



PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

- What has happened in the centuries since the apostles?
- How can Christians live faithfully in a non-Christian world?

Beginnings and initial spread (AD 33 – 312)

The Church began in AD 33 on the Day of Pentecost (Part 21). As the gospel spread across the world, churches were formed in every city. The Christians faced opposition, initially informally from Jews and local leaders, and later officially from the Roman Empire after Emperor Nero turned against them in AD 64. Peter and Paul were probably martyred during Nero's persecution. The era of the apostles was coming to an end (although John lived for around 30 years longer). During the next 200 years, the Church grew and became stronger throughout the Roman Empire (the Middle East, Europe and North Africa) despite continuing opposition.

Official acceptance and spread to new territories (AD 313 – 1054)

In AD 313, Emperor Constantine gave freedom of worship to Christians. He later made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire. It is difficult to say whether Constantine became a Christian or saw Christianity as a way to keep his Empire united. This new freedom allowed the gospel to spread more freely, but it was now possible for people to identify as 'Christian' for personal gain and Christianity became linked with the State and with politics in ways that sometimes compromised Christian principles. The gospel spread to Ireland (432), Germany (716), the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe (863) and Russia (988). In some areas, however, (most notably in Russia) rulers accepted a form of Christianity for political reasons, and the nation became officially 'Christian', but only a small minority of people came to a real faith in Christ.

Division and movement away from the Bible (AD 1054 - 1517)

In AD 1054, a growing division between East and West finally resulted in a split between these two branches of Christianity. The division was over a range of minor issues, but reflected political and cultural differences. Over time, the teaching of the State Church in the West (centred in Rome) moved away from the teaching of the Bible, taking in false ideas from other religions and from Greek philosophy. Leaders in the established Church took political power and became rich. They sometimes taught that Christianity could be spread or defended by force. Many people believed they were Christians because they were born in a 'Christian country' to 'Christian parents' or through attending Church. Most people could not read or had no Bible in their own language, so the Bible's teachings were distorted or neglected. There were, of course, many true Christians, both within the mainstream Church and in separate simple churches where the Bible was taught.

Reformation, Counter-Reformation and revival (AD 1517 - 1793)

In AD 1517, a man called Martin Luther started a debate about some of the areas where the official teaching of the Church had departed from the Bible. He was not the first to do so, but his message caught hold and spread. Luther's main concern was to re-establish the truth that forgiveness of sins is received directly from God through faith alone, rather than through the Church. The Reformers wanted all of God's people to have the Bible in their own languages and to follow its teachings. The Roman Catholic Church refused to change, and followers of Luther and others had to break away and form new churches. These new churches became known as 'Protestants' because they protested against distortions in the Church. Protestants became the majority in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, Scandinavia and North America. In the 18th Century, revivals in Great Britain and North America brought many people to renewed faith and commitment.

Worldwide spread (AD 1793 - 2006)

In 1793 an English man called William Carey went to India to spread the gospel. He was among the first of thousands of Western Protestant Christians who travelled, often at great risk, to countries where the Church was not yet present or had died away. Today there are Christians in every country on earth, and the church is stronger in Africa, South America and some Asian countries including China, than in Europe, where increasing wealth and consumerism, supported by ideas of atheism, have distracted many people from Christian beliefs. Christ continues to build His Church as individuals come to faith in Him and are born again by the Holy Spirit.

Christians as Citizens

Some of the biggest problems for the Church throughout history have occurred either when the State tried to control the Church (limiting its freedom to serve God or to speak His truth clearly) or the Church tried to control the State (causing Church leaders to be distracted by power and money). How should Christians live as citizens of modern countries, especially where they disagree with aspects of government policy?

Jesus taught that His followers should respect those who rule over them and pay their taxes as good citizens (Matthew 22:15-21). He never encouraged his followers to be revolutionaries and He never took a position of power in this world. Instead, He told them to seek God's kingdom and righteousness, trusting Him to provide their needs (Matthew 6:33). They should focus on doing good works that reflect God's rule and so become salt, preserving and adding flavour to the world, and light, shining God's truth so that people may glorify Him (Matthew 5:13-16). He taught His followers to love everyone, even their enemies (Matthew 5:44). He set an example of humility and gentleness, not retaliating to those who persecuted Him and promised that those who experienced persecution for being His followers would be blessed in heaven (Matthew 5:11-12).

The apostles, led by the Spirit, said more about Christians' responsibility as citizens. Christians should:

- Honour and pray for those who rule over them, who are appointed by God and accountable to Him, and should do good and submit to the authorities (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-16);
- Do everything they can to live at peace with other people (Romans 12:17-18);
- Be hard working (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13), unselfish, and honest (Ephesians 4:25-28);
- Forgive, be generous to all, and care for their families and fellow-workers (Colossians 3:12-14).

These qualities make for a very good citizen in any country. In countries where they have the opportunity, some Christians may seek to serve God as politicians and in positions of authority, but they must be faithful to God's standards. Only where the law of the State directly conflicts with obedience to Christ should Christians disobey the law, and, even then, they should do it in a way that submits to the authorities and seeks peace.

Recognising and dealing with false teachings

Jesus warned that false teachers would come after Him (e.g., Matthew 24:23-25) and the apostles wrote about the dangers of false teachers who were already in the churches at the time when they wrote the New Testament letters. Some people would be deceived by their false teachings (e.g., Paul's warnings in 2 Timothy 3:12-13, Peter's in 2 Peter 2 and Jude's in Jude 3-4). Jesus described false teachers as wolves in "sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15-23) because they may appear to be harmless and to be one of God's people, but beneath this they cause destruction. It should not surprise us, then, that false teachers exist today and false prophets have even founded movements. False teachings are usually of one of two types:

- **Subtracting from Jesus** – some false teachings suggest we need something or someone else as well as Jesus, perhaps an additional experience of God or extra knowledge. Some of the earliest false teachings, called Gnosticism, spoke of secret knowledge known only to some. Others said God could only be pleased through faith in Jesus plus circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses. More recent 'Jesus plus' teachings include cults that add other books to the Bible or follow the teachings of a prophet who was not one of Jesus' apostles. Two of the most widespread originating in the USA are the Jehovah's Witnesses (founded in 1852 by Charles Russell), recognisable by their publications bearing the name 'Watchtower', and the Mormons (or 'Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints', founded by Joseph Smith in 1829). Islam could also be considered as a 'Jesus plus' religion because it teaches that Muhammad was a prophet subsequent to Jesus whose teachings supersede His. These beliefs **subtract** from Jesus because they claim He is less than fully God or that His death alone is not sufficient to save us.
- **Distracting from Jesus** – these subtler false teachings do not deny any important truth about Jesus (their teachers may even sign up to standard Christian beliefs), but they do not place the emphasis where the Bible does. They may **distract** from Jesus by focusing on blessings God gives or by promising people wealth or health (healing from all diseases) if they follow Jesus. Alternatively, the distraction may be a theological system or emphasis that, even though it may true, is held to be essential or used divisively.

SUMMARY: God has preserved His people and biblical truth throughout history

- Christians must recognise false teachers by testing all teaching against the Bible.
- Christians should be good citizens, seeking the good of their nation as they shine for God.