

The Modern Era

Summary: Since the 17th century, Christians have disagreed about how to interpret the Bible, relate religious faith to scientific discovery, and incorporate broader social changes into church structure. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s led to Roman Catholic ecclesiastical change, while Protestant churches have offered diverse, sometime ecumenical, and sometimes conflicting answers to these questions. In more recent years, the world has seen a resurgence of evangelical Christianity as well as an increase in pentecostalism, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and the U.S.

The modern period, heralded by what is known as the Enlightenment, began in the West in the 17th and 18th centuries with the end of the religious wars that had torn Europe apart. In the wake of years of bloodshed over religious doctrine, 18th century Enlightenment thinkers emphasized religious toleration and the need to separate religious life from political power. The role of reason in religious thinking—that people should be free to use their intellect to make up their own minds about what they believed—was reaffirmed. A current of thought called Deism, for example, stressed “natural religion,” a creator God, and a common moral and ethical ethos, without many of the supernatural elements that, they believed, confounded the principles of reason. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, so prominent in framing the American Constitution, were influenced by this movement. During the past two centuries, the role of reason in the realm of faith has continued to inspire Christian thinkers.

The Enlightenment was also influenced by the scientific revolution that began to transform assumptions about the natural world, beginning with Isaac Newton in the 17th century. In the 19th century, the work of Charles Darwin challenged the biblical story of creation with his theories about the development and evolution of species as published in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In the modern era, Christian thinkers of each succeeding generation have had to claim and articulate their faith anew in light of a wider worldview, informed by the expansion of science. Does faith today occupy the shrinking area of mystery left over by the growing body of scientific knowledge? Or is faith an orientation to all of life that is not threatened by science but consonant with it?

Biblical scholarship has also posed challenges to faith in the modern era. The text of the Bible has been laid open to study by methods of critical and historical analysis. What is the Bible? How did this particular collection of writings come into being? Is each word the revelation of God or is it a collection of inspired writings that may be studied and interpreted as products of particular historical contexts, with

their own historical concerns? In the early 20th century, a movement known as Fundamentalism arose in opposition to many trends in modern biblical scholarship. Fundamentalist Christians have been concerned with protecting the literal interpretation of the Bible from what they consider to be the undermining effects of Biblical scholarship. More liberal Christians, on the other hand, do not find the intensive scholarly study of the Bible a threat to their faith, but rather an enhancement of their understanding of it.

The second half of the 20th century saw new currents of confluence, bringing together once again the divided streams that have characterized Christianity for nearly a thousand years. This trend is called the ecumenical movement, from the Greek term *oikoumene* which means “the whole inhabited earth.” The most prominent expression of this ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC), formed in 1948. Today it is a fellowship of over 300 Protestant and Orthodox churches committed to growing together in faith and working together on shared issues of justice, peace, education, and emergency relief. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council also made far-reaching contributions to Christian ecumenism, opening the door to closer cooperation between the Roman Catholic and other Christian churches. Toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople removed their one-thousand year old mutual excommunication and embraced.

The convergence of churches today is visible in many ways. National, regional, and local councils of churches throughout the world are another expression of the ecumenical movement. While old divisions are beginning to heal, new areas of tension and fission are opening in the Christian churches of the early 21st century. The interpretation of the Bible, the ordination of women, attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and the ethics of abortion and reproduction are all issues that have opened new fissures, not so much between but within denominations.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the resurgence of evangelical Christianity worldwide is sometimes called a “third force” in the Christian ecumenical movement, along with the Vatican and the WCC. The National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, describes itself as being a “united voice” for evangelicals. Despite their differences, evangelicals today base their theology on a strong commitment to the Bible as the only infallible and authoritative word of God. There is also emphasis placed on personal faith, expressed by “accepting Christ” into one’s own life, and on evangelism, or the sharing of that faith with others in mission. The worldwide ministry of Billy Graham, with his huge rallies and

revivals, is an example of how mid-20th century evangelists made effective use of the television communications revolution. Graham was also the first to help steer a new evangelical movement away from the stricter dogmatic line of the early fundamentalists.

The soaring growth of pentecostalism is a significant part of the new evangelical wave of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Pentecostal worship emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” including speaking in tongues to relive, in a sense, the experience of the early church on the first Pentecost. This movement is especially strong in the growing cities of Latin America, Africa, and the U.S. where the pentecostal style of spirit-filled worship has created vibrant new Christian communities.