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PART 1

# THE IRRESISTIBLE ADVANCE

The urgency of the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples was probably not well understood by many New Testament believers, nor was it even the primary impetus for the rapid church growth during the early centuries. Persecution scattered believers throughout the Mediterranean world and Christianity quickly took root, at first mainly where Gentile seekers had gotten a head start in synagogues. By the end of the first century the church was beginning to move into Europe, Africa, and Asia. "Had the church been wiped off the face of the earth at the end of the first century," writes Ramsay MacMullen, "its disappearance would have caused no dislocation in the empire, just as its presence was hardly noticed at the time. . . . Three centuries later it had successfully displaced or suppressed the other religions of the empire's population."[1]

While evangelism and church planting took priority in the New Testament church, theological issues soon came to the fore in the era of Emperor Constantine, and Christian leaders found themselves consumed not only with heretical influences from without, but also with doctrinal controversies from within. Theologians hammered out creeds, and church councils argued about everything from the deity of Christ to the date of Easter. In the process, the New Testament missionary fervor declined. Missionary outreach would continue in the centuries following Constantine largely through monastic ministries—some more polite and proper than others. For example, one of the most celebrated evangelists of the fifth century was the peculiar saint known as Symeon Stylites. He made his home high on a pillar near Antioch, where he stood "day after broiling day . . . drawing to him by his great repute the most various visitors from the most distant places."[2] Bishop Theodoret, who spent time in a small enclosure at the base of Symeon's pillar, wrote about the evangelistic appeal that radiated from this remote outpost:

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> [Even the bedouins] in many thousands, enslaved to the darkness of impiety, were enlightened by the station upon the pillar. . . . They arrived in companies, 200 in one, 300 in another, occasionally a thousand. They renounced with their shouts their traditional errors; they broke up their venerated idols in the presence of that great light; and they forswore the ecstatic rites of Aphrodite, the demon whose service they had long accepted. They enjoyed divine religious initiation and received their law instead spoken by that holy tongue [of Symeon]. . . . And I myself was witness to these things and heard them, as they renounced ancestral impiety and submitted to evangelic instruction.[3]

With the invasion of the barbarians and the subsequent fall of the Roman Empire, Western Europe was in chaos, and it required the talent and ability of a man like Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome (590–604), to stabilize the church and revitalize its missionary activity. He saw the necessity of political alliances, and he established a pattern of church-state cooperation that continued for centuries—convinced that the church could not maintain its presence among hostile peoples without the military support of temporal rulers.

Charlemagne (742–814), the great king of the Franks, ranks above all other kings as a military supporter of Christianity. No other ruler before or after gave as much attention to the copying and transmission of the Bible. Charlemagne brought nominal Christianity to vast portions of Europe and was the prime mover in the Carolingian Renaissance that fostered learning and a wide variety of Christian activity.

But while the Christian movement seemed to be making headway with the barbarians in middle Europe, it was rapidly losing ground to the mighty force of Islam as that religion spread out from east to west through Palestine, across Africa, and on into Spain. The Muslims were stopped by military might at the Battle of Tours in 732, and during this period force was seen by most leaders as the only viable response to this all-encompassing threat. The Crusades (1095–1291), described by Ralph Winter as "the most massive, tragic misconstrual of Christian mission in all history,"[4] were launched to reclaim lost territories. They eventually failed in that effort, while at the same time diverting vast resources of Christendom from any true missionary endeavor.

This is not to suggest that there were no sincere missionary enterprises during the Middle Ages. Celtic and Arian missionaries conducted noteworthy evangelistic ventures, bringing vast numbers of barbarians into the church. In many cases, the Roman Catholic monks actively evangelized the barbarians. The Benedictines were particularly influential through their founding of mission compounds in remote areas; but gradual accumulation of wealth eventually brought about their decline, diverting the monks' attention from spiritual matters and making their monasteries prime targets for Viking raids.

The attacks of the Goths, the Visigoths, and the Vandals that brought down the Roman Empire were almost mild in comparison to the later raids by the

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Vikings. These seafaring warriors "were the scourge of England and the continent," according to Herbert Kane. "So devastating were their raids on the monasteries and churches that for a time they threatened to terminate the missionary outreach of the English Church."[5] The "Irish volcano which had poured forth a passionate fire of evangelism for three centuries," writes Winter, "cooled almost to extinction." The destruction of the monasteries, though, did not erase the gospel witness. "The phenomenal power of Christianity," as Winter points out, could not be destroyed: "The conquerors became conquered by the faith of the captives. Usually it was the monks sold as slaves or the Christian girls forced to be their wives and mistresses which eventually won these savages of the north."[6] Nevertheless, the Viking attacks were a devastating blow to the stability of both the Celtic and Roman traditions in the British Isles and in central Europe.

The destruction of biblical manuscripts along with monasteries and churches had a negative effect on missions, but there were other factors that were no doubt an even greater deterrent to evangelism during the Middle Ages. Church leadership during much of the medieval period was in a sad state of affairs. The power of the papacy had long invited abuses, and in the tenth century the decadence representing that office had reached an all-time low. Some of the popes were among the worst scoundrels in society. Pope Stephen IV (d. 772) brought his deceased predecessor to trial (propping his corpse up in a chair to face the synod), and he himself was thrown in prison, where, after serving less than a year, he was murdered at the orders of an opponent. Other popes openly committed immoral and criminal acts while in office. The Great Schism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that resulted in two popes, and for a time three, did nothing to improve the image of the office or spirituality of the church leadership.

But if this politicized form of Christianity was too preoccupied with other matters to be concerned about missions, so was the academic tradition. The speculative and philosophically-oriented theology of the Middle Ages known as Scholasticism occupied the best minds of the church. Education turned away from practical pursuits and instead was concentrated on reconciling dogma with reason. "With intrepid confidence," writes Philip Schaff, "these busy thinkers ventured upon the loftiest speculations, raised and answered all sorts of doubts and ran every accepted dogma through a fiery ordeal to show its invulnerable nature. They were knights of theology. . . . Philosophy . . . was their handmaid" and "dialectics their sword and lance."[7]

On the positive side, there were many movements that sought to purify the church. A number of efforts were aimed at reforming the papacy, some more successful than others, and there were significant monastic reforms—ones that usually resulted in a greater evangelistic outreach. The Cluniac reform that began in 910 at the monastery of Cluny in central France was the beginning of a spiritual renewal in monasticism. It was followed by the inspirational ministry of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and the founding of the Cistercians that

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brought an even greater resurgence of evangelistic activity in Europe. The greatest mission development in Roman Catholic religious orders, however, came with the rise of the friars—the preaching monks who in the late medieval period stimulated mission outreach. The Franciscans (founded 1209) and Dominicans (founded 1216) and later the Jesuits (founded 1534) planted churches and monasteries in Europe and all over the world.

For many Christians these reform efforts were not carried far enough, and throughout the Middle Ages there were movements to purify the body of Christ that were in direct opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. The Waldensians are a prime example. Though they were branded as heretics, they sought to reflect New Testament Christianity more closely than did most Roman Catholics. They emphasized evangelism, Bible study, and personal commitment to Christ, and from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries they made their presence known in central and eastern Europe. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the followers of Wycliffe and Hus instituted similar reforms, paving the way for the Protestant Reformation.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation stirred hearts and shook the very foundations of Christendom but contributed little to evangelism outside areas that were already deemed Christian. This spiritual renewal in Europe brought a meaningful faith to large segments of the population, but the urgency to reach out to others was not seen as a top priority. Protestants were consumed in fighting for their own survival (and among themselves), and in some cases the Great Commission was all but forgotten.

The Protestant Reformation, as with all other reform movements throughout church history, had difficulty maintaining its spiritual vitality. The enthusiasm generated by Luther, Calvin, Melanchthon, and Zwingli soon began to wane and many Protestant churches became appendages of the state. But as had been the case in centuries past, no matter how low the established church sank there were always those who sought a deeper spiritual meaning in life. The Anabaptist movement that spawned the Brethren and Mennonite churches reached out in evangelistic zeal, and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries evangelical revivals furthered the mission advance. Pietism on the continent and the evangelical movements in Britain and America led to a revitalization of Christianity from which a passion for missions arose. Pietists and their Moravian successors fanned out all over the world, and Christians in Britain and America were moved to action by a spiritual concern for the native American Indians. The dawning of the modern missionary movement had begun, but only after generations of uncertainty.