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Looking Back to Imagine Going Forward

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"Change is the only constant."

—Heraclitus

"Don't panic."

—Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*

About twenty years ago I sat in an undergraduate Russian history course at the University of Minnesota. The United States had recently invaded Afghanistan, and our professor, who was an expert in Russian history, was discussing the war. He told us we would never win in Afghanistan. The Soviets had tried it, and they had spent a fortune in time, money, and lives only to fail. We would not do any better.

Utter failure is the term I would use to describe the US involvement in Afghanistan—we too spent a fortune in time, money, and lives for nothing. I thought about this during the botched American withdrawal this past fall.[1] My

[1] Just one of countless news reports on the US's chaotic withdrawal: David Zucchino, "The U.S. War in Afghanistan: How It Started, and How It Ended," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/article/afghanistan-war-us.html.

History is not about predictions. There is nothing mechanical about linking the past with the present or future, and nothing predetermined. However, people and institutions being what they are, there are things from the past that are illustrative of patterns and trends that may well continue into the future, things from which we can learn.

old professor was, of course, completely correct in his assessment all those years ago. Does history help us predict the future? We are all, after all, very familiar with the phrase "Those who don't learn their history are doomed to repeat it."

Now I am the one teaching the history classes, and I can safely say no, understanding history does not give us the ability to predict the future. History is remarkably good at explaining why things are the way they are, and it can give us clues as to how certain events *may* play out, but I have to respectfully disagree that history always repeats itself—there are too many variables; people act too unpredictably; an unexpected event can change everything. That said, patterns tend to emerge, and the past can and should inform our view of the future.

It is with this view of history—that it is useful for envisioning a future but in no way a crystal ball—that I approach the future of Christianity. It is clear to anyone who is paying attention that people are worried about the future of Christianity in America. After decades of church membership decline in the US, the general feeling of many Christian leaders seems to waver between panic and resignation on any given day. As a Christian historian, I have a rather different outlook—others likely find me oddly optimistic. No, history cannot predict what the future of the church will be, but based on Christian history, I argue that the church will not die. That said, the church is *changing*, but this is to be expected: the Christian church has always changed and always will be changing. However, change brings uncertainty and difficulties, and folks will mourn what has been lost even as new things emerge.

A brief reminder of where the global church has been over the past years can help us frame our present situation. In its earliest days, Christianity was a small splinter-sect of Judaism in Roman-occupied Israel. Quickly the faith began spreading throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, with missionaries taking the faith all over the known world—the earliest Christians took the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19) *very* seriously. Christianity spread to Syria, Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, Western Europe, and North Africa. By the tenth century, Christian monasteries could be found scattered across central Asia from Persia all the way to China.[2] During the first thousand years of its existence the church was very much a global church.

Over time, Christianity became more and more associated with Europe. As Christian-held lands in North Africa and the Middle East fell to Islamic forces starting in the seventh century, Christianity gained traction in Europe, and eventually a European expression of Christianity became so dominant that Western Christians often forget that there was a time when Christianity was not European. Here in America, we are heirs to this Western European Christianity, and it is helpful to understand that this is not the only valid expression of Christianity. For

[2] Dale T. Irving and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 305. To learn more, this book provides a wonderful view of the early global church.

example, Christianity in Africa predates Christianity in the United States by well over one thousand years.

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Recent Global Trends in Christianity

The strong association between Europe and Christianity began to change over the course of the twentieth century. In 1910, 90 percent of Europe was Christian, but as of 2018, only about 71 percent of Western Europeans identified as Christian. One must also remember that there is a difference between active participation in religious life and saying one identifies with the Christian tradition. According to polls, only about 22 percent of Western Europeans attend a religious service of any kind at least once a month.[3] Here in the United States the decline has been less severe than in Europe, but for many Christian denominations, there has been a rapid change over the past couple of decades. While Christians continue to make up the majority of the US population, the numbers are in decline. Today 63 percent of the US population self-identifies as Christian, which is down from 75 percent only a decade ago, and currently about 29 percent of Americans consider themselves "nones." Mainline Protestants have been hit the hardest, with 52 percent of American identifying as mainline in 2007 and a mere 40 percent in 2021.[4]

While Europe and the United States became less Christian, Asia and Africa became more so. Asia was 2.4 percent Christian in 1910, and in 2010 it was 9 percent. While 9 percent may seem relatively low, Asia has the largest population of any continent, and that 9 percent translates to hundreds of millions of people. The gains in Africa are even more pronounced. In 1910, Africa was 9.4 percent Christian; now it is 48 percent, which is incredible growth over the course of one century.[5]

Another matter to consider when one begins to discuss the death of Christianity is that over the past hundred years or so, the total number of Christians globally has quadrupled (yes, you read that correctly). In 1910, there were about 600 million Christians, and in 2010, there were about 2 billion, though this growth

[3] "Being Christian in Western Europe," Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/.

[4] Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

[5] Scott Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), xvii–xviii.

is largely due to population growth since the overall global percentage of Christians has remained similar (32 percent in 1910, and 35 percent in 2010). However, the distribution of Christians has changed. In 1910, Europe had 66.3 percent of the total number of Christians globally, and the Americas had 27.1 percent (with the Middle East–North Africa region at 0.7 percent, Asia and the Pacific with 4.5 percent, and sub-Saharan Africa at 1.4 percent). In 2010, Europe had 25.9 percent of the total number of Christians across the globe, the Americas had 36.8 percent, sub-Saharan Africa had 23.6, Asia and the Pacific was at 13.1 percent, and the Middle East–North Africa remained in a similar spot at 0.6 percent).[6]

This expansion of Christianity outside of the West can also be seen in global missions. Despite the long tradition of missionaries being sent from Europe and North America, the portion of long-term missionaries hailing from the Global North is declining. In 2021, 227,000 missionaries, about 53 percent of the total, came from the Global North. This is down from 88 percent in 1970, whereas missionaries from the Global South now make up 47 percent of the total—203,000 in 2021. This shift has happened in a remarkably short time. In 1970, for example, only 31,000 or 12 percent of missionaries hailed from the Global South.[7] The United States still sends out the most missionaries each year, but South Korea, Brazil, India, South Africa, the Philippines, Mexico, China, Colombia, and Nigeria are all major senders of Christian missionaries as well.[8]

You may be thinking: *Yes, this is great—I am glad that Christianity is growing elsewhere—but what does that mean for us here in the United States?* Global trends do not change the fact that pews sit empty on Sunday mornings and that people have turned from the faith in alarmingly high numbers. What can we do here and now?

This is an example of where looking at the past can help us imagine a brighter future. The church at large has been in tough spots before (tougher, I would argue, than what we are dealing with today) and has emerged stronger and more vibrant for it. Cycles of decay and renewal have repeated over the millennia (though they never look quite the same), and despite very serious challenges, Christianity has adapted but never died.

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[6] "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Center, December 19, 2011, https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/.

[7] Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "World Christianity and Mission 2021: Questions about the Future," *International Bulletin of Mission Research 2021* 45, no. 1: 16–17.

[8] Melissa Steffan, "The Surprising Countries Most Missionaries Are Sent From and Go To," *Christianity Today*, July 25, 2013, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/july/missionaries-countries-sent-received-csgc-gordon-conwell.html.

Looking Back to Imagine Going Forward

While there are plenty of historical examples of religious revivals and renewal movements, the following focuses on the First Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century, the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, and the beginnings of global Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century. The two Awakenings and the Pentecostal revival transformed Christianity from stagnant to a vibrant and growing faith that connected with the people on a popular level. It is my hope that these examples can provide assurance and inspiration for the future.

A note must be made on the scope. I am focusing on *renewal* efforts, not missions. There are ample historical examples of missions among populations that did not previously know the gospel, but today in the US we are dealing with a situation where people are at least superficially aware of the gospel—many are just not particularly interested in it. In other words, to have a renewal movement there needs to be some sort of already-present Christian foundation, even if that foundation is shaky.

I am also focusing on examples in the United States because this article is specifically about the American church. While Europe is also suffering a decline, different solutions are likely needed in a European context. It is my hope that even though the historical eras are different, there are enough cultural touchstones that we can glean valuable lessons. I do not intend these stories to be a template for future renewal efforts, though elements could certainly apply to our context today. Ultimately, the universal church will need to adapt to meet the needs of our world today, and those answers will not necessarily be found in late-eighteenth-century New England or early-twentieth-century California or any number of other contexts that saw moments of religious revival.

American Awakenings

The Puritans of New England have had a disproportionate influence on American history. Grade-school children are taught that the Puritans came to America looking for religious freedom and to establish a New Zion in the wilderness. This has colored our perceptions of early American religion. People tend to believe that early Americans were far more religious than they actually were—in fact, in the colonial period, it is estimated that only 10–20 percent of colonists belonged to a church.[9] Most colonists were more interested in economic endeavors than in creating a perfect new Christian society.

The First Great Awakening is a term that describes a series of religious revivals that occurred in both the British Isles and the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. In the American colonies—which are our focus—these revivals led to

[9] Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: The Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 27–29.

an all-around greater commitment to faith and to some conversions. The Awakening's great theologian was Jonathan Edwards, and its great preacher was George Whitefield. Key features of the Awakening included calls to conversion, itinerant preaching (often outdoors), media use to promote revivals, ecumenical interests, and an emphasis on approachable preaching, often using the vernacular. This particular Awakening, with its elements that now seem so familiar to us, was controversial at the time. It challenged old forms of religious authority, and it divided people into pro-revival and anti-revival camps.[10] For example, in 1744 Harvard College (as it was then known) issued a condemnation against itinerant preaching and against Whitefield in particular, calling him "an Enthusiast, a censorious, uncharitable Person, and a Deluder of the People," after he accused New England colleges of deadness of religion.[11] Many clergy found Whitefield's methods too emotional, too threatening, and, frankly, too low-brow. Despite the controversies, the First Great Awakening had profound influence on American religion. It established patterns of popular religion that would endure in US religious culture, even if the actual number of conversions was modest. It would be the Second Great Awakening that did more to encourage widespread conversions.

The Second Great Awakening, a series of religious revivals that ran roughly from 1795 to 1835, followed a time of political and social disruption and low religious adherence. The colonists won their freedom from England and established a new nation with a radical new idea: separation of church and state. In this post-revolutionary era, there was an increase in immigration, social mobility, and access to wealth.

Despite all of these social and political changes, Americans were no more religious than in the early colonial period. In 1776, only about 17 percent of Americans were members of churches.[12] Even considering clergy shortages and the disruption caused by the American Revolutionary War, one could hardly classify the US as a piously Christian nation. Considering that, the current percentage of self-identified Christians in America (63 percent[13]), seems relatively positive.

This Awakening, which truly transformed American religion, emphasized free will, personal conversion, and more social-reform efforts. Large revivals, first in the frontier region and later in urban centers, became a hallmark of this movement. The best-known of the early revivals, though certainly not the only one, was at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. Thousands of people living on the frontier traveled to Cane Ridge to spend several days listening to preachers and socializing. It was at this particular event that religious excitement took hold and many

[10] Nancy Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, rev. and exp. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 38.

[11] Elisha Williams, "The Testimony of Harvard College against George Whitefield," (1744) in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, ed. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 342.

[12] Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 27–29.

[13] Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults."

converted, sang, danced, and in general were "slain" by the Spirit.[14] Soon revivals were occurring back in the more-established East.

This was a time when great preachers took their message out of the churches and to the people. The most well-known of the revivalists was Charles Finney, an attorney from New York, who committed his life to preaching after a dramatic religious experience. He was famous for his "new measures," which were techniques he used to encourage people to accept Jesus and convert.[15] Other famous itinerant preachers included Phoebe Palmer, who led revivals in the US, Canada, and the UK,[16] and Jarena Lee, the first African American woman to publicly preach the gospel.[17]

As during the First Great Awakening, there were plenty of people who rejected this style of Christianity. It was new, emotional, and reliant on personal choice. But it was also successful. The estimated religious adherence in 1850 was 34 percent, which is double that of 1776.[18] It also fundamentally changed the look of Christianity in America. For example, in 1776, of the relatively small number of Americans who participated in religious life, 20.4 percent belonged to the Congregationalists and only 2.5 percent belonged to the Methodists, but by 1850, only 4 percent were Congregationalists and 34.2 were Methodists.[19] So while there was an overall increase in religious adherence, it was not spread evenly among denominations, and some churches lost out.

A Modern-Day Pentecost

The final revival moment worth discussing is the rise of modern Pentecostalism because it truly transformed Christianity on a global scale. The Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906 is largely considered by historians to be the beginning of this movement, but there were important Pentecostal revivals in both Wales and India around the same time,[20] and a large Pentecostal revival in Chile shortly thereafter, in 1909.[21] In some ways, all the attention on Azusa is misleading. The revival did not occur in a vacuum, and there were precursors to this event. The

[14] Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 68.

[15] Koester, 71-72.

[16] Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids: Asbury, 1986).

[17] Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: No publisher, 1849).

[18] Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 23.

[19] Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 56. This source provides the larger picture of religious adherence by denomination in 1776 compared to 1850: Congregationalists—20.4 percent in 1776 and 4 percent in 1850; Episcopalians—15.7 percent in 1776 and 3.5 percent in 1850; Presbyterians—19 percent in 1776 and 11.6 in 1850; Baptists—16.9 in 1776 and 20.5 percent in 1850; Methodists—2.5 percent in 1776 and 34.2 percent in 1850; and Catholics—1.8 in 1776 and 13.9 in 1850.

[20] Allan Anderson, "Pandita Ramabai, the Mukti Revival and Global Pentecostalism," *Transformation* 23, no. 1 (2006): 37.

[21] Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 273.

Holiness movement, which came out of the Second Great Awakening, emphasized the "second blessing" and affirmed a spiritual conversion event. Types of ecstatic worship were also present at revivals before this. Jarena Lee, for example, spoke of people being slain by the Spirit during her services.[22] Speaking in tongues, which would become a hallmark of Pentecostalism, occurred at an event five years before Azusa at Charles Fox Parham's Bible school, but the event petered out instead of exploding.[23] William J. Seymour, the person most associated with Azusa, was introduced to the concept of speaking in tongues as evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Houston, Texas, by his pastor, Lucy Farrow, in 1905, prior to his own revival.[24] The elements of Pentecostalism were there, but Azusa was the spark to ignite the movement.

This revival, under the leadership of Seymour, lasted for three years. He arrived in California in February 1906, and on April 6, he led a prayer group on a ten-day fast. Three days later the Azusa Street revival officially began when Seymour laid hands on a member of the group named Edward Lee and prayed for him to receive the Spirit baptism and Lee began to speak in tongues. Three days later, Seymour received the gift as well. A group of believers began to meet at the former Stevens African Methodist Episcopal Church on April 15, 1906, and the great San Francisco earthquake, which occurred on April 18, 1906, set the stage for a spectacular revival with apocalyptic overtones. Jennie Evans Moore, who would eventually marry Seymour, became the first woman to speak in tongues.[25]

The Azusa revival was characterized by ecstatic worship, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), healings, and other miraculous spiritual gifts. The initial inclusion of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender was a critical aspect of the revival but, unfortunately, did not last. What did last, however, was a strong desire to spread the message of this new Pentecost.

Like previous revivals, the Pentecostal movement had and continues to have critics. However, it has had tremendous impact in the US and across the globe. Though the movement is only a little over one hundred years old, roughly 20 percent of Christians globally now identify as Pentecostals or charismatics.[26] It is also of note that while Pentecostalism emerged from Protestantism, it is an unwieldy movement, and you can find Pentecostals in a variety of Protestant denominations, movements, and nondenominational organizations; there is even a growing expression of charismatic Catholicism.

[22] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, 12.

[23] Scott Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century*, 125.

[24] Estrelda Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 37–38.

[25] Jennifer Hornyak Wojciechowski, "William J. Seymour," in *The World's Greatest Religious Leaders: How Religious Leaders Helped Shape World History*, ed. Scott Hendrix and Uchenna Okeja (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2018).

[26] Douglas G. Jacobsen, *Global Gospel: An Introduction to Christianity on Five Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 15.

Where Do We Go from Here?

I am not suggesting we all become itinerant preachers or Pentecostals (though, of course, you are free to do so if you desire). Nor am I suggesting we take their methods and apply them today without any sort of adaptation. We live in a different world, and modern solutions are needed for our modern problems. However, there are key features of each of these revival movements that could provide a solid backbone for future renewal efforts: a willingness to experiment, empowering the laity, and proclaiming the message boldly.

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Leaders in each of the aforementioned revival movements tried new things—whether that was outdoor preaching, using media to promote events, using accessible language, utilizing different conversion "techniques," or embracing a lifestyle that ran counter to mainstream culture. Elements in each of these revival movements were criticized for being new and different. Yet, it was this newness, this experimentation, that made these revivals so successful.

Clergy cannot bring about renewal alone. In the Second Great Awakening, some of the most successful preachers and leaders were lay people. Phoebe Palmer was a laywoman who led hundreds of revivals; Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith were successful itinerant preachers, though neither was ordained. Charles Finney was an attorney who got his preaching license. Many of the Pentecostal evangelists were members of the laity. To promote a vibrant faith, we need to lift up the laity and encourage their gifts.

Finally, the church will never expand if we won't talk about our faith. I have found that often Christians, even pastors, feel uncomfortable with any form of evangelization. We live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by colonialism, and there are ramifications of this. However, the Christian message does not need to be coercive. I converted to Christianity as an adult because I was *invited* to church by friends. It was a form of evangelism, and I am thankful for it.

Concluding Thoughts

Being a Christian is not easy. As C. S. Lewis points out, "The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead."[27]

[27] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 197.

For many of us today in the United States, it is heartbreaking to see the churches that we love losing membership and relevance. Throughout this article, I wrote about different revival movements, but it is critical to understand that revival does not mean going back to what we once were. Christianity is changing, but it has always been changing. We are not and cannot be the church of the third century, or the eleventh century, or even the 1950s.

I do not believe that Jesus is done with us, and I believe that Christianity will adapt to meet the needs of our current world. However, I do not know what that will look like. Aspects of American church culture that I hold dear may be lost someday, but we have to remember that our human-made institutions are not God, and that declining membership does not mean God is receding from the world. ⊕

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