

## Essential Church History

# 10

## The Church of the 21st Century

Over the last nine lessons, we have taken a grand tour of Church history. We have tracked the progress of the Church since her birth in the first century, followed her through her decline, and witnessed her dramatic restoration through the Reformation and the Great Awakenings. Now, in this final lesson, we will look at the state of the Church today, and have a sneak preview of what is to come in this century of rapid and world-shaking change.

### The Charismatic Movement

The Charismatic Movement shaped the Church of the twentieth century in countless ways. Even church denominations that were resistant to the movement unknowingly experienced benefits, for with the Charismatic Movement came a move toward deeper worship and more participation by the “lay” members of the churches. Furthermore, many of the mainline denominations that had been largely untouched by the awakenings of the previous two centuries were now deeply impacted by this new awakening that knew no church boundaries. And over the years, the Charismatic Movement “has increasingly broken down many of the barriers and misconceptions on both sides.”<sup>1</sup>

James Dunn gives examples of the worldwide, trans-denominational spread of the Charismatic Movement:

- The Incredible Spread of the Gospel
- The Living Church
- The Seeds of Decline
- Leaven, Leaders and the Word
- The Dark Ages
- The New Dawn
- Truth on the March
- Waves of Awakenings
- To the Ends of the Earth
- ▶ **The Church of the 21st Century** ◀

“By the mid-1980s over 100 Anglican bishops were active in renewal, and in France there were almost one million charismatics within the Catholic Church.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of the very cross-denominational and spontaneous nature of the Charismatic Movement, many errors and misunderstandings did take place. There was a great need for the teaching of the Word to balance and direct the liberty that came with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. But the overall work of the Holy Spirit had positive effect. As James Dunn expresses it:

“...[A]t its best, it has led to a renewal of confidence, a re-energizing of lay authority, an enlivening of worship, a new emphasis upon the church as community, and the offering of a new basis for unity between Christians. It has spread across all the traditional groups in society and church life...”<sup>3</sup>

## **Trends Set by the Twentieth Century**

With the close of the Charismatic Movement, the Western Church saw both positive and negative trends set in during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

### ***The Polarization Trend***

Many denominations recognized the Charismatic Movement as a work of God in his Church, yet were concerned that it was not under their denominational control. So they gathered the movement under their respective denominational “umbrellas,” and set in place denominational boundaries. The cross-denominational conferences of the 1970s (where participants showed no interest in denominational name tags) were soon replaced by charismatic meetings that were denominationally focused. And so the wider movement polarized to the “Catholic Charismatics”, the “Episcopal Charismatics,” and so on.

### ***The Ecumenical Trend***

The ecumenical\* movement was first organized in 1910 when an International Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland. Its main aim was to survey the world mission of the Church and to recover the shared heritage of the denominations. Then, in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches was established to orchestrate ecumenical contact and activity. Much of this so called “ecumenical” activity, however, made the lowest common denominator a loose definition of Christianity as a social movement, rather than establishing the common denominator as the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so ecumenical activities have often been viewed with suspicion by many evangelical sections of the Body of Christ.

The Charismatic Movement caused many denominations to recognize the need for practical unity in the Body of Christ. However, as the Charismatic Movement polarized, many mainline denominations saw ecumenism as the main way to ful-

\* Ecumenism is an interdenominational movement within the Christian Church aimed at practical unity and consensus based on committees that establish broadly accepted principles of the Christian faith and action.

fill this need for unity. For this reason, the 1970s and 1980s saw a number of mainline denominations merging. Renwick and Harman give some examples:

“In England the Congregational Church of England and Wales joined with the Presbyterian Church of England in 1972 to form the United Reformed Church, and in 1982 the Churches of Christ became part of this body. The formation of the Church of North India in 1970 merged six denominations...In the United States four different denominations were represented in the union which produced the United Church of Christ in 1961...Australia was the scene of a major ecumenical experiment with the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977. It consists of all the former Methodist Church, a considerable number of Congregational Churches, and a majority of the former Presbyterian Churches.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Independence Trend***

With denominational polarization, there also arose a groundswell of “independent” churches. In the United Kingdom, the house church movement became a major trend, and in the United States, Australia and many other Western countries, the “megachurch” became a growing focus.

## **The Rise of the Megachurch**

The 1980s saw the rise of the megachurch – churches with multiple thousands in attendance. These “super-churches” came into being because of four reasons:

### ***The decline of the mainline denominational churches***

The last half of the twentieth century saw a marked decline in church attendance throughout the West. Drawing on a growing discontent felt by many Christians toward more traditional churches, the megachurches were like a magnet.

“With attenders in the thousands, Sunday morning services in these churches were usually ‘full-service’ assemblies. But their buildings were filled the rest of the week too, with Bible classes, support groups, field trips for Seniors, weight-loss classes, and children’s activities.”<sup>5</sup>

These megachurches generally carried their own name tag, rarely identifying themselves with any particular denomination. “They much preferred ‘chapel,’ ‘center,’ or ‘community’ on the sign out front. The name was a symbol of their openness to people with diverse backgrounds and problems: divorce, addictions, and depression.”<sup>6</sup>

The growth of the megachurches in the West, with a few exceptions, was not so much because new people were coming to the Lord through evangelism, but because Christians were transferring in droves from other churches. Many were people who had left their former church because of hurts or disappointments of some kind. And further fueling this magnetic growth, many smaller churches were “swallowed up” by the megachurch because people preferred what the megachurch was offering.

### ***The attractiveness of the presentation***

The meeting format at the average megachurch was attractive to many Christians who were dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the rigid, sometimes ritualistic formats of many mainline churches. Offering a vibrant worship and upbeat approach to church life, the megachurch held a strong appeal, particularly to the younger generation. As Bruce Shelley explains:

“...the worship in these large congregations was marked by fast-paced and enthusiastic, popular, religious music. From black gospel to rock’n’roll to jazz, music was a major element in the warm-up for worship and, on occasion, for sheer entertainment.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***The personality of the preacher***

As a rule, megachurches were established upon the reputation and ministry of the “Senior Pastor.” This lead ministry often had his own radio or TV programs, which extended the influence of the megachurch far beyond its facilities.

“[Megachurches] were built around the attractive ministry of a magnetic preacher who possessed a winsome personality. The sermons stressed the Bible’s application to day-to-day life. Loyalty, what there was to be found in the gathering, was usually to the pastor, rather than to a denomination or congregation.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***The convenience of facilities***

Because the megachurch attracted a large attendance, the church’s budget was also many times larger than the average church. This meant that the church could afford the best that money could buy, and this trend toward excellence in facilities and presentation proved a major attraction to many Christians.

The underlying philosophy behind the megachurch was a comprehensive, holistic approach to the Christian life. They saw their duties as covering every need in the Christian life – a “womb-to-the-tomb” approach. As Bruce Shelley remarks:

“[E]ven in the excitement of a large crowd, attenders of a megachurch were looking for faith that served the private life: help on child rearing, family unity, and personal emotions.”<sup>9</sup>

The very strong points of the megachurch approach, however, tended to produce self-centered Christians focused on the “comfort-zone” of life. Numerically, the churches were growing, due mainly to transfer growth, but this consumer-oriented Christianity all too often produced a dearth of true spiritual life and relationship with God.

## **Pockets of Blessing in the West**

Although a statistical analysis of the Church in the West indicates that it has actually been in negative growth for a number of years (in other words, more people are leaving churches than joining them), during the 1990s it did experience scat-

tered pockets of blessing. In the midst of the natural comforts and spiritual barrenness, a hunger for God to move again began to rise in people's hearts. It began in Argentina. Karin Detert of Berlin, Germany reported:

"In 1992, a...revival began with Claudio Freidzon, founder of a Buenos Aires church that in four years has grown to 3000 people. Pastor Claudio, who was very busy in all areas of his church felt a need to really come to know the Holy Spirit. Whilst he was seeking an encounter with God, the Holy Spirit touched him one day in a powerful way and his ministry changed dramatically. An unusual presence of the Holy Spirit started accompanying him in his meetings. During the services, as people entered into adoration and worship, some became drunk in the Spirit and could not stand up. Some had to be taken home by others because they could not drive or walk on their own. Others laughed in the Spirit or fell under the power of God. The services were very long (4-5 hours), many miraculous healings were reported. Other pastors came to see and to receive the same anointing. Claudio prayed for them and they received a fresh and new anointing and took it back to their churches. A hallmark of this revival is an emphasis on worship and praise. God's presence descends as we immerse ourselves in adoring Him. Some people weep throughout an entire service; others rejoice with laughter. Many are led to deep repentance..."<sup>10</sup>

But what was significant in this "pocket of blessing" was not simply the immediately observable "manifestations of the Spirit." Deep change was also evident in thousands of Christian lives. Karin Detert's report continues:

"An emphasis on personal holiness has caused many to change their life-styles. Less time spent watching television, for example. Critics have accused some of faking religious experiences. But the emphasis on holiness, the desire of the people to praise and worship, and increase in concern for reaching others with the Gospel are genuine. And although the revival started in Claudio's church, it has spread to hundreds of pastors and churches in Argentina...The presence of God was always very powerful. The people in the church are very healthy and spiritually strong in the Word. There is a bold emphasis on the need for balance between the Word and the Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

This touch of God's blessing spread to many parts other parts of the world, igniting a small fire that touched many nations. Toronto, in Canada, and Pensacola, in Florida, were two of the better known areas, but many other places were also touched.

Many positive results emerged from this blessing. Some Christians who had become spiritually dead were revived, healing and deeply ministered to. But some negative results could also be observed. Although some manifestations were questionable (either fleshly or demonic), many of the leaders involved in this "manifestations ministry" discouraged any form of discernment, saying, "Don't worry, let God do what he wants to do." This dangerous premise resulted in some churches going "haywire" with manifestations that were clearly not from God.

Another negative result was that the focus of many Christians shifted from the Lord himself to the manifestations. People flooded to church to seek the manifestations and be “touched by God.” But ultimately this kind of self-focused revivalism created only “spiritual junkies” and could not be sustained.

The Word and the Spirit always act in concert. The Word of God functions as banks to the river of God’s Spirit. Even though Karin Detert observed that in the original Argentinian revival there was “a bold emphasis on the need for balance between the Word and the Spirit,” this important balance found in solid Biblical teaching was lacking in many of the churches that later experienced this “blessing.” Yet despite these negatives, these pockets of blessing were indeed a call of the Spirit to awaken his Church.

## Important Trends of the 21st Century

Each century in Church history has had unique characteristics, and the twenty-first century will be no different. Even though we have only just stepped over the threshold into the new century, everyone recognizes that we now live in a very different world. The shape of world politics has changed, shaped by religious and cultural distinctives rather than superpower politics and ideologies. And within the Church, too, subtle but important trends are at work.

### *The Shift to the Third World*

The spiritual decline of the Western Church during the closing decades of the twentieth century has not been mirrored in the Third World Church. The exact opposite is happening there, with an explosion of the Gospel taking place in many nations. What was once looked upon as “the mission field” by the Western Church, is now, to a great degree, no longer so. In fact, the situation has largely been reversed.

As David Liew of the Chinese Overseas Christian Mission commented:

“Our eyes are on Europe. In the past, we in Asia have benefited from the missionary activity of Europe, but now Europe is one of the least evangelized regions of the world. We are now sending missionaries back to Europe.”<sup>12</sup>

In the last decade or so, much of the explosive growth and spiritual awakenings have been taking place amongst non-Western peoples – so much so that the Western Church now makes up only 30% of the world Church. 70% of all committed Christians presently live in the so-called Third World (which many are now beginning to call “The Two-Thirds World”).

This shift is not a sudden phenomenon, however. Right through Church history, there has been a slow but perceptible shift of the Church’s center of gravity, according to the broad strategic plan of **Acts 1:8**.

- **Jerusalem** – In the first half of the first century, the center of Church activity was Jerusalem. The first hint of a shift came with the establishing of the church at Antioch, which became the major missionary-sending church of the early Church, but even after many churches had been estab-

lished in the Gentile cities of the Roman Empire, all these churches still looked to Jerusalem as their Mother Church (**Romans 15:25-27**).

- **Asia Minor** – After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the Church’s center of gravity shifted from Jerusalem to Asia Minor. The Seven Churches of Asia Minor, addressed in **Revelation 2-3**, show the significance of this region. The largest concentration of churches could be found in Asia Minor through much of the second century.
- **Rome** – Starting in the third century, the Church’s center of gravity slowly began shifting toward Rome. Although the Eastern end of the Roman Empire (centered in Asia Minor) remained a focal point of Christian learning and missionary activity for many centuries to come, the Roman Church gradually began to consolidate its influence, and by the Middle Ages was the recognized center of Christian activity.
- **Western Europe** – Rome’s claim to the center of Christianity was broken in the Reformation, as large sections of Western Europe broke away and formed their own state churches. The fires of revival and awakening in Western Europe showed a significant shift of the Church’s center of gravity for the first time away from the Mediterranean. Now countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Holland and England became the focal point of Church reform and missionary activity. In time, Great Britain came to play a critical role in the Church’s strategic advancement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- **North America** – Toward the end of the nineteenth century, America began to rise in predominance as the focal point of Church advancement. During the twentieth century, America’s role was further consolidated so that by the second half of the twentieth century, America was the indisputable center of Christian activity. More Christian books, radio programs and television shows were produced in America than in any other place in the world. The Church largely looked to the United States for leadership in the Christian community. The Church’s center of gravity had shifted across the Atlantic to the New World.
- **Asia-Pacific** – But even by the end of the twentieth century, there were signs of a shift in progress. With overall negative church growth, the United States had become more introverted and less out-reaching. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, however, the picture was very different. The Church was exploding, spreading like a wildfire. *TIME Magazine* has called the twenty-first century “The Century of Asia and the Pacific.” Although describing a shift in the world’s *economic* center of gravity, this could equally describe a shift in the Church’s *spiritual* center of gravity.\*

\* Although the Church is growing rapidly in Asia and Africa, there is still a dearth of teaching and training. The greatest need presently in Asia and Africa is for leadership training. In order for Asia and Africa to wield a strategic influence upon the Church as a whole, as North America has done in the twentieth century, it needs to be producing leaders who have a strategic voice in the global Church.

- **Jerusalem** – As we move toward the climax of Church history and the fulfillment of all the signs prior to Christ’s return, Jerusalem once again returns to the Church’s sights. We have indeed fulfilled the commission of **Acts 1:8** and taken the Gospel to “the ends of the earth.” But Jesus predicted a time when “the times of the Gentiles” would be fulfilled (**Luke 21:24**).<sup>\*</sup> During this last shift, Jerusalem will again become a key focal point of the Church.

The Church in the West has much to learn from the Church in the East. The Eastern Church has taken up the baton of the Church’s birthright and are running toward the finishing line. But as with a relay race, we are all part of the same team. Every church in every region has a destiny to fulfill, but the Church in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in particular, have a special role to play in this century.

We explore this trend further in the supplementary study **SP113-10A**.

### ***The Spread of Persecution***

According to *Voice of the Martyrs* (Special Edition, 2001), 70% of all committed Christians now living in the Third World “endure varying degrees of harassment, discrimination and persecution from Communism, military dictatorships, and from radical and extreme elements in Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism...In countries such as China, North Korea, Vietnam and Laos, more that 1.35 billion people still endure the oppressive policies of Communism... [P]ersecution is now a rapidly growing phenomenon, producing some of the worst violence and atrocities of recent years. It is estimated that the collective persecution of Christians around the world produces a staggering 450-500 martyrs each and every day.”<sup>13</sup>

Never in the history of the Church have so many been martyred for their faith. Not even the second and third centuries can rival the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for the intensity of persecution experienced in some countries.

This trend will not diminish. As the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ continues to spread, satanic opposition will arise, even as Jesus predicted would happen in **John 15:18-21** and **John 17:14**.

We explore this trend further in the supplementary study **SP113-10B**.

### ***The Explosion of Communications***

The latter half of the twentieth century saw an explosion in the area of communications. As never before, the Gospel was able to cross boundaries in reaching the masses of the world.

#### **The Voice of Radio**

Radio has been greatly used in spreading the Gospel to previously unevangelized areas. For example, the Far East Broadcasting Association, and other Christian radio ministries, continually beam Christian messages into otherwise unreachable regions.

\* This will be taken up further in **ES114-03**.



### The Flood of Literature

Gospel tracts, teaching materials and Bible studies were printed and distributed by the millions. During the 1960s, for example, a series of “Newspaper Crusades” (full-page illustrated Gospel messages published in the leading newspapers) saw 246,000 Buddhists in Thailand respond and enroll in Bible Correspondence Courses.\*

### The Impact of Television

The latter half of the twentieth century saw television used as a tool for both evangelism and teaching. Names such as Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland and Joyce Meyer are known all over the world through this media.

### The Growth of the Internet

The greatest medium has now become available for the Church of the twenty-first century via the Internet. As never before, the opportunity lies ahead for the spread of the Gospel worldwide by this means.

As the new century unfolds, the Church will continue to use the varied communications media to proclaim the Gospel.

## A New Awakening is Coming

### Read 1 Thessalonians 5:5-9

If there is one thing that should have begun stirring in your heart, as you’ve studied this module on Church history, is a desire to see a new Awakening sweep across the Church of the Twenty-First Century.

There are two ways that a person can be “awakened.”

- **Called awake (Isaiah 52:1-2)** – If a person is asleep, all that is often necessary is to call them to awaken. This is what God does, by his Spirit – calling his Church to rouse from slumber and take up her birthright in her generation.
- **Shaken awake (Hebrews 12:26-28)** – But if someone refuses to respond to the call to awaken, there still remains one option: shake him awake. On occasion, the Lord does this to his Church. Where there has been complacency and apathy, the Lord comes and shakes his Church out of the status quo. Through natural disasters and disturbing events, the Church is shaken into prayer and active evangelism.

Which will it be for us? Let’s respond to the Lord’s call to awake.

## God’s Overriding Plan

From the very beginning, God has had a plan for his Church, and this plan has defined the forward movement of Church history. Despite the strategies of Satan and the machinations of man, God’s plan will ultimately succeed.

\* This was pioneered by Paul and Alexandra Collins, who are part of the OBC Team. In many ways, the roots of the Online Bible College can be found in the Bible Correspondence Courses of the 1960s.

In **Hebrews 12:2**, we discover that it was for “the joy set before him” that Jesus endured the Cross. In **Ephesians 5:25-27**, we learn that this joy was none other than the joy of the bridegroom, for Paul writes:

“...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

This verse alone sets the pace for what God has planned to do in his Church. Despite a history riddled with old-self in-fighting, the Lord still intends that the new-self pattern of selfless love and compassionate power be revealed in and through his Church. In fact, God describes this future Church as being “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” How can this possibly happen? There is only one way – by “cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”

Right through the New Testament, we find the constant theme of God’s plan for his Church. **Philippians 1:6** tells us that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” In **Colossians 1:28**, Paul says that the purpose of his ministry is “so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.” A few verses later, in **Colossians 2:2**, Paul restates that purpose and says that his goal is that the Church “may be encouraged in heart and united in love.” Once again, the way Paul does this is by “admonishing and teaching everyone in all wisdom” (**Colossians 1:28**).

God never intended for his Church to peter out in puff of smoke. By its very nature, as an extension of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Church cannot be marginalized or reduced. Although man might seek to reduce God’s plan, God’s action in this world through his Church cannot be reduced. God’s plan will prevail.

There is probably no better place to see God’s plan for his Church than in the prayer of Jesus himself. In **John 17:20-23**, Jesus prayed:

“...I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*. I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one*: I in them and you in me. *May they be brought to complete unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Could it be any clearer? The intention of the Lord Jesus for his Church is “that *all of them may be one*” and that “they be brought to *complete unity*.” And what will be the result of this unity? The world will believe that Jesus is indeed the Savior of the world! We see this same theme repeated in **John 13:34-35**, when Jesus declares the sole regulation of the New Covenant upon which the Church is founded:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this *all men will know that you are my disciples*, if you love one another.”

Again, in **Romans 16:25-27**, Paul connects the New Covenant lifestyle of the believer with the responsiveness of the world, when he writes:

“Now to him who is able to *establish you by my gospel...so that all nations might believe and obey him...*”

## Going on to Maturity

### Read Ephesians 4:11-13

God's goal is clear. He has planned for his Church to come to full maturity, and that maturity is described in **Ephesians 4:13** as completed when “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to *the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*” Simply put, full maturity means that “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” is being expressed through the Church on the earth.

How can this happen? There is only one way. **Ephesians 4:12** tells us this maturing action will only take place as the five-fold ministry of church leadership – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – equip and prepare the Church for “works of service.” And so, as you can imagine, God's prioritizes the refining and training of Church leadership, for they are the key to a Church united “in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.”

The reason God has placed leadership within the Body of Christ is not just to do the work of the ministry themselves, but to equip the Body of Christ for the work of the ministry. The only way that the Church will mature is if each believer learns to hear from God and respond individually to God's call upon his or her life.

Toward this end, there have been not one but two reforming trends within Church history.

- **The First Reformation** – This reformation began in the fifteenth century and resulted in passing *the Word of God* back to the people. This enabled the average believer to hear God's Word for himself or herself.
- **The Second Reformation** – This reformation began in the twentieth century and is resulting in the passing of *the ministry of Christ* back to the people. This is enabling the average believer to be equipped to fulfil God's individual call upon his or her life.

Vital to both reformations is the leadership of the Church. One of the most important functions of leadership within the Church is to help the individual believer not only to *hear* from God but also to *serve* God in obedience to his call.

## The Blueprint for Restoration

### Read Hebrews 6:1-3

The writer to the Hebrews is very clear that we must “go on to maturity,” but he is equally clear that this maturity is founded on “the elementary teachings of

Christ.” While we should not go back and continually re-lay the same foundations, it is important to realize that without the foundations of these “elementary teachings” there can be no progression toward maturity.

In **verses 1-2**, the writer lists the “elementary teachings” of Christ. Many Christians would consider these as the highest of revelations and experiences in Christ. What he calls the “foundation” most of us would think of as the whole completed building! Let’s take a quick look at them:

- Repentance from dead works (KJV)
- Faith in God
- Instruction about baptisms
- The laying on of hands
- The resurrection of the dead
- Eternal judgment

What the writer records here was far more than just a list of *doctrinal* truths to the early Church. These were *living* truths. In other words, each of the principles listed was a living reality to the Christians of the first century. They not only believed these principles, but had experienced each of them. Repentance and faith were not just doctrinal issues but were personal experiences (**Acts 2:36-38; 16:30-34**). Baptism was not just an act of obedience but was the outward demonstration of an inward experience — the death and burial in Christ of the old sinful self and the resurrection of the new creation to “walk in newness of life” (**Romans 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17**).

And it is true of all the other doctrines on the list. The early Christians knew the reality of the laying on of hands. They had seen people healed and gifts imparted (**Acts 28:8; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6**). They not only believed in the resurrection of the dead; they lived in the power of the resurrection life of Christ (**Acts 9:36-41; 14:19-20**). They not only believed in the coming judgment of God; they knew the reality of that judgment operating in their midst (**Acts 5:1-10**). In fact, so high was the Church’s expression of holiness at that time that Ananias’ and Sapphira’s lie to the Holy Spirit (a relatively minor offence by today’s standards) was instantly revealed and judgment came swiftly from God. This was height of the standard of righteousness the early Church was born into and lived in on a daily basis.

Thus the writer to the Hebrews encourages the believer to leave behind the “elementary teachings” about Christ and to go on to maturity. The goal is the full image of him who is the image of God (**Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4,6**)! “Don’t go back,” the writer exhorts them. “Go on!”

The call to “go on” had become urgent because the opposite was beginning to happen. The church was not merely *not* going on; it was beginning to go backward. She was starting to lose some of the living principles she was founded upon. The enemy had begun to erode the Church’s faith.

As we have studied the succeeding centuries of Church history, we have witnessed the steady decline that took place. Each of the “elementary teachings” of Christ listed in **Hebrews 6:1-2** gradually disappeared until, by the Middle Ages, they had all been replaced by man’s own religious concepts. We have seen how, beginning with Martin Luther, the Reformation restored the first two principles – “repentance from [dead works], and of faith in God.” The twentieth century saw the restoring of the ministry of “the laying on of hands.” But in order for us to go on to full maturity, two more foundational aspects of the Christian life must be re-laid.

## Looking Forward

The last two “elementary teachings” – “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” (**Hebrews 6:2**) – are yet to become a living reality in the Church again. To be sure, we believe them doctrinally. But the experience of these essential doctrines has yet to be fully restored to Church life. This is the next worldwide Awakening that the Church is awaiting.

For these two truths to be a living expression in today’s Church, as it was in the first century, the common standard of holiness has to be the same (as we saw in the account of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5:1-10**). There is no way that this kind of judgment could operate in the Church today, for we would find Christians dropping like flies everywhere! No, God’s righteous judgment can only operate when he has cleansed his Church from the majority of impurities – the “toxic Gospels” we explored in **Module 102**. And in the purity of a Gospel-founded life, the Church will experience once again the full dynamic of the resurrection life of Christ.

Jim Cymbala brings this challenge in his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*:

“Whether we call ourselves classical evangelicals, traditionalists, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, or charismatics, we all have to face our lack of real power and call out for a fresh infilling of the Spirit. We need the fresh wind of God to awaken us from our lethargy. We must not hide any longer behind some theological argument. The days are too dark and dangerous.”<sup>14</sup>

## God’s Magnificent Goal

All the Awakenings of history were not just times of blessing for the Church, but times when multitudes were reached with the Gospel and brought into the kingdom of God. Just as God declared to Abram in **Genesis 12:2-3**:

“I will make you into a great nation and *I will bless you*; I will make your name great, and *you will be a blessing*. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*.”

Abraham was not simply blessed for his own sake. He was blessed so that he would be a blessing to the nations! It is the same with the Church, for in Christ we are “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (**Galatians 3:29**).

And so what will be the focus of the Next Great Awakening? It will be nothing less than the focus that God himself has – a lost and dying world! The Church of the Twenty-First Century, at one with the heart of the Lord, will have its eyes on reaching the world!

God’s ultimate goal for his Church is expressed by Paul in **2 Corinthians 3:18**:

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Just like a newborn baby, from the moment it draws breath, has one goal – to grow to a fully mature adult – so it is for the newborn creation in Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:17**). The goal is the full glory of Christ himself. This has been the underlying theme of all Church history to date, and it is only in the fulfilment of this glorious goal that Church history will reach its consummation. But once again, we need to always remember that God’s purpose is not just to reveal his glory *to* the Church but *through* the Church! Just as **Isaiah 40:3-5** was fulfilled in John the Baptist, who ushered in the first coming of the Lord, so this passage will have a second fulfillment in the last-generation Church, which will usher in the second coming of the Lord.

“And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.650.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.650.

<sup>3</sup> *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.650.

<sup>4</sup> A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.228.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.480.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.480.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.480.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.480.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.480.

<sup>10</sup> Karin Detert, quoted by Richard Riss, *Flashpoints of Revival* (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Karin Detert, quoted by Richard Riss, *Flashpoints of Revival* (1995).

<sup>12</sup> As spoken to David Collins, The Online Bible College.

<sup>13</sup> *Voice of the Martyrs*, Special Edition, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p.97.

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