



Session 9 ■ Special Interest Topic 2

Church History: Past and Present

The third trumpet sounded a time of spiritual decline and apostasy in the church. Apostles like Peter had warned that the experiences of Israel would be repeated in the Christian church. (see 2 Peter 2:1-4)

Even while the Bible was still being written, some ideas foreign to the Christian faith as taught by Jesus were threatening to filter into the thinking of many Christians. (see 2 Thessalonians 2)

Scientific advancement was held back, honest toil was degraded as they became engrossed in seeking salvation through some inner mystical experience. Some wandered around Europe barefoot, never washed their body, never cut their hair, and carried a cross on their shoulder.

Belief in salvation by faith in what Christ has done for you as the central issue was lost by most of the Christian world. For more than 1000 years, society lay stagnant and corrupt. We look back today and call this period of history the “Dark Ages.”

Then in the 16th century, a monk named Martin Luther entered a monastery to seek his salvation. If ever anyone tried under this system, he did. He fasted and thrashed his body. He lay on cold marble. He wore out confessors who worked in shifts. He was so frightened that he may have missed out confessing one sin.

He said it seemed God was condemning him. He later declared that during this time in his life he did not love God, he hated Him. God was righteous—and he had to admit he was corrupt.

Eventually he read Romans 3:21-25 and began to ponder it; slowly it sank in. He thought about it for weeks. The Bible talked about a righteousness God had provided for us. Everything God required for our salvation He had provided in Christ.

The re-discovery of the gospel as described in the Bible by this monk changed the course of human history.

There was a Reformation, followed by scientific advancement and our modern age.

Christianity today

The Christian world has changed remarkably across its 2000-year history. For the first few centuries after Christ, Christianity was strong in Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Then, during the first 1000 years, it moved into Asia and North Africa. Eventually, Islamic invasions almost wiped out Christianity in many of these countries.

Christianity grew most vigorously and had the strongest influence in Europe into the 1400s and beyond. European migration added strong growth in North America, and so for the past 500 years, the centre of the Christian world has been Europe and Western civilisation.

But during the latter half of the 20th century, a numerical shift took place changing the central hub of the Christian faith to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University states in his book *The Next Christendom*, regarding the present and future state of the Christian world, with the following observations:

“Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and the European-derived civilisations overseas, above all in North America....Over the past century, however, the centre of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia and Latin America...If we want to visualise a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*.”¹

Jenkins goes on to show the numbers of Christians now found in developing countries. Africa has 360 million [42% of its population]; Latin America 480 million; Asia 313 million. He states that in some of these countries Christianity is mutating as it embraces tribal religions and extreme forms of Pentecostalism. In some nations the form of Christianity developed has been made a state religion. In many nations of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Christianity and Islam are at each other’s throats in on-going conflicts. He concludes that by 2025, 50% of the Christian population will be in Africa and Latin America and another 17% will be in Asia. He sees a split dividing Christians in developed countries from those in the developing world. This split, he says, will be as significant as the split caused by the Protestant Reformation.²

The highly regarded British scholar Alister McGrath makes this observation in his book *The Future of Christianity*:

“Old habits die hard. One of the working assumptions underlying most discussion of the future of Christianity in the twenty-first century is that it represents a western society. By 1990 it was perfectly obvious that this was no longer true. Over the century the centre of gravity had moved south, and now lies in the developing world. To its critics in the third world, western Christianity continues to behave as if the Christian world orbits around it. The reality however is rather different.”³

McGrath then goes on to point a realistic picture of the Christian world we see today:

“We now look at the four movements which are most likely to dictate the shape of a future Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It will be obvious that there is an omission here. Mainline Protestantism seems very unlikely to survive the next century in the west, at least in its present form....At present, the only sections of western mainline denominations which are showing any signs of life or growth are those affected by evangelical or charismatic renewal.”⁴

We have seen with the demise of colonialism in the 20th century, that Christianity grew in many developing countries like an uncontrollable bush fire. Charismatic types of leaders emerged breaking away from established churches, claiming to have had visions directly from God. Church leaders of many persuasions are concerned that these new leaders are relying upon visions and dreams to instruct them regarding Christian teachings and not the Bible. They are claiming to have received the gift of prophecy which enables them to both receive and pass on to others, messages supposedly from God. As a result, multitudes of followers rely upon these leaders for instruction in Christian faith instead of the Bible. Many of the sincere followers of these leaders cannot check the teaching by the Bible as often they do not process one. Even if they were given a Bible to read they cannot read it for many are illiterate.

¹ *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. By Philip Jenkins, Oxford University Press, 2002 pages 1, 2. Jenkins also shows that if the present trends continue “By the 2050, only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. (Page 3). He sees by current trends that by 2050 there will be one billion Pentecostal believers. That is as many as the number of Hindus and twice as many as Buddhists (page 8). He also berates Christian writers for neglecting these facts as they project the future “In North America at least, most visions of the coming century are based firmly on extrapolating familiar domestic conditions. The imagined future looks more like the American present...” Page 5.

² Ibid Pages 5, 6

³ *The Future of Christianity*, Alister McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 2002, page 40.

⁴ McGrath, pages 99, 100

Today there are about 6.5 billion people on our planet, of which 2 billion are Christians. Christianity has become the religion of many of the developing nations around the world, and stands to get even bigger since most of the population growth is in these countries. In some respects Christians in the developing world come closer to the first Christians in that they also belong to the poor and downtrodden who live under oppressive rulers. As such they can relate to many of the Bible stories with greater meaning and understanding as they battle to survive the rigours of life.

However, as Christianity grows in many of these countries, it is mutating by taking on their national cultural characteristics. In most cultures there will be some things compatible with the gospel and others that are relatively neutral. In such areas it is possible for the Christian faith to take on some unique expressions. The challenge, however, is to stay close to Scripture and make sure that the cultural expressions one includes in their faith do not subtly steer away from the clarity of the gospel. When we cross the line between truth and error, we create a mixture that confuses people and masks the power of the gospel.

The Christians who lived in the cities of the seven churches addressed by John in Revelation also struggled as to how they could relate to the culture of their day and yet remain faithful to Christ. It is a struggle that every generation of those who wish to follow Jesus have had to deal with. For them it was how they would relate to the temple services and remain loyal citizens and yet loyal to Christ. John saw some of them as being faithful but he also warned others of their dangers.

When any religion spreads rapidly, some of the characteristics of the local religion and culture tend to be absorbed into their belief. This can be seen from the earliest days of Christianity's interaction with the Roman Empire, of which Christmas and Easter are obvious examples.

Today, among these new forms of Christianity, some see the messages received by their prophet as equal in authority to the Bible. Many of these new religions are taking on some of the characteristics of the old tribal animistic religions. This includes contact with and worship of dead ancestors. Some of the people who are so poor they cannot afford a doctor are finding hope through miracles of healing from their church.

Jesus warned His people to be careful of relying upon miracles as they approach the nearness of His return to this world with these words

“For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See I have told you ahead of time. Matthew 24:24, 25.

Today there is a danger that the simple gospel of trusting in Jesus alone to be accepted by God may be lost sight of once again. The changes taking place in the Christian world at the present time are giving many church leaders of different denominations cause for concern.

To lose the simple story of Jesus and salvation through Him alone as revealed in the Bible can lead to a time of darkness. Jesus is the light of the world and absence of Him and His teachings as revealed in the Bible can lead to great darkness.

We need to be careful. While looking at what happens to others, the challenge for all of us is to look carefully at the culture in which we live and see how we relate to the various aspects both positively and negatively. We need to ask ourselves the question “Are there aspects of our culture which, if we don't handle correctly, can cause us to lose the light of the gospel?”