

ADVANCE THROUGH STORM IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

The Scottish scholar, Marcus Dods, said near the end of the 19th century that he didn't envy those who would carry the banner of Christianity into the twentieth century. But he added, "Yes, perhaps I do, but it will be a stiff fight." This past century saw the conflict between liberalism and fundamentalism, culture wars and worship strife, the blood of martyrs shed by Communism, Fascism, and Islam, but also church growth in unexpected quarters. Who can tell what the future holds for the Church? One can only predict trends on the basis of past events and developments within the Church. In this article I can only point to a few dangers and trends which impact the Church. But this we do know for certain: The shaping of the future is, thankfully, by no means entirely in our hands. In the midst of the world's turbulence and upheaval, our almighty and sovereign God will continue to unfold His purposes. This truth will give God's people encouragement, strength, and hope.

Many questions can be raised about the future of the Church. Will denominations go on as we know them? Will our secular society become even more hostile to Christianity than in the past? Will the trends of the recent past plot the direction the Church will take in the years to come? In the West, the future of the Church does not look promising. This should not be a surprise for us. The New Testament has much to say of evil. It even seems pessimistic: "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). And Jesus spoke about the wheat and the tares. They will grow together until the great Harvest Day. Although from a purely human perspective, the future for the Church may look troublesome and even grim, the Church may not act as a beleaguered city besieged by an army. The Church is challenged not only to defend but also to attack.

What are some of the trends we should watch for as we enter the Third Millennium? Already in 1972, the Dutch theologian, Dr. A.A. Van Ruler, said that there is no guarantee that the Church of Christ and the Kingdom of God in the West will remain with the whites. Why should the Church not be taken away from us and transplanted in Asia or Africa? Van Ruler's musings proved correct. The majority of Christians will be in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Christianity will have many rivals. The cults and the sects will not slacken down in their battle for the hearts and minds of men. Islam is Christianity's most serious and dangerous rival. It is anti-democratic and a foe of religious freedom. Where Muslims are in political dominance, the law of Islam is enforced. In Muslim States, the government makes the conversion to Christianity so difficult as to be impossible. In his remarkable book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington exposes the threat of Islam. He calls its resurgence an extremely important historical event affecting one-fifth or more of humanity, and at least as significant as the American Revolution, French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution. He shows that it has affected Muslims in every country. Islam is a zealous militant missionary faith. Huntington notes that the Saudi, Libyan, and other governments use their oil riches to

stimulate and finance the Muslim revival. He even raises the possibility of a global war of civilizations as a consequence of the vast growth of Islam. Hence, the presentation of the Gospel among Muslims should be a priority for the Church in the Third Millennium. The Western world is in a spiritual crisis. The revival of paganism in the Western world, combined with secularism, will continue its relentless opposition to the Gospel, threatening the very existence of the Church while contributing to the further disintegration and decline of Western civilization. Already in 1946, the American church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, wrote that millions on the continent of Europe are so secularized that they are, in fact, pagan. He also noted that in the United States many areas exist, some in the cities, some in the rural districts, which are either completely untouched by the Gospel or so superficially reached that they are almost non-Christian. D.A. Carson observes that very little consensus is left in Western countries over the proper basis of moral behaviour. And he reckons that due to the power of the media, for millions of men and women, the only venue where moral questions are discussed and weighed are the talk shows where, more often than not, the primary aim is to entertain, even shock, and not to think. Christopher Lasch describes our Western culture as narcissistic. The prevailing passion is to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. In his provocative book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, Stephen Carter shows how modern politics and law trivialize all values, and marginalize religion. In 1987, Lesslie Newbigin asked in an article, "Can the West be converted?" His analysis of the West's religious condition was perceptive. He was convinced that what we have is a pagan society whose public life is ruled by beliefs which are false. And he stated that "because it is not a pre-Christian paganism, but a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity, it is far tougher and more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which foreign missionaries have been in contact during the past 200 years. Here, without possibility of question, is *the most challenging missionary frontier of our time*" (italics mine).

In North America, religion is still influential, but, to many, theology does not appear very important. David F. Ford observes that it tends to be seen as a specialized professional discipline and marginal, within both academic and wider culture. Modern theologians appear more interested in addressing and changing society rather than relating theology to the Church. Nancy T. Ammerman, a sociologist and researcher at Hartford Theological Seminary, suggests that a new "Golden Rule Christianity" is taking hold even in a growing number of conservative, evangelical congregations. This new form of Christianity defines the faith, not in terms of beliefs and doctrine, but simply in terms of practices, making few intellectual demands on believers. They are fuzzy about the doctrines of God, sin, repentance, redemption, and the Church. Experience counts more than theology. This waning interest in the historic creeds, confessions and doctrine is distressing and bodes ill for the future. Centuries ago, God warned that lack of knowledge of His Word is destructive. (Hos. 4:6)

Conservative churches seem to follow rather than lead in our secular society, a society which has become almost totally Biblically illiterate. Statistics show that 35 percent of all the Americans who claim to be born again don't read their Bibles at all! This sad state of

affairs presents a new and urgent challenge for Christians who believe in the supreme authority of the inerrant Scriptures. Dr. Carson claims that American pastors and evangelists cannot assume any Biblical knowledge on the part of their hearers: the most elementary narratives are completely unknown. And he observes that the situation is getting worse, now that the Bible is excluded from the public schools, is not taught systematically in most churches, and has been further sidelined with the demise of family devotions. Sadly, the situation in the U.S. is no different from Canada's. In the new millennium, conservative churches will also have to deal with the appalling Biblical illiteracy among their own members. By the end of the twentieth century, conservative churches grew numerically but not in spiritual depth. Many churches are busy building relationship and counseling programs, supporting weight loss programs and courses on improving self-esteem, promoting family values and combating the erosion of denominational loyalty. But if the Scriptures are not taught, where will the next generation get their doctrines? No wonder that so many Biblically ignorant Christians don't have the foggiest idea what it means to look at the world through a Biblical world and life view. It should not come as a surprise, then, that so many Christians don't see the danger of New Age teachings. Our youth and adults need to be taught and disciplined in the faith.

In the new millennium, Christians in the West may become so marginalized that outright persecution is a distinct possibility. When we believe in the Lordship of Christ and obey His Word, we must be prepared to suffer the consequences. Privatized, therapeutic, Golden Rule Christianity is irrelevant. Biblical Christianity, the way of the cross, invites opposition. Professor M.H. Ogilvie noted in a speech delivered in March 1999, at Ottawa's Carleton University, that for the first time since the 4th century, in the west, ridicule, marginalization, discrimination and threats of civil and criminal legal sanctions often accompany the professing of Christ, both in the university and in civil society generally. *The banishment of Christians and of Christianity from both university and civil society is almost complete* (italics mine).

Will the Third Millennium be the last? When the end of history will come, we don't know. The Scriptures don't give us the exact time or hour. While we wait for our Lord's glorious return, we are called upon to live patiently, prayerfully, actively, and expectantly before Him, refusing to bow down before modern idols or to surrender to false teachings and ideologies. Let the Gospel be the Gospel while boldly proclaiming it as public truth! The task won't be easy, but our Lord has promised to keep His Church even in the midst of fiery trials. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus says (John 16:33); "but take heart! I have overcome the world."

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