

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 1: The Early Church

### THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

#### *Church growth in the New Testament period*

Christ commanded his disciples to take the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28v19-20; Acts 1v8). The message of the gospel, proclaimed in a pluralistic context, was uncompromising: 'Jesus is Lord.' Paul and other missionaries spread the gospel through the Eastern Mediterranean. There was probably a church in Rome by AD 50, before Paul visited. Paul possibly reached Spain (Romans 15v28). The gospel spread quickly because there were Jewish communities living in most of the major cities. The early missionaries preached first to Jews and Greek God-fearers (e.g. Cornelius - Acts 10v2) and then to pagans (e.g. Paul in Athens Acts 17v16-34). After the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in AD 70 the dominance of the Jerusalem church came to an end and the church became a predominantly gentile movement.

#### *Church growth after the New Testament period*

After churches were established in the major cities Christianity tended to spread by personal evangelism. There was little effort to preach the gospel beyond the boundaries of the Empire. The first Christians were, with some exceptions, largely from the lower classes. Women in the higher classes were the main means by which Christianity penetrated higher social groups.

#### *Why did Christianity grow?*

- corruption and depravity of paganism
- radical egalitarianism made it attractive to the oppressed (e.g. slaves, poor, women)
- obvious love of Christians for each other - 'See how these Christians love one another' (*Tertullian*)
- willingness of Christians to die rather than deny Jesus

## THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

### *Persecution by the Jews*

The majority of the persecution of the church recorded in the New Testament was inflicted by the Jews, who either persecuted the Christians directly or stirred up the Roman authorities to persecute them (e.g. Acts 17v5, 13; 18v12-17; 2 Corinthians 11v24). It seems that trouble in Rome between the Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity caused Claudius to expel the Jews from Rome:

'Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the City.' (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*)

### *Persecution by the Roman Empire*

Christians were persecuted because they refused to worship Caesar or participate in the worship of the pagan gods (cf. 1 Corinthians 10v14-30). Christianity was initially treated as a sect of Judaism, which enjoyed protected status in the Empire. Christians sought to ensure that they were not perceived as seditious rebels (e.g. Romans 13v1-7; cf. Mark 12v13-17). As persecution increased Christians endured economic hardship because the local trade guilds operated 'closed shops' centred around the pagan Temples and membership required worship of the local gods.

In 64 AD Nero (55-68) blamed Christians for the fire of Rome.

'To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats - and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called)...First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned - not so much for their incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies.' (Tacitus)

The Church enjoyed peace under Vespasian & Titus but there was renewed persecution under Domitian (81-96). *Revelation* may date from this period. The policy of Trajan (98-117), which he communicated to Pliny in Bithynia, was 'don't ask, don't tell.' Christians were not to be sought out, but when accused they should be punished if they refused to recant. Major Christian leaders executed included Ignatius (107 AD) and Polycarp (155 AD). Christians were noted for their obstinacy and refusal to recant:

'But when the Pro-Consul pressed him and said "Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ," Polycarp said: "For eight and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"'

Persecution revived under Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and there was a final

severe period of persecution under Diocletian (284-305). On April 30th 311 Galerius issued an edict granting Christians tolerance:

‘After the promulgation of our edict ordering all to return to the ancient customs, many obeyed for fear of danger, and we were forced to punish others. But there are still many who persist on their opinions, and we are aware that they neither worship nor serve the gods, nor even their own god. Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order.’

He required them to ‘pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace.’ Under Constantine (306-337) Christianity became the state religion.

## **THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

The early Christians were a despised minority with no political power. Pliny described the practices of the early Christians:

‘They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for criminal purposes, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.’ (Pliny, *Letters* 106-114 AD)

Christians were suspected of cannibalism because they ate the body and blood of Jesus, and of holding orgies because of their ‘love [agape] feasts.’

### *Features of the early Church*

- no buildings - they met in houses
- no national structure/denominations - churches were organised locally
- democratic - elders and bishops elected by the people
- practical care - e.g. by 251 AD the church in Rome was supporting 1500 Christian widows and other needy people

## DOCTRINAL DISPUTES AND HERESIES

### *Gnosticism (1st Century)*

Gnosticism was a movement in the 1<sup>st</sup> century which had strong roots in Platonism. Gnostics believed that matter was evil and that the spirit was imprisoned in the body. Salvation was conceived in terms of the liberation of the spirit from the body by secret spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*). Gnosticism led to the idea that Jesus did not have a physical human body but only appeared to be a man (Docetism). Gnostics tended to become either extreme ascetics (denying bodily pleasures) or extreme libertines (anything is permissible).

### *Marcionism (144 AD)*

Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament (Jehovah) was not the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Whilst Jehovah made the material world, the Father intended a spiritual world. Marcion compiled a Canon of Scripture excluding the OT. The Church countered Marcionism by the Apostle's Creed (approx. 150 AD) and formulating the Canon of Scripture:

'I believe in God, the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'

### *Montanism (circa. 155 AD)*

Montanus claimed that he was a prophet who had received a fresh outpouring of the Spirit marking the beginning of a new age, and indicating that Jesus would shortly return to establish the millennial kingdom. Montanism was accompanied by increased moral rigour, which made it attractive to some Christians. Montanism was opposed by the majority of the church because it suggested that the new age/last days had not begun with Jesus.

'The orthodox reply, as formulated by Hippolytus of Rome, was unerringly directed against Montanism's weakest point, namely its divisiveness.; the quest for miraculous gifts is well (he thought), but the supreme miracle is conversion and therefore every believer alike has the gifts of the Spirit; the supernatural is discerned in the normal ministry of the word and sacrament, not in irrational ecstasies which lead to pride and censoriousness.' [Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*]

### *Donatism (circa. 313 AD)*

Donatists rejected the legitimacy of the ministry of those consecrated by Bishops who had yielded to persecution, e.g. by handing copies of the

Scriptures to the authorities. Donatus was a rival Bishop of Carthage who rejected the legitimacy of Caecilian because he had been consecrated by a compromised bishop. The dispute was influenced by social factors. Donatists tended to be of a lower social class. Their opponents came from the 'establishment' of the newly Christian Empire. The schism continued until Islam conquered North Africa, when it became irrelevant.

#### *Arianism (circa. 325 AD)*

Arius taught that Jesus was a created being. His slogan was 'there was when he was not.' He was opposed by Alexander Bishop of Alexandria. A church council at Nicea in 325 AD rejected Arianism. The Nicene Creed employed the language of Greek philosophy to declare Jesus fully divine:

'...true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father...But those who say that there was when he was not, and that before being begotten he was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the catholic church anathematizes.'

#### *Nestorianism (circa. 428 AD)*

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 AD, taught that Jesus had two natures and two persons, one divine and one human. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD declared that Jesus had two natures in one person:

'This is one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, manifested in two natures without any confusion, change division or separation. The union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary the properties of each are kept, and both are joined in one person and *hypostatis*. They are not divided into two persons, but belong to the one Only-begotten Son, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.'

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## Episode 2: The Medieval Church

### THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

#### *Constantine's conversion*

Constantine was proclaimed emperor in York in AD 305, and over the next 20 years conquered the entire Roman Empire. In AD 312, on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge outside Rome, he had a dream in which he saw a Christian symbol, “chi-rho” in the sky. After success in the battle, he professed Christian faith, and then proclaimed the Christianity was to be the official religion of the Empire.

#### *Christianity – the state religion*

Christianity now quickly came to occupy a privileged position in the Roman Empire. Worship had previously been secret and often dangerous, but now became open, and many of the traits of emperor worship began to appear in church services: incense, ministerial robes, processions and choirs. Increasingly grandiose church buildings reflected the Old Testament temple pattern, with a sanctuary and an altar. The early church's eager anticipation of the new heaven and new earth in contrast to the hardships of this life was rapidly eroded, and the ideals of worldly success permeated the church.

#### *Asceticism and Monasticism*

Some Christians were dismayed by this corruption of the church. Different sects split off, claiming they were the real church. But the principal reaction against state religion was monasticism. Individual believers went off to live alone in isolation in the desert, renouncing all comforts and company, to concentrate on ascetic living and worship. Some, such as the “pillar saints” went to bizarre lengths in self-denial.

Soon larger communities developed in monasteries. The first large monastic order was the Benedictines, founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Italy by Benedict. As time went by many monasteries relaxed the severity of their lifestyle, and many monasteries became wealth and influential, although the Franciscans returned to voluntary poverty. The Dominican order focussed especially on study and doctrine.

## *Augustine*

Augustine was born in North Africa in AD 354. He went to study philosophy in Carthage, and lived a dissolute, immoral life. He studied Christianity and accepted it intellectually, but didn't want to change his lifestyle. His prayer at that time was:

“Give me chastity and continence – but not too soon!”

One day in a garden he heard a little girl singing a ditty: “Take and read.” He picked up Paul's letter to the Romans and read part of Ch.13. He was convicted and converted and went on to become a great Christian theologian. For many years he was the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

Augustine vigorously opposed the heresy of “Pelagianism.” Pelagius was an English monk who claimed that there is no such thing as original sin, and that men and women have complete freedom to sin or not to sin. Augustine insisted that the bible tells us we are slaves to sin, and that conversion is God's initiative, not ours.

Augustine wrote a famous book called, “The City of God,” in which he described the “earthly city” (pagan society following its own desires) and the “City of God” (true Christians living amongst the pagans). These correspond to the wheat and the weeds in Jesus' parable, and will be separated at the final judgment.

## **THE CHURCH IN TURMOIL**

### *The fall of the Roman Empire*

During the early years of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the western half of the empire was invaded by barbarians from the east and north, and Western Europe fragmented into numerous different states. The Eastern Empire survived intact for another 1,000 years, based on its capital, Constantinople. The Eastern Orthodox Church was largely under the control of the state, whilst in the West, the Roman Catholic Church and, in particular, the popes, came to hold the real power.

### *The spread of Christianity*

Just as the persecution of the early church led to the spread of the Gospel in the Near East, so the collapse of the Roman Empire led to the

spread of Christianity in Europe. The Gospel reached much of Western Europe by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and in the East, Orthodox Christianity spread through the Balkans, to the Slavs and Czechs, to Egypt and to Russia. “Cyrillic” script, the lettering still used in Russia and SE Europe, was devised specifically to take the bible to the Slavs. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century Queen Olga of Russia was converted and sent for missionaries from Germany, and orthodox Christianity became firmly established there.

### *The East-West Schism*

On Christmas Day AD 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charles, the king of the Franks, as Holy Roman Emperor, and he became known as Charlemagne. The power of the Roman Catholic Church continued to grow. It looked to secular rulers in the west for support and became increasingly distanced from Eastern Orthodoxy. East and West differed over the relationship between state and church, and over clerical celibacy. But it was a trivial argument about the addition of a single word, “filioque,” to the Nicene Creed by the West that led to the final bust-up. On 16<sup>th</sup> June 1054, Pope Leo IX’s ambassador to the East strode into St Sophia’s Cathedral in Constantinople at the start of the mass, and slammed down on the high altar a sentence of excommunication against the Eastern Orthodox patriarch. The split between East and West has remained to this day.

## **THE CHURCH UNDER ATTACK**

### *Islam*

In AD 610 in Mecca, Mohammed claimed to have received a divine revelation from the angel Gabriel, and pronounced himself the last of God’s prophets (successor to the Hebrew prophets and Jesus). His message was written down in the Qur’an, and demanded submission from men and women in every area of life. Mohammed was forced to flee to Medina where the first Muslim community was established, but later returned in triumph to Mecca, and Islam spread very rapidly throughout the Arab world, and also into Spain and briefly southern France. Palestine and Jerusalem itself eventually fell to the Muslim armies.

### *Crusades*

For more than 100 years, starting early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe fought a series of misguided crusades to recapture the “Holy Land” for the church. Much blood was shed in this wrong-headed attempt to

promote God's kingdom by physical force instead of the preaching of the Gospel.

## **THE CHURCH AND PHILOSOPHY**

### *Scholasticism*

During 9<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in the monasteries and church schools, there was increasing interest in analysing and systematising Christian thought in the categories of classic philosophy. A series of brilliant scholars, often known as the “schoolmen,” taught and wrote extensively. Much of the work the scholastics produced was arid and only of academic value.

Anselm in the 12<sup>th</sup> century produced a proof for the existence of God:

“So true is it that there exists something than which a greater is inconceivable, that its non-existence is inconceivable: and this thing you are, O Lord our God!”

The most famous of the scholastics was Thomas Aquinas, who wrote commentaries on most books of the bible, and tried in two giant tomes to present Christian thought firstly as divine revelation, and secondly in terms of human reason. Sadly, these complex works tend to obscure, rather than illuminate, biblical truth.

## **THE CHURCH CORRUPTED**

### *The power of the Roman Catholic Church*

Leo the Great in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was the first pope to claim direct succession from the apostle Peter. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory I introduced many of the traditional doctrines of Roman Catholicism, including the repeated sacrifice of Christ whenever the mass is celebrated, the necessity of CONFESSION of sins and ABSOLUTION by the priest, and PENANCE as punishment for sins – in the form of prayers, fasting, alms, pilgrimage or physical pain.

It was therefore believed that human works must be added to Christ's death to pay for our sins. Pope Gregory also introduced the doctrine of PURGATORY, a place where it was claimed the punishment of believers who hadn't done adequate penance on earth could be completed before

they were admitted to heaven. In 1215 the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council adopted the doctrine of TRANS-SUBSTANTIATION, which meant that, during the celebration of the mass, the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Christ – reaffirming the sacrifice of Christ again and again at every mass. So there was no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church – if you were excommunicated, you were damned. In 1245 a papal bull was issued:

“It is absolutely necessary for salvation that all human creatures be under the Roman pontiff.”

Numerous abuses of power and influence flourished in the Roman Catholic Church:

- SIMONY – the offer of money in return for a cushy ecclesiastical position
- ABSENTEEISM – church leaders neglected their charges, often because they held a whole series of lucrative positions in different places
- NEPOTISM – the appointing of relatives to important positions in the church
- INDULGENCES – payment of money to the church in return for the promise that the pains of purgatory would be shortened, either for oneself, or for a loved one who had already died

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 3: The Reformation

### THE BACKGROUND TO THE REFORMATION

**The Renaissance** - New ideas and thinking which challenged the assumptions of the old order. Greek text of the New Testament rediscovered.

**Rise of the bourgeoisie** - New merchant class no longer wanted to remain subservient to the old order. Growth of nationalism and desire to escape the power of the Pope/Holy Roman Emperor.

**Early Reformers John Wycliffe** (c. 1329-1384) argued that true authority was vested in the Bible not the Pope and denied transubstantiation. **John Huss** argued that the Pope was subject to the authority of the Bible and was burnt as a heretic on July 6th 1415. Savonarola sought reform of abuses in Florence and was burnt in 1498.

### THE REFORMATION IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE

#### *Luther (1483-1546)*

Martin Luther was a monk who taught theology at the University of Wittenberg. In 1515, while preparing lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans, he suddenly grasped that God gives his righteousness to those who live by faith. This brought him the spiritual comfort he was seeking:

'I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase "the justice of God" no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love.'

Luther did not set out to start a new church. On October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517 he protested against the sale of indulgences by nailing his *95 Thesis* to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. He was protected by the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. He burnt the Pope's Bull threatening excommunication. In 1521 he refused to recant before Charles V at the Diet of Worms:

'Unless I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason, then I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract . To go against the conscience is neither safe nor right . God help me. Amen.'

The main reforms he introduced were:

- **Scripture final authority in all matters (i.e not church tradition or Pope)**
- **Justification by faith and not by works - Distinction between “law” and “gospel”**
- **Translating the Bible into German & church services in vernacular**
- **Abolition of the Mass & only two sacraments (Baptism & Communion)**
- **People able to partake of communion in both kinds (i.e. both bread and wine)**
- **Priesthood of all believers**
- **Abolition of priestly celibacy**
- **Jesus Christ the only mediator between man and God (i.e. no role for priests or saints to intercede on behalf of Christians)**
- **No Purgatory and no prayers for the dead**
- **Rejection of monasticism and sanctification of ordinary life**
- **Distinction between Church and state (cf. following Augustine)**

Several German Principalities became Protestant. In 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg the Protestant Princes refused to recant. Under the Peace of Nuremberg of 1532 Protestants were allowed to remain in their faith but could not seek to extend it to other territories. Lutheranism was strong in Germany, Scandinavia and Iceland.

Despite his great achievements, Luther also had failings:

- **Devalued the Epistle of James as a ‘right strawy Epistle’**
- **Doctrine of ‘consubstantiation’ - bread and wine are literally the body and blood of Christ**
- **Permitted Phillip of Hesse to take a second wife in secret**
- **Anti-Semitic attitudes**

*Calvin (1509-1559)*

Calvin was born in France and published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536. In the same year he helped to reform the church in Geneva, was banned from the city, and returned in 1541. Calvin’s distinctive contributions to the Reformation were:

- **Writing a systematic theology and commentaries on most of the Books of the Bible**
- **Emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation by election/predestination**
- **Presence of Christ in Communion is only spiritual (‘real presence’)**
- **Developing a fuller doctrine of sanctification to complement Luther’s doctrine of justification**
- **Presbyterian form of church leadership**
- **State to enforce conformity with teaching of the church**

Those who followed Calvin’s teaching were termed ‘reformed.’ Reformed Christianity was strong in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Scotland and England (in a watered down form).

Calvin also had flaws, both as a man and as a theologian:

- **Expecting the state to serve the interests of the church**
- **Instigated the burning of Servetus in 1553**
- **Undue place for the Law in the Christian community**

### *The Anabaptists*

The Anabaptists were the radicals of the Reformation. They insisted on a distinction between the church and the world, and rejected infant baptism on the basis that becoming a Christian requires an act of personal faith. They taught that the Sermon on the Mount must be practised literally. Some considered pacifism essential. Thomas Muntzer claimed that revelations of the Spirit were more important than the Bible and led a 'Peasants Revolt' in Germany in 1524. Luther forced him out of Saxony and called on the Princes to suppress the rebellion. More than 100,000 peasants were killed. Anabaptists were severely persecuted by Catholics and Protestants. One extreme group of Anabaptists conducted an armed revolution and said that the New Jerusalem would be established at Munster. The city was besieged and captured and the leaders executed.

## **THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND**

### *England*

Henry VIII (1509-1547) opposed Lutheranism, writing an apologetic work which earned him the title *Defender of the Faith* from the Pope. Henry broke with Rome because the Church would not grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. In 1534 Parliament declared Henry 'supreme head of the Church of England'. The monasteries were dissolved and their land sold to raise money for the Crown. Henry created a church which was Catholic in theology but independent of the Pope. The Act of Six Articles of 1539 decreed drastic penalties for the denial of transubstantiation, private masses, private confession, and clerical celibacy. The Church of England only began to be reformed during the reign of Edward VI (1547-53). The Act of Articles was repealed. Cranmer's English prayer book was issued in 1549, and a more 'reformed' version was adopted in 1552. When Edward died Mary (1553-8) sought to re-establish Catholicism. Some 300 people were burned for heresy, including Cranmer and other leading bishops. This encouraged popular support for Protestantism. Elizabeth I (1558-1603) sought to unite the country under a moderate form of Protestantism.

An amended version of the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* was brought into use in 1559. The *Thirty-nine Articles* were adopted in 1562.

### *Scotland*

The reformation in Scotland was more radical than its counterpart in England. It was led by the Scottish nobility against the French Catholic Regent, Mary of Guise, and Queen Mary Stuart. The leading figure was John Knox, who organised the Reformed Church of Scotland. Mary was forced to abdicate in favour of her infant son James VI and fled to England. James Stuart, Earl of Moray, a Protestant, became Regent.

## **THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE REFORMATION**

The Reformation forced the Roman Catholic church to address its own abuses. However it defended traditional doctrines against the Protestants. Pope Paul III convoked the Council of Trent, which completed its work in 1563. The decrees of the Council of Trent remained the definitive statement of Catholic belief and practice until Vatican II in the 1960's.

Decrees of Council of Trent reforming the practices of the Catholic Church:

- **Absenteeism & Pluralism condemned**
- **Obligations of the clergy defined**
- **Use of relics and indulgences regulated**
- **Study of Thomas Aquinas promoted**

Decrees of Council of Trent reasserting traditional doctrines:

- **Vulgate (Latin translation of Bible) authoritative in matters of doctrine**
- **Tradition has equal authority to Scripture**
- **Seven sacraments**
- **The Mass is a true propitiatory sacrifice of Christ than can be offered for the dead**
- **Communion in both kinds (i.e. bread & wine) not necessary**
- **Justification is based on good works done through collaboration between grace and the believer**

## **THE CENTRAL ISSUES OF THE REFORMATION**

### *Scripture alone*

The central issue in the Reformation was that of *authority*. The Reformers claimed that ultimate authority was to be found only in Scripture, and that the Pope and the Church were subject to the authority of the word of God.

The Catholics claimed that the Pope and the Church - through tradition - enjoyed equal authority with Scripture, so that they could add new doctrines or declare how the Scriptures should be interpreted.

### *Christ alone*

The Reformers claimed that only Christ was redeemer and mediator between God and man. The Catholic church claimed that the Church enjoyed a mediatorial role exercised by priests administering the sacraments.

### *Grace alone*

The Reformers claimed that salvation was only possible through the free gift of God. No human contribution could be made to salvation. The Catholics claimed that Christians contributed to salvation by doing good works.

### *Faith alone*

The Reformers claimed that salvation was received solely by trusting the gracious promise of God. The Catholics believed that salvation could only be received through the Church by undertaking the works which the church required.

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 4: The Early Modern Church

### WAR AND INTOLERANCE

#### *Germany*

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) extended tolerance to Lutherans but not Calvinists. In 1608 the Protestants formed the Evangelical Union for protection. The Catholics responded by forming the Catholic League. In Bohemia King Ferdinand persecuted the Protestants. In 1618 two of the Kings advisors were thrown from a window in Prague, marking the beginning of the Thirty Years War. Under the terms of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) Calvinists enjoyed equal rights with Lutherans and Catholics.

#### *France*

In 1598 Henry IV granted the Huguenots tolerance under the Edict of Nantes. Louis XIV sought to stamp out Protestantism and revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1684. The Huguenots fled abroad.

#### *England*

The Puritans pressed for further reform of the church. Disputes during the reign of Elizabeth concerned the wearing of vestments by clergy and the holding of 'prophesyings' - informal meetings for the study of the scriptures and preaching. Elizabeth sought to suppress such meetings. During the reign of James I the power of the Puritans grew. They wanted:

- sober life guided by commandments of Scripture
- strict observance of the Sabbath
- simple rather than elaborate worship
- critical of drunkenness & against the theatre - because involved immorality and duplicity (i.e. acting)
- opposed to rule of Bishops (episcopacy) in favour of Presbyterianism or Independency (Congregationalism)

During the reign of Charles I, Willam Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, persecuted the Puritans. Conflicts between King and Parliament led to Civil War. Laud was executed in 1644. The King was defeated and executed on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1649. Cromwell sought to reform church and state. He was tolerant of different strands of Protestantism (Presbyterian,

Baptist, Independent) and passed legislation to enforce Sabbath observance. The monarchy was restored in 1660 after his death.

Charles II reacted against the Puritans. The Episcopacy was restored. In 1662 the Act of Uniformity required all clergy to give 'their unfeigned consent and assent' to everything in the Book of Common Prayer. 2,000 left their living and became Non-conformists/Dissenters. The Conventicle Act (1664) forbade religious meetings in which the Prayer Book was not used, and the Five Mile Act (1665) forbade ejected clergymen coming within five miles of a city or corporate town. Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford jail 12 years for preaching the gospel. In Scotland the Covenantors refused to accept episcopacy and the interference of the Crown in the church, which led to severe persecutions.

Charles was succeeded by James II who wished to restore Catholicism. The English rebelled and invited William of Orange and his wife Mary (James's daughter) to take the throne. Religious tolerance was granted in 1689 to anyone who would subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and swear loyalty to the sovereign. Those who would not swear were granted tolerance provided that they did not conspire against the sovereign.

### *America*

Virginia was initially founded on puritan principles, with laws requiring attendance at worship twice a day, strict observance of the Sabbath, and providing stern punishment for profanity and immodest dress. Puritan influence waned after James I placed the colony under his direct rule in 1624. The colonies of New England were more thoroughly Puritan. Rhode Island was more tolerant, and a centre for Baptists who had been forced out of the other colonies. Pennsylvania was founded on principles of religious tolerance.

## **DOCTRINE AND DISAGREEMENT**

Once the future of Protestantism was secure there internal divisions and disagreements emerged as doctrine was further clarified.

### *Lutheranism*

Luther was succeeded by Phillip Melancthon, who had a higher view of human reason. He came to speak of a collaboration between the Spirit,

the Word and the human will. He was opposed by strict Lutherans, who emphasised the corruption of human nature by sin, and who also rejected Calvin's view of the presence of Christ in Communion. The Formula of Concord (1577) adopted an intermediate position on most issues, but adopted the strict Lutheran view of communion. Subsequent Lutheran theologians sought to produce a systematic theology reconciling the views of Luther and Melancthon. This gave rise to Protestant Scholasticism, which was academic rather than pastoral in focus, and based in the Universities.

### *Calvinism and Arminianism*

In Holland Jacob Arminius argued that predestination was based on God's foreknowledge of those who would have faith in Jesus. This led to a division amongst Dutch Calvinists. The followers of Arminius published the Remonstrance in 1610. They were opposed by the followers of Francis Gomarus, who argued for strict predestination. The Dutch Parliament convened the Synod of Dort in 1619. The Synod rejected the Remonstrance and adopted what have become known as the 'five-points of Calvinism':

- Total Depravity - human nature is corrupted by the fall
- Unconditional Election - predestination based on God's sovereign choice and not foreknowledge
- Limited Atonement - Christ died for the elect and not all of humanity
- Irresistible Grace - The elect will be brought to belief and cannot reject god
- Perseverance of the Saints - Elect will not fall from grace

In England the Westminster Assembly produced the most comprehensive statement of Calvinist Doctrine in the Westminster Confession of 1648. It was Presbyterian and paedo-baptist. The substance of the Confession was adopted by the Independents (Congregationalists) in the Savoy Declaration (1658) and by the Baptists in the Baptist Confession (1689).

### *Pietism*

This was a German movement which reacted against the growing coldness of the establish Protestant church in Germany. It stressed the importance of personal faith and obedience to the word of god rather than doctrine.

## **RATIONALISM AND SECULARISM**

During the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the philosophical foundations were laid for a turn of western culture away from religion to reason, science and secularism.

### *Reason*

*René Decartes* (1596-1650), a religious philosopher, unwittingly brought about a fundamental change of attitude amongst western intellectuals. He suggested that true knowledge could be derived by reason from the starting point that man thinks (or doubts) - 'I think, therefore I am'. This made man, rather than God, the source of knowledge and truth.

### *Empiricism*

*John Locke* argued that all knowledge is obtained by experience through the senses. Empiricism relied on the observance of cause and effect. In contrast to knowledge gained in this way, knowledge gained by faith in revelation can never be certain but only highly probable.

### *Deism*

Deism was a rational version of Christianity. God was a remote creator who had set the world going in accordance with the laws of nature. It discounted the significance of Jesus.

## **REVIVAL AND REVOLUTION**

### *The Great Awakening in America*

Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinist minister in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1734 people began to respond to his sermons which called for a personal experience of conversion. The movement swept the area and lasted for about three years. The revival met with opposition on the grounds that it was marked by emotional outpourings.

### *Revival in England and Wales*

In 1729 a group of students at Oxford formed a Society to promote personal piety. They studied the Bible and diligently pursued good works, but they had not grasped the grace of the gospel. They included two men who would become leaders of religious revival: George Whitefield and John Wesley.

Whitefield was converted in 1735 and ordained in 1736. He was a Calvinist. He pioneered open-air preaching to reach ordinary people. He preached to crowds of miners in Bristol, often numbering 10,000 people. He was involved in the Scottish revival at Cambuslang (1742) and was an associate of leading Welsh ministers Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland. He visited America seven times. He died in 1770 at the age of 55.

Wesley visited Georgia as a missionary in 1734, but was not converted until 1738. He went on to become a wandering itinerant preacher for 50 years, preaching on about 40,000 occasions. He remained an Anglican minister. He was Arminian rather than Calvinist. His followers were abusively termed 'Methodists'. Methodist Churches were only formed independently of Anglicanism after Wesley's death in 1791.

### *Revolution in America and France*

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century ended with two revolutions which had profound effects on the church. The American Colonies declared their Independence from Britain in 1776. The American Constitution enshrined a division between church and state. The absolute monarchy of Louis XVI in France was overthrown by the Revolution which began in 1789. The revolution was inspired by rationalist philosophies. The leaders of the revolution sought to abolish religion in favour of a new age of science and reason. They established a 'Cult of Reason' and devised secular ceremonies to take the place of religious festivals. Temples to reason were built and a new list of saints issued, including Jesus, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius and Rousseau. Some 2,500 priests were guillotined. The French Revolution was a precursor of what lay ahead, since the major conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would be between the Church and secularism.

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 5: The Modern Church

### CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

#### *Liberalism*

The liberals originally set out to defend the bible against rationalism, by attempting to make the Christian faith credible in objective scientific terms. But this led to scepticism about everything that couldn't be fully explained, and soon there was widespread doubt about the historical accuracy of the bible and about everything supernatural. Original sin and divine judgment were denied, and Jesus was regarded as simply an exceptionally wise moral teacher. The leading thinkers were found in German Liberalism. Schleiermacher said there was no transcendent, self-disclosing God, and Strauss relegated everything supernatural to the category of "myth."

#### *Fundamentalism*

Fundamentalism began in the USA as a reaction to liberalism, reaffirming traditional confidence in the basic biblical doctrines. The Evangelical Alliance was founded in Britain in 1846 to unite those who opposed liberalism. The fundamentalists vigorously opposed Darwin's theory of evolution. At a debate in 1860 against Bishop "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, TH Huxley said he "*would rather be descended from an ape than from a bishop,*" and the evolutionists won the day. But the arguments go on.

Some of the fundamentalists went too far, and argued that every word in the bible must be taken absolutely literally. They took no account of the different literary genres in the scriptures, and ended up looking extremist and rather ridiculous.

#### *Dispensationalism*

Rejection of the conclusions of biblical scholars opened the door to various ways of interpreting the scriptures. Dispensationalism claimed that God has dealt with men and women in different ways during different eras of biblical history. Scofield divided all of history into seven ages, and published the Scofield Reference Bible with notes explaining the system. Many dispensationalists continue to make a distinction between Israel and

the church, such that they are looking for the re-establishment of the State of Israel as a precondition for Christ's return. This has significant implications for the politics of the Middle East.

### *The Oxford Movement*

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a group of Anglicans in Oxford became concerned about the loss of mystery and tradition brought about by both liberalism and fundamentalism. "The Oxford Movement" put much emphasis on feelings and on symbolism and ritual, and came to have much in common with the Roman Catholic Church. John Henry Newman published a series of tracts setting out these beliefs, and the movement was sometimes known as "Tractarianism."

In 1845, Newman converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1879 he was made a cardinal. The views of modern Anglo-Catholicism are very much those of the Oxford Movement.

### *Neo-orthodoxy*

In 1919, the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, published a commentary on Romans in which he reaffirmed God's sovereignty and self-revelation, and the finiteness of human beings. This was a landmark break with German liberalism, and the start of a movement called "neo-orthodoxy." Barth later produced a huge work called "Church Dogmatics," in which he insisted that the bible is self-authenticating, and can't be subjected to human criticism.

## **THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE**

### *Revivalism*

Reacting against rationalism, Christians became anxious to feel, rather than to think, and an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism developed. In the USA there was nostalgia for the exciting days of the Great Awakening, and people tried to recreate these events by organising meetings which they called "revivals." It's important to grasp the difference between a real "revival," when God sovereignly pours out his Spirit causing conviction of sin and leading to conversion of sinners – and this "revivalism," which is an attempt by men to reproduce what only God can do.

"Revivalism" started on the frontiers in the American West with huge open-air meetings at which the speakers whipped up their hearers' emotions

and appealed for a personal response there and then. The movement spread and one of the early leaders was Charles Finney, who visited Britain more than once. The most famous revivalist was Dwight L Moody, who had a huge influence in Britain during an evangelistic tour in 1873-75. The revivalists were very much Arminian in their theology, emphasising the centrality of human decision in conversion. Many people really were saved, but there were also many spurious professions of faith, and this set the scene for the widespread nominal Christianity of later years.

The Salvation Army was founded by William Booth in London in 1865. They combined revivalism with an emphasis on social action, and majored on uniforms and brass bands. Their motto was: “*Soup, soap and salvation.*” It was also out of revivalism that the Keswick Movement grew. They taught that Christians could be delivered from the power of sin once for all at a “second blessing,” and they proclaimed, “victorious Christian living,” as the goal. They started open-air meetings at Keswick in the Lake District and 1823, and these still continue every summer, although the theological emphasis has changed.

### *The missionary movement*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of much evangelistic activity in overseas missions, with the development of a truly worldwide church.

William Carey was the “father of modern mission.” He founded the Baptist Missionary Society, and worked for many years in India, translating all or parts of the bible into 35 languages.

David Livingstone walked thousands of miles exploring southern Africa, campaigning against slavery and preaching the Gospel.

Hudson Taylor went to China in 1853 and founded the China Inland Mission. He adopted the local language and also Chinese dress and culture. If others had followed his example it would have lessened the problem of cultural imperialism, in which western culture was sometimes imposed as part of the package when the Gospel was preached.

In Edinburgh in 1910, the “World Missionary Conference” was held, with the optimistic motto: “*The Evangelisation of the World in This Generation.*”

Post-millennialism was widespread – people expected a literal 1,000 year Christian era of special blessing before the return of Christ, and that's what they were working towards. All this changed after the First World War.

### *The Social Gospel*

One of the outworkings of liberalism was an increasing focus on the here and now, and on social action. Christians led the way in seeking justice for the disadvantaged. William Wilberforce opposed slavery, Lord Shaftesbury fought for better factory conditions and regulation of child labour. Thomas Barnardo and George Muller started institutions for orphans.

Unfortunately, in many churches, social action came to displace the Gospel entirely, and an emphasis on changing society as a whole detracted from the holiness and purity that should distinguish the church from the world.

## **CHRISTIANS IN SOCIETY**

### *Nominalism*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century church-going became fashionable. The outward observances of Christian ritual were observed, but a living relationship with Jesus was often sadly lacking. This was “nominal” Christianity. Almost all infants were baptised, and were then thought to be Christians. Britain was said to be a “Christian country.” The church was powerful and the clergy well-respected. Becoming a vicar was a good and secure career.

### *World War I*

The horrors of the First World War shattered misplaced optimism about human nature. The ruling classes in Europe collapsed with the disintegration of the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria, Hungary and Prussia, and the authority of the establishment church came down with the ruling classes.

### *Communism*

In Russia the Tsar was overthrown in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and communism was established and spread to Eastern Europe, China and beyond. Karl Marx's book, “Das Kapital,” written in the British Museum at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century advocated forcible overthrow of the class system, and the abolishment of private property. Religion was said to

support the class structure, and Marx described religion as “*the opium of the people.*” Christians were persecuted. Some churches compromised to survive, and were “registered” by the communists; others went underground. There is still conflict between these two groups now.

### *Fascism*

Fascism urges the rejection of individual liberty and concentration of power in the hands of dictatorial cult leaders. In Germany, Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 leading the National Socialist Party – the Nazis. The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Nietzsche, was the prophet of Nazism, proclaiming, “God is dead,” and advocating the development of an Aryan super-race. Mostly the church failed to stand up against Nazism. Where they did, churches were burned and clergy killed. In 1934 a group of Christian leaders from around Germany founded “The Confessing Church.” They included Pastor Martin Niemoller, who spent 8 years in a concentration camp, and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged for his involvement with the German resistance movement. If German Liberalism hadn’t rejected the doctrines of sin and judgment, the church might have been more ready to confront fascism when it came.

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 6: The Contemporary Church

### THE QUEST FOR UNITY

After the trauma of war, church unity was much sought after in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*“I pray for those who will believe in me ...that all of them may be one.”*

Jesus’ prayer was viewed very differently by different groups

#### *The ecumenical movement*

Sought to achieve unity on the basis of worship and experience, sidelining doctrine. The first assembly of the World Council of Churches was in Amsterdam in 1948, and established itself as a liberal organisation. Many denominational mergers have since occurred.

Before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey supported reunion of the Anglican Church with the Roman Catholic Church, and in 1994 *“Evangelicals and Catholics Together”* encouraged united action on social and moral issues, and on the Gospel – but they disagreed about what the Gospel was!

#### *Evangelicalism*

Evangelicals submit to God’s word as the final authority, and believe that all born-again Christians *are* united, even if they’re dispersed amongst the denominations. The Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846 in response to liberalism, but it was the InterVarsity Fellowship (later to become UCCF) that really began to unite evangelicals around a commitment to biblical doctrine. When it began in 1928 IVF was much smaller than the liberal Student Christian Movement, and the treasurer kept the funds for the entire organisation in an Ovaltine tin under her bed! The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) was founded before World War II, and the British Evangelical Council in 1952.

The International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lausanne in 1974 was chaired by John Stott. It insisted that the kingdom of God consists only of those who have been born again, and that the church's mission is evangelism alongside good works.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evangelicals had been defensive in the face of the prevailing liberalism of the day. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century saw a new emphasis on solid biblical studies, and evangelicalism recovered intellectual respectability. Leaders such as Carl Henry at Fuller Seminary in the USA, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel in London led the way in the evangelical recovery, and in our own day, John Stott and Don Carson have carried on an extensive preaching and writing ministry.

## **THE QUEST FOR RELEVANCE**

### *Existential theology*

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the existentialist philosophers described a nihilistic universe in which the only reality is what we ourselves experience. The German theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich followed by denying that the bible can teach objective truth or history, and that we must just "*experience the idea of God.*"

### *Atheism*

Disbelief in the existence of any God at all gained ground during the last century. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, vigorously opposed Christianity and subscribed wholeheartedly to Darwinian evolution. Atheism began to appear in the church! In 1963 Bishop John Robinson published a popular book called "Honest to God," in which he rejected the whole idea of "a god up there." When he retired, the last bishop of Edinburgh, Bishop Holloway, denied any belief in God at all.

## THE QUEST FOR POWER

A number of groups have re-interpreted Christianity in the service of their own particular ends. Most have had valid points to make, but have tried to *use* the bible for political purposes.

### *Black theology*

In pressing for equal rights for black people, the Civil Rights Movement in the southern USA fought racism, led by Martin Luther King Jr., but many black churches became little more than training places for protesters, and the Gospel got squeezed out. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He was assassinated in 1968.

In stark contrast, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa attempted to justify apartheid by claiming that all black peoples were descended from Noah's youngest son Ham, whose descendents were cursed by Noah.

### *Feminist theology*

The long history of patriarchal dominance in the church was challenged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the women's liberation movement grew in western society. The ordination of women "priests" in the Church of England has caused much controversy, and it's certainly true that some women have pressed for an authority in spiritual leadership that isn't biblical. Nevertheless, many of the changes have been long overdue.

### *Liberation theology*

At a conference in 1968 in Medellin, Columbia, Latin American bishops rejected both capitalism and communism and called on Christians to take the side of the poor in their struggle for a better life. Unfortunately, they went on to move the focus of biblical hope from the spiritual to the material, and from the world to come to our own age. And they went as far as advocating violence to achieve their ends.

### *Roman Catholicism*

In response to a feeling that the Catholic Church was losing touch with the people in the post-war years, the Second Vatican Council was opened in 1962 under Pope John XXIII, with the aim of bringing about reform. Over the three sessions of the council the liturgy was changed, and the use of vernacular languages authorised. There was also much emphasis on a Christian "*bias to the poor,*" which gave some support to liberation theology.

But there was *no* change in the core doctrines: Mary was reaffirmed as, “*mother of the church*”, the authority of the pope remained undiluted, justification was still by grace *plus* good works, and Christ was still to be sacrificed afresh at every celebration of the mass. The Vatican II changes were largely window-dressing.

## THE QUEST FOR EXPERIENCE

### *The charismatic movement*

For many years in the mainstream churches the Person and work of the Holy Spirit were sadly neglected. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there had been an emphasis on supernatural gifts among some “holiness” churches, but this died out. Then in 1906, at a meeting in the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, these practices reappeared with great vigour, and the Pentecostal Movement was born. It spread in the USA, mostly among poorer people, and the main Pentecostal denomination there was the Assemblies of God.

In the late 1950’s the charismatic movement spread more widely in the Western World. At first, charismatics tended to remain within their denominations, but later there were divisions and many churches split over the issue.

The charismatic movement revolutionised worship which in many churches had become old-fashioned and unexciting, and it brought a welcome move to every-member ministry. However there were also excesses, with gifts of the Spirit given overdue emphasis at the expense of biblical doctrine. The extremist claims of “*Power Evangelism*” with dramatic healings which couldn’t be substantiated undermined the credibility of the movement, and a damaging “*health, wealth and prosperity Gospel*” is still widely preached in many countries.

## THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

### *Pluralism*

More than at any time since the early church, we live in a society with a wide diversity of different religions. While it is proper that all religions should be tolerated, there is an increasing weight of opinion that all

religions are equally valid – despite the fact that the differing truth claims of the major religions makes them all mutually incompatible.

### *Postmodernism*

Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “*classical*” thought assumed that absolute truth existed and was revealed to men and women by God. Then Descartes laid the basis for “*modernism*” by claiming that truth is worked out by human thought and methods.

Since the 1970’s “*postmodernism*” has rapidly gained ground, declaring that there is no such thing as objective truth, and that all belief is relative and individual. Any overall plot in world history (meta-narrative) is denied. Religion has been relegated from the realm of objective, public fact to the category of subjective, private opinion.

## **WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

The increasing displacement of the church from political influence is allowing the Gospel to make more of a “counter-cultural” impact, and post-modernism isn’t all bad – it’s brought an increasing willingness to consider spiritual things. Challenges include controversies regarding women’s ministry, the response to the homosexual lobby, and the pressures of ecumenism.

The real encouragement is seen in the accelerating growth of the worldwide church, with the focus moving from the Western World to the “Third World.”



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