

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 22 – Church History and Present

### Key Questions:

- How has the Church continued to grow throughout history? How should Christians relate to the government?

### A brief history of the Church

#### Beginnings and initial spread (33 – 312 AD)

The Church began in 33 AD on the Day of Pentecost (see *Part 21*). At that time there was only one local church, in Jerusalem, but as the Christian message spread across the world, local churches were formed in every city. The Christians faced opposition, initially from Jewish people, and later from the Roman Empire after Emperor Nero turned against the Christians in AD 64. Peter and Paul were probably martyred during Nero's persecution. Although the apostle John lived on for around another 30 years, the age of the apostles was coming to an end. During the following 200 years, the Church became more strongly established throughout the Roman Empire (the Middle East, Europe and North Africa). It continued to face opposition from the Roman establishment in waves, but the number of Christians continued to grow.

#### Official acceptance and spread to new territories (312 – 1054 AD)

The situation changed in 312 AD when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. He gave freedom to Christians, and later made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire. It is difficult to know whether Constantine was really a true Christian or whether he only took the name of Christian because he thought it would help him keep his Empire united. The freedom Christians enjoyed was a good thing to begin with, but it soon became a bad thing, as Christianity became linked with the State and with politics. This was never the intention of Jesus or the apostles, and it led to interference by rulers in the activities of the Church and corruption of church leaders. During this 700 year period the gospel spread to new regions including Ireland (432 AD), Germany (716 AD), the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe (863 AD) and Russia (988 AD). The difficulty was that in some areas (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. Christian thinking began to compromise with culture and with other religious and philosophical ideas.

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

In 1054 a growing division between churches in the West and churches in the East finally resulted in a great split between these two branches of Christianity. The division was over a range of minor issues, but also reflected political and cultural changes. Over time the teaching of the established State Church in the West (centred in Rome, and later becoming the "Roman Catholic Church") moved further away from the teaching of the Bible, taking in false ideas from other religions and from Greek philosophy, and many people became Christians in name only (that is "nominal Christians"). People believed that they could be Christians just because they were born in a "Christian country" or to "Christian parents" or by going to church services or being a member of the State church. They lost sight of the Bible's teaching that every person needs a personal relationship with God through Jesus. There were, of course, always many true Christians as well as these "nominal Christians", both within the mainstream churches and in separate groups of simple churches where the Bible was taught (for example the Waldensians). One of the saddest developments during this period was the increasing involvement of leaders of the established Church, particularly the Pope, in political affairs. This resulted in corruption in the organisation of the Roman Catholic Church which took large amounts of money from the people to build massive buildings and to make the Pope rich. It also led the Pope to support and even encourage European rulers to take part in Crusades against Muslim armies in the Middle East. The Crusades were a low point in the history of Christianity as armies fought in the name of Christ, whose message was one of grace and forgiveness not war.

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

In 1517 AD a man called Martin Luther nailed a piece of paper to the door of a Cathedral in Germany. The paper was intended to spark a debate in the Roman Catholic Church about some of the main areas where the official teaching of the Church had moved furthest from the Bible. 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 as a result of good deeds. The Roman Catholic Church refused to change, and followers of Luther and other Bible teachers were formed to break away from it to form new churches. Some of these churches followed the Roman Catholic pattern of being linked with the State, but others, especially the Anabaptists (who rediscovered the truth of believers baptism) were separate from the State. These new churches became known as Protestants because they protested against the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants became the majority in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, Scandinavia and North America. Unfortunately many people within Protestant churches also became nominal Christians over time, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century there were great revivals in Great Britain and North America as God drew many people back to Himself.

#### Mission and worldwide spread (1793 - 2006 AD)

In 1793 an English man called William Carey went to India to spread the gospel. He was the first of thousands of Western Christians who went to countries where the church was not yet established or had been present but had died away over the following 200 years as missionaries. 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. Christ is continuing to build His Church one person at a time as individuals come to a living faith in Him. After becoming a Christian there are many other things to learn, including truths about the Church, but these are of secondary importance to knowing God personally through Christ. Being a member of a church will not save you – only God can save you through faith in Jesus.

## Christians as citizens

Jesus never intended Christianity to be linked with the government of the State, and some of the biggest problems in Church history occurred when either the State tried to control the Church (causing the Church to compromise its message) or the Church tried to control the State (causing Church leaders to be distracted by power and money). So, how should Christians live as citizens of modern countries, especially where they disagree with aspects of government policy?

### Christ's teaching about citizenship

Jesus taught that His followers should respect the people who rule over them and pay their taxes as good citizens (Matthew 22:15-21), and He never encouraged his followers to be revolutionaries. If Christians believe that the government of their country is unfair and needs to change they should work peacefully for this rather than rioting or fighting. **Christians should always work peacefully to make their society a better place, more like the Kingdom of God, since they are citizens of God's Kingdom first** of all and only secondly citizens of the land they live in (Matthew 6:33). Although the Kingdom of God is here now among His people, it will not come on earth until Jesus returns (see *Part 23*). Christ's message was one of overcoming sin and oppression through humility and sacrifice, and He demonstrated this by overcoming sin and the Devil through the cross. Christians are called to follow His example and to overcome what is wrong through demonstrating God's love.

### The apostles' teaching about citizenship

The apostles' teaching agrees with Jesus' position, and teaches more about our responsibility as citizens. Christians should be better citizens than people who are not Christians, as they will:

- *Respect and pray for those who rule over them* (Romans 13:1-7; I Timothy 2:1-4)
- *Be honourable, and do everything they can to live at peace with other people* (Romans 12:17-18)
- *Be hard working* (II Thessalonians 3:6-13), respectful of others, unselfish, and honest (Ephesians 4:25-28)
- *Be more forgiving and generous and more loyal to their family and fellow-workers* (Colossians 3:12-14)

These qualities make for a very good citizen in any country. So, the Church should never try to control the State, and the State should not try to control the Church, but should allow freedom for Christians to worship God. Only in situations 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 reflects submission to the authorities and a desire for peace.

## Recognising and dealing with false teachings

The Bible predicted that many false teachers would come in the years after the death of Jesus. Jesus Himself spoke about this (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. This would result in great opposition for Christians, and some people would be deceived by the false teaching (see warnings from Paul in II Timothy 3:12-13, Peter in II Peter 2, and Jude in Jude 3-4). Jesus described them as wolves in "sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15-23). It should not surprise us, then, that there are false teachers today. False prophets have even started religious movements (usually called cults) that have gained large numbers of followers. I will mention two here that have been targeting many Chinese people. They are useful examples in helping us think about how to recognise cults. One originated in the West and the other inside China:

### Jehovah's Witnesses

This group was founded in America in 1852 by Charles Russell and is very active among Chinese people in the West, where they have some Mandarin speaking teachers. Their literature can always be identified because it says "**Watchtower**" on it. They do not believe that Jesus is God, and they also teach that people must earn forgiveness from God rather than receiving it as a free gift. They use their own translation of the Bible which distorts the meaning of many verses. They may be nice people, but their teaching is not true Christianity.

### Eastern Lightning (Dongfang Shandian)

This group was founded by Zhao Weishan in 1989, and claims that Jesus has returned to earth in the person of a 30-year old Chinese woman in Henan province. They claim that only people who believe in this female Messiah can be saved, and that there are "ten standards" that people must aim to achieve, including pure understanding, a sensitive conscience, willing submission and a deep love for God. They reject the authority of the Bible. They enter Christian churches, pretending to be interested in becoming Christians, and then try to deceive Christians and destroy the church.

These are only two examples of cults, but there are many others (another high profile example is the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* or *Mormons*). There are five simple tests you can use to test the teaching of any group to help you know if they are a cult:

1. **Do they have a book other than the Bible?** True Christians believe that the Bible is God's word, and the only book He has given us. They will always try to follow the teachings of the Bible and not any other person.
2. **Did they start with a person other than Jesus who they see as God's spokesperson?**
3. **Do they believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully human?**
4. **Do they believe that the only way to have sins forgiven is through the death of Jesus?**
5. **Do they believe that only people in their group are going to be in Heaven?** Although Christians believe that only people with a personal relationship with God through Jesus will be saved, there are true Christians in many different church groups on earth. Any church or group that claims that people must be a member of their own group to be saved, or that refuses to work with other Christian churches is probably a cult.

Another good test is to ask a mature Christian you know whether they can recommend this group or church to you.

### Key Lesson: Christians should be good citizens but their loyalty is first to God's Kingdom

Christians must be loyal to the values of God's Kingdom. This will normally make them good citizens of the country they live in (respectful, honourable, peaceable and hard-working). When the state conflicts with God's Kingdom Christians should protest peacefully but may need to face persecution from the government.