

# 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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