

The Story of God's Mighty Acts 1st Millennium

To the casual observer, the first Christian millennium began in light and ended in darkness. Unquestionably, the era began in light. As Matthew said when he noted the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "The people which sat in darkness saw a great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up" (Matthew 4:16). The time of the birth of Jesus Christ was, as Paul said, "the fulness of the time" (Galatians 4:4).

The sovereign hand of God had directed the course of history to prepare the world for the coming of the Saviour. The Greeks had brought cultural unity to the Mediterranean world through their language and literature. The Romans had established political and economic unity through the military legions that established their empire. Above all, the Jews made their contribution. They were the ones "to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever" (Romans 9:4-5). All were tools in the hands of God to shape history to His ends.

By contrast, the world in A.D. 1000 at the end of the millennium appeared very dark; it is the era historians often call the Dark Ages. Consider the popes of the period, the supposed heads of Christ's church on earth. Their administrations in the tenth century have been called, even by Roman Catholics, papal "pornocracy" ("rule by harlots"). Popes of later eras—whatever their personal failings—were at least men of political skill and worldly shrewdness. In the tenth century, the popes were nothing more than lecherous time-servers, mere pawns in the hands of political factions in Rome. The real power behind the papal throne was a mother (Theodora) and her two daughters (Marozia and Theodora), the women for whom the epithet "harlots" was intended. If the popes represented the apex of the church, then one might ask with Chaucer, "If gold rust, what shall iron do?" Or in the words of Christ Himself, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness" (Matthew 6:23).

Certainly the light had dimmed by the time the first Christian millennium came to a close, but the light was never entirely put out, and as we trace its path and its effects from the time of Christ to the end of the first millennium, we see the hand of our sovereign God at work.

Consider first the expansion of the gospel. After the ascension of Christ, Christians were but a handful of people in Palestine. Within a short time, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and swelled their numbers. Soon Philip was taking the gospel to the Samaritans, and Peter was breaking down the great division between Jews and Gentiles by carrying

the gospel to the Gentiles. Then God called Saul of Tarsus—the apostle Paul—to be the apostle to the Gentiles. In every direction from Jerusalem, the gospel spread.

After the close of the first century, the message still spread even though error and corruption soon found their way into the church. When one reads the history of times after the close of the New Testament, it is sometimes difficult to discern truth from error in the work of the zealous but error-prone evangelists of the early and medieval church. Although Edward Gibbon was a cynic and a rationalist, there is much truth in his comment in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: "The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings." But in the midst of it all, God was ever at work preserving His word and His church even as He had promised: "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). It is clear that even in the worst of times the believer can with confidence hold onto Christ's promise that God always has His witness.

Note how the gospel spread geographically. It reached into Africa, first with Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch and then with the conversion of the Kushite kingdom (modern Sudan) in the fourth century. Even the flood of Islam could not overwhelm the Christian remnant that held Ethiopia throughout the Middle Ages. Armenia, on Rome's border, became the first kingdom to pronounce itself Christian even before Constantine embraced the church (much to the church's detriment). To the east, the Church of the East (sometimes called the Nestorian Church) spread as far as China. Archaeologists have discovered a limestone monument in China which the Church of the East erected as a sort of medieval gospel tract—a summary of the Christian faith etched in permanent form testifying of the gospel.

Consider also how the message spread northward with the conversion of the German barbarians after the fall of Rome. The Goths, the



Franks, the Angles, the Saxons, the Frisians, and more all claimed to swear allegiance to Christ as their king. Many of these “conversions” were political and tribal, undoubtedly, but one should not lose sight of the fact that it was among these people that God would work in the sixteenth century to bring the Protestant Reformation to the world. The missionaries who took the Christian message to the Saxon people never realized that one descendant of those people, Martin Luther, would one day shake the world for the cause of the gospel.

In addition to tracing the spread of the gospel, one should also note the bright testimonies that dot even the Dark Ages. Many Christians are already familiar with the stories of the martyrs, those like Polycarp of Smyrna, who lived in the second century and who, when told to revile Christ, said, “Fourscore and six years have I been his servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Such witnesses (which is what *martyr* means) are truly those “of whom the world was not worthy.”

The Celtic church was also such a light. Virtually cut off from the rest of Europe by the barbarian invasions, the Celts of Ireland nonetheless benefited from a ministry of evangelism and church planting under the preaching of notable saints. The most famous of these is Patrick of Ireland. Commonly called St. Patrick today and considered by Roman

Catholics to be the patron saint of Ireland, Patrick was rather a simple gospel preacher. In the brief writings he left, there is no trace of the papacy, the Roman hierarchy, or the sacramental system that was slowly spreading over the continent of Europe. Instead, Patrick’s writings present a story of devotion and holy zeal. Following Patrick were other evangelists, such as the monks living on the island of Iona. They reached not only Ireland but also the rest of the British Isles and even northern Europe. Only later was the Celtic church brought under the sway of Rome.

Space does not allow the opportunity to discuss other lights in that age. There was Bishop Claude of Turin in the ninth century, who opposed image worship and taught salvation by grace instead of by works. In his writings on predestination, Saxon theologian Gottschalk, also of the ninth century, showed perhaps the clearest grasp of the doctrines of grace between Augustine and Luther. These men are but representatives of other heroes, heroes who for the most part are unknown today. No one could argue that the light of the tenth century in any way rivaled that of the first, but neither can one say that the light of the gospel has ever been extinguished. ■



Dr. Mark Sidwell is a historian on the staff of Bob Jones University, Greenville, S.C.

