

The “Lost Years” of Church History

In the year 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine and his rival Licinius met in Milan and proclaimed official toleration of Christians throughout the Empire. As mentioned a couple of weeks back, this ending of persecution against Christians, at least within territory under Roman rule, changed things dramatically for the church. Now, instead of Emperors ordering the mass execution of the followers of the Way, you had Emperors presiding over the councils of the church and helping to frame doctrinal beliefs that would remain for centuries. Fortunately, there were strong Christian thinkers who were in positions of influence, so the Emperors didn't determine the beliefs of Christianity. But they did form a powerful bond between the church and the state, a bond which became a bondage over the centuries that followed.

Today, I want to race through a thousand years of church history, through a period called the “dark ages”, through the medieval period which led into the Renaissance and also into the Reformation of the Church, which gained its major momentum in the early 16th century.

Mongols moved westward and pushed the Huns ahead of them into eastern Europe. The Huns pushed the Germanic peoples into the Roman Empire, the Empire also had to make room for the Visigoths and, by the end of the fourth century, the Roman Empire was beginning to crumble under the weight of Franks, Burgundians, Vandals, Lombards, Goths, Huns and others. Military victories were being won by the invaders and the empire in the west started to disintegrate.

Early in the next century, in 410, Alaric, the Visigoth king, captured Rome and 45 years later the Vandals sacked Rome. In 476 the Visigoth Odoacer deposed the Western Roman emperor Romulus Augustulus and became king of Italy -- the Western Roman Empire had ceased to exist.

If you could point a finger at one person who influenced the church in a positive way for the next 500 years or so, you would not go wrong in thinking of Patrick, although the theologians would more likely point to Augustine.

Patrick was captured by Irish pirates when he was about 16 years of age from his native England. Six years later he escaped and returned to his family, but after becoming a priest, he returned to northern and western Ireland to serve as a missionary. What he accomplished there is a model to the church of how missions can change a culture for the better.

First of all, he travelled far and wide, preaching the gospel and leading people to faith in Christ. He then established monasteries, centers of learning, in which believers could study the Scriptures while living in Christian community. In these monasteries, copies of the Scriptures were hand written, over and over again, along with the classic works of ancient Greek and Roman literature. While the libraries of Rome were being burnt and the records of the great civilizations were disappearing on the continent,

learning of all kinds was being kept alive in Ireland. Out of these monasteries came one of the great missionary movements in church history. Once they had been trained, monks went out and established similar communities, in places like Iona in England and elsewhere. And these communities also became centers of learning, of the study of Scripture and the copying of ancient works, of teaching, both the monks and the community around them. Eventually, after the collapse of civilization on the European continent, these monasteries expanded into Europe and brought with them the same vibrant love for the word of God, the same value of learning and the same desire to evangelize the people around them. It was a high water mark in a period where the church was rapidly becoming a powerful institution which would wield that power in unfortunate ways in the centuries to come.

While Ireland was a success story for the fifth and sixth century movement to Christ, other areas saw suffering and loss. Zoroastrianism was revived in Persia and 250,000 Christians were martyred for their faith in the resulting persecutions. As the Barbarians advanced, many Roman Christians were killed and the number of martyrs in the fifth century reached 575,000. But, by the year 500, 19.9% of the world's population was Christian.

Obviously someone was spreading the news about Jesus. Although it was rare, a few groups attempted cross-cultural mission, learning the languages of the groups they were trying to reach and presenting the gospel in their cultural context. The notable examples of this, Patrick in Ireland, the Copts in Egypt and the Armenians in the Caucasus, produced strong churches that withstood persecution and held firm to the faith for centuries.

But, about the middle of the fifth century, the church of Jesus Christ had been split into three different theological streams. In 451, the Council of Chalcedon condemned two views on the nature of Christ and so Egypt and Ethiopia formed one stream and the Eastern church another, while the Latin Church, what we know as the Roman Catholic church, remained committed to the views argued for at Chalcedon. The Greek Orthodox church also remained within that theological stream.

Also in the fifth century, we start to see a phenomenon that occurred again and again in European history. One people group would conquer another and, within a few years, they would adopt the Christian faith of the conquered people. In 496, Clovis, King of the Franks, became a Christian. The Frankish Empire was later the main bastion against the advance of Islam, protecting the political survival of Christendom. At the close of the century, we saw the first attempt by the Eastern Church to send missionaries into Central Asia -- some of them even reached China.

The sixth century saw major catastrophes that decimated populations around the world. There were 5 million fewer people in the world at the end of the century than at the beginning. First, the eruption of the volcano Krakatoa in Indonesia caused harvests to fail for many decades. Famine, plague and massive migrations of people led to the collapse of empires and major changes in religious affiliation. Starting six years after Krakatoa, the bubonic plague spread throughout Europe and the Middle

East, taking out half the population ... 50%! Imagine that today.

In the Christian world, monasticism was now firmly rooted in Ireland and Britain and the Irish monk Columbanus founded monasteries all over what is now France, Germany and northern Italy. Visigoths in Spain began to convert to Christianity. The number of martyrs in this century dipped dramatically, to 74,000 and the number of Christians grew by 2 million to 21.5% of the world's population. The mission movements of the sixth century came at the fringes -- the Celtic Christians came to Europe from Britain, the Berbers of North Africa carried the Gospel message and the heavily persecuted Eastern Christians pushed further eastward, doing amazing missions work in all the regions between Persia and China ... even into China.

But the great advance of the Christian movement ended in the seventh century -- can you guess why? The prophet of Islam, Mohammed, died in 632 and the armies of Islam soon spread their message, quickly conquering the two most powerful empires of the day, Byzantium and Persia. In 639, the Muslims conquered Egypt, which was followed by mass conversions from Christianity to Islam. In 680 the Muslim world became divided between Sunni and Shi'a over who was to be the successor to their prophet. The Sunnis went with a political, patriarchal caliphate, the Shi'ites a theocracy.

In five short years, Christianity lost three of their five major centres as Alexandria in Egypt, Jerusalem and Antioch were overwhelmed by the Arab Muslims. In addition, the key centres of the missions-minded Eastern church, Adiabene and Edessa were also lost. This was a disaster for Christendom and the total growth of the church during the entire century was the smallest ever, less than a million, and the percentage of world population slipped to just under 20%.

In the eighth century, the percentage of Christians dropped again, down to 18.7%. There was a great slaughter of Berber Christians in Tangiers by Arab conquerors, persecution of the church in Changan, China and the monastery at Lindesfarne, off the east coast of England, was burned by Danish raiders. 13 years later, 80 monks were massacred there and in 867 the abbey was destroyed. This wasn't the first encounter between the Christian world and the Vikings, but it was a serious hurt to the advance of the gospel.

Here's a chart of the persecutors and the martyrs of the eighth century. The Celtic church and the Eastern church continued to send missionaries, to build bridges by learning local languages and cultures, then educating the converts so that they could be missionaries to their own people, their own cultural group. In contrast, the model developed by Augustine and the Catholic church, furthered by Charlemagne and applied among the Germanic people, was to use power politics, money and the threat of death to enforce conversion. Charlemagne conquered Saxony in 774 and compelled all Saxons to be baptized. In 780 he slaughtered 4500 who refused. As a result, much of Germany was "Christianized", but not converted to Christ.

The ninth century began with Charlemagne being crowned the “Holy Roman Emperor” by the pope.

What could go wrong with the church having the right to confer kingship and continue to rule Europe in partnership with political leaders? Meanwhile, almost every other part of the church was experiencing persecution. The Iona monastery was sacked by Vikings, whose raids and destruction did much to end the Celtic missions which had proved so fruitful. There were Muslim attacks on the Coptic churches of Egypt -- by 837 most churches in Egypt had been destroyed and many believers were martyred. The year 835 saw China's third imperial persecution of both Buddhists and Eastern Christians. In 845, 40,000 hermitages and temples and 4,600 monasteries were destroyed or closed in China. By the year 900, after 329,000 martyrs paid for their faith with their lives, the percentage of Christians in the world had dropped again, now to 17.1%. This time, the persecution came from the Muslims, from the Chinese, from the Byzantines, the Vikings and others.

By the year 1000, the percentage of Christians among the population of planet earth had dropped a tiny bit more, but the number of Christians during the tenth century had grown by nearly 4 million. Orthodox missionaries Cyril and Methodius had reached the Czech population with the gospel. One of their converts was Borivoj I of Bohemia, the grandfather of Duke Wenceslas who carried the gospel further among his people before he was martyred in about 935. 900 years later he was given the honorary title King Wenceslas and the popular Christmas carol was written about him. In this century, the gospel reached Burma in the east, Greenland in the north and Ukraine and Russia. Poland became Christian, Denmark's king was converted, Olav became the first Christian king of Norway and Olov the first Christian king of Sweden. Vladimir, the ruler of Kyiv-Rus, ordered a mass baptism of all Ukrainians and Russians. The Kerait Mongolians embraced Christianity and spread its influence among Turkic and Mongolian tribes. In the year 1000, the Icelandic parliament decided to adopt Christianity.

But even where things were going “right”, they weren't really going right. The church in much of Europe was growing through power and manipulation. Once it became allied to the state, the church became a political organization that was more concerned with maintaining control over a uniform religious population than with extending the cause of Christ in the world. The power of the church separated it from the message of Jesus. Where the church insisted on Latin in the services and refused to be sensitive to the cultures where it was advancing, it was fairly easy for Islam and other conquering peoples to remove Christianity from the culture. Whereas, where the Celts and the Eastern church had established Christian outposts, including the language and culture of the people in their witness, the Christians there were able to withstand wave after wave of brutal persecution and survive.

This is illustrated perfectly in the 11th century. Two large people groups, the Berbers of North Africa and the Turks, groups which had once been largely Christian, became strongly Muslim and great enemies of Christianity. At the same time, the Ethiopians

and the Armenians withstood centuries of attacks from Islam and remained faithful. Why? The Berbers used Latin and the Turks used Syriac for their services, while the Ethiopians and Armenians had Scriptures and services in their own language. Christian faith was their faith, in their language, a deeply embedded part of their culture. The same could not be said for either the Berbers or the Turks. It's interesting to note that in 1954 a Kabyle Berber New Testament was produced and the church in Algeria has grown, despite persecution, to over 50,000 Kabyle believers.

In the 11th century, the number of Christians in the world grew by over 7 million, but the percentage didn't grow. And at the end of the 11th century began a 200-year odyssey known as the "Crusades". The Crusaders have rightly been criticized for their cruelty and hatred towards Muslims, but what is not as often expressed are some of the reasons for the Pope calling for Crusades in the first place.

As conquerors, the Muslim rulers made life extremely difficult for any Christians who were subject to them. For example, in Egypt, a small minority of Muslim rulers didn't allow the Christians to ride on animals, forced them to wear different clothes than Muslims, imposed a tax more than 3 times higher than the taxes Muslims paid and restricted the occupations that Christians could work at. When they were wronged, the legal system did little to help them out. Later, as the Muslim population grew, largely because people converted to avoid these penalties, those who remained Christian suffered terrible persecution. Many were martyred.

What started the crusades was not power hungry popes with imperialist ambitions. They started with a request for aid from the eastern emperor in Constantinople, now called Istanbul. The Seljuk Turks had conquered Asia Minor, now Turkey, which had been Christian since the time of the Apostle Paul. The Byzantine Empire was hanging on as its people were being slaughtered by the Moslem Turks and he wrote to Pope Urban II, telling him of their desperate situation and asking if the church in the west could help. The Pope made the appeal public, and a very large number of people, most of them wealthy men, landowners in Europe, risked impoverishing themselves for what was presented to them as a righteous cause. They knew they were sinful men and the Pope promised forgiveness of sins to all who would join this mission, so many responded and joined the cause. The first goal of the Crusades was to rescue the Christians of the East.

How does a man love according to divine precept his neighbor as himself when, knowing that his Christian brothers in faith and in name are held by the perfidious Muslims in strict confinement and weighed down by the yoke of heaviest servitude, he does not devote himself to the task of freeing them? ... Is it by chance that you do not know that many thousands of Christians are bound in slavery and imprisoned by Muslims, tortured with innumerable torments?

(Urban's successor, Pope Innocent III)

This pope wrote to the Knights Templar, *"You carry out in deeds the words of the Gospel, 'Greater love than this has no man, that he lay down his life for his friends.'"*

The second goal of the Crusades was the liberation of Jerusalem and other places made holy by the life of Christ. This was not colonialism, but an act of restoration and an open declaration of an individual's love for God. Muslims were never forced to convert to Christianity, nor did they lose their property or their livelihood except in rare cases.

Many mistakes were made, and brutal excesses were committed. Before the main force left for the first crusade, and again before the launch of the Second, independent groups decided to attack and kill Jews in Europe and had to be stopped by the church. The fourth Crusade ended up as an attack on Christians of the Eastern persuasion in Constantinople. Worst of all, none of this looked anything like what Christ had commanded His disciples and the mission He had given His followers throughout the world. It slowed down the advance of Islam for awhile, but Islam, not Christianity, was the dominant force in the Western World during this period known as the Middle Ages.

Let's summarize the state of the church through the 12th and 13th centuries. By the year 1200 the world population of Christians had begun to reverse its earlier declines, now 65.7 million people, 18.4% of the world's people would describe themselves as Christians. But the stunning advance came in the next century as the number of Christians grew to 82 million, 24% of world population. Also staggering is that this came despite a massive number of Christian martyrs. Never before had a century gone by with a million martyrs, but the 13th century saw 7.5 million and most were not killed by Muslims but by the new great power in Asia, the Mongols.

The thirteenth century also saw the beginning of reform movements, notably the Waldensians, who suffered extreme persecution -- some were burnt as heretics. The passion for a true church that moved the Waldensians grew into a major movement of Reformation by the early sixteenth century.

In the fourteenth century, further steps towards reform included John Wycliffe translating the Bible into English - a huge step and Jan Hus began a pre-Reformation biblical reform movement in Bohemia. He was burnt at the stake as a heretic and his followers attacked by the Catholic crusaders.

The fourteenth century also saw one of the most effective mass killers in history at work -- Timur conquered Persia, the Golden Horde, sacked Baghdad, and crippled the Delhi Sultanate in India. He was attempting to establish the Mongol Empire again but this time as a strongly Muslim entity. He killed many Christians -- there were 5.5 million martyrs in this century, with 4 million killed by Timur's orders, another 335,000 Copts in Egypt, 150,000 killed in the destruction of the Christian city of Arbela, 200,000 more in India. The Christian population dropped from 82 million to 56.7 million, from 24% down to 18%.

The Catholic church at this time had a run of wicked and ungodly popes, who suppressed renewal movements viciously and began the Spanish Inquisition in

1480. In the meantime Christian groups were being annihilated, from the Nubian Christians in Egypt, wiped out by Islam, to the Eastern Christians in India. The Georgian Church was gone, the Jacobite Church in Syria was gone and in 1380, the last Christian Ughurs were forced to convert to Islam in northwest China.

The church lacked spiritual leadership, lacked a missions focus, lacked the grace and compassion that it began with, and had been corrupted into an organization that served itself, rather than reaching the world. Having said that, it was in these dark hours and desperate times that the Catholic church launched a missions movement, led by men like Francis of Assisi and orders of monks who were devoted to the call of Christ. And out of these truly dark ages, a light began to burn in the hearts of a few, a longing for the restoration of the true church, with a vision for the conquering love of God to reach the world. But it would have to wait ... for at least a couple of weeks.