

HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

Part VI – Into all the World:

The Christian Movement in an Age of Uncertainty (A.D. 1789 - 1989)

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On July 14, 1789, a mob of French peasants in Paris attacked the famous prison, the Bastille, stormed its gates and burned it to the ground. This act of violence marked the beginning of the French Revolution, the first in a series of political and religious revolts which were to shake Europe during the next two centuries. On November 9, 1989, citizens of East and West Berlin converged on the infamous Berlin Wall, which had symbolized the great divide between communism and the free world. With picks and hammers, they chipped away until the wall was reduced to rubble.

In this study, we will look at the history of Christianity between these two defining events — 500 miles and 200 years apart — the fall of the Bastille and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is the story of the church in an age of revolution.

WILLIAM CAREY

The tiny village of Paulerspury, in the Midlands region of England, is a far cry from either Paris or Berlin. Yet the little boy, who was born here in 1761, would have a revolutionary effect on the Christian witness in the modern world. His name was William Carey, and we remember him today as “the father of modern missions.”

Carey was a poor cobbler by trade, but he had an amazing gift with languages and taught himself Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Dutch. He had an unusual concern for the world and tried to persuade his fellow Baptists that they should pray for the conversion of those who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ! At one meeting, while he was making such a plea, a senior minister said to him, “Young man, sit down. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without your help or mine!”

In those days, many Christians, even Baptists and other evangelicals, believed that the Great Commission had been fulfilled long ago and was no longer applicable to them. Sometimes they even joined in singing anti-missionary hymns:

Go ye into all the world, the Lord of old did say.

But now where He has placed thee, there He would have thee stay.

Carey could not accept this theology. When he read the Great Commission, it was clear what Jesus meant: “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” “Go ye,” Carey said, “means you and me. . . here and now.”

On May 31, 1791, he preached a famous sermon based on Isaiah 54:1-5. “Let us expect great things from God,” he urged, “and attempt great things for God.” In the following year, Carey published his ideas in a book, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. “We must pray, plan, give, and go,” he said. Carey’s *Enquiry* became the manifesto of the modern missionary movement.

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On June 13, 1793, Carey, his wife Dorothy, and their four children, including a nursing infant, sailed from England on a Danish ship headed for India. No one on board that ship would ever see their native homeland again. Carey spent 41 years in India translating the Bible into Bengali and scores of other Indian languages and dialects of the East. He and his fellow missionaries at Serampore, near Calcutta, had a phenomenal ministry among the people of India. They preached the Gospel, planted churches, built schools, and worked to overcome inhumane practices, such as infanticide and *sati*, the burning to death of widows.

Carey always insisted that the Gospel was addressed to the whole person. He would have agreed completely with E. Stanley Jones, the great twentieth century Methodist missionary to India, who said, "A soul without a body is a ghost; a body without a soul is a corpse." Jesus came to bring good news to the whole person — body and soul.

Although he lived in a radically pluralistic culture, Carey never compromised the essential Christian message. He always proclaimed Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples everywhere. Through the publication of his letters and journal, Carey's work in India became well known throughout the Christian world. Shortly before he died, Carey was visited by Alexander Duff, a preacher from Scotland, who had traveled many miles to see the famous missionary. Carey summoned him to his bed and whispered, "You have been speaking of Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey. When I am gone, speak no more of Dr. Carey; speak instead of Dr. Carey's Savior." When he died in 1834, Carey requested that two lines from a hymn by Isaac Watts be inscribed on the simple stone slab that would mark his grave: "A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall."

Although Carey's work in India was sponsored by the Baptist Missionary Society, he worked closely with Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and other Christians who were committed to carrying out the "Great Commission." The modern quest for Christian unity was born on the mission field. Those who followed in his footsteps, such as Henry Martyn, David Livingstone, Lottie Moon, and Hudson Taylor, were all guided by the same principle which informed his approach to ecumenical cooperation: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

Carey's mission to India was a catalyst for a great missionary awakening throughout the entire Body of Christ. In 1810, he called for Christians of all denominations to come together to devise a common strategy for world evangelization. Precisely 100 years after Carey had proposed such a gathering in 1910, the first International Missionary Conference convened at Edinburgh.

In recent decades, the modern ecumenical movement has lost influence, as the original vision for missions and evangelism has waned. And yet, the work of God cannot be stopped by official structures and bureaucracies. Today, Christians are cooperating in ways that would have surprised William Carey. Conservative Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants work and pray together for the sanctity of life, moral values in society, the translation and spread of the Scriptures, the struggle for religious liberty, and the sharing of the Gospel around the world.

THE CHURCH, ATTACKED AND CRITICIZED

During these two centuries, Christianity spread around the world at a phenomenal pace. But spiritual and theological storms were brewing in western Europe, in the heart of what had once been "Christian" civilization. The church was like an army besieged by an unseen foe, unable to respond to new forms of attack and criticism.

- Karl Marx and Friedreich Engels called religion “an opiate of the people.” They exhorted the workers of the world to unite against traditional Christian beliefs.
- Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution seemed to call into question the biblical account of creation.
- Sigmund Freud looked deep into the human soul and pronounced it void of religious significance.
- Few were as bold as Friedreich Nietzsche, who summed up the mood of his age in this way: “The most important of recent events — that God is dead, that the belief in the Christian God had become unworthy of belief — already begins to cast its first shadows over Europe.”

Amidst these shadows of doubt loomed the greater shadow of violence and war. Looking back on all of this, H. Richard Niebuhr characterized the theology which prevailed as the world hovered on the brink of chaos: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

KARL BARTH

In the midst of this malaise, a young pastor in Switzerland, Karl Barth, spoke out for a new kind of theology, very much at odds with the prevailing liberalism of the day. Barth’s sermons were preached within sound of the gunfire of World War I. The liberal theology, he had been taught in the finest German universities, was inadequate to the crisis which engulfed him and his parishioners. Barth’s answer was to return to the witness of the Reformation and to the Bible, which lay behind it. In 1918, he published his commentary, *On the Epistle to the Romans*, which, as someone said, “fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians.”

“One cannot speak about God,” Barth said, “simply by speaking about man in a loud voice.” What was needed was a recovery of the transcendent God, the God who speaks in the Bible, above all the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. This medieval painting by Matthias Grunewald, which Karl Barth hung on the wall behind his desk, depicts one of his favorite scenes in the Bible. It shows John the Baptist pointing with his long bony finger to Jesus on the cross. The mission of every theologian, of every Christian, of the church itself, is not to draw attention to ourselves, our ideas, or our achievements. Our job, like that of John the Baptist, is to point others toward the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Barth was soon called on to put his theology into practice when he was offered a teaching post in Germany. It was the era of the Weimar Republic. Germany was still reeling from its defeat in World War I. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were already rising to power. Many Christians in Germany found Hitler’s appeal irresistible. On many issues, Hitler stressed pro-moral and pro-family values. He promised to eliminate pornography and prostitution. Nazism, he said, was the true fulfillment of Christianity, and many German Christians agreed with him. “The swastika on our breasts, the cross in our hearts” was their motto.

But the real motive of the Nazi movement was better expressed by Heinrich Himmler who said, “We shall not rest until we have rooted out Christianity.”

THE CONFESSING CHURCH

In 1933, Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran pastor in Berlin, organized resistance to the Nazi takeover of the church. That opposition set up an alternative church structure known as the "Confessing Church." In May, 1934, Karl Barth drafted the famous "Barmen Declaration," the theological standard of the Confessing Church.

Article I declares:

Jesus Christ, as He has testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death. We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, images and truths as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God, as a source of her preaching. We also repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but to another lord, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through Him.

Later that same year, Karl Barth found himself in trouble at the University of Bonn when he refused to begin his classes with the Nazi salute, "Heil Hitler!"

He was soon deprived of his teaching post and expelled from Germany.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

One of Karl Barth's closest friends and disciples was a young theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Like Barth, he denounced the paganism and anti-Semitism of the Nazis. For awhile, Bonhoeffer served as the director of an underground seminary, training pastors for the Confessing Church. But near the end of the war, he became involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The plot was uncovered, and Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Gestapo. Eventually he was executed in the concentration camp at Flossenbergl. In one of his early books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer had written, "When Jesus Christ calls a man to follow Him, He calls him to take up his cross and die."

Payne Best, an English officer, shared a prison cell with Bonhoeffer during his last days. "Bonhoeffer was all humility and sweetness," he wrote. "He always seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom God was real and close."

Bonhoeffer and Barth were part of a minority of Christians who dared to stand for the truth of the Gospel in a time of great darkness and distress. After World War II, many Christians publicly repented of their complicity in the evil deeds of the Nazi regime. In recent decades, many other Christians have suffered greatly under Communist totalitarianism in China and Russia. In fact, more martyrs have been put to death for their faith in Christ in the twentieth century than in all other persecutions in the history of the church. Now, as then, the price of religious liberty and spiritual integrity is eternal vigilance.

THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION

Nearly 100 years ago, a group of open-minded, progressive Protestants launched a new journal which they called *The Christian Century*. It is a label that is hard to justify from the record of the past ten decades: two world wars, the Holocaust, poverty, oppression, and dehumanization. Yet Christianity survives, and even thrives, especially in Africa and Latin America, and even in China, where decades of oppression and persecution were not able to extinguish the flame of Christian faith. Korea has also become a dynamic center of Christian

witness in Asia, sending thousands of missionaries to people groups yet unreached with the Gospel. Nearly 2000 years ago, Jesus said to His disciples, "Upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Christians have often felt that they are here and there, up and down, without sure footing in this present evil world. But the church's one foundation is still Jesus Christ her Lord. His purposes remain intact, undaunted, despite all the changes, successes, and disappointments in the annals of human history.

EASTERN ORTHODOXY

What is Christianity's future? The German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, has said that the three vital forces within the Christianity of the third millennium will be Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and conservative evangelicalism. Of these three groups, the Orthodox churches of the East may be the least open to change, tied as they are to national identity and ethnic history. Yet the majesty and dignity of the Orthodox tradition continue to attract new believers while a prophetic figure such as Alexander Solzhenitsin calls for renewal of the Christian faith in both East and West. Orthodox theologians have also been stalwart defenders of classical Christology and the historic doctrine of the Trinity, against more modernist views within the circles of liberal ecumenism. At the same time, others have raised the issue of religious liberty and the freedom to share the Gospel in many countries where orthodox churches are dominant.

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

While Orthodoxy has pursued its own pathway, Roman Catholicism has emerged as an aggressive global movement of numerous national churches, all in fellowship with the Bishop of Rome, who claims to be the vicar of Christ for the whole Christian church. The direction of Roman Catholicism in the third millennium will be shaped by the legacy of the two greatest popes of the twentieth century, John XXIII and John Paul II.

John XXIII was elected pope in 1958. He surprised the world by announcing that he intended to summon a general council to consider many basic matters of church teaching and worship. It was time, he said, to open the windows and let some fresh air into the corridors of the Roman Catholic church. His favorite word for this process was *aggiornamento*, which means "bringing up to date." The work of the Second Vatican Council, which Pope John convened in 1962, has led to major changes within the Catholic church, including an eager desire to read and study the Scriptures, and to conduct worship in the common language of the people. Non-Catholic Christians were no longer automatically condemned but regarded instead as "separated brethren." Vatican II also lifted up the role of the laity in the life of the church and extolled the ideal of religious liberty for all people.

The election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II in 1978 was another signal of the worldwide significance of the Catholic church. Coming from Poland, John Paul was the first non-Italian pope since the sixteenth century. If John XXIII's watchword was *aggiornamento* (bringing things up to date), John Paul II's keynote theme has been *ressourcement*, (a returning to the resources of tradition and early church thinking). The Pope, supported by his chief theological advisor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, has opposed the modernizing theology of scholars such as Hans Küng and the excesses of liberation theology in Latin America. He has also refused to ordain women priests, lift the ban on clerical celibacy, or change the church's teaching about birth control, all controversial issues for many Catholics in America. At the same time, John Paul II has had an impact far beyond the bounds of the Church of Rome. His stand against communist oppression in Eastern Europe was a major factor in the disillusion of that totalitarian system. His opposition to what he calls "the culture of death," including abortion and euthanasia, has struck a prophetic note when human life is increasingly regarded as cheap and dispensable. For all these reasons, John Paul II is widely regarded as the greatest living Christian statesman in the world today.

EVANGELICALISM

Pannenberg's third vital force, in the Christianity of the third millennium, is evangelicalism. In 1942, a group of conservative Protestant church leaders met in Chicago to form the National Association of Evangelicals. They were unhappy with the narrow separatism and constant bickering of some of their fellow conservatives — the feudin', fightin', fussin' Fundamentalists. But they were also wary of the liberal drift and compromising theology advanced by many leaders in the mainline Protestant denominations. They wanted to forge a third way between these two extremes.

The distinctive witness of evangelical Christians in the world today has been shaped by numerous entrepreneurial ministries and parachurch movements, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Prison Fellowship, World Vision, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Three of the greatest leaders of evangelicalism during the past half century have been theologian Carl F. H. Henry, British writer C. S. Lewis, and Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham.

KEY FIGURES: HENRY, LEWIS AND GRAHAM

Carl Henry was a founding member of the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminar, and also the founding editor of the evangelical journal *Christianity Today*. His 1947 book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, marked a decisive break with stilted patterns of the past in favor of a positive engagement with culture and contemporary social life. Henry's six-volume *magnum opus*, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, defended a high view of biblical inspiration against looser views of scriptural authority.

While Henry wrote as a theologian, C. S. Lewis, himself a renowned scholar of English literature, produced numerous popular books on apologetics and the Christian life. His writings have been translated into numerous popular languages of the world and are treasured today as classics of Christian spirituality.

No one person has represented the wide world of evangelicalism more fully than Billy Graham. Throughout his long and productive ministry, he has consistently stuck to one theme: salvation by grace through personal faith in Jesus Christ. The clarity of his witness and the integrity of his life, stand out in contrast to less worthy exemplars of the evangelical movement. In 1966, Billy Graham and Carl Henry convened the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin. Eight years later, Billy Graham spoke to the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne. His five key principles may be taken as hallmarks of the world evangelical movement:

1. The authority of the Scriptures,
2. The lostness of human beings apart from Jesus Christ,
3. Salvation in Jesus Christ alone,
4. A witness to the Gospel in word and deed,
5. The priority and urgency of evangelism and missions in fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ Himself.

THE CHURCH — THE BODY OF CHRIST

We close this series on the history of Christianity by remembering that the Church is the Body of Christ, extended throughout time as well as space. Between Jesus and the first disciples, there is a long line, a trail of brothers and sisters, a circle of forgiven sinners, a company of fellow pilgrims in the family of faith, forever united through the bond of Christ's love and forgiveness. Although each of us may differ from one another in many respects, all who know Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord belong to His Body and share in His life.

The connection which binds God's people together across the boundaries of nation and denomination, of culture and language and time, is nowhere better seen than in the witness of Irina Ratushinskaya, a Christian poet in Russia, imprisoned by the Communist Regime for her Gospel witness and her defense of human rights. From her gulag in Siberia, Irina wrote the following words:

Believe me, it was often thus: in solitary cells, on winter nights, a sudden sense of joy and warmth and a resounding note of love. And then, unsleeping, I would know a huddle by an icy wall: Someone is thinking of me now, petitioning the Lord for me. My dear ones, thank you all who did not falter, who believed in us! In the most fearful prison hour we probably would not have passed through everything — from end to end, our head held high, unbowed — without your valiant hearts to light our path.