

The Truth is Marching On! 9-28-03

Matthew 13:33

I want to start out giving credit to Newsweek magazine 4-16-01 and Dr. Jim Garlow for the information I'm going to share with you this morning. It is an amazing story. In fact, it is so incredible, if you weren't familiar with parts of it, you might think I was making it up. The statistics are so astounding that you may want to verify them for yourself. It is the story of Christianity. It began in the heart of the Father before the creation of the world. Sometime around 4 B.C. the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, was born to a virgin named Mary. Around the age of 30 He began to teach and preach. His first disciples were followers of His cousin, John the Baptist. John said his entire mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. Other disciples were called. He had an inner band of 12. The numbers grew and then waned. He lived a sinless life, performed many miracles, but His message was so challenging that many turned away. He fulfilled dozens of specific prophecies about the Messiah that were given hundreds of years earlier.

In spite of, or because of, that incredible life, the religious leaders of that day had Him executed as a criminal. Three days later He walked out of His grave victorious over death. The disciples were now worshippers. One of the last things He said to them before ascending into heaven is recorded in Acts 1:8 (NIV) *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

120 of His disciples had gathered to wait in Jerusalem, following Jesus' instructions. The promised power that they would need to be witnesses of His resurrection did come. That day Peter preached a message, and 3000 people became believers. The church grew in Jerusalem as a sect of Judaism until about 8 years later when Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian church. The church, now about 20,000 strong, scattered to the many Jewish settlements. Paul went west; Thomas to the East, sharing the story of Jesus and hope of salvation through His name. The last Apostle to die was John the Beloved around the year 100. Before his death he warned of false teachings that were invading the church. From without there was physical persecution begun by the Jews and carried on by the Romans, especially Nero from the year 64. The world was dominated by Rome and the worship of the Roman Emperor as god. Allegiance to Rome required the burning of incense to the Emperor by every citizen except the Jews. Christians were no longer recognized as Jews, and because of their allegiance to Jesus, the Roman world saw them as traitors.

From the years 120 to 220 the doctrinal attacks from within were especially strong. God raised up apologists to defend and define true faith, men like Justin Martyr and Tertullian. During this time the Gospels and letters were translated into other languages and passed among the churches. The term Bishop no longer just applied to the local elders but to an overseer of a region of churches. His job was to help them avoid the false teachings that were sprouting up. When a false teaching was particularly rampant,

the bishops would gather together to consider the truth or error of a teaching. These meetings, church councils, helped the mostly illiterate church stay with pure doctrine.

250-261- The Decade of Horror. During this time persecution was so intense and thorough that Christians were labeled in one of three categories. There were martyrs, those who had given their lives rather than deny Christ. There were the confessors, those who had scars of torture or loss of limbs because of their refusal to deny Jesus. There were the Lapse, those who denied Christ and yet claimed to believe. It was around this time that church buildings began to be erected. The church struggled within as it went from the itinerant pastors to locally established pastors.

By 311 Christianity had converted so many that Rome decided to make peace with it and passed the Edict of Toleration, ending persecution. 313 Constantine put the cross of Jesus on the shield of his troops and was victorious. By 380 Christianity became the national religion of Rome. What a radical change! In 350 years the little band of 12 had now grown to be the religion of the greatest earthly power. The Bible was then in 500 languages, but where there is worldly power, there is corruption.

590 to 1517. The Middle or Dark Ages. Pope Gregory became the first pope as we understand the position today. Doctrines of the mass and purgatory were developed to keep the people submitted to the hierarchy of the Church. All versions of the Bible other than Latin were abolished. Corruption within the church grew increasingly wicked. Church conferences now meant a major increase in prostitution where they were held. Simony was introduced, named after the magician in Acts who wanted to buy the Holy Spirit. Priests sold supposed relics of the saints, which were said to give you special favor in God's eyes. If all the bones of Saint Peter were assembled, he would have been at least six stories tall! To be the Bishop of an area meant an enormous income, so a bishopric went to the highest bidder. Indulgences were sold as a way of buying forgiveness even before you committed a sin.

But while all this was happening, little bands of true believers evangelized the world. On the southern tip of Ireland a secret school of pastors trained men in the truth of the Bible and sent them out to proclaim it. The established church ran into little bands of believers that were spiritual descendents of the original apostles that went into the entire world. When the Church ran into them, it insisted that they submit to their authority, and when they would not, they would kill or imprison them. One such group was the Waldensians named after one of their prominent leaders, Peter Waldo. This band of Christians fled to the French Alps to continue to worship in freedom. The Church harassed them for 600 years, but there are still 20,000 of them in New York in our day.

The Catholic Church realized that one of the most dangerous things was the word of God in a language that the common person understood. It would burn alive anyone found with a translation of the Scriptures. Some were killed for even teaching the Lord's Prayer to their children in their native tongue.

1100-1300. The church was embarrassed that the Holy Land was under Muslim control, and so the pope encouraged crusades to take it back. At first successful, they controlled Israel for 100 years until again driven out by the Muslims. The atrocities and crimes committed by the church during that time are deplorable. In 1212 a Children's Crusade was organized. Children were loaded onto ships to go to liberate Jerusalem and instead were sold into slavery.

There was a power struggle within the Catholic Church. At one time there were 3 popes all fighting to be the one recognized pope. In contrast to all this power mongering, mystics arose within the church. They were humble men like Saint Francis, John of the Cross, Theresa of Avilar, Bonaventure, and Ekkert. Their teachings encouraged people to have a personal relationship with Jesus. We might consider some of their teachings a bit too esoteric for us today, but they had a profound devotion to God in the midst of such corruption.

Then God began to stir men who saw the need for the Word of God to be in the hands of the people to break the hold of this long age of darkness. John Wycliffe was such a man, convinced that the Bible in English would change England. He taught against the corruption of the Church and raised up laymen called Lollards (to mutter or inarticulate) to help him get the message out. They were persecuted as they went about preaching the truth. The notes his students took would become the fuel of the Reformation. Before his death in 1384, he translated the New Testament from the Latin Vulgate into English. By 1408 the Church had banned his and all other translations.

John Huss came to realize and teach that believing in Jesus made you a part of the true church. The Catholic Church demanded that he recant his teachings, they gathered his life works, volumes of books written by hand, and in 1416 set them ablaze throwing Huss on the fire to die with his writings and some of the handwritten notes of Wycliffe's students. Huss last words predicted that in 100 years God would raise up a man whose voice of dissention could not be silenced.

1483 Martin Luther was born. Traveling a road one day in 1505, a lightning bolt just misses him and he commits his life to be a priest. After training as a priest, he sets about to administer his first communion. As he raises the elements to begin what he thought was their transformation into the body and blood of Jesus, he shook with such fear that the altar boys had to help steady his hands. Under that altar someone had hidden the ashes of John Huss.

In Martin's confessions to Father Stopitz, he would go on for hours about his sins. Father Stopitz thought he needed to get his mind on something else and so assigned him to study and teach Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. As he studied, he saw the truth that church had neglected so long. During a visit to Rome, disgusted with all the decadence, as he climbed the stairs on his knees doing penance, the Scripture broke through to his understanding, "The just shall live by faith". On returning to Wittenberg, he nailed his 99 thesis to the door of the church. It was common to post topics for discussion, but the things he posted were uncommon. They were the truths that Wycliffe and Huss had seen. This happened 100 years after Huss' prediction. He

became known for the expressions Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), Sola Gratia (Grace alone), Sola Fide (Faith alone).

1521 He was ordered to defend himself at the Diet of Worms. Once there he found that he was ordered to recant. He asked for a night to consider. The next day he stood before his church leaders and declared, "My conscience is held captive by the Word of God. I cannot, I will not recant! Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen." On his return trip, men lay in wait to murder him. Before he got to that point in the road, friends kidnapped him and held him against his will in the Wartburg Castle. There he translated the Bible into German.

William Tyndale fought to get the Bible into English. When the church told him the Bible would never be in English, he replied, "The day will come when every ploughboy in England knows the Bible better than you!" Since resistance was too strong in England, he went to Germany to translate and publish it and smuggled 6000 copies of the New Testament back into England. In 1536 he was caught, strangled and his body was burned. By then, 50,000 copies of his New Testament in English had been printed. His dying prayer was that God would open the eyes of the King of England.

1490s and educated pastors like Savonarola and John Collette began to preach to their congregations by directly translated the Bible from Greek manuscripts. Soon the cathedrals filled as people craved the fresh translation of the word of God in their own language.

A short time later in England, Henry the VIII wanted an annulment of his marriage. His wife was related to the pope who refused to annul the marriage. King Henry decided he would try this new form of Christianity that the Church was resisting and formed the Anglican Church. He ordered 20,000 copies of Tyndale's English Bible to be printed.

One of the men he hired to define this faith was named Kramer. Kramer was later captured and broken, and recanted his beliefs in writing. From Kramer's cell he could see two others, Lattimer and Ridley being marched to the stake to be burned. He overheard one of them declare, "This candle they are lighting will never be put out!" Later, when Kramer was brought out to be made a show of, Kramer walked over to the fire. Ordered to declare his recantation he said, "I recant of my recanting and put the hand that signed that document into the fires first." That day he and 200 others were burned alive, but you cannot stop the Word of God.

Jump forward over a century. The Anglican Church in England is now settling into its own forms of corruption. A pastor named Wesley had his home set afire because of his teachings. He and his wife and 8 children escaped but saw their youngest in the second story window. The neighbors formed a human ladder and rescued young John Wesley just before the house collapsed. His mother, Susanna declared, "Young John, surely you are a brand plucked from the burning." He studied to be a minister and went to Georgia as a missionary. He was a total failure. On the ship back to England, a storm threatened to sink the ship. He saw a group of Christians called Moravians. They were singing with joy and peace during the storm. When he asked their leader, Peter Bowler, why it was

they had such peace, Peter told him, "John, preach faith until you have it, and when you have it, you will most assuredly preach it!" May 24th, 1738 at Aldersgate Street reading the preface to Romans by Martin Luther, John said, "My heart was strangely warmed." Then he began to preach faith.

Challenged by Whitfield to preach to the masses outside the church, he preached to coal miners at 5am on their way to the mines, and was overwhelmed at the response. That began a ministry of 50 years of 18-hour days and 40,000 sermons that would transform England. He began home Bible study groups in which every individual was asked, "How is it with your soul?" At the time of his death it is estimated that 1 million were adherents to Wesley's teachings of the Bible.

The First Great Awakening in America came around 1740s with the preaching of Jonathon Edwards. He was a very educated man but with poor eye sight. He buried his head in his notes as he preached so that he could read them. When he looked up he was always amazed at the response that the word was having on people. Some fell to the floor in repentance; others clung white knuckled to their pews fearing they would fall in to hell at any moment. It is estimated that 10% of the population of the US was converted to Jesus, and 150 new churches were built during that period of revival.

The Second Great Awakening came in 1801. Yale was celebrating its 100th anniversary when the Spirit of God began to move and 1/3rd of the campus came to accept Jesus as their Lord. Camp meetings began in the South in which large numbers came to Christ. Volunteerism was growing by leaps and bounds. The Sunday School movement began teaching lay people to teach the Bible. Wayside Chapel is an extended result of that Second Great Awakening. Some of the most sweeping reforms happened as a result. Missions began in earnest.

In 1857 in New York, a noontime prayer meeting began with just 3. The next day 12 came and then 20. Soon New York was closing down at noon while people sought God in prayer. But as we have seen earlier in history, when things are their strongest, the attack begins. This time the attack came as cults began to spring up. Textual criticism of German scholars began to sow doubt about the Word of God. An era began in which every attempt was made to discredit God's word, but God's word is strong enough to stand intense scrutiny.

1900 Believers in America dedicated the century to God. 80% of believers were in North America and Europe. As churches grew and flourished so did the attack on the word of God. Finally, by 1960 every mainline denomination was in decline.

But the truth goes marching on. While faith in the old bastions of Christianity, America and Europe, languished, it began to flourish in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Christianity passed the growth of Islam. In Africa, upbeat Christian music plays on popular radio stations in Ibo, Twior, or Swahili. Businesses have given themselves names that declare their faith, "Thy Will Be Done Hair Salon, The Lord is My Light Car Wash, and Trust in God Auto Repair. South of the Sahara, Africa is distinctly Christian. There, Christianity is spreading faster than at anytime or place in history!

Today 60% of Christians are in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Look at these charts of the growth of Christianity in these regions. In Nigeria alone there are 7x more Anglicans (Presbyterians) than in the USA. The rift in the denomination is between liberal US Christians and fundamental Christians in the third world. But this growth is not going unchallenged. 1000s have been murdered by the radical Islamic element. We only hear a small portion of the crimes against Christians around the world. But the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Christianity continues to out pace Islamic growth.

Step back now and take a look at what God has done in spite of all the forces of hell trying to stop Him. Jesus started with 12. We might look at that and say He wasn't too successful. By the day of Pentecost there were 120. That evening there were 3120. By the year 38 they had grown to 20,000. That year persecution drove 12 of them to Antioch. By 100 AD there were 100,000 believers in Antioch alone. By the year 1000 there were 50 million believers. By 1900 560 million! Today there are 2 billion believers! Do you think it is just population increase? Look at it in an even more startling way. In the year 100, 1 in 360 confessed Christ. By the year 1000 it was 1 in 220. A little better don't you think? But the population really exploded by 1990. Surely it is a smaller portion then? By 1990 it was 1 in 7! Today, as we approach the year 2004, nearly 1 in 4 people claim to trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation. You say, "But are you including the Catholics?" The Catholic Church is experiencing its own revival. There are more people who claim to be born again in the Catholic Church than in any single denomination.

During this service approximately 5,000 people have come to trust in Jesus Christ. About one million will become Christians this week. More than 28,000 convert every day in China alone! In Africa 40 new churches spring up every day! Oh but what about Islam you ask? More Muslims have come to Christ since 1980 than in the previous 1000 years! 70% of all believers have come to Christ since 1900. Of those, 70% came to faith since WWII. 70% of those came in the last 3 years!

Jesus said, *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."* Matthew 24:14 (NIV)

Brothers and sisters, we have a skewed perspective influenced by our media and culture. Reality is that the truth is marching on! Against all odds, the wrath of power hungry men and Satan, Jesus' words are coming to pass. Look up! Your redemption is drawing near!