

The Evangelical “Streams” of the Christian Church

As we ended last week, we saw several streams emerging from the Reformation that began in the 16th century and which continued, in various ways, through the centuries that followed. But, with a little tweaking here and there, some reforms in practice and training, we can say that the Roman Catholic church continued on as a dominant political and spiritual force. The Reformed churches: Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed, also went through their periods of tweaking and adjustment, but they didn't change too radically from the ideas that shaped them during the turbulent Reformation period.

Way more interesting is the study of the history of the Evangelical movement, which grew out of the desire of individuals to experience God. As I mentioned last week, there was a strong sense that the Reformers like Luther and Calvin and Knox didn't go far enough in changing the centuries-old practices of the Catholic church. They got rid of some practices they hated, like the selling of indulgences, but they didn't stray far from the Roman model in worship, most doctrine or even structure.

By the way, someone asked me last week about the sale of indulgences -- what exactly is that? Basically, it's giving money to the church so that you can buy salvation for a loved one who has passed away. The saying that Luther despised and wrote against was, “When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” In other words, if you give us some money to help us rebuild St. Peter's in Rome, we'll guarantee that great-grandpa will be admitted to heaven. Of course, it was arrogant, unbiblical and dishonest, but it was also an effective way to raise the money for their building project. It worked some guilt with some tender feelings and respect for the departed and made people more willing to give.

But we're going to leave the continuing history of Catholic and Mainline churches now so we can look at Evangelicals.

The early roots of Evangelicalism go back to the 17th century and a movement among German Lutheranism that is called *Pietism*. Pietists were concerned about devotion to Jesus and a commitment to living in a way that honors God. They experienced renewal and this experience became something they sought after and nurtured in small groups divided by age and gender.

This pietism influenced some of the Presbyterian churches in America in the early 18th century from which the Great Awakenings were sparked. The first “revival” took place in Massachusetts under the leadership of a preacher named Jonathan Edwards. In the fall of 1734 he preached a series of sermons on “Justification by Faith Alone” and there was an extraordinary response, especially among the young people. At about the same time a revival broke out at Yale University, from which came a number of key church leaders for the next generation.

A few months later, in the spring of 1735 over in England, some men who would become leaders of a movement of revival experienced what they described as

“conversion”. They trusted in Christ alone for their salvation, knew that they were justified by their faith, not by works, and received in their minds and hearts an assurance of their salvation. George Whitefield was one of these men and he later remarked, “About this time God was pleased to enlighten my soul and bring me into the knowledge of His free grace, and the necessity of being justified in His sight by *faith only!*” Three years later, first Charles and then John Wesley experienced conversion. John was strongly influenced by Pietism, particularly as he saw it among the Moravians. Two years before his conversion, he had travelled to America as a missionary and had the following exchange with fellow trans-Atlantic passenger Spangenberg, the leader of a Moravian group that was also going to America.

(Spangenberg) said, “My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” I was surprised and knew now what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused and said, “I know He is the Savior of the world.” “True, but do you know He has saved you?” I answered, “I hope He has died to save me?” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words.

Wesley then began to search for this assurance and was met by the Lord while someone was reading Martin Luther’s preface to his book on Paul’s letter to the Romans.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

I’ve spent some time on this to give us a way of understanding the religion of the day and where Evangelicalism took root. Sincere believers had no confidence that they were accepted by God through their faith in Christ, and when they began to receive that assurance, their lives were radically changed. They became excited about their faith and began to preach the message to others. Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards were among the first, but there were many who came after. This was the true beginning of what we know today as the Evangelical movement. Personal salvation and living in a way that honored God became the hallmarks of the movement, and resulted, not only in revivals and salvations, but also social activists, such as Wilberforce in England taking on the slave trade and the birth of the Salvation Army, both taking place in the 19th century.

One of the radical differences between the old order of Catholic and Reformed churches and the new order of Evangelical churches was that the governing structures of the new were much less rigid and centralized. In other words, Evangelicalism was wide open to entrepreneurs.

Nothing had to be cleared by a pope, or by a General Synod of Reformed theologians. People who had a conviction about any particular issue, could easily start a new movement in which they advanced their particular point of view. In the 1800’s this

“free enterprise” kind of Christianity exploded into all kinds of cults and sects, each with their own particular emphasis. One of the launching pads for these movements was the teaching of William Miller, a Baptist preacher who predicted the return of Christ for the spring of 1844. When it didn’t happen, he and others readjusted dates and kept hoping, but his prophetic interpretation of Scripture became known as “The Great Disappointment” and left some disillusioned and many discouraged.

Before his predicted day came and went, however, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon church, had told his followers that Miller was wrong and that Christ would not return until December 23, 1890. By the end of the 19th century there were many groups that preached that Jesus’ return was imminent, including the Watchtower Society, the Mormons, the Christadelphians and the various Adventist churches.

The more important contribution from the 19th century to the evangelical movement came in the Second Great Awakening which spread quickly through western New York State, Kentucky and Tennessee and southern Ohio. Tens of thousands would attend revival meetings and many people’s lives were changed. One of the results of this awakening was the re-emergence of an emphasis on personal holiness, particularly a second work of grace.

Those who became involved in the Holiness movement would look for, and expect, first, an experience of salvation, in which sins were forgiven and new life begun ... but also a second experience in which the desire to commit any sin would disappear, therefore allowing a person to live, ideally entirely without willful sin. These groups are still around today and have rules against any consumption of alcohol, participation in gambling, dancing, or going to movies.

The holiness groups found their fertile ground in Wesley’s Methodist churches and it was their beliefs that became a foundation for the Pentecostal movement that began at the beginning of the 20th century. On January 1, 1901, the students of Charles Fox Parham’s Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, prayed for and received an experience they described as the baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied by speaking in tongues. Parham went on a 4-year revival tour of Kansas and Missouri, teaching the baptism of the Holy Spirit and, while he was doing that, a revival broke out in Wales in which thousands came to faith in Christ and many spoke in tongues. Expectation grew among parts of the evangelical world that God was about to move by His Spirit and renew the entire Christian church.

In 1905 Parham moved to Houston and started another Bible school. One of his students was William Seymour, who went from there to Los Angeles, to a church building on Azusa Street where he preached and revival followed. Like other revivals, this was very experience-oriented. People came out of these meetings with a new passion for Jesus and a burning desire to bring His message to a lost world. Many stories emerged of people planting them-selves in small prairie towns and starting a church, with little or no training, but a desire for people to experience what they had experienced at Azusa Street. Other denominations that came out of that revival

include the Foursquare Church and Apostolic Churches of Pentecost.

You probably don't associate the Alliance Church with the Pentecostal movement, but there was a strong link in the early days. Alliance founder A. B. Simpson supported the Pentecostals and many of their pastors and missionaries were trained at the school he founded in New York. He helped resolve a split in his own denomination over the gift of tongues as "initial evidence" of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Simpson embraced the infilling of the Spirit and all the gifts of the Spirit, but rejected the position that tongues was the only initial evidence for Spirit baptism, instead arguing that the fruit of the Spirit, as listed in Galatians 5, and fruitfulness in general, were also evidences of the Spirit's filling.

Through most of the 20th century, Pentecostalism was held at arm's length from the rest of the Evangelical church. Some critics argued that this experiential faith was the work of the devil and others said that it was fraud. And so there wasn't a great influence in the rest of the church resulting from the gifts of the Spirit experienced in Topeka or Asuza Street and beyond. But that changed in 1960 when Dennis Bennet, the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, described his "baptism in the Spirit" to his congregation. (Episcopal in the U.S. is what "Anglican" is in Canada.) Soon, pastors in mainline, or traditional reformed, churches were experiencing and describing their encounters with the Spirit and a renewal movement gained strength. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal began in 1967 at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Typical of the renewal meetings and services of that period was a focus on praying for people, both for an experience of the Spirit and very often, for physical healing.

The charismatic renewal was not widespread among churches with evangelical beliefs until the Vineyard and other renewal movements beginning in the 1980's. For a few years, starting in 1994, the Toronto Airport Vine-yard became a destination point for people seeking a renewed and revived spiritual experience. People flew in from around the globe, with many coming from Germany and England and, of course, Canada and the U.S.

Today, the Catholic Charismatic movement is the second largest subgroup within Catholicism, with 120 million people calling themselves Catholic Charismatics -- the largest subgroup being traditional Catholics, those wanting to see Catholicism restored to its state before Vatican II - but let's not get into all that that means.

In 2011, Pentecostals and charismatics made up 8.5% of the world's population and 27% of all Christians. This is the fastest-growing major division within Christianity around the globe. In an era when the mainline churches in the West have moved towards the kind of liberalism that casts doubt on the truth and authority of Scripture, they have been in steady decline for nearly 50 years, but the evangelical churches have continued to grow.

Now, how did the Anabaptists of Europe become the Mennonites of Canada? And do

they fit within the sphere of Evangelicals, or are they something different? The Anabaptists, that was the name given to them by others, the “rebaptizers”, were arguing their beliefs at the same time as other Reformers. They believed, probably more consistently than the state church reformers like Luther and Calvin, that the Scripture alone should be their authority in matters of church government and in worship. They believed strongly in the separation of church and state, knowing that the state often stood against the Kingdom of God in this world. Another conviction was freedom of conscience and so they opposed all forms of persecution. They argued as well for believer’s baptism and emphasized spiritual experience and a life of obedience to God.

The key figures in the formative years were Menno Simons, from whom the name Mennonite was drawn and Conrad Grebel in Switzerland, to whom the Amish communities trace their beginnings. There were many others who wanted the same freedoms that these Anabaptists were preaching and the ideas of Scripture alone, separation of church and state and freedom of conscience spread throughout Europe.

Of course, such radical views invited persecution and the Anabaptists received it from both the Catholics and the Reformers. Between 1525 and 1660 thousands of these believers were executed. This led to mass migrations in search of greater freedom of the Amish, Hutterites and Mennonites. They were pacifists who were seeking to be exempted from military service and for whom freedom of religion was very important. In 1763, Catherine the Great of Russia issued a Manifesto inviting all Europeans to come and settle various pieces of land within Russia and many German Mennonites responded to this invitation, beginning with the first settlement in southern Ukraine in 1789 and a second, larger one, in 1803.

After several decades of life in the Ukraine, the Mennonites faced an internal division over the spiritual health of its community. In 1860, the Mennonite Brethren Church broke with the main church saying, “The total Mennonite brotherhood has decayed to the extent that we can no more be part of it,” and that they feared “the approach of an unavoidable judgment of God.” This break helped to bring spiritual health to the whole of the Mennonite communities as it challenged some patterns that had been negative to their growth.

In 1870 the Russian government announced a plan that would end all special privileges for Mennonites and others by 1880, including exemption from military service. When the government realized they were about to lose 40,000 of their most productive farmers, they negotiated a new deal that would require service that was in no way connected to the military. Many accepted these conditions, but 10,000 went to the U.S. and another 8,000 to Manitoba.

Later, as World War I degenerated into Russian civil war and the communists took over the country, Mennonites in the Ukraine experience persecution and confiscation of their property. It was in response to their suffering that the Mennonite Central Committee was formed and did relief work in the Ukraine, serving meals to tens of

thousands over a period of three years. The wave of immigrations continued to both the U.S. and Canada, and some of the more conservative Mennonites migrated from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920's, spurred by Canada's introduction of compulsory, secular public education. They saw that such public education would threaten their culture which included speaking German, and their religious beliefs. Mexico actually became the number 1 destination for Mennonites leaving the Soviet Union, with Bolivia and Paraguay also attracting them in the 10's of thousands.

What do we learn today?

1. When you look at these streams from the history of the church, you are struck by the sacrifices that people were willing to make for principles. Whether they valued the separation of church and state, the belief that only those who have made a commitment to Christ should be baptized, the right to refuse to fight in war or the right to educate their children, people would change countries and continents in order to find a place that protected their right to hold those beliefs and to practice their faith in freedom.

This is a challenge to us. How important is it for us to be able to live in a way that we feel is honoring to God? How far do we integrate into a secular society without fear of compromising our faith in Christ? At what point would we pick up and move to another country, risking the disruption and the separation from friends that that might involve? Christians throughout history have made great sacrifices in order to protect important values ... and have brought blessing wherever they have ended up. Believers who place the values of the Kingdom of God ahead of personal convenience or comfort should always be a challenge to us to have that same commitment, that same willingness to sacrifice.

2. The other thing that stood out to me was that, once people had an awareness of the Gospel, once they had the Bible in their own language and knew more about Jesus than they had known before, you see time and time again that they developed a hunger to experience God. People wanted the presence of God, whether it was among the German Pietists in the 16th century or the Pentecostals and Charismatics in the 20th. The Moravians wanted it, the leaders of the Great Awakenings in America and Britain wanted it and they pursued God's presence with passion and perseverance. That same experience of intimacy with God, of communion with the Creator, is available to all who truly seek it today. History shows us that God is willing to move when people really seek Him, so I encourage you to do that. Historically, this has happened a lot when people come together to pray and to ask for a move of God's Spirit, so if you can swing that with a group of friends, by all means go for it. The great moves of God are not over and we should maintain a hunger for His presence and His power in our lives, too.

