

Chapter 6 :

The Modern Church

From the end of the Thirty Years' War, 1648, to the present.

A. The development of other Protestant churches and of pseudo-Christian cults

Some Protestants persecuted other believers who differed doctrinally from them, just as the Catholic Church did. (The extent of persecution by Catholics was far greater.) We have seen that some Protestants fled persecution by the Church of England and went to America in 1620 in pursuit of religious freedom. Many more people from Britain and Europe followed them to America for the same reason. In this way the various Protestant churches were established in America. Roman Catholicism was also transported to America.

In our last chapter we studied the beginning of the Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Baptist, Quaker, Anglican and other churches. But after 1650 other Protestant churches and also cults grew up in Europe and America. Here we can only notice a few of them briefly:

In America in 1774 the Unitarian Church began. Unitarians believe that there is only one person, not three, in the God-head. They teach that Jesus is not divine and that the scriptures are not the inspired, infallible word of God. In denying the doctrine of the Trinity, they resemble the Arian heresy of the Fourth Century A. D.

The Methodist Church began in England in 1795. John and Charles Wesley, who were Anglicans, wanted to gather people within the Anglican Church for the purpose of seeking God through deeper prayer life and greater holiness. They saw that many people were keeping traditional forms of worship without any personal relationship to God. They had no intention of starting a new church, but the Anglican Church rejected them, and the followers of the Wesleys, left to themselves, became the Methodist Church.

In America around 1800 a number of teachers in various denominations began to be deeply concerned about the divisions and competition between various followers of Christ. They saw that believers could not unite because each denomination looked for authority to its own distinctive creed in addition to the scriptures. These teachers from various backgrounds began to call for the abandonment of all the conflicting, humanly written creeds and a return to the divinely inspired scriptures as the only authority for the church in matters of faith and practice. They pleaded for the abandonment of the human traditions which had been added since the time of the apostles and for a return to simple apostolic doctrine and practice as seen in the New Testament. They believed that if people would abandon conflicting creeds and traditions and follow the scriptures alone, they could unite, since the Bible is held in common by all believers. Their ideal was a non-sectarian, non-denominational approach to Christianity. Their movement, aimed at restoring New Testament doctrine and practice in the church, was known as the Restoration Movement. Members of this movement began to be called the Church of Christ or Disciples of Christ or the Christian Church. This has been called the first indigenous church movement in America.

Also in America, a church called the United Brethren in Christ was begun in 1800. In 1816 the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a black church, began.

In America in 1830, Joseph Smith began the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also called the Mormon Church. Smith said that he had seen an angel who showed him where to dig up some golden plates inscribed with a message for people in the last days. He said God helped him to translate the message and write it in the Book of Mormon. Mormons believe that the Bible is not a sufficient revelation for our times, and the Book of Mormon is also necessary, along with continuing revelations to Mormon leaders, in order to know God's will.

A Baptist preacher in America, William Miller, an avid student of prophecy, began to teach that Jesus would return in 1843. When Jesus did not appear, Miller's followers divided into various groups. From one of these groups began the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 1863. This group had as its prophetess Mrs. Ellen G. White. Adventists believe that her writings are authoritative revelations from God in addition to scripture. Another group that came out of Miller's following are the Jehovah's Witnesses. They took this name officially in 1931, but their original leader, Charles Taze Russell, formulated many of their main beliefs in 1884. Judge J.R. Rutherford became leader after Russell's death. Witnesses believe that the writings of Russell and Rutherford are necessary in addition to the Bible.

In England a Methodist, William Booth, started the Salvation Army in 1865. It was fundamentalist in doctrine and not a cult. In America Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy founded a cult called the Church of Christ, Scientist, whose teachings are called Christian Science, in 1866. Mrs. Eddy taught that such things as sin, sickness and death do not exist. She said that such things are only in people's minds because of wrong thinking, and that if the thinking is made right, a person will have no sickness or death or sin. She also taught that Jesus did not die for the

sins of the people of the world, because there is no such thing as death or sin.

Also in America in the late 19th Century, there began to appear "Pentecostal" churches which emphasized the Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit, healings, and other miraculous signs. The Church of God headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, began in 1886. C. H. Mason began the Church of God in Christ in 1895. The Church of the Nazarene was founded in 1908, and the Assemblies of God started in 1914. (The Nazarene Church places less emphasis on miraculous gifts than Pentecostal churches generally do.) In 1927, a woman named Aimee Semple McPherson founded the Foursquare Gospel Church. The United Pentecostal Church began in 1945.

In America and Europe many other churches, denominations and cults have appeared, but those named here will illustrate the negative and positive aspects of developments in Protestantism since the Reformation. The principal Protestant churches since the Reformation have been the Anglicans (called the Episcopal Church in America), Reformed, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregational, Quakers, Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, Christian Churches and Pentecostals.

A note about cults: There is a difference between a cult and a denomination. A Christian denomination usually accepts, at least in a broad sense, the foundational beliefs that have always marked orthodox Christianity. The denomination exists as a separate body because of some distinctive feature or doctrinal emphasis. The name of the denomination often reflects that distinction. Lutherans are named for their founder; Presbyterians and Episcopalians for their form of church government, Baptists because of the importance historically placed on baptism. In fact, the term "denomination" means something set apart, identified and distinguished by a particular name. But denominations usually recognize as Christians the members of other denominations.

A cult, on the other hand, is highly exclusive and much more divisive. Some of the marks of a cult:

- 1) Belief in the authority of some modern prophet or revelation in addition to the Bible.
- 2) Tight regimentation and control of members' lives.
- 3) Belief that they alone are God's faithful church.
- 4) Built around some strong personality.
- 5) Denial of some central fact of the gospel, such as the divinity of Christ, the atonement, or the bodily resurrection of Christ.

In the estimation of this writer, the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), the Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science are examples of pseudo-Christian cults. The Seventh Day Adventist Church is in some respects a denomination, but shares

some cultic marks such as the modern prophet, exclusivism, etc. The United Pentecostal Church is semi-cultic because of its militant, divisive denial of the Trinity and its exclusivism on that basis. There are of course many cults that do not pretend to be Christian.

B. The Growth of Missionary Activity.

We have already seen how Roman Catholic missionaries went to the Far East and to the Americas from 1500 onward. As Protestant churches emerged, they too sent missionaries to people who had not heard the word of God. British churches sent missionaries to the American Indians beginning in 1649. Protestants in Denmark and Germany began near 1700 to send missionaries to India and other places. The greatest Protestant missionary activity was from 1800 onward. Churches in America and Europe sent missionaries to numerous places and the name of Jesus was preached to many of the nations on earth. Among the best-known missionaries were William Carey, who went to India, Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, and David Livingstone, who went to Africa. There were not many countries which had not received missionaries. Also around 1800, Bible Societies were organized in many countries. They had two purposes: 1) To translate the scriptures into more languages, and 2) to make Bibles affordable and plentiful in every possible place.

C. Developments in the Roman Catholic Church in Modern Times.

We have seen the measures taken by the Roman Catholic Church to counter the effects of the Protestant Reformation. In 1789 the people of France rose up against their Catholic king, killed many Catholic priests and ran others out of France. Napoleon took over the rule of France. The pope of Rome was offended at Napoleon and quarreled with him. In 1796 Napoleon took an army to Rome and made the pope sell one-third of his lands. Again the pope and Napoleon quarreled and Napoleon moved the pope to France in 1799. The matter was settled quickly and the pope was allowed to return to Rome. But in 1801 Napoleon removed all the Catholic bishops in France and replaced them with bishops chosen by himself. The rest of the pope's lands were taken from him by the Italian government in 1870. Since that time, the pope has only had a small area called the Vatican in one part of the city of Rome.

In 1854, Pope Pius IX promulgated a new dogma (a dogma is an important doctrine which all Catholics must believe) which said that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was born without original sin. This teaching is known as the Immaculate Conception. Before this time, when a pope promulgated a new dogma, he would do so in conjunction with a council. But now for the first time the pope defined a dogma for the church by his own act. Thus the power of the pope grew another degree within the church. In 1870 the Vatican Council proclaimed that the pope is infallible when he speaks ex cathedra (that is, in his official capacity as "pastor and doctor of all Christians," defining a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the universal church). This is known as the doctrine of Papal Infallibility.

In 1950, the pope defined another dogma to the effect that when Mary died, her

body was soon taken up to heaven. This is known as the Bodily Assumption of Mary. The Vatican II Council (1962-1965) liberalized some things in Roman Catholicism. No dogma or basic doctrine was changed, but the council did allow the mass to be said in the languages of the common people, rather than in Latin. Catholics were allowed more freedom than before to read the Bible and a more friendly attitude was expressed toward Protestant and Greek Orthodox believers. Many Catholics in recent times, especially in the West, have become unhappy with the stand of the Catholic church on such matters as birth control, celibacy of the clergy, and the authority of the pope. Some believe that the supreme authority in the church should be in a council, not in the pope. Lately there has been a movement by some in the Catholic Church seeking recognition of Mary as "co-mediatrix" with Christ. Also recently the Catholic Church in America has been shaken by scandals over sexual abuse by priests. On the positive side, the church has remained steadfast in its opposition to abortion and divorce, in spite of the contrary cultural tide.

D. The growth of rationalism and unbelief.

From about 1700, learning grew rapidly in Europe, America and elsewhere. Scientists began to learn more about the workings of nature. Some people began to think they could explain all of reality in terms of the natural. (This way of thinking is called naturalism.) Some began to say that there is no God and that everything began by pure accident, not by creation. Others said that there is a God who created all things, but that he does not act today. Everything runs by natural laws which God fixed at creation, so prayer has no effect. (This thinking is known as deism.) With Charles Darwin's book Origin of Species in 1859 arose the theory of organic evolution, which maintains that man originated from the lower animals rather than from creation. The original life was supposed to have been a microscopic one-celled animal which accidentally came to be. Other teachers began to say that a person should not believe anything which cannot be understood by human reason. Therefore they rejected God, miracles and the supernatural. This philosophy which makes man's reason the highest measure of truth is called rationalism.

It began to be said by some that science contradicts the Bible accounts of creation and other things in the Bible. Some said that if a person had been educated in the facts of science, he could no longer believe the Bible. Actually there is no conflict between the provable facts of science and actual statements of the Bible. The conflict was only between unproved guesses and theories of science on the one hand, and invalid interpretations of the Bible and assumptions by theologians on the other. True science and the Bible agree; God's truth in his creation and God's truth in his word do not contradict each other. Even now some scientists say things contradicting the Bible, but they are only expressing theories, not observed facts. There are also some scientists who have strong faith in the Bible.

But in the period following the Renaissance, many educated people had little patience with religion, for they felt revulsion toward the evil things done falsely in the name of Christianity during the medieval period and at other times. They

tended to measure all religion by these false examples. In addition, natural man always prefers to be independent rather than to humble himself under God's authority or to acknowledge his dependence on God. Therefore when someone preaches that there is no God, or resurrection, or eternal judgment or moral responsibility, man is strongly biased toward believing such statements. He can then go his way and do whatever he desires like any other animal, with no more troublesome worries about moral accountability. These ideas of unbelief were expressed in the Twentieth Century in the East in atheistic communism, and in the West in Secular Humanism. Secular Humanism exalts man and his desires above all else, denies the existence of God, denies any concrete, objective standard of morality, attacks traditional Judaeo-Christian standards of morality, and works against the institutions of marriage and the family.

Even in the churches, some teachers and leaders began to share ideas of doubt and unbelief. Some began to reject the divinity of Christ and said he was only a great teacher like other great teachers. They said that the Bible was only a human production like other books and that it was not uniquely God's work, written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They said the miracles of the Bible were only dreamed up by the popular mind or by writers wanting to promote their religious cause. They denied the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection. Many denied the reality of sin and the need for a blood atonement for sin. Such unbelieving ideas in theology are called liberalism or modernism, and they grew especially between 1800 and 1900. Such teachers still called themselves Christians, but they denied the truths which are at the heart of the gospel. Many theological seminaries taught such unbelief. The teachers produced in these seminaries undermined the faith of many church members. Liberal theologians said that man does not need salvation from sin but from social problems of this life such as poverty, disease, ignorance and racial conflict. (The Bible teaches that while we must be concerned about these social problems, we must be most concerned about the root problem of sin which is behind all the other problems.) Liberal theologians believed that man is still evolving and that he is also getting better and better morally as he becomes more intelligent. It was thought that if man could learn enough, he could save himself from all of life's problems and make for himself paradise here on earth.

But in the Twentieth Century there occurred two great, destructive world wars with frightful loss of life and terrible suffering. In Germany, the home of "enlightened" liberal theology, the Nazis committed some of the most unspeakable atrocities in modern times. Later the opposing great powers used their scientific knowledge to make stockpiles of terrifying weapons that could destroy the earth many times over. It was clearly seen that man is not getting better morally without God, and that although man can do many things through science to help himself, he cannot change his own heart or rid himself of evil desires by his own learning.

Theologians began to recognize again that man is sinful and needs God. Teachers began to say that after a person has gone his own way until he is in deep trouble and great need of God, he reaches out for God and meets him in the scriptures in a moment of crisis. They said that the scriptures are full of errors but that God uses them to speak to a person who is in need. This kind of

theology is called neo-orthodoxy and it is built on the philosophy of existentialism. Neo-orthodoxy is very prevalent in the more liberal churches today. Although neo-orthodoxy takes more notice of the supernatural than the old liberalism did, it still refuses to acknowledge that the scriptures are dependable as the inspired word of God. When it uses theological terms such as salvation, resurrection, grace, etc., neo-orthodoxy uses them with different meanings. It has weakened and confused the faith of many. The theological difference between liberal or neo-orthodox people on the one hand and fundamental or conservative believers on the other, is greater than most of the theological differences between traditional conservative denominations.

Not all believers were carried away by the trend of unbelief. Many teachers and churches kept their faith in God and Christ and the Bible and still preached about salvation from sin. In the Nineteenth Century such people were called Fundamentalists. Now they are more likely to be called Evangelicals. (Here we are not speaking of any one church but of a theological stance common to many churches.) From evangelical ranks have arisen many powerful and intellectually able leaders who have shown clearly that the facts of science do not contradict what the Bible really says. They have also ably defended the divine inspiration of the Bible and have shown the scriptures to be uniquely the word of God, rather than just another human production.

Since 1700 among Protestants there have been periodic revivals of faith and love for God, affecting large numbers of people. Powerful preachers have arisen, able to convict people of sin and move their hearts. This has helped the churches to combat the unbelief that had weakened the cause of Christianity. Well-known revivalists have included George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley and Charles Simeon in England, and Jonathan Edwards, D.L. Moody and Billy Graham in America.

Near 1900 there had appeared in America new churches which emphasized miraculous signs of the Holy Spirit such as healing and tongues. Such groups are known as Pentecostals. But in many non-Pentecostal groups, from about 1970, there emerged a new wave of interest in the manifestations of the Spirit. This also extended to some members of the Roman Catholic Church. This trend is called the Neo-Charismatic Movement. Those of different churches who share these charismatic views have a kind of unofficial unity in spite of the different doctrines of their various churches.

In Western Europe and North America from the late 20th Century there has been a reaction against organized religion, as well as a movement toward secularism. Secularization has progressed further in Europe than in North America. In many Christian churches, emphasis on doctrine has been replaced by an emphasis on personal relationship with God. Western culture has moved from modernism to post-modernism. This has resulted in less belief in concrete standards of truth and morality, less emphasis on rational evidence, and more emphasis on subjective inward feelings.

E. Marxism or Communism.

The teachings of Karl Marx and his fellows began to appear about 1850. Marx wrote about the distribution of wealth in society. His teachings are referred to as Marxism or communism. Starting with the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Marxist revolution spread to many countries. Many governments were overthrown and replaced with communist ones. Russia and China have been the world leaders in communism, but communism has recently lost power in Russia and most of Eastern Europe. China also is slowly moderating and moving toward free enterprise.

We mention communism in a study of church history because spiritually it is a great enemy of Christianity. Along with his economic and social theories (which were based on the idea of evolution), Marx denied the existence of God and taught that man evolved from the lower animals. Marx denied eternal judgment and life after death. Marxists say that religion is a myth dreamed up by people in the ignorance of the past to make life easier. Religion, they say, is useless and even detrimental in this age of science and should be abolished as soon as possible. Man can save himself from his problems through education, science, and state socialism. Communist governments do not allow the scriptures to be produced and circulated freely. And communists constantly try to subvert other governments and foment Marxist revolution wherever possible. More and more countries were swallowed up by communist expansion, and wherever this happened, the communists tried to wear down and extinguish the churches, either by direct or covert action. Many churches have been forced to operate "underground" and many Christians have been imprisoned or killed for their faith. such is the trouble which many believers in many countries have been going through while some of us enjoyed peace and freedom.

F. Modern persecution of Christians

From the late twentieth century, minority communities of Christian believers have sprung up in many Asian, North African and other nations that were once solidly Muslim or Hindu. In mainland China Christianity is growing at an unbelievable rate. But in most cases the spread of the Christian faith in these areas is meeting strong resistance and persecution. Those who study these things believe more Christians are being imprisoned and martyred in our time than at any time in the history of the church. Christians in the Sudan, for example, have suffered horrible atrocities during the long civil war there. A number of nations have made it illegal to evangelize among their people.

Though Christians still face serious opposition from communism in China and from Hinduism in India, the most significant opposition is from radical Islam. A majority of Muslims are content to coexist with Christians, but the radical element in Islam has grown increasingly aggressive and violent, trying to bring more countries under Islamic law and persecuting Christian believers. This is partly fed by memories of the crusades (done at a time when the church had strayed far the spirit and intentions of Christ), partly by the Palestinian conflict, partly by reaction to moral decadence in the West, and partly by radically different views on freedom.

F. Other developments:

One thing that has hindered Christianity in the West has been the continued multiplication of cults which claim to be Christian but teach strange doctrines which deviate severely from the faith taught in the scriptures. Many Eastern religions have also become popular in the West in recent times. New Age thinking is growing rapidly. It is a revival of ancient paganism. There has been a marked re-emergence of occult religion and practice such as spiritism and Satanism.

There has been much effort in the Twentieth Century toward uniting various churches. This has become known as the Ecumenical Movement. Some separate denominations have merged. Others have formed associations for common action such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of Churches in America, and the World Council of Churches on the international level. But the churches have sometimes placed more importance on unity than on essential doctrines of scripture and have sought unity through doctrinal compromise rather than through a return to the common ground of scripture. The NCC and WCC have been criticized by the evangelical churches for their liberal theology, their "social gospel" and their involvement with Marxist revolutionaries, while the NCC and WCC have criticized the evangelicals for lack of Christian social concern.

In Britain and America Christian teachings brought about the abolition of slavery in the Nineteenth Century. This also occurred in various African countries. Christianity's influence has helped to overcome many other evils in society during modern times. But the Christian is still faced with heavy moral and spiritual issues today, such as these: 1) How should Christians feel about war and the arms race? 2) How can we overcome racism and bring brotherhood between the races? 3) How can wealthy nations share with and help poorer nations? 4) How can we manage in a Christian way the problems of overpopulation and world hunger? 5) What can be done about the rising tide of immorality (homosexuality, abortion, illegitimacy, etc.)? 6) How can we enjoy a reasonable standard of living without letting materialism (money and pleasure) control us as gods? (Many Western Christians have become soft, careless and self-indulgent.) 7) How should we interact with and relate to non-Christian and even anti-Christian forces in today's pluralistic Western society? 8) How can Bible-believing Christians show love to Muslims, Hindus and others and share their faith with in a way that promotes more understanding? 9) What answers can we find to the serious moral questions posed by genetic and technological research? How can believers in Christ unite on the basis of God's word so that we will not waste our power in division but have a real effect on the world?

G. Christianity in the world today:

How many people in the world today profess Christianity? All people in all churches who profess Christianity amount together to almost one-third of the world's population. In other words, nearly one out of every three people on earth

claims to follow Christ. If we count the world's population as about 52 billion, the world's people are divided religiously approximately as follows:

All professed Christians	1,900 million
Muslims	1,000 million
Hindus	750 million
Buddhists	350 million
Modern occultism	125 million
Animists	105 million
Sikhs	21 million
Jews	20 million

Professed Christians fall into the following divisions (the numbers are estimates):

Protestants	540 million
Anglicans	60 million
Catholics	1,050 million
Eastern Orthodox	195 million

Source: The Almanac of the Christian World, 1993-94, Edith Draper, ed., Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL, 1992, p. 75.

Conclusion: In the history of the church we have seen clearly how Satan always tries to destroy the work of salvation and righteousness begun by Christ in the church, the body of Christ. But we have also clearly seen the strong hand of God protecting the church, the gospel, and all people who fear God and love truth. Thousands of Christians have died for the cause of Christ and they will be honored by the Lord. Because of their sacrifice and service, the gospel of Christ has come down to us. What will we do with it?

As individuals, we must identify and break down every "idol" that hinders us from serving Christ with total purity and love and dedication. (If it is worth serving Christ at all, it is worth serving him completely). In the church we need to purge away self-service, human will and the elevation of human tradition. We need to return to the will of Christ as revealed in the scriptures. We must humble ourselves and submit to Christ as Lord in everything we do, caring about all that he says because he is our Lord. And we must dedicate ourselves in the love of Christ to the enlightening of those who do not know the word of grace that can save their souls.

Christians in the West may face persecution before Christ returns. We must be willing to pay any necessary price to serve Christ without reservation. The forces of evil are that dedicated. So must Christians be if we are to survive and overcome in an increasingly evil world. If the world is not saved through the gospel of the cross of Christ, it will not be saved at all.

---B. Shelburne