

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#21. Summary of The Church in the Twentieth Century

The story of the Church in the twentieth century is arguably the most perplexing and paradoxical in history. On one hand, the Church seriously declined in some parts of the world, but at the same time experienced explosive growth in others. It was an age of enhanced educational opportunities, yet in some circles the academic atmosphere was not true to doctrinal orthodoxy. There was explosive growth in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, but there was also intense opposition to that branch of Christianity by those who rejected modern miracles and continued expressions of spiritual gifts, including speaking in tongues.

The twentieth century basically saw three major trends in Christianity.

#1. Liberalism

- Following the lead of liberal scholarship that was blooming in many seminaries, there was a marginalization of Scripture. Gone was the idea of Biblical authority and complete, verbal inspiration.
- The idea of "salvation in community" largely replaced a personal relationship of faith in Christ.
- As a result, changing eschatological beliefs gave rise to an emphasis upon social justice, the role of human government in societal evolution, and the belief that all of mankind's problems could potentially be solved by education and reform (Humanism). Unlike their conservative counterparts, liberal theologians de-emphasized, allegorized, or ignored the teaching of Christ's Return. Following the lead of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher, these Christians emphasized the role and responsibility of man above the idea of a sovereign God.

#2. Conservatism

- Many of the ideas of the early church Fathers and Reformers were the focal points of Fundamentalists and Evangelicals of the 20th century. Conservatives generally held to the idea of

- "salvation by faith alone," "Revelation and authority by the Scriptures alone," and a personal need for a born-again experience.

- There was also a resurgence in the belief of the literal, personal Return of Christ and the establishment of a Millennial Kingdom orchestrated by His Second Coming.

- Many differing groups and denominations made up both liberal and conservative branches of Christianity, but each group shared a generally similar theme concerning the role of Scripture, the means of salvation, and the role of the local church. Similarities often existed in matters of eschatology.

#3. Revivalism

- Several groups are considered Revivalists. Their emphasis was usually marked by a commitment to Scriptural authority, belief in a personal relationship with Christ Jesus, a fresh awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit in church life, and an embracing of the Return of Christ. Most of the movements specifically embraced (to varying degrees) the idea that Speaking in Tongues is a normative experience of Christianity. These groups are identified most often as Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Third Wave Revivalists.

- Doctrinal differences exist, and out of this group (and other Evangelical churches), the Church Growth Movement, the Apostolic Movement, and Emerging Church movements have gained a considerable following.

- Noteworthy revivals and movements in this century include the Welch Revival, the Azusa Street Revival, the Latter Rain Movement, The Argentinian Revival, The Charismatic Renewal, The African Church Movement, The Growth of the Chinese Church, The Toronto Blessing, The Brownsville Revival, and Third Wave Renewals along with many other outpourings around the world.

The final chapter in Part One will look at the first two decades of the 21st century, and discuss some possibilities and trends as the Church builds the Kingdom and awaits the Return of her Savior.