

THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Complete in One Volume
The Early Church to the Present Day

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PRINCE
PRESS

1999

once again, thus reminding me that we are not as far removed as we sometimes think from the time of Origen and Eusebius!

As I send this book out into the world, it is my hope that others will enjoy the reading of it as much as I have enjoyed the writing of it.

1/Introduction

*In those days a decree went out from
Caesar Augustus that all the world should
be enrolled.*

LUKE 2:1

From its very beginning, the Christian message was grafted onto human history. The Good News Christians have proclaimed through the ages is that in Jesus Christ, and for our salvation, God has entered human history in a unique way. History is crucial for understanding not only the life of Jesus, but also the entire biblical message. A good deal of the Old Testament is historical narrative. The Bible tells the story of God's revelation in the life and history of the people of God. Without that story, it is impossible to know that revelation.

The New Testament writers are quite clear about this. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the birth of Jesus took place during the reign of Augustus Caesar, "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:2). Shortly before, the same Gospel places the narrative within the context of Palestinian history, recording that it took place "in the days of Herod, king of Judaea" (1:5). The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that places Jesus within the framework of the history and hopes of Israel, and then goes on to date the birth of Jesus "in the days of Herod the king" (2:1). Mark gives less chronological detail, but still does affirm that Jesus began his ministry "in those days"—that is, the days of John the Baptist (1:9). The Fourth Gospel wishes to make clear that the significance of these events is not transitory, and therefore begins by stating that the Word who was made flesh in human history (1:14) is the same Word who "was in the beginning with God" (1:2). Finally, a similar note is sounded in the First Epistle of John, whose opening lines declare "that which was from the beginning" is also that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1:1).

After completing his Gospel, Luke continued the story of the Christian church in the book of Acts. He did not do this out of mere antiquarian curiosity, but rather out of some important theological considerations. Ac-

cording to Luke and to the entire New Testament, the presence of God among us did not end with the ascension of Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus himself promised his followers that he would not leave them alone, but would send another Counselor (John 14:16-26). At the beginning of Acts, immediately before the ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, by which they will be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (1:8). Then follow the events of Pentecost, which mark the beginning of the witnessing life of the church. Thus, the theme of the book that is usually called "Acts of the Apostles" is not so much the deeds of the apostles as the deeds of the Holy Spirit through the apostles (and others). Luke has left us two books, the first on the deeds of Jesus, and the second on the deeds of the Spirit.

But Luke's second book does not seem to have a conclusion. At the end, Paul is still preaching in Rome, and the book does not tell us what became of him or of the rest of the church. Luke had a theological reason for this, for the story he was telling shall not come to an end before the end of all history.

What this means for those who share in Luke's faith is that the history of the church, while showing all the characteristics of human history, is much more than the history of an institution or of a movement. It is a history of the deeds of the Spirit in and through the men and women who have gone before in the faith.

There are episodes in the course of that history where it is difficult to see the action of the Holy Spirit. As our narrative unfolds, we shall find those who have used the faith of the church for their financial gain, or to increase their personal power. There will be others who will forget or twist the commandment of love, and will persecute their enemies with a vindictiveness unworthy of the name of Jesus. At other times it will appear to many of us that the church has forsaken the biblical faith, and some will even doubt that such a church can be truly called "Christian." At such points in our narrative, it may be well to remember two things.

The first of these is that, while this narrative is the history of the deeds of the Spirit, it is the history of those deeds through sinners such as us. This is clear as early as New Testament times, where Peter, Paul, and the rest are depicted both as people of faith and as sinners. And, if that example is not sufficiently stark, it should suffice to take another look at the "saints" to whom Paul addresses his first Epistle to the Corinthians!

The second is that it has been through those sinners and that church—and only through them—that the biblical message has come to us. Even in the darkest times of the life of the church, there were those Christians who loved, studied, kept, and copied the Scriptures, and thus bequeathed them to us.

What those earlier Christians have bequeathed to us, however, is more than the text of Scripture. They have also left the illuminating record of their

striving to be faithful witnesses in the most diverse circumstances. In times of persecution, some witnessed with their blood, others with their writings, and still others with their loving acceptance of those who had weakened, and later repented. In times when the church was powerful, some sought to witness by employing that power, while others questioned the use of it. In times of invasions, chaos, and famine, there were those who witnessed to their Lord by seeking to restore order, so that the homeless might find shelter, and the hungry might have food. When vast lands until then unknown were opened to European Christians, there were those who rushed to those lands, there to preach the message of their faith. Throughout the centuries, some sought to witness by the word spoken and written, others by prayer and renunciation, and still others by the force of arms and the threat of inquisitorial fires.

Like it or not, we are heirs of this host of diverse and even contradictory witnesses. Some of their actions we may find revolting, and others inspiring. But all of them form part of our history. All of them, those whom we admire as well as those whom we despise, brought us to where we are now.

Without understanding that past, we are unable to understand ourselves, for in a sense the past still lives in us and influences who we are and how we understand the Christian message. When we read, for instance, that "the just shall live by faith," Martin Luther is whispering at our ear how we are to interpret those words—and this is true even for those of us who have never even heard of Martin Luther. When we hear that "Christ died for our sins," Anselm of Canterbury sits in the pew with us, even though we may not have the slightest idea who Anselm was. When we stand, sit, or kneel in church, when we sing a hymn, recite a creed, or refuse to recite one, when we build a church or preach a sermon, a part of which we may not be aware is one of the factors involved in our actions. The notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation, is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to absolutize our interpretation, confusing it with the Word of God.

One way in which we can avoid this danger is to know the past that colors our vision. A person wearing tinted glasses can avoid the conclusion that the entire world is tinted only by being conscious of the glasses themselves. Likewise, if we are to break free from an undue weight of tradition, we must begin by understanding what that tradition is, how we came to be where we are, and how particular elements in our past color our view of the present. It is then that we are free to choose which elements in the past—and in the present—we wish to reject, and which we will affirm.

It is at this point that the *doing* of history converges with the *making* of it. When we study the life and work of past generations, and when we interpret it, we are *doing* history. But we must remember that future generations will read about our times as past history. In that sense, like it or not, both by our action and by our inaction, we are *making* history. This is both

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an exhilarating opportunity and an awesome responsibility, and it demands that we *do* history in order to be able to *make* it more faithfully. Every renewal of the church, every great age in its history, has been grounded on a renewed reading of history. The same will be true as we prepare to move into the twenty-first century. Part of that preparation will be the *doing* of history to which this book invites its readers.

PART I

THE EARLY CHURCH