defended the statement arguing that it was an attempt to translate Christian concerns into a new language students could understand.⁴

Despite the loss of its evangelical wing, SCM was still able to establish itself in every university and major college. Its impact was felt beyond its student work in both universities and secondary schools. Tatlow and the SCM made a vital contribution to the ecumenical movement that resulted in the

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establishment of the World Council of Churches. Ex-SCM staff and students became major leaders in the ecumenical movement and in the central bureaucracy of the World Council of Churches. SCM Press became a prominent international publisher of theological works. By the 1950's SCM boasted up to forty staff.

Storm clouds

Ironically it was in the 1960's that SCM's collapse occurred. Superficially, the story of SCM was one of outward strength up until the late 1960's. At that time it moved beyond Ecumenicalism and Liberalism into student radicalism, Marxism and "Death of God" theology.

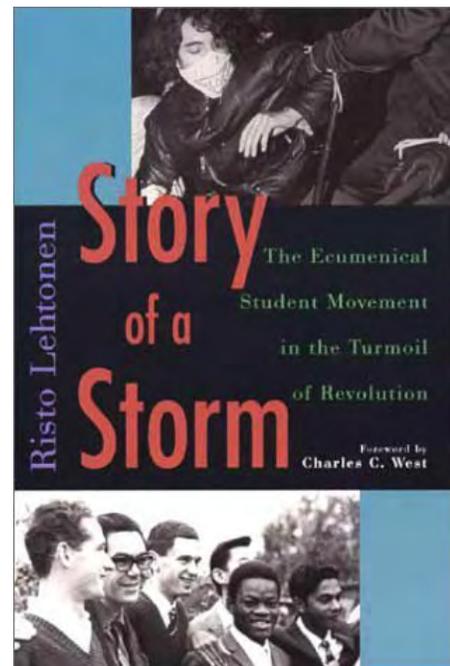
SCM was committed to relevance in the modern world. The ecumenical movement was deeply influenced by the Dutch missiologist, Johannes Hoekendijk.⁵ During the 1960's Hoekendijk became representative of a stream in mission theology which rejected the church as an "illegitimate center" for missionary thinking. He challenged the traditional notion that God was at work in the Church to save the world (God — Church — World). Instead, he asserted that the secular world is the stage of God's activity. The church must co-operate with what God is doing in the world (God — World — Church). The slogan emerged in ecumenical circles that "The world sets the agenda for the church." According to Risto Lehtonen, "He was considered the mentor of those who found signs of God's action in the revolutionary political movements in China and elsewhere

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and in the anticolonial struggle, in Marxist ideology and in the emancipatory movements of modernization and secularization."⁶

The Ecumenical movement's perspective on the mission of God was that "the primary arena of God's action is the world in general and the struggle for the poor and oppressed in particular. According to this, the church has at best only a secondary role, if any, in God's design for the world and that is to discern and follow God's action in political struggles.

Furthermore, the redemptive action of God, the salvation brought by Christ, is expected to take place outside church structures."⁷ No salvation outside of the church became no salvation inside of the church. God's activity was in the world. Revolutionary action programs





for the poor and the mission of God became one. “The gospel of the cross is replaced by political and ideological triumphalism.”⁸

A recurring theme of SCM policy discussions of the post-War era was that of ‘building bridges’ with the secular world. With the rise of student radicalism in the 1960’s, the application of this principle meant “If the students were not interested in Christianity but were in Marxism then SCM had to build a bridge to the Marxists by showing what a lot they really had in common. If Freudianism was this year’s flavour, then SCM had a conference of Christ and Freud. When many young people became attracted to the idea of communal living lo and behold, the SCM discovered that there was really a strong communal streak in Christianity too and built their own commune.”⁹

The strategy was justified on ideological grounds. If the world sets the agenda, then Christians need to be where the action is. It was also justified practically as a means of recruitment to SCM and to Christianity. Regardless of ideology, the strategy was organisational suicide.

Bruce explains, “The bridges that were built to the secular world did not serve to bring new blood into SCM or the Christian Church. Instead, these bridges served as paths of defection for SCM members. Rather than Marxists becoming Christian, the Christians became Marxist. One year, the whole Edinburgh branch left the SCM to become a cell of a Trotskyite party. One leading staff member left the SCM during its commune period to join a ‘real’ commune. In competition with other groups and organisations built around a more specific set of beliefs, an organisation built upon a diffuse and general belief system must lose.”¹⁰

Risto Lehtonen writes as a former participant in ecumenical student movement. Looking back, he speaks of his bewilderment that “the ecumenical movement, which advocated the renewal of the social witness of the Church, so readily fell under the spell of the increasingly authoritarian political ideologies of the New Left and of neo-Marxism.... Suddenly, after 1968, a surprising number of church and ecumenical leaders, together with the radical student generation, were willing to welcome totalitarian ideologies and to accept their claims to provide a normative interpretation of reality, including the Christian faith.”¹¹

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SCM’s ideology undermined its organisational integrity at a time when it was needed most. SCM was swept along with the sixties popular rejection of authority and institutional structures. “The SCM became committed to the idea that all the full-time staff should equally

share the executive work, the clerical work and the maintenance work on the large crumbling Elizabethan Manor that had been bought as a communal 'Heart' for the movement. The result was administrative chaos. The collapse of SCM was rapid. In 1963, it was still able to attract large numbers of students to its summer conferences. By 1973 the movement had practically no student members and was continuing to exist on interest from the investment of previous generations.¹²

Between 1975 and 1979, a serious conflict developed between the Trust Association that was responsible for SCM's funds and the organisation. Allegations of financial misdealings arose. The Trust referred SCM to the Charity Commissioners for investigation. It also tried to sack SCM staff and freeze assets. The dispute was finally resolved as SCM began to moderate with the decline in student radicalism in the late 1970's.

By this time it hardly mattered. "The membership had dwindled to the level where it was less than 200. This in contrast to a figure of over 7,000 in 1957 and has to be seen in the context of the massive increase in the numbers of students in higher education. With no income at all from current members, the SCM continues to exist because income from capital invested in the nineteen fifties allows the employment of about eight full-time staff who spend their time trying to build support."¹³

By the 1980's, SCM was surviving largely because capital invested in the 1950's generated the funds to pay its staff. It had very little student support in terms of membership or financial contributions. In the colleges it was dwarfed by the rival conservative evangelical Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) which grew out of local schisms from SCM.

Epilogue

Today, SCM barely survives on a few British campuses. Its secondary schools work has collapsed and its publishing arm has separated. According to one interested observer, "There is still nothing equivalent to a functioning SCM in Britain...."¹⁴

In contrast, the evangelical student movement (now UCCF) that formed as a breakaway from SCM in 1928, now boasts 20,000 student members and 49 full-time staff in the UK.¹⁵ InterVarsity USA has 33,000 members and 880 workers in the US.¹⁶ Its mission and commitment to evangelical Christianity is clear and it can justifiably lay claim to be the modern day successors to the Cambridge Seven.

The official [SCM website](#) affirms that SCM "chooses to hold no doctrinal basis" and boasts that membership "is open to people of any faith and none".¹⁷ The only "watchword" found on the website was "SCM—*Questioning the Christian Faith*." The Movement has come a long way from its original watchword—"The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation."

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Endnotes

1. www.movement.org.uk Accessed 20 August 2002.
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3. Steve Bruce, [Firm in the Faith](#) (Aldershot, GB: Gower, 1984), 69.
4. Bruce, [Firm in the Faith](#), 73.
5. Johannes C. Hoekendijk, [The Church Inside Out](#), ed. L.A. Hoedemaker and Pieter Tijmes, trans. Isaac C. Rottenberg (London: SCM, 1966).
6. Risto Lehtonen, [Story Of A Storm](#): The Ecumenical Student Movement In The Turmoil Of Revolution, 1968- 1973 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 25.
7. Lehtonen, 336.
8. Lehtonen, 337.
9. Bruce, [Firm in the Faith](#), 91.
10. Bruce, [Firm in the Faith](#), 91.
11. Lehtonen, 332.
12. Bruce, [Student Christian Movement](#), 79.
13. Bruce, [Firm in the Faith](#), 77.
14. Lehtonen, 339.
15. www.uccf.org.uk/about/index.php Accessed on 9 August 2005.
16. www.intervarsity.org/aboutus/facts.php Accessed on 9 August 2005.
17. www.movement.org.uk Accessed on 20 August 2002.

7 Lessons on the Death of a Movement

1. Drift to secularism

A recurring pattern in the lifecycle of movements is the drift to secularism. Finke and Stark write, "By 'secularized' we mean to move from otherworldliness, to present a more distant and indistinct conception of the supernatural, to relax the moral restrictions on members and to surrender claims to an exclusive and superior truth." SCM surrendered to this tendency and paid the price.

2. Failure of Gospel nerve

SCM's commitment to theological liberalism meant that it tended to define itself by what it did not believe. Biblical authority was undermined. Its message became vague and poorly distinguished from other agendas.

3. Powerless to mobilize

In order to have some chance of being effective in recruitment, a movement needs a clear understanding of what the truth is, who has it and who needs it. A lack of clear beliefs undermined recruitment and made internal cohesion and united action unlikely.

4. Treated with indifference

The lesson of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that Liberal Protestantism has failed abysmally to attract support from those in the modern world looking for religious answers to life's questions. Ironically, theological liberalism set out to make the faith intelligible to the modern, rational, secular world only to find itself treated with indifference by that world.

5. Hijacked agenda

The increasingly authoritarian political ideologies of the New Left and neo-Marxism filled the spiritual void that SCM for itself. Lacking the courage to define itself, SCM allowed itself to be defined by movements alien to the Gospel.

6. External life support

Finally, SCM found itself, as every declining movement does, living on external life support—asset rich but cash poor. Surviving due to investments made by a former generation.

7. God is faithful

The story of the decline of SCM is paralleled by the story of the rise of Inter-Varsity. God is faithful and his purposes will not be thwarted even when movements prove unfaithful. He is always at work, often on the fringes raising up new movements for the renewal and expansion of the church.

Reflection

1. What is at the heart of the drift to “secularism”. How can it be prevented without causing a drift to “fundamentalism”.

2. Were the evangelicals right to leave SCM? Should they have stayed and worked to change SCM from within?

3. What have you learnt in this case study that has relevance for your life and ministry? What do you need to do about it?

Going further

Steve Addison, “Liberal Protestantism” www.steveaddison.net/category/movement-case-studies/liberal-protestant/

Steve Bruce, *Firm in the Faith* (Aldershot, GB: Gower, 1984).

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About the author

Steve Addison is a life-long student of movements that renew and expand the Christian faith. Steve distills the characteristics of dynamic movements and makes them available to leaders committed to the multiplication of healthy churches.

Steve began his research into Christian movements in the late 1980s while serving as a church planter in Melbourne, Australia. He carried that interest into his Doctor of Ministry with Fuller Seminary. Steve currently serves as Director of [Church Resource Ministries \(CRM\) Australia](#), a member of the [CRM global community](#). CRM empowers leaders for the church.



Steve's calling is to empower godly leaders who strengthen and multiply churches, everywhere. Visit Steve's blog at www.steveaddison.net for his latest insights.

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