

## **The Rise of Islam**

### **By David Feddes**

Muslims, people who hold the religion of Islam, consider Muhammad the greatest of prophets. Some Muslims think so highly of Muhammad that they want to imitate him any way they can. If tradition says Muhammad slept on his right side, they try to sleep on their right side. If tradition says Muhammad washed a certain way, they try to wash that way. If tradition says Muhammad cleaned his teeth in a particular manner, that's how they clean their teeth.

Muslims think so highly of Muhammad that any insult directed at him is taken as a terrible offense. The majority of Muslim law experts say that if a non-Muslim insults Muhammad, the proper punishment is a flogging and a prison sentence. The harshness of the whipping and the length of imprisonment depend on the seriousness of the insult. A smaller, but influential, group of Muslim law experts think that anyone who insults the prophet should be killed on the spot, without waiting for a trial. A Muslim who hears someone insult the prophet should kill the offender then and there. This view is based on a saying which some attribute to Muhammad but others don't accept as authentic: "If anyone insults me, then any Muslim who hears this must kill him immediately." Whether an insult to Muhammad brings instant death, or a trial, whipping, and imprisonment, one thing is clear: many Muslims hold Muhammad in such high esteem that they not only want to imitate him, but they feel a duty to punish anyone who has insulted Muhammad.

Muslims believe that Muhammad received revelations from God through the angel Gabriel and that these divine revelations are recorded in the Koran. Most Muslims think the Koran, written in Arabic, is a perfect copy of an eternal original in heaven. The Koran must be handled with reverence. School children in Saudi Arabia are taught to do ritual washing before touching the Koran. Before opening it, they are to kiss it three times and touch it to their foreheads. They are to do this again when they close it and put it away. Women having their period are not allowed to touch a Koran. The Koran must always be placed on the highest shelf in any home so that no other book or object is above it. It must never be put on the ground, and even to drop it by accident is shameful. Anyone who insults, or even questions, the Koran, is thought to provoke divine wrath—and may face Muslim wrath as well.

Not all people who call themselves Muslims are very devout. Not all strive to imitate Muhammad or follow the letter of the Koran or punish people who insult the prophet or the book. Some simply grew up in Muslim lands and identify with Islam as part of their culture, but they're not very zealous. Some are more moderate in their views on religious freedom and on various other matters. Still, most serious Muslims regard Muhammad and the Koran very highly.

Many non-Muslims don't know much about Muhammad. Some lump Muhammad together with Jesus, Buddha, and other religious leaders, assuming that all religions are pretty much the same and that any of them can show the way to God. Others think of Muhammad and Muslims more negatively, but they don't base their opinion on any facts except the fact that some of the world's worst terrorists are Muslims. We need an accurate understanding of Muhammad and Islam.

## **Muhammad's Life**

Muhammad was born about 570 years after Jesus. Muhammad's father died before Muhammad was born, and his mother died when the boy was six. The young orphan grew up in his uncle's household in Arabia and learned much about trading and commerce. As a young man, Muhammad showed skill in business and, according to tradition, had a reputation for honest dealings, gaining the nickname "the trustworthy one." When Muhammad was 25 years old, he was hired by a 40-year-old widow named Khadijah to manage her business. She fell in love with him, and they became husband and wife until her death 25 years later.

Muslim tradition says that at age 40 Muhammad began hearing voices and seeing visions. At first Muhammad feared he might be possessed by an evil spirit. One Muslim account even says that he considered suicide. But his wife Khadijah encouraged him not to despair or to think he was being misled by an evil spirit. She told him that he was kind, truthful, faithful, generous, and helpful. He was too good to be deceived by demons. More voices and visions came. Muhammad, who couldn't read or write, memorized the words and taught them to others. After Muhammad's death, the revelations were put into final written form as the Koran.

Muhammad saw himself as the apostle of the one true God. He told the people of Mecca to acknowledge him as God's prophet and to obey his leadership. At that time, the Arabian peninsula had a variety of tribes who worshiped many different gods. But Muhammad insisted that there was only one God, Allah. (Allah is the Arabic word for deity. Muslims aren't the only ones who speak of Allah. Arab Christians also call God Allah.) When Muhammad preached one God instead of many gods, he faced ten years of opposition in Mecca. In 622 he left Mecca and went to Medina, where he gained followers. During the next ten years, Muhammad overcame the hostility of Arabia's idol worshipers and instituted worship of one God.

Muhammad didn't just use peaceful persuasion though. He fought in 70 military clashes, according to Muslim tradition. Some of these were in defense against attacks, but others were aimed at conquest—and Muhammad succeeded. By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad was in control of Mecca, and Arabia's tribes were united and powerful. Within a century, Muslim power had spread across the Middle East, much of Asia, North Africa, and Spain. This did not happen through pure missionary persuasion but occurred mainly through military conquest.

At first, when Muhammad had few followers and no military strength, he called for peaceful, patient preaching that would win people over by its wisdom and beauty. As the movement grew somewhat, he declared that it was right to fight in defense against attackers. Later passages of the Koran further expanded the teaching of jihad and encouraged going on the offensive. Muslim warriors who died in battle were promised that they would go to the top level of heaven. Those who survived and triumphed in battle could divide captured goods, including prisoners of war who became their property and slaves. The Koran encouraged Muslims to "fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them" (9:5). Jews and Christians were not considered pagans and did not have to become Muslims, but they had to submit to Muslim rule and pay a special tax, or else they were to be fought until they surrendered (9:29).

Muslim traditions hold that Muhammad was known as an upright man by people who knew him. That may be so, if measured by the standards of his time and culture.

However, if Muhammad is supposed to be a greater prophet than Jesus, as Muslims claim, we should take a closer look at some of Muhammad's actions. I'm not going to mention deeds that anti-Muslim people accuse Muhammad of. I'll just mention a few things that Muslim tradition itself says of Muhammad.

Before Muhammad came to power, he funded his movement by attacking caravans and plundering their goods. He fought in many bloody battles. In one victory, hundreds of Jewish men surrendered to Muhammad's forces. These unarmed prisoners were all beheaded with Muhammad's approval. Among the surviving women and children, Muhammad saw a beautiful woman. She had just witnessed her husband, father, and brother beheaded. Muhammad took her to be one of his wives. During Muhammad's first marriage to Khadijah, he had no other wives. But after Khadijah died, he had at least fourteen wives and perhaps many more, as mentioned in various Muslim traditions. One wife was a beauty who had been married to a friend of Muhammad, but then Muhammad had a revelation that God wanted the friend to divorce that gorgeous wife so that she could become Muhammad's wife. Another of Muhammad's wives was six years old when she was betrothed to him, and nine years old when the marriage was physically consummated. Muhammad was over fifty years old at the time. He said he had a dream that revealed he was supposed to marry this young girl. Let me stress again that these are not slurs from anti-Muslim sources; these things are in Muslim accounts.

The Koran approves polygamy, though it limits men to no more than four wives. The only exception allowed to have more than four wives was Muhammad himself. The Koran calls for spreading Islam through war. Muhammad himself did so, and the Muslim rulers who followed him conquered vast regions. These are key facts about the rise of Islam.

Now compare that to Jesus. Jesus triumphed by his message of love and his miracles of healing, by his suffering and death, and by his resurrection. The Christian church, for its first 300 years, spread by peaceful mission and by martyrdom, not by military power. Later, kings and popes would take up the sword in the name of Christ, but most Christians today look back on such wars of religion with sorrow, at odds with Jesus' way. Most Muslims, on the other hand, look back on the first century of Muslim conquest as the golden age of Islam.

### **Sharia and Jihad**

To this day, in orthodox Islam, the goal is the worldwide rule of Islamic law, Sharia. Muslims have a duty to continue the struggle until all resistance has been overcome. Not all Muslims feel this way. Some prefer peace, prosperity, and freedom, not holy war. They emphasize a text in the Koran that says there must be no compulsion in religion, and they prefer to interpret jihad as spiritual struggle to overcome one's own faults, not to take over the world by military force. Such Muslims are less aggressive than more zealous literalists. Still, the teaching of the Koran, the example of Muhammad, the actions of Muslim armies in the century following Muhammad, and commentaries by early Islamic scholars show that the main meaning of jihad is armed struggle.

Muslim tradition divides the world in two: the House of Islam and the House of War. In the House of Islam, Muslim governments enforce Muslim law. The rest of the

world, with non-Muslim governments and mainly non-Muslim populations, is the House of War. In the House of War, Muslims must continue the struggle to overcome resistance and set up Muslim governance. Temporary truces may be allowable if Muslims don't yet have the numbers and strength to prevail; but where there is opportunity to gain ground, jihad must continue. The duty of jihad, holy war, will cease only when the whole world is in the House of Islam, and the House of War no longer exists. Modernist Muslims, and some politicians, claim that Islam is a religion of peace. But ever since Muhammad, the peace offered by orthodox Islam is the peace of surrender and compliance with Muslim power.

This does not mean that every Muslim you meet is just waiting for an opportunity to make war and seize control, nor does it mean that all Muslims are polygamists. Some Muslims are kind people and excellent neighbors. All are fellow humans, made in God's image. Some Muslims in North America feel hurt by racial prejudice and contempt from others. Those of us who are Christians are called to love our neighbors and to share with them the hope that God has given us.

At the same time, we should not be ignorant about Muhammad and the rise of Islam, and we should not be naïve about the desire of a sizeable number of zealous Muslims today. Those who are most eager to be guided by the words of the Koran and the actions of Muhammad will not rest content until Islamic law governs the world.

Not all Christians throughout history have been peaceful and kind. Not all Muslims have been warlike and cruel. But Jesus' methods were clearly not Muhammad's methods. The Bible tells of a woman caught in adultery who was brought to Jesus. Some men wanted to stone her, but Jesus spared her life and told her, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Contrast that with a Muslim account of a woman who came to Muhammad after getting pregnant through adultery. Muhammad treated her decently until she gave birth. Then he had her stoned to death.

Muhammad was not like Jesus, and the rise of Islam was not like the rise of Christianity. Jesus died to save his enemies. Muhammad conquered and killed enemies. Jesus' first followers reasoned with people and sought to persuade them to believe the gospel. Muhammad's first followers used military and political force to compel submission.

If you're a Christian getting to know an individual Muslim, don't assume that all Muslims think or feel alike. And don't launch a direct attack on the character of Muhammad or the teachings of the Koran. It's helpful for you to know key facts about the rise of Islam so that you don't fall for the common error of thinking all religions and their founders are more or less the same. But if you have opportunities to talk with Muslim individuals, don't judge them in advance, and don't arouse their anger and resistance by attacking what they cherish. Instead, speak of the Lord Jesus you love, and let his love and truth shine through you.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Islam 101

Basics of a foreign faith

### The Five Pillars of Islam

1. **Shahadah:** Confession of faith. "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger."
2. **Salat:** Prayer. All Muslims are to pray five times every day, facing Mecca.
3. **Zakat:** Tithing. Muslims must give at least 2.5 percent of their total wealth to the poor and needy.
4. **Sawm:** Fasting. During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims are to refrain from food, water, and sex from sunrise to sunset.
5. **Hajj:** Pilgrimage. If at all possible, at least once in a lifetime Muslims are to travel to Mecca to engage in rituals of prayer and worship at the central shrine in Islam's holiest city.

### The Qur'an

- The Qur'an, in Arabic, is the perfect Word of Allah.
- The Qur'an contains 114 chapters, or **suras**.
- Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel.
- The Qur'anic material was composed from 610 through Muhammad's death in 632.
- The final compilation was completed about 650.

### The Prophet

- Most Muslims believe that Muhammad was sinless, but not divine.
- Most Muslims believe that the prophet was illiterate.
- The prophetic status of Muhammad is not to be questioned.
- Muhammad provides the greatest example for all aspects of life.
- The traditions about the prophet are known as **hadith**.
- Allah gave the prophet permission to have 12 wives.

### Other Major Muslim Beliefs

- Islam started with Adam, not with Muhammad.
- People are saved by the will of God through obedience to God's law, **Shari'ah**.
- Though humans are imperfect, they are not fallen through original sin.
- Those chosen by God for salvation will enter paradise. Only God knows whom he has chosen.
- The damned will burn in eternal torment in Hell.
- All countries and peoples should follow Islam and Islamic law.
- Muslims are to engage in **jihad**, which usually means private spiritual struggle.
- Jihad sometimes demands defense of Muslim territory and military aggression.
- God will restore the world at the end of time through a coming human leader known as the **Mahdi**.
- Muslim males can marry up to four wives.

## **Muslim Groups**

- Almost 90 percent of Muslims belong to the Sunni tradition.
- Shi'ite Islam is popular in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and several Persian Gulf states.
- Sufi Islam represents the mystical path.
- The Islam practiced in most Muslim countries is heavily influenced by local folk customs.

## **Muslim Views of Jesus**

- Jesus was a prophet of God but not the Son of God. He was a lesser prophet than Muhammad.
- He was born of the virgin Mary.
- He performed many miracles.
- He was protected from a death of crucifixion.
- He did not rise from the dead.
- He ascended to heaven after his death, and he will return to earth.
- He was a faithful Muslim, or follower of Allah.

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## **Islam and Christianity**

### **By David Feddes**

More people in the world call themselves Christian than any other faith, and Islam has the second largest following. Not all who claim to be Christian or Muslim are very clear in their belief or firm in their commitment, but Christianity and Islam are the top two faiths in terms of numbers. The two faiths hold some things in common, but they also differ in crucial ways. Let's first look at common ground and then at key differences.

### **Common Ground**

Both faiths are monotheistic and agree that there are not many gods but one. Both faiths reject polytheistic belief in various gods and goddesses. Both faiths reject pantheistic belief that all things are God or part of God. Both faiths reject atheistic belief that no God exists and that mindless evolution produced all things. Christianity and Islam agree that there is one all-powerful, all-knowing Being, with no beginning or end, who created and rules all things.

Islam and Christianity agree that angels are real and that evil spirits are also real. They agree that death is not the end of any human, but that people live on forever, either in heavenly happiness or hellish horror.

Islam and Christianity agree that religion is not just a private feeling or personal belief but a worldview and a way of life. Islam, unlike Christianity, approves polygamy, in which men may have several wives at the same time. Still, both faiths agree on many moral principles. Both teach that murder, lying, stealing, adultery, homosexuality, and abortion are wrong. Both agree that family ties, generosity to the poor, hard work, and honest business are good. Many commands in the Koran agree with similar commands in the Bible.

In fact, Islam teaches that the Bible contains revelations to God's holy prophets. Where the Bible differs from the Koran, Muslims believe the Koran is always right. Differences arose, they say, because biblical writings, though originally pure and true, were not preserved with total accuracy. Over the centuries, errors crept into the Bible, say Muslims; the Koran is God's final revelation and has been preserved without error.

Muslims and Christians agree on some key facts about Jesus. The Koran says some striking things about Jesus that echo what the Bible says. The Koran says Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, who became pregnant by a divine miracle, not by the act of any earthly father. The Koran says Mary was a holy woman blessed by God. According to the Koran, Jesus' coming was "good news," and he did amazing miracles. The Bible tells more details about the wonders Jesus did, but the Koran agrees that Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, and raised the dead.

The Koran says things about Jesus that it says about nobody else. Only Jesus and nobody else is called "Messiah." Only Jesus and nobody else is called "the Spirit from God." Only Jesus and nobody else is called "the Word of God" and "the Word of Truth." As highly as Muslims regard Muhammad, not even Muhammad is called "Messiah" or "Spirit from God" or "Word of God," and not even Muhammad is said to have raised the dead or given sight to the blind. The Koran attributes those things only to Jesus.

Muslim tradition holds that Jesus was without sin, as does the Bible. Muslim tradition says that Jesus will return someday, reign over the earth, and usher in the end time. A devout Muslim scholar writes, "Muslims have great respect and love for Jesus (Isa) the Messiah. He is one of the greatest prophets of Allah. To deny the prophethood of Jesus is to deny Islam."

Some Christians might be surprised at these similarities, but in fact, certain Muslim moral principles and beliefs about Jesus are closer to the Bible than the beliefs of some who call themselves Christians. Even some pastors and scholars rewrite morality and do not accept that Jesus was born of a virgin or that he worked mighty miracles by divine power or that God spoke to the writers of the Bible.

Similarities between Islam and Christianity are not so surprising if you keep in mind that the Koran was written more than 600 years after the Bible was completed. Muhammad had met Jews and Christians before he began telling Arabia's idol worshipers that there is only one God. Muhammad did not claim to be bringing a brand new message. Instead, he said that his words were in line with the prophets of the Bible, including Jesus. So Islam was never meant to be a brand new religion but to be a continuation of earlier truth and a correction of errors that allegedly had crept in. Muhammad borrowed much from biblical ideas, so there was bound to be common ground.

### **Crucial Differences**

Of course, there are also differences between Islam and Christianity.

One key difference concerns the Trinity. Christians worship the one God as an eternal union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible says "God is love." That's not just because God is loving toward us but also because God's inner being is characterized by the eternal love that unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Koran flatly denies the Trinity. The Koran (5:72-75) threatens hell for those who say Jesus is God come to earth and who believe in the Trinity. Although Muslims believe in Jesus' virgin birth, they do not believe that in this birth God the Son took on a human nature. The Koran denies that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, with the same divine nature as God the Father. The Koran denies that the Holy Spirit is a divine person along with the Father and the Son. A Muslim writer says, "The doctrine of Trinity, equality with Allah, and sonship, are repudiated as blasphemies."

The Trinity, however, is not some phony idea that some deceptive Christians made up on their own. According the Bible, Jesus himself said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus also said that after he went to heaven, his Father and he would send the Holy Spirit to live within the Lord's people.

The Koran says that if you want more information about Jesus, you should read the gospel about him. But if you read the gospel writings of the New Testament, you find statements from Jesus himself and from his closest friends, clearly identifying Jesus as God. Many Muslims don't actually read the New Testament and aren't aware that Jesus said such things. Those who do read it assume that any statement of Jesus declaring himself as one with God must not be what Jesus actually said but must be an error that crept into the Bible over the centuries.

But consider the facts. The authors of the New Testament part of the Bible knew Jesus personally. They saw him in action, heard him speak, enjoyed close friendship



with him, and wrote what God directed them to write. Their writings came six centuries before the Koran, and we have ancient manuscripts that go back long before Muhammad's time. Those ancient manuscripts match the Bible as we have it today, and in those manuscripts, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). It is wiser to believe Jesus' close associates and their writings authenticated by ancient manuscript evidence, rather than a book written 600 years after the fact, as the Koran was.

The apostle John was Jesus' dearest friend during his time on earth. John heard Jesus say, "I and the Father are one." John heard Jesus' enemies accuse him of blasphemy and snarl, "You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:30,33). Jesus proved his claim by rising from the dead and by accepting the worship of a disciple who called him, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). John heard these things and wrote them down. His purpose was "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Many people did believe in Jesus as God's Son. Others hated him. Later on, still others would claim that although Jesus was somehow special, he was not the eternal Son of God who came to earth in human flesh. John, under God's direction, said, "Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:22). It's not enough to say Jesus was a prophet. We must believe in Jesus as God with us. John wrote, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life... He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:11-12,20).

Christianity accepts Jesus as God and trusts his death and resurrection as the basis of forgiveness and eternal life. This salvation is a free gift of God to all who believe and entrust themselves to Jesus. Islam denies all this. As one Muslim puts it, "Muslims do not believe that Jesus is God, nor do they believe that God ever chose to come down to earth in a form of a man to die for our sins to purify us and forgive us." Muslims don't believe that our sins can be paid for by the suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, they don't believe Jesus died at all!

The Koran says that Jesus' enemies thought they killed him but were fooled by appearances. Islam agrees with Christianity that Jesus' enemies wanted to kill him and that Jesus was willing to die. But the Koran denies that Jesus actually died. Muslims believe that someone else, probably Judas, was made to look like Jesus and was nailed to the cross instead of Jesus. The enemies of Jesus thought they killed him, but they actually killed someone else. God fooled them. Jesus himself was taken directly to heaven.

According to Islam, Jesus did not die, and we did not need him to die. We can be right with God by being good. Christianity teaches that we are born sinners, unable to save ourselves, but Islam denies that humanity is fallen. All people are born good but forgetful; they just need to be reminded of what God wants, and then do it. Christianity teaches that even biblical heroes of faith were sinners who did some terrible things, but Islam says otherwise. The Bible says Noah got drunk (Genesis 9:21), that Abraham lied (Genesis 20:2), and that David committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). But Islam denies that such serious sins were committed by God's prophets. In Islam, salvation is earned by those who deserve it. In Christianity, salvation is God's gift to the undeserving. A leading Muslim scholar says, "Islam does not identify with the Christian

conviction that man needs to be redeemed. The Christian belief in the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ does not fit the Islamic view that man has always been fundamentally good.”

The Bible says, “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ... If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:16,21). Islam teaches that righteousness *can* be gained through the law. If we didn’t need Jesus’ death to make us right with God, it would mean Christ died for nothing. Islam follows that logic but takes it in the opposite direction. Islam would not want to say Jesus died for nothing, so instead it says Jesus did not die at all. One reason Jesus could not have been crucified, according to Islam, is that humanity is not sinful enough to need him to die for us. Another reason is simply that God would not let his holy prophet die disgracefully. In the words of a Muslim author, “It would seem most inappropriate for the Messiah to die through a shameful crucifixion. God, who is just, would not permit the righteous Messiah to suffer in that manner.”

Rejecting the death of Jesus, Islam says that humans have the ability to earn eternal life through our own efforts. According to Islam, humans are not born in sin, so they don’t need salvation—they just need the guidance of Islamic law so that they can meet the requirements for getting into heaven. In Islam, salvation must be earned. In Christianity, salvation is an unearned gift from “God who justifies the wicked” (Romans 4:5).

A Muslim writer says, “In Islam, God’s mercy is supremely expressed through the revelation of a perfect law.” In Christianity, God’s mercy is supremely expressed through God’s sacrifice of his beloved Son for our salvation. Islam sees God mainly as a Master who deals with his servants on the basis of whether they follow his rules. The Bible reveals God not only as a mighty Master but also as a loving Father and a Friend who made a huge sacrifice to pay for the sins of those he loves. Christians must approach God with reverence and awe, but we may also pray to him with confidence. God is not just a supreme monarch far above us. He is a close companion who has lived among us in the person of Jesus and who lives within us Christians in the person of the Holy Spirit. This makes possible a warm, intimate relationship with God. Islam counts on a Master’s law. Christianity counts on the Father’s love.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Secrets of Islam's Success

It spread faster than any other religion in history. Here are some reasons why.

Elesha Coffman

When Muhammad died, in 632, Islam could boast only semi-stable control over part of the Arabian peninsula. The prophet's territorial gains had been mainly pagan losses. Further expansion required conquest of Christian lands—a task that would prove all too easy, thanks to years of imperial and doctrinal wars.

To Islam's west lay Egypt and the rest of Christian North Africa. Once consolidated under the Roman Empire, by the sixth century the territory was divided between Latin-speaking Berbers in the west and Greek-speaking Byzantines in the east, with a few Baal-worshippers in the south.

Africa's theological divisions ran even deeper. Byzantines upheld the two-faceted definition of Christ's nature affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but Egypt's Monophysite ("one nature") Christians, along with churches in Armenia and Syria, vehemently rejected it. African Christianity was also plagued by controversies among Catholics, Donatists (who insisted that all other Christians were apostate), Nestorians (who disagreed with both Monophysite and Chalcedonian Christology), and radical desert ascetics.

To Islam's near north and east sprawled the massive, though fading, Persian Sassanid Empire. The Zoroastrian Persians had persecuted Christians severely in the fourth century, judging the new friends of Persia's old enemy, Rome, to be a threat. After a toleration edict in 409, though, the Persians opted to control the church rather than destroy it.

By meddling in ecclesiastical governance, Persia had sent the local church into serious decline by the turn of the seventh century. Conflict between Nestorians, the majority Christian group, and their sworn enemies, Monophysites, hastened the slide.

To the northwest lay the shrinking Byzantine Empire, the remains of Roman glory. By Muhammad's time, battles with Persia had forced the Byzantines to withdraw from provinces such as Egypt and Syria and protect their capital, Constantinople. The Egyptians and Syrians were glad to see them go, taking their high taxes and persecution of "heretical" churches with them.

### Hail to the new chiefs

With the Middle East in such disarray, Muhammad's successors were able to make rapid gains. The Muslims proved to be both fearsome warriors and shrewd politicians, sometimes killing or uprooting their enemies, sometimes grinding them down with economic and religious oppression.

The first Islamic *caliph* (deputy), Abu Bakr, was murdered before he could make much of a military impact beyond central Arabia, but his successor, Umar, routed a Byzantine army in Syria and hounded the last Persian shah to his death. Damascus, Jerusalem, and the Persian capital, Ctesiphon, fell like dominoes.

Umar solidified control of the Arabian peninsula and assumed at least nominal authority over Persia's

far-flung properties. He also built the first mosque in Jerusalem. But his stunning success created challenges.

Christians significantly outnumbered Muslims in most of Islam's new territories. In addition, Christians had diplomatic and medical expertise that Muslims lacked. Killing all of the Christians made no political sense, and in any case, the Qur'an advocates better treatment for "Peoples of the Book." Umar's solution, as described in his famous pact (see page 16), established Christians and Jews as dhimmi, or protected persons.

On the surface, the terms seem quite fair, especially for the seventh century. In exchange for paying extra taxes, dhimmi qualified for nearly all rights and protections under Islamic law. More importantly, unlike pagan Arabs, Christians and Jews were not forced to convert to Islam.

Christians thought they were getting a good deal. High taxes were nothing new, and Muslim authorities took no sides in the bitter doctrinal wars that divided the Christians. The Nestorian patriarch wrote to a fellow cleric, "They have not attacked the Christian religion, but rather they have commended our faith, honored our priests ... and conferred benefits on churches and monasteries."

### **Stealth oppression**

Unfortunately, seventh-century Christians failed to see the deeper threat of Umar's bargain. Modern apologists for Islamic tolerance generally make the same mistake. Protected status really meant second- or third-class status, with strictures guaranteed to erode all religions but Islam.

Granted, both Eastern (Byzantine) and Western (Roman) Christian powers put a high priority on enforcing what they deemed to be true religion, and neither was above using physical or civil coercion to achieve this aim—in the seventh century or for centuries afterward.

Indeed, Muslims apparently adapted parts of their policy on other religions from existing Christian codes. It is less often reported that Muslims also looked to Persia's ghetto-like *melet* system for guidance.

At various times, especially under comparatively secular caliphs, Islamic regimes did display more religious tolerance than Christian regimes, particularly toward Jews. But neither the Qur'an nor Islamic law, which are much more closely linked than the Bible and any past or present system of governance, ever sanctioned the fundamental equality that predicates modern tolerance.

One of the most popular verses in the Qur'an states, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:258). Yet the Qur'an also mandates:

"Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection" (9:29).

Umar's pact is thus not a peace treaty, but a description of the terms of his victory. Per the prophet's instructions, it prohibits what Allah prohibits (wine) and imposes a steep tax—failure to pay the poll tax (*jizya*) voided the contract. It also codifies Muslim superiority while humiliating anyone who clings to another religion.

Even some provisions that seem preferential undercut non-Muslim communities. For example, dhimmi were exempted from military service—and from the rich bonuses in pay and plunder that soldiers received. This placed dhimmi beneath *mawali*, recent Arab converts to Islam who were barred from

some privileges but could serve in the military.

Despite the obvious incentives to convert, most Christians and Jews under early Muslim rule held onto their faith. But resistance eventually died out in all but a few pockets. The inability to build new places of worship or repair old ones, the prohibition on evangelism, and the fact that Muslim men could marry Christian and Jewish women (and raise their children as Muslims) while dhimmi could marry only their own kind achieved exactly what they were supposed to achieve. Islam won the region.

***Elesha Coffman is managing editor of Christian History.***

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## **Charles Martel Defeats the Muslims at Tours (732)**

Charles was the illegitimate son of Pepin of Herstal, master of Gaul, but he did not let his birth become an obstacle to success. After Pepin's death, his wife Plectrude imprisoned Charles. Under her rule, tribes that Pepin had controlled revolted. During the troubles that followed, Charles escaped, battled enemies on every side, placed a king from the Merovingian dynasty on the throne, overthrew Plectrude, named himself Mayor of the Palace, and became lord of Western Europe.

Meanwhile Muslims, having conquered most of the formerly Christian lands of the Mideast, North Africa, and Spain, set their sights on France. Led by Abderrahman, they defeated Duke Eudes of Aquitaine and headed toward Tours, seeking plunder. Charles hurried to save the city.

According to a Muslim account, Charles did not arrive on time: "Abderrahman and his host attacked Tours to gain still more spoil, and they fought against it so fiercely that they stormed the city almost before the eyes of the army that came to save it; and the fury and the cruelty of the Moslems towards the inhabitants of the city were like the fury and cruelty of raging tigers." That same author also reported the Muslim defeat. "It was manifest that God's chastisement was sure to follow such excesses; and Fortune thereupon turned her back upon the Moslems."

On October 10, 732, Charles met the invaders near Poitiers. The Muslims were mounted, and their cavalry employed stirrups. The Franks were on foot. Nevertheless, they were able to stand against the horsemen. At evening, the battle was a stalemate.

The next morning the Muslims seemed on the verge of victory, breaking through the French lines and almost reaching Charles. However, a rumor flew about that their loot was being plundered and many warriors dashed off to protect their spoils. The Franks cut down Abderrahman. Without their leader, the Muslims lost heart and fled, suffering heavy losses.

Many historians believe that this battle preserved Christendom. Although much of Europe was still pagan, Christianity had taken hold in parts, and Charles' victory ensured that mission work could go forward. Muslims would raid again from Iberia, but never presented as much of a threat as they did at Tours. Because of his many victories, Charles earned the nickname "Martel," meaning "hammer." His descendants held great power in Europe, most notably Charlemagne, who founded the Holy Roman Empire.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 40: The Crusades

## Bloody Pilgrimage

As the crusaders assaulted Jerusalem, the holy and savage joined hands.

Mark Galli

When he heard the Christian armies were approaching, Iftikhar ad-Dawla, Muslim governor of Jerusalem, readied the city for a siege. He destroyed the wells outside the walls, poisoning some, dumping earth in others. He drove outlying flocks and herds into the city, and then drove Christian inhabitants, who outnumbered the city's Muslims, out into the Judean wilderness. He strengthened the towers with sacks of cotton and hay, to absorb the shock of bombardment by French catapults. Then he sent a message to fellow Fatimids (a branch of Islam) in Egypt, imploring them to send armed aid.

Meanwhile, along the coastal road of modern-day Lebanon, the Christian armies advanced—color-filled banners fluttering in the wind, relics carefully borne, pilgrims trudging behind, sometimes singing, sometimes chanting, like a monastery on the march. As they made their way during this spring of 1099, they found only light resistance from Muslim cities and fortresses, at least compared to the protracted siege and fierce fighting they had seen in Antioch. At Jaffa, they turned inland and started the slow ascent to Jerusalem.

On June 5, the Christians' spirits were buoyed by a lunar eclipse—a portent of victory. The next day, one army headed for Bethlehem and conquered it in short order. On the evening of June 7, the main army encamped, finally, within sight of the massive, stone walls of the Holy City.

Thus began a five-week siege, which would culminate in a fierce three-day battle, which in turn would conclude nearly four years of prayer, courage, savagery, and faith we now call the First Crusade.

## Taking Up the Cross

It all started at a meeting of church bureaucrats. Pope Urban II had gathered leaders at Clermont, in South-East France, in November 1095. After nine days of sessions among clerics, he invited the public to a speech. In an open field, Urban called upon the men of France to defend their fellow Greek Christians, who had been invaded by the Turks. Furthermore, he exhorted them to liberate Jerusalem, particularly the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, from the infidel Muslims.

When Urban finished, a great cry went up from the crowd: "God wills it! God wills it!" Immediately volunteers approached and knelt before him. To Urban's surprise, the Christian imagination had been seized. In the next few months, as he and others preached his message through France and Germany, dukes and counts, knights and foot soldiers, bishops and priests, and poor, simple pilgrims "took up the cross," literally sewing the emblem on their shirts as sign of their vow to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

It would be a dangerous 2,000-mile trek, and most had no idea what lay before them. They knew, though, what lay behind. Wrote a chronicler of one man leaving his wife, "He commended her to the Lord, kissed her lingeringly, and promised her as she wept that he would return." But whether with families or without, whether gladly or sorrowfully, thousands ventured forth.

They went because they feared Muslims, the fierce and aggressive devotees of a heathen religion. Still entrenched in southern Spain, Muslims had also recently swallowed large chunks of land in Asia Minor and

were now an easy march from Constantinople, the capital of Byzantine (Eastern) Christianity.

They went because they were outraged. For 400 years, Muslims had controlled the most sacred of Holy Land sites. Though Christian pilgrims were generally permitted to visit sites, their Lord Christ was not, in fact, Lord of his manor, Jerusalem. Worse, he was not Lord of the most sacred church in Christendom, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the place where Christ was buried and resurrected, the scene of the greatest miracle in history.

They went because they hungered for forgiveness. Vows and pilgrimages to the Holy Land—to touch sacred history and receive partial remission of sins—had become increasingly popular. Now the pope announced a pilgrimage of extraordinary importance. Not only would Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher be delivered from defiling infidels, “Remission of sins will be granted to those going.” All past sins would be forgiven!

And so they left—men, women, children—a few out of lust for money and adventure, a few to fight someone besides fellow Christian knights, most because they felt something larger calling them. Some went on horseback, some on foot, some glimmering with chain mail and armaments, others in rags.

On their way to Jerusalem, the band had starved and plundered, had killed and been killed. They had seen strategic victories at Nicea, Antioch, and lesser cities. Now one objective remained: the Holy City, and within it, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

### **The Hermit’s Prophecy**

On Sunday, June 12, the princes of the crusading armies surrounding Jerusalem made a pilgrimage to the Mount of Olives. There they met an aged hermit. To their surprise, he exhorted them: “If you will attack the city tomorrow, the Lord will deliver it into your hands.”

The princes balked. Jerusalem was one of the great fortresses of the medieval world. The walls had been strengthened and maintained since Roman emperor Hadrian had rebuilt them. The eastern wall faced the steep slopes of the Kidron Valley. On the southeast, the ground fell toward the Valley of Hinnom (the Bible’s Gehenna). A third steep valley ran along the western wall. In addition, the princes were short of scaling ladders, mangonels (catapults), and siege towers.

The princes objected, “We don’t have the necessary machinery for storming the walls,” but the hermit persisted.

“God is all powerful,” he declared. “If he wills, he will storm the walls even with one ladder. The Lord aids those who labor for the truth!”

These soldiers could not ignore this argument. Since their victory at Nicea early in the campaign, they had witnessed heavenly signs. In early October 1097, they saw a comet with a tail shaped like a sword. On December 30, during the siege of Antioch, an earthquake shook, and the heavens glowed red, and the crusaders spotted a great light in the form of a cross. Just outside of Jerusalem, they had seen a lunar eclipse. All, they felt, showed sure divine approval.

They had also experienced the supernatural. Many soldiers had glimpsed St. George and St. Demetrius, with gallant faces and glimmering armor, leading their armies in the Battle of Dorylaeum. In Antioch, some had seen an army of angels, saints, and dead crusaders leading the fight, carrying white banners and riding white horses.

These men were hardened soldiers, though; they didn’t believe every vision reported. They knew God



generally gives victory to the army with tighter discipline, better plans, and more men. The unruly masses led by Peter the Hermit, on a preliminary, brief wave of the First Crusade, were faith-filled pilgrims. But they were not soldiers, and they had been slaughtered outside Nicea by the Saracens (the crusaders' term for Muslims). These princes had passed through that mountain pass seven months later and marched past their fellow pilgrims' skulls and bleached bones.

Still, it only made sense that with the golden prize of the journey before them, God would work a great miracle. The princes left the hermit, returned to their camps, and ordered their soldiers to prepare an attack.

### **Not Enough Ladders**

The Christian armies were strategically encamped. On the northern wall camped the army of Robert "Duke of Normandy" the courageous eldest son of William the Conqueror. Next to him was the army of Robert, Count of Flanders, a younger man whose father had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem eleven years earlier.

To the northwest sat the army of Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lower Lorraine, a handsome man with yellow beard and hair. He was joined by the army of Tancred, a Norman knight, who brought with him flocks from his recent capture of Bethlehem.

To the south, "near the Church of St. Mary the Mother of the Lord, where the Lord shared the Last Supper with his disciples," was the army of Raymond, Count of Toulouse, a man of some 60 years and a veteran of holy wars against Muslims in Spain.

On Monday, after the sun had risen and shown brightly on the city, the trumpets sounded. The crusaders cried, "God wills it!" and "God, help!" and rushed the city from all sides. They quickly overran an outer stone defense, and began throwing their few ladders against the main wall.

Knights, one at a time, scaled the ladders, and with swords and spears, fought face-to-face with the Saracens. But they had too few ladders; they couldn't scale the walls in sufficient numbers to overtake the defenders. After several hours of desperate fighting the soldiers of Christ were forced to withdraw. They returned to their camps profoundly discouraged.

### **Deathly Thirst**

Time was on the Muslims' side. Though the Muslim army was barely sufficient to man the walls under siege, the city was well supplied with food and water. If the defenders could hold out till the Egyptian reinforcements arrived, the siege, and the crusade, would be over.

On the other side, the crusaders, even before the first attack, were suffering thirst. Their only source of pure water was the Pool of Siloam, below the south walls. But it was only a bow shot from the city. When crusaders dipped their cups into the pool, sometimes a hail of arrows from the walls would drive them back.

The crusaders sewed up skins of oxen for containers and scoured the countryside, sometimes traveling five miles before they found water. On arriving at a pool, the desperate Christians often shoved and fought each other to get at the water. Worse, the Muslims would often sortie out and ambush Christians at these pools, killing them and cutting them to pieces.

At times the crusaders drew water that was "all muddy" and that, borne in skins, smelled putrid. Still, back in camp, it sold for high prices, and often, as one chronicler noted, "a thirsty man hardly got enough to satisfy his barest need."

Summer in Jerusalem can reach temperatures above 100 degrees, with few trees for shade. The hot wind and dust dried throats. Animals thirsted to death and rotted where they had stood. One chronicler reported, "Many sick people fell down by the fountain [of Siloam], with tongues so parched that they were unable to utter a word."

## **Weapons Shortage**

Still the crusaders had work to do. The failed attack had convinced the princes they needed more siege equipment. That meant, first, siege towers, portable castles that could be wheeled up to a city wall, where a small drawbridge could be dropped, enabling the attackers to enter. They needed scaling ladders to climb the walls. They also needed mangonels, catapults that took 50 men to operate, some powerful enough to hurl a 300 pound stone 150 yards. Mangonels also launched balls of fire—burning wood, straw, and animal fat, wrapped in iron bands—to set cities ablaze.

But the crusaders lacked supplies to build these weapons. As had happened more than once on this expedition, though, hope arrived at just the right time, this time in Jaffa: six Christian vessels, carrying food and ropes, nails and bolts. A party (and later another, because the first was ambushed) was sent to retrieve the supplies.

Now the problem was wood; little was to be found on the bare hills surrounding Jerusalem. So expeditions were formed, which traveled many miles. Eventually Tancred and Robert of Flanders returned from the forests of Samaria, laden with logs and planks, carried on the backs of camels and captive Muslims. Construction was begun.

## **Desertions**

By now, the crusaders' spirits ebbed. Food had become scarce. Quarrels broke out—not the first time—among the expedition's leaders.

The first concerned the possession of Bethlehem. Tancred had left his standard flying over the Church of the Nativity, meaning he had taken it as his own. The clergy and rival princes argued that so holy a building should not be in the power of a secular lord.

They also fought about the future status of Jerusalem. Some knights wanted a king appointed. The priests argued that no Christian should call himself a king in the city where Christ was crowned and suffered. After bitter debate, decisions were postponed, but between certain princes bad blood remained.

All along, soldiers and pilgrims had deserted the expedition, despite their vows. Military defeats, famine, disease, and sundry tragedies (one ship carrying 400 crusaders had capsized, drowning all aboard), as well as ongoing exposure to heat, cold, wet, and mud, took their toll. Though a stream of pilgrims had joined along the way, the attrition had been steady.

In 1096 at Nicea, the first city besieged by the crusaders, about 43,000 knights, foot soldiers, and noncombatants were at hand. At Jerusalem now, three years later, the numbers were down to about 15,000. Before the very walls of the city, more crusaders deserted. One company went to the Jordan and were rebaptized; then they gathered palm branches and headed for Jaffa to find a ship for home.

In early July, things came to a head. The crusaders heard that a great army had set out from Egypt to relieve Jerusalem. But even this alarming news could not shake them out of their doldrums. As it turned out, it would take a miracle to do that.

## **Barefoot Procession**

In the early morning of July 6, priest Peter Desiderius told two princes that he had received a vision: Adhemar, Bishop of Le Puy, dead now for many months, had appeared to him.

At the Council of Clermont, Adhemar had been the very first to kneel before Urban, seeking to join the holy expedition; soon Urban appointed him spiritual head of the armies. He proved to be a strong and compassionate preacher, a military tactician, and a careful diplomat—a man all respected. Adhemar's presence had kept the expedition together until his tragic death after the victory at Antioch.

"Speak to the princes and all the people," the bishop had commanded in the vision, "and say to them, 'You who have come from distant lands to worship God and the Lord of hosts, purge yourselves of your uncleanness! Let each one turn from his evil ways.' "

As penance for their selfishness, greed, and quarreling, the crusaders should "with bare feet march around Jerusalem, invoking God; you must also fast. If you do this and then make a great attack on the city on the ninth day, it will be captured. If you do not, all the evils that you have suffered will be multiplied by the Lord."

Immediately, the princes gathered an assembly of soldiers and pilgrims. Peter told them of his vision. If they obeyed, God would "open the city to us and give us judgment upon his enemies and ours, who now with unjust possession contaminate the place of his suffering and burial, the enemy who seek to deny us the great blessing of the place of God's humiliation and our redemption."

During this long expedition, many crusaders had received visions: of Jesus, of Mary, of saints Peter and Andrew, as well as of deceased crusaders. Some visions inspired courage, others skepticism; often the most dubious hearers, in fact, were priests and bishops. On this occasion, though, soldiers, clerics, and pilgrims alike believed.

So on Friday, July 8, a solemn, barefoot procession slowly wound around the city walls. Bishops and priests came first, bearing crosses and holy relics. Princes and knights followed, then the foot soldiers, and finally the pilgrims. Muslims gathered on the walls and mocked them. They placed crosses in yokes, striking them and performing other obscene acts.

Then the crusaders ascended the Mount of Olives, where the fiery Peter the Hermit and two other preachers exhorted them: "Now that we are on the very spot from which the Lord made his ascension and we can do nothing more to purify ourselves, let each one of us forgive his brother whom he has injured, that the Lord may forgive us." Princes, who for weeks (and years) had been quarreling and vying for power, embraced.

Thirst and fasting could not now dampen their enthusiasm. In the next two days, mangonels were completed and ladders built, and finishing touches were put on the siege towers. Pilgrims sewed camel-hide and nailed it on the exposed parts of the towers, to protect them from the fire balls Saracens would hurl. Crossbows and battering rams were readied; spears, spikes, axes, and swords were sharpened.

On Sunday, the wooden towers were wheeled to their stations, one against the north wall, one against the south; a third, slightly smaller, was put against the northwest corner. The Christians' work had been carefully guarded, so the Saracens were alarmed at seeing the structures. Iftikhar, the city governor, quickly shored up weaker sections of his defenses and began bombarding the siege towers with stones and fire.

All was ready.

## **Fresh Assault**

On Wednesday evening, the horn sounded, and soldiers climbed the towers and charged the walls with shouts of "God wills it!" The main attacks were from the south (Raymond) and northeast (Godfrey and Tancred), with a diversionary attack on the northwest (the two Roberts).

The first objective was to bring the wooden towers right up to the walls, but that meant filling up the ditch that ran around the city. All night long and during Thursday, the crusaders dug and filled, while rained on by stones and fire.

For the next day and a half, battering rams thudded, arrows whirred, huge stones crashed, and streaks of fire shot through the skies. Wrote one chronicler, "Thus the fight continued from the rising to the setting sun in such a splendid fashion that it is difficult to believe anything more glorious was ever done."

By Thursday evening, Raymond's men, on the south, had succeeded in wheeling their tower over the ditch against the wall. But the defense was fierce, for Iftikhar himself commanded this sector. In the end, Raymond could not establish a foothold on the wall.

That night, anxiety settled in both camps, according to one crusader. "The Saracens feared that we would take the city during the night or on the next day, for the outer works were broken through and the ditch was filled. ... On our part, we feared only that the Saracens would set fire to the machines that were moved close to the walls. ... So on both sides it was a night of watchfulness, labor, and sleepless caution."

## **Good Friday**

In the morning, the trumpets blasted again, and the crusaders, with banners flying and shouts of "God wills it!" rushed the walls. Priests and pilgrims prayed, sang, and chanted at a safe distance; some brought water to cool thirsty soldiers. The Saracens defended themselves fiercely. By mid-morning, the wooden towers and many mangonels were badly shaken by the blows of the huge Saracen stones; some were burned.

The soldiers, weary from nearly two days of battle, sank in discouragement. There were just too many defenders to get a foothold on the wall. The walls still stood high and strong, and in one Christian's words, the "great resources and skill the enemy exhibited in repairing their defenses seemed too great for us to overcome."

A council was held to decide whether the towers should be withdrawn. But as the council met, some soldiers with Godfrey, on the north, spotted a knight on the Mount of Olives. He waved his shield to advance. One chronicler noted, "Who this knight was, we have been unable to find out. At this signal our men began to take heart."

The loud, steady battering of the wall began afresh; fresh attempts were made to scale the walls. On the north, archers shot burning arrows at the nearby Saracen tower, and the fire caught on reinforcing wood. Soon smoke was bellowing forth, and the men guarding it were forced to retreat.

Godfrey released the long drawbridge on his tower; it swung down and made a bridge to the wall. Two Flemish knights led an army across, soon followed by Godfrey himself. One chronicler noted that the crusaders were entering the city on "the day of the week when Christ redeemed the whole world on the cross."

Once that sector of the wall was captured, other attackers scurried over the walls from ladders, and now everything seemed to happen at once. In one chronicler's words, "With trumpets sounding and with everything in an uproar, exclaiming, 'Help, God!' they vigorously pushed into the city and straightaway

raised the banner on the top of the wall." Godfrey remained on the wall, shouting encouragement to the newcomers; he sent men to open the city gates to let other crusading forces in. Tancred and his men, having come across the drawbridge, were soon deep in the streets of Jerusalem. The Saracens, "completely terrified," ran for their lives through the narrow streets.

Meanwhile, on the southern wall, Raymond couldn't get a foothold, but it became apparent to him and Iftikhar that all was lost for the Muslims. Iftikhar retreated to the tower of David, a citadel he could have defended for many days. Iftikhar immediately began negotiating a surrender, offering to turn over to Raymond a great treasure for the return of his life and that of his bodyguards. Raymond accepted and occupied the tower. Iftikhar and his men were escorted out of the city. They were nearly the only Muslims to get out of the city alive.

### **Worship at the Tomb**

A chronicler noted, "Now that our men had possession of the walls and towers, wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men (and this was more than merciful) cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames."

Some Muslims fled toward the temple area, where the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of al-Aqsa stood. They intended to use the latter as their last fortress. But as they crowded in and up on the roof, Tancred was already upon them. He began pillaging the Dome of the Rock. The Muslims hastily surrendered to him, promising a heavy ransom. Tancred accepted and gave them his banner to display over the mosque as protection.

Meanwhile, crusaders rushed through the streets and into houses and mosques, killing everyone they met—including women and children. All Friday afternoon and night, the killing and looting continued as soldiers and pilgrims rushed through the city, "seizing gold and silver, horses and mules, and houses full of all sorts of goods."

It was a frenzied attack, and yet not without rules. Whichever looter "entered the home first, whether rich or poor, was not to be harmed by anyone else in any way. He was to have and to hold the house or palace. ... They mutually agreed to maintain this rule."

Saturday morning the blood flowed unabated. Tancred's banner, turned out, was no protection to the refugees in the Mosque of al-Aqsa. A band of crusaders forced entry into the mosque, killing those on the roof with arrows, hacking others to pieces with swords. "If you had been there," one chronicler said, "your feet would have been stained up to the ankles with the blood of the slain."

Another reported, "Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from the blasphemies."

The Jews of Jerusalem fared no better. They had fled to their chief synagogue, but since they were believed to have aided the Muslims, the building was set on fire.

No one was safe: "With drawn swords," one chronicler reported, "our people ran through the city; nor did they spare anyone, not even those pleading for mercy. The crowd was struck to the ground, just as rotten fruit falls from shaken branches, and acorns from a windblown oak."

By evening, soldiers and pilgrims, "weeping from excess of gladness," picked their way through the bodies of people and horses, past piles of heads, hands, and feet, and made their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. There, "singing a new song unto the Lord in a high-sounding voice of exultation, and making offerings and most humble supplications, [they] joyously visited the Holy Place as they had long desired to

do.”

“Oh, time so longed for!” this chronicler continued, “Oh, time remembered among all others! Oh, deed to be preferred before all deeds! Truly longed for, since it has always been desired by all worshipers of the Catholic faith with an inward yearning of the soul.”

Another wrote, “This day, I say, will be famous in all future ages, for it turned our labors and sorrows into joy and exaltation; this day, I say, marks the justification of all Christianity, the humiliation of paganism, and the renewal of our faith.”

## **Heading Home**

In the hot summer sun, it didn’t take long for the smell of decaying bodies to become revolting. So, the few surviving Saracens were commanded to drag the dead ones outside the walls, where they were thrown into piles “as big as houses” and set on fire.

On July 22, a week after the Christians had entered the city, the princes gathered and elected Godfrey as ruler (not king) of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. And on August 1, a Latin patriarch (Roman Catholic bishop) was elected.

On August 12, crusading armies resoundingly defeated a rescuing Egyptian army at the Battle of Ascalon, thus securing the safety of Christian Jerusalem for nearly a century to come. By the end of the month, the bulk of the crusaders, having fulfilled their vows, headed home.

That December, Fulcher of Chartres, who would shortly compose his chronicle of the First Crusade, visited Jerusalem. He noted that both inside and outside the walls of the Holy City, the stench of death still lingered.

***Mark Galli is managing editor of Christian History.***

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## **Saladin (1138–1193)** **Chivalrous Muslim general**

Balian, a soldier in Christian forces just defeated by the Muslims, asked Saladin for one favor. Could he travel safely to and from Jerusalem to get his family out before the Muslims attacked the city? Saladin granted the request; he asked only that Balian not stay to fight.

When Balian reached Jerusalem, however, the city's few defenders wanted him to command the garrison. Embarrassed, he asked Saladin for release from his vow. Saladin understood and also gave Balian's family safe passage to the coast.

Such incidents have built the chivalrous reputation of the brilliant and sometimes brutal Saladin.

A Muslim Kurd from northern Iraq, Saladin was raised in a prominent family. At 14 he joined his uncle's military staff and at 31 followed him to Egypt, where his uncle became vizier (a high officer). When his uncle died two months later, Saladin succeeded him. He then defeated competing Muslim leaders and started a dynasty that restored Egypt as the major Muslim power in the Middle East.

Saladin declared a jihad against the Christians. In July 1187, in mountains overlooking the Sea of Galilee, he won the bloody and critical Battle of Hattin. Thousands of Christians were killed during the battle, and hundreds slaughtered afterwards. Then Saladin swept through Palestine, taking Jerusalem and capturing more than fifty crusader castles in two years. When he was done, he had pushed the Christians back to three coastal cities.

In Richard the Lion-Heart, Saladin found a worthy military opponent, who thwarted his Muslim armies time and again. Saladin found Richard "pleasant, upright, magnanimous, and excellent." Once when Richard contracted a serious fever, Saladin sent him peaches and pears, along with ice from the top of Mount Hermon 100 miles away. Eventually stalemated, Richard reluctantly agreed to a three-year truce.

Islam's most famous military hero left an empire stretching some 1,200 miles north to south, covering parts of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. Saladin died at 55, weary of perpetual war. Generous throughout his life, he did not have enough money left to pay for a grave.

## **Richard the Lionheart (1157–1199)**

King Richard I of England deserved his nickname.

During the Third Crusade, while 70 miles from Jaffa, he heard that the city had fallen to Muslims and that the last defenders were surrounded. He immediately started his troops on the march while he sailed ahead. From Jaffa's harbor, he saw Muslim flags flying in the city. A priest jumped from the fortress walls into the ocean and swam to the ship, telling Richard that Christians were negotiating a surrender.

Richard unstrapped his leg armor and waded ashore. Behind him were no more than fifty knights and a few hundred archers and sailors. His advance stirred the defenders in the fortress to charge, and the Muslims were run out of town.

Richard's crusading career began ten months after he was crowned at age 32. Recovering Jerusalem was his top priority. He made his way to the Holy Land with no more than 800 mounted soldiers. They were, however, well financed: Richard had collected an unpopular tithe of all income, arm-twisted acquaintances for donations, and even sold political offices.

An accomplished military strategist and skilled politician, Richard was also hotheaded and sometimes irresponsible. He arrived in the Holy Land in June 1191, in time to join the siege of Acre. Muslim defenders surrendered a month later. While negotiations for the release of captives were underway, Richard suspected bad faith on the part of the Muslims. In a rage, he ordered the immediate massacre of 2,700 Muslim hostages.

A month later, Richard headed south and began fortifying cities to make an assault on Jerusalem. Twice he managed to get within 12 miles of the Holy City, but his supply lines and forces proved too weak.

After sixteen months in Palestine, Richard heard his brother was plotting a takeover and that France was amassing troops for an attack. Before he left, he made a treaty with Muslim general Saladin that gave crusaders the same stretch of coastline from Tyre to Jaffa. Christians also were accorded safe passage throughout Palestine, permitting them to visit holy shrines.

Richard was 41 when, in a minor battle in northern France, he was killed by a lone arrow.



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 40: The Crusades

## How Could Christians Do This?

Why followers of the Prince of Peace waged war.

Bruce L. Shelley

Within Christian circles, the terms *crusade* and *crusader* survive as expressions of devout purpose. Near where I live, a Christian high school calls its athletic teams "Crusaders," and several evangelical organizations refer to their ministries as Christian "crusades."

In other circles, however, *crusade* usually triggers less admiration, more shock. It recalls the violence and cruelty of medieval military expeditions to conquer the Holy Land, all done in the name of Christ and with the blessing of the church.

Many of us, then, not only balk at using the term *crusades*, we ask, "How could Christians have done such a thing?"

### Sweeping Forces

Historians usually answer this question by describing the historical circumstances, or the "proximate causes," of the Crusades. Three such causes often top the list.

First, Christians faced the military and political threat of Islam. The Seljuk Turks, new and fanatical converts to Islam, invaded the Holy Land and seized Christianity's sacred shrines. They then aggressively headed for Asia Minor, Christian territory. Forces of the Byzantine [Eastern Christian] Empire tried desperately to bar the invader, but at the battle of Manzikert (1071), the Turks captured the eastern emperor and scattered his army.

Within a few years, Asia Minor, the chief source of Byzantine revenue and troops, was lost. Nicea fell to the invaders in 1092, bringing the Turks perilously close to Constantinople, the Byzantine capital. The new emperor, Alexius I, sent emissaries to Pope Urban II, pleading for mercenaries to aid in the rescue of lost territories.

Thus, Christian crusaders streamed toward the Holy Land in part because they were invited. They were giving aid to Christians in the East.

Second, the Roman Catholic Church of the eleventh century was led by a militantly aggressive papacy. The reform-minded party of the church, which had recently come to power, thought church improvement lay in investing the pope with more authority; they cast a vision of the universal sovereignty of the Holy Father. In his rallying sermon for the First Crusade, Urban referred to himself as "spiritual ruler of the whole world."

A universal Christian sovereign, naturally, would want the Holy Land liberated from Turkish "infidels," so Urban was inclined to accept the invitation to send troops to Asia Minor and Palestine. Some historians speak of the First Crusade as "the foreign policy of the reformed papacy." That foreign policy would, it was hoped, bring the Holy City of Jerusalem back under Christian control. And it would possibly restore unity between Eastern and Western Christians.

Third, Europeans, after centuries of political and economic disintegration, were entering a new era of self-conscious unity.

Separate regions worked to enhance mutual interests: forest land was cleared, new markets opened, and Italian shipping poised to challenge Muslim dominance in the eastern Mediterranean. Many historians have suggested the Crusades would have been next to impossible without these Italian ships.

One answer, then, to "How could they?" is simply, "Conditions were right." Christian crusaders were swept along by the tides of history.

### **Deeper Questions**

Still, most Christians today feel an ethical shock over the crusaders' seemingly blind and bigoted religious zeal. It is easy for us to criticize the Crusades. They permanently embittered relations between Christians and Muslims, and they left Jews suspicious and fearful of Christians.

Yet, if we fail to see the crusaders' spiritual ideals, we misperceive the spirit of the times. The evil elements of the Crusades, though repulsive, are not the whole story.

The Crusades raise deep questions about the human heart. What is the nature of a "good" society? How do we restrain evil? Can "good" be defined by Christian doctrine? If so, how shall destructive ideas (called "heresy") be eliminated from society? Such questions are not buried in the twelfth century. Thoughtful Christians today, concerned about the moral decline in our own society, are asking essentially the same questions.

So, a second way to answer the question about Christian sponsorship of the Crusades is to check the ideals of the times. We might call these "more distant causes" or "internal motivations."

One can scarcely speak of a single motive in a movement embracing hundreds of thousands of people over several centuries. Still, a look at three principal ideals of crusaders helps explain their motivations.

### **Defending Christians**

Pope Urban II and other preachers of the Crusades wanted to defend Christian society. In launching the First Crusade, Urban reportedly exhorted his listeners, "You must carry succor to your brethren dwelling in the East. ... The Turks have attacked them, ... occupying more and more the lands of those Christians." They have "destroyed the churches and devastated the kingdom of God." If Christians permitted them to go unchallenged, "they will extend their sway more widely over many faithful servants of the Lord."

Furthermore, Christians of the time believed that violence, if used rightly, was a proper means of defending Christians. Augustine had laid down the principles of a "just war": it was conducted by the state; its purpose was the vindication of justice, meaning the defense of life and property, and it respected noncombatants, hostages, and prisoners. For Augustine, a just war's purpose was to achieve peace. Even in waging war, a follower of Christ must "cherish the spirit of a peacemaker."

Unfortunately, this ideal evaporated in the heat on the way to the Holy Land. The just defense of Christians faded from view, and Christians became increasingly inflamed with avenging the wrongs perpetrated against Christians and their holy places—especially Jerusalem.

En route to the Holy Land, crusading mobs destroyed Jewish communities in the Rhineland, raping, plundering, and murdering. And in the Holy Land, even Muslim noncombatants, women, and children, were slaughtered. In the fervor of a crusade, the noble end justified the ignoble means.

## **Knights' Honor**

Many crusaders were also motivated by the honor of knighthood. The clearest portrait of the ideal knight came from English philosopher John of Salisbury, who wrote, "What is the office of the duly ordained soldiery? To defend the church, to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood, to protect the poor from injuries, ... to pour out their blood for their brothers ... and, if need be, to lay down their lives. The high praises of God are in their throats, and two-edged swords are in their hands."

The First Crusade, as originally designed, was composed of nobles from France, Germany, and Italy. The pope envisioned the Crusades partly as an outlet for restless, pugnacious nobles. "Gentle knights were born to fight," wrote one French chronicler, "and war ennobles all who engage in it without fear or cowardice." Urban wanted to enlist the knight for the glory of God.

Unfortunately, honor, in historian J. Huizinga's words, is "a strange mixture of conscience and egotism." In addition, though the crusaders formally took high moral and spiritual vows in "taking up the cross," history shows that greed motivated some of them, at least some of the time. This mixture of knightly motives led too often to brutality.

## **Forgiveness of Sins**

Finally, the crusaders were empowered by the hope of salvation, an ideal that was not buried with the crusaders.

For centuries, peaceful European pilgrims had been traveling to worship at the birthplace of Christ. The rise and spread of Islam during the seventh century did not interrupt this traffic. By the tenth century, bishops were organizing mass pilgrimages to the Holy Land. In 1065, about 7000 pilgrims set out from Germany, probably the largest of these events.

Like our rallies at state capitals or marches on Washington, these pilgrimages were part devotion and part celebration. Through the years, the church adopted them as acts of penance. Surrounded by deep, religious emotions, pilgrimages assumed an aura of special sanctity; any disruption of them could be interpreted as blasphemy.

The crisis came when the Seljuk Turks seized Jerusalem from their fellow Muslims and sometimes denied Christians access to Christianity's most holy places. This halted medieval Christians from practicing a deeply meaningful act of devotion and an aid to salvation.

When Pope Urban II rallied Christians, he offered an extraordinary reward to those who set out to liberate the land of the Savior's birth: "All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins."

For years the church had claimed the power to remit part of a sinner's temporal punishment, but no complete remission had been granted until this historic moment.

It was only a slight step further to confer like benefits upon those who were unable to go on a crusade but who contributed to the cause. Thus, as the risks of the pilgrimage were heightened, so were the spiritual rewards.

## **Another World**

The intensity of crusaders was caught by Shakespeare, in words put in the mouth of that pugnacious

English monarch Henry IV:

We are impressed and engaged to fight ...  
To chase those pagans in those holy fields,  
Over whose acres walked those blessed feet,  
Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed,  
For our advantage on the bitter cross.

Some Christian ideals change with time and culture. Today, we do not share many of the assumptions of medieval Christians. The modern world exalts democratic individualism, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state. Urban II and the crusaders lived in a world with different ideals.

Still, we consider it unfortunate that the crusaders never understood two basic truths: Christianity's highest satisfactions are not guaranteed by possession of special places, and the sword is never God's way to extend Christ's kingdom.

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## **Fall of Constantinople 1453**

### **By Dan Graves**

Mehmed II, Sultan of the Ottomans, was determined to bring Constantinople under Islamic control. It was the last holdout of the Byzantine Empire. Because of its triple-thick walls and geographical position, it would be a difficult city to take. He set about the task with considerable forethought, erecting fortresses near Constantinople, and bringing up ships to attack from the sea and armies from the land. Among his troops were Janissaries, captured Christians groomed into a ferocious fighting force. Mehmed also had his engineers cast a giant gun capable of hurling stones weighing a quarter of a ton for up to a mile.

With this monster cannon as well as smaller weapons, he pounded the city day and night. It was not long before he reduced the outer walls to rubble. Things looked grim for the Christians in Constantinople. They were down to seven thousand tired defenders, who feared God had abandoned them. Food was running low. All the same, they did not give in, but erected makeshift barriers that kept Mehmed's armies at bay.

A strong chain under the water prevented Mehmed's boats from approaching the walls. Even when Mehmed built a slipway of greased planks over a steep hill and dragged eighty small ships into the inner waterway, the defenders stalemated the attacks. They also managed to put the great cannon out of commission.

After sustaining heavy losses in their attempt to take the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Turkish rank and file began to murmur at the toll the attacks were taking on them. Mehmed assembled a council and persuaded his followers to unleash one last assault. If it failed, he promised he would lift the siege. He directed all of his big guns against the most damaged points, with the Janissaries facing the heavily damaged center. Around 1:30 am May 29, 1453, he ordered the attack.

The Christians defended their city valiantly. Even the Janissaries could not smash through the walls. Once again, Mehmed's army was repulsed. However, a few Ottoman soldiers had fought their way through an open gate. Although they were quickly killed, they had planted flags on the city wall. Christian defenders, looking back in the dawn, saw Mehmed's banners and thought the city had been captured behind them. They wavered. Mehmed noticed and hurled his Janissaries at them. The Christian line collapsed.

The Ottoman army poured into the city, murdering indiscriminately. They looted churches and seized sacramental chalices. Some of the Christian fugitives claimed women and boys were raped on the altars. The Turks tore down the cross above the city's great cathedral, the Hagia Sophia, replacing it with a crescent. Survivors mourned it as "the last day of the world."

Constantine XI Palaiologos, the last Byzantine emperor, died fighting as a common soldier. Popular folklore said he would one day return to restore the empire and its great city, and that a priest would walk through the walls of the Hagia Sophia, bearing the elements for the restoration of the Eucharist.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 74: Christians & Muslims

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## A Deadly Give and Take

**Crusaders fought many terrible battles in the Middle East, but Muslims started - and won - the war.**

Paul Crawford

Osama bin Laden called America's response to September 11, a "new crusade and Jewish campaign led by the big crusader Bush under the flag of the cross." He clearly meant to link the military campaign to European campaigns from a millennium ago, during which, the prevailing mentality holds, Christian warriors unjustly attacked Islamic possessions in and around Palestine.

By establishing this connection, though, the fugitive fanatic admits more than he alleges. In the Middle Ages, as in 2001, Islam struck first—and in such a way that the West would certainly respond.

### Waves of conquest

Jerusalem has changed hands many times over the centuries, but the seventh century was particularly tumultuous. Pagan Persians stormed the city in 614. Eastern Christians, led by Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, reclaimed it by 630. Within a few years, though, Islamic forces had broken the Byzantine military and chased them out of Palestine.

Jerusalem surrendered to a Muslim army in 638. Construction began soon afterward on a mosque at the Temple Mount. Sophronius, the patriarch of the city, is said to have burst into tears and wailed, "Truly this is the Abomination of Desolation spoken of by Daniel the Prophet!"

After capturing Jerusalem, the Muslim armies poured through the eastern and southern provinces of the reeling Byzantine Empire. In the 640s Armenia in the north and Egypt in the south fell to Islam. In 655 the Muslims won a naval battle with the Byzantines and very nearly captured the Byzantine emperor.

By 711 Muslims controlled all of northern Africa, and a Muslim commander named Tariq had set foot on European soil—on a rock that took his name (Jebel al-Tariq, corrupted into Gibraltar). By 712 Muslims had penetrated deep into Christian Spain. At the battle of Toledo that year, they defeated the Spanish and killed their king. The Spanish kingdom promptly collapsed.

Surviving Christians retreated into the mountains of northwestern Spain and dug in their defenses. The Muslim armies bypassed them and began raiding across the Pyrenees into France.

Meanwhile, in the East, Muslims continued to push into the Byzantine Empire. By 717 they had landed in southeastern Europe, and they besieged the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. Had they taken the city, they might have conquered the entire continent. But the Byzantines resisted. Their capital would not fall to Islam until 1453.

Western Christians stopped the Muslim advance into their territory in 732 at the Battle of Tours (or Poitiers), France. Charles of Heristal, Charlemagne's grandfather, led a Frankish army against a large Muslim raiding party and defeated them, though Muslim raiders would continue attacking Frankish territory for decades. For his victory, Charles became known as the Hammer—in French, Charles Martel.

After regrouping, Muslim forces began to move into south central Europe, launching invasions of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica in the ninth century. They mounted operations on the Italian mainland as well, sometimes at the invitation of quarrelling Christian powers.

In 846 Muslim raiders attacked the outlying areas of Rome, the center of western Christianity. This act would be comparable to Christians sacking Mecca or Medina, something they have never done.

Toward the end of the ninth century, Muslim pirate havens were established along the coast of southern France and northern Italy. These pirates threatened commerce, communication, and pilgrim traffic for a hundred years or more.

During the tenth century, however, the tide began to turn. In the East in the 950s and 960s, the Byzantines mounted a series of counterattacks. They eventually recovered the islands of Crete and Cyprus and a good bit of territory in Asia Minor and northern Syria, including Antioch. They lacked the strength to retake Jerusalem, though they might have struggled harder had they known what terrors the city would soon face.

### **New threats**

In 1000, much—perhaps even most—of the population of the Holy Land was still Christian, of one affiliation or another. This was about to change.

One reason was the rise of a local Muslim ruler named Hakim, who was possibly insane and certainly not an orthodox Muslim (he claimed to be divine). Hakim persecuted Christians and Jews fiercely. In 1009 he ordered the destruction of the rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Christian population of the Holy Land began to shrink under his tyrannical rule.

Hakim aroused great hostility even from other Muslims, and his reign was soon over. The Byzantines, distressed by the damage to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, negotiated with the Muslims and in 1038 were allowed to begin rebuilding it again. But the losses to the local Christian (and Jewish) communities were harder to repair.

Another, and perhaps more serious, cause of distress for the local populations of all faiths was the intrusion into the Middle East of the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuks, pagan nomads from the steppes of central Asia, made steady inroads into the more sophisticated world of the Muslim Arabs in the early eleventh century.

In 1055, the Seljuks captured Baghdad, destroying a long-lived Muslim dynasty and seriously disrupting the stability of the Middle East. This might have provided an opportunity for the Christian Byzantines to recover their lost provinces, but even as the Seljuk Turks conquered the Arabs, they converted to Islam. The Muslim Arab overlords of the region were thus replaced by harsher, coarser Muslim Turks.

### **Pleas from the East**

In 1071 Byzantine Emperor Romanus Diogenes confronted a Turkish invasion force in the far eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. The two armies met at the village of Manzikert, near Lake Van, and the Byzantines were utterly defeated. As a result of this disaster, the Byzantines lost all the territory that they had recovered, painstakingly, in the ninth and tenth centuries. This included the entirety of Asia Minor, the breadbasket and recruiting ground of the empire.

Succeeding Byzantine emperors sent frantic calls to the West for aid, directing them primarily at the popes, who were generally seen as protectors of Western Christendom. Pope Gregory VII received

these appeals first, and in 1074 he discussed leading a relief expedition to Byzantium himself. But this proved impractical, and no aid was offered. The Byzantines continued sending appeals, however, eventually finding an audience with Pope Urban II.

In the meantime, Turkish invasions continued to affect the Holy Land. Jerusalem, which was held by the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty of Egypt, was captured by the Seljuk Turks in 1071. The Turks, suspecting (rightly or wrongly) that the local Christian population might prefer their former Fatimid rulers to the new overlords, persecuted them. In 1091, Turks drove out the Christian priests.

The Fatimids, meanwhile, bided their time. When the moment was right, they seized the city again—in 1098, just one year before the First Crusade would arrive to recapture it.

In 1095, the West finally responded to the plight of Eastern Christians by mounting the First Crusade. In 1099, crusaders stormed Jerusalem. Like the capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614, but unlike the negotiated surrender to the Muslims in 638, this attack ended in a bloody massacre of the city's inhabitants. "Heaps of heads and hands and feet were to be seen throughout the streets and squares of the city," a medieval historian wrote.

A Christian kingdom controlled much of the Holy Land until 1291, when the Muslims once again conquered the area. But the crusades themselves were military failures. Whatever battles Christians could claim, Muslims would win the war.

### **Islam strikes back**

The recapture of Jerusalem by Christian forces in 1099 did not, at first, draw much notice from the Muslim world. A few poets wrote laments on its capture. Abu I-Muzaffar al-Abiwardi, an Iraqi poet, called for a response:

***Sons of Islam, behind you are battles in which heads rolled at your feet.***

***Dare you slumber in the blessed shade of safety, where life is as soft as an orchard flower? ...***

***This is war, and the man who shuns the whirlpool to save his life shall grind his teeth in penitence.***

The titular supreme ruler of the Islamic world, the caliph of Baghdad, also issued a statement of regret. But in general, local Muslim rulers adapted to the presence of the Christian rulers of the crusader states just as they had adapted to the intrusion of the Turks: here were new players on the stage of the Middle East.

Before long, that began to change. A series of Muslim rulers, including Zengi, Nur al-Din, and the famous Saladin, fought to reunite the fractured parts of the Islamic Middle East. These leaders initiated a ***jihad***, a counter-crusade against the Christians of Jerusalem and the surrounding regions. A desire to reconquer the city figured more and more notably in Muslim writings.

By the end of the twelfth century, Saladin had reconquered Jerusalem more or less permanently. The entire Holy Land was back under Islamic control by 1291.

Christians repeatedly tried to launch crusades to drive back the renewed Muslim assault, but these attempts all failed. Crusading was too difficult, dangerous, and costly. Besides, the growing kingdoms of Europe were more interested in their own affairs than they were in the fate of Jerusalem or of Eastern Christians.



## Europe under siege

By the fourteenth century, a new Muslim force had appeared in Asia Minor: the Ottoman Turks. Brought into southern Europe by one side in a Byzantine civil war, the Ottomans quickly established a base from which to expand.

Christian Balkan powers began to fall before the Ottoman advance. Christian leaders like Prince Lazar of Serbia, John Hunyadi of Hungary, and the Albanian guerilla commander Skanderbeg put up a heroic resistance, but in vain. The drumbeat of Muslim advance had resumed.

Lazar was defeated and killed in the first battle of Kosovo in 1389. Bulgaria was overrun in 1393. John Hunyadi was defeated in 1448 at the second battle of Kosovo while trying to mount a campaign to save the beleaguered Byzantines, who by now were virtual prisoners inside their capital city of Constantinople.

Constantinople was sacked in May 1453. The last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI, died in desperate fighting around the gates of the city.

Legend has it that an Orthodox priest was celebrating mass in the Cathedral of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) when Muslim troops broke in. He escaped by walking miraculously into the altar, from whence, according to the legend, he will return once Constantinople is Christian again.

The legend is doubtless just that. But no more Christian services were conducted in the cathedral—Hagia Sophia, like most of the other churches of Constantinople, was converted into a mosque.

Over the next 200 years, European strength grew to match, then exceed, Islamic power. European states also began to claim colonies around the globe. Muslims lost their grip on land-based Asian trade and never developed the naval technology to keep pace with Europeans at sea.

In 1683, the Ottomans launched a final attack on Europe, staging their second siege of Vienna (the first took place in 1529). Once again, the city seemed on the verge of falling. It was saved by what may have been the last true crusade.

A Polish force, led by Jan Sobieski, caught the Turks by surprise and relieved the siege. Sobieski also, it is said, brought coffee and croissants onto Western tables when he discovered the Turks' uneaten breakfasts in their tents.

Muslims made no more serious attempts to take the city, or any other territory in Europe. The Muslim world was slipping into a long period of decline from which it is only now emerging.

## Crusades reconsidered

Though some Christians decried the crusades while they were happening (see page 28) and soon afterward (see page 31), anguish over this episode in history dates primarily from more recent years. In the early 1950s, at the end of his sweeping three-volume history of the crusades, Sir Steven Runciman put it this way: "The Crusades were a tragic and destructive episode. The Holy War itself was nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is the sin against the Holy Ghost."

Muslims, too, have lately taken a darker view of the crusade era. Until relatively recently, they saw the battles as episodes in the long contest between Islam and Christianity—a contest initiated by

Islam. Now, statements like this, from Lebanese journalist Abin Maalouf in the 1980s, are more common: "[T]here can be no doubt that the schism between these two worlds [of Islam and Christianity] dates from the crusades, deeply felt by the Arabs, even today, as an act of rape."

In the late 1990s, an American child led a "Reconciliation Walk" across Europe and the Middle East, distributing hugs, apologies, and a written statement, saying, "We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors" to the bemused Muslims he and his companions met along the way.

The child's activities fit into a larger pattern of Western amnesia about the conflict between Islam and Christianity, and of fashionable Western self-loathing. Muslims have offered no apologies. Some Muslim leaders still call the faithful to counter-crusade today, viewing themselves as continuing the tradition of Muslim conquest of Christian lands (though many of those lands have ceased to be Christian in any meaningful way). Muslims in general seem to have accepted the Christians' self-description as unjust aggressors.

But if Christians are allowed to wage war when attacked, and if Christians believe that their religion has a right to exist outside the sphere of Islamic law, perhaps modern Christians should take a second look at the crusades and their historical context, in which Christianity was under near-constant pressure from the Islamic world from the seventh century to the seventeenth.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 94: Building the City of God in a Crumbling World

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## Encounters with Islam

Few issues have more serious implications for Christian witness and global politics today than Christian-Muslim relations. We can learn much from Arab Christian apologist John of Damascus, eloquent Assyrian Church leader Patriarch Timothy 1, and tireless Protestant missionary Samuel Zwemer.

Andrew Saperstein

**Relations between the Muslim world and** the West dominate the international news. The events of 9/11, ongoing war in Iraq, developments in Afghanistan, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the Danish cartoon crisis, Pope Benedict's remarks on Islam, countless other lower-profile events—all reflect the fact that Muslim-Christian and Muslim-Western relations stand among the defining issues of our age. This situation compels serious followers of Jesus to consider precisely what Christ is calling us to concerning our Muslim neighbors—and our Muslim enemies.

Christians today are not the first to face this challenge. Since the sudden emergence of a vigorous and growing Muslim community in the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century, Christians and Muslims have been forced to negotiate the realities of face-to-face interactions in everyday life, in political relations between Christian and Muslim nations, and in all-too-common violent conflicts.

Unfortunately, violence has shaped Muslims' and Christians' views of each other and generated shame and anger on both sides. Marching under the banner of the cross, medieval Crusaders slaughtered thousands of Muslims, justifying their behavior in part as a response to Islamic aggression against Christians in the East. During the 14th and 15th centuries, Mongol warlord Tamerlane and his armies left great heaps of skulls across Asia as a symbol of their grisly ventures in the cause of holy war. More recently, European colonial powers have pilfered Muslim lands and subjugated their peoples in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. And today, murmurings of an impending "clash of civilizations" mingle with the din of violent confrontations involving Muslims and Christians on several continents.

While these painful realities must be reckoned with, there are brighter points in our shared history as well. Among the many past Christians who engaged Muslims in more constructive ways, three stand out: Christian apologist John of Damascus, Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I, and Protestant missionary to Arabia, Samuel Zwemer. These three men inhabited different times and places and had different callings, but they display to varying degrees certain critical features of constructive Christian-Muslim engagement: a commitment to Christian orthodoxy, to intentional, non-violent engagement of Muslims, and to the respectful accommodation of their words and deeds to Muslim experience.

### **John of Damascus: Defender of Orthodoxy**

Born to a prominent Arab Christian family in 655, John of Damascus (Yahya al-Dimashqi in Arabic) spent the first years of his career as the chief financial officer to the Muslim caliph Abd al-Malik. He was later elevated to the position of chief councilor of Damascus. John was well educated, gifted in rhetorical skills, and fluent in Arabic, Syriac, and Greek. With his thoroughly multicultural upbringing he undoubtedly moved among Syriac-speaking Christians, Arabic-speaking Muslims, and other local groups with ease.

John was apparently not always in favor with his Muslim employers or with the broader Christian community. He found himself on the wrong side of an increasingly acrimonious political and theological divide when he challenged the iconoclastic edicts of Byzantine Emperor Leo III, defending instead the role of images in Christian worship.

Leo III retaliated by sabotaging John's reputation among his Muslim patrons: He arranged for someone to forge a letter in John's handwriting offering to deliver the city of Damascus into Byzantine hands. John left the service of the caliph and spent the remainder of his life in the monastery of St. Sabas, less than 20 miles from Jerusalem.

At St. Sabas, John devoted his time to anti-heretical writing. Given his firsthand knowledge of Islam, it is not surprising that he turned his attention to defending the Christian faith against Muslim teaching, which he considered to be a kind of Christian heresy. His polemical work for Christians, "Against the Ishmaelite Heresy," was, in keeping with the genre, intentionally derogatory in tone—a sort of "anti-creed" that explained, "This is what we do not believe, and here's why ... "

John's familiarity with Islam is evident throughout the work; he cites numerous details of Muslim faith and practice and quotes ten different Qur'anic verses. But his tone is not conciliatory, and he makes statements such as "Mohammed wrote many ridiculous books" and "Mohammed said: 'Oh by the way, God has commanded me to take your wife'"—clearly not an approach that promotes constructive engagement with Muslims.

But John was a product of his times, and he reflects a noble, if not always nuanced, commitment to Christian orthodoxy. His words represent the first substantive Christian engagement with the Muslim community in writing. In both good and bad ways, he set the tone for future Christian-Muslim interactions.

### **Patriarch Timothy I: Respectful Debater**

Like John of Damascus, Patriarch Timothy I grew up as a Christian under Muslim rule. Born 50 years after John and 500 miles from Damascus, he came of age under the second great Muslim dynasty, the Abbasids of Baghdad. Timothy succeeded his uncle as bishop of the Assyrian Church, sometimes referred to as the Nestorian Church. In this role, he oversaw churches and missionaries as far away as China. (The rest of Christendom considered the Assyrian Christians heretical at that time, though this may have had more to do with politics than theology.)

As a Syriac-speaking Christian leader educated in the Greek classics and living among Arab Muslims, Timothy was ideally situated to be a bridge between the cultures and ideas of the classical West, the Assyrian Church, and the Muslim community. He developed the intellectual and diplomatic skills that would later distinguish him as the most nuanced of the early Christian leaders in his interactions with Muslims.

In 781, Timothy participated in a celebrated debate with the third Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi. Given the respectful tone of both men, it is perhaps more appropriate to call the exchange a dialogue. Timothy's words are a model of how to maintain Christian orthodoxy while accommodating the message to Muslim perspectives and experiences.

Timothy later wrote of their exchange: "After I had paid to him my usual respects as King of Kings [the appropriate title of address to the caliph at the time] he began to address me and converse with me not in a harsh and haughty tone, since harshness and haughtiness are remote from his soul, but in a sweet and benevolent way." The caliph inquired about the Trinity, "If He is one, He is not three; and if He is three, He is not one; what is this contradiction?"

Speaking of the king as "his exalted Majesty," and addressing him with affection and respect, Timothy replied: "The sun is also one, O our victorious King, in its spheric globe, its light and its heat, and the very same sun is also three, one sun in three powers. In the same way the soul has the powers of reason and intelligence, and the very same soul is one in one thing and three in another thing. In the same way also a piece of three gold denarii, is called one and three, one in its gold that is to say in its nature, and three

in its persons that is to say in the number of denarii. The fact that the above objects are one does not contradict and annul the other fact—that they are also three, and the fact that they are three does not contradict and annul the fact that they are also one."

The dialogue, in the form of a question and answer session between the caliph and Timothy, extended over two days and covered a broad range of practical and theological concerns. The conversation was always cordial, as seen in their closing remarks: "And our victorious King said: 'We have hope in God that we are the possessors of this pearl (the pearl of true faith), and that we hold it in our hands.' —And I replied: 'Amen, O King. But may God grant us that we too may share it with you, and rejoice in the shining and beaming lustre of the pearl! God has placed the pearl of His faith before all of us like the shining rays of the sun, and every one who wishes can enjoy the light of the sun.'"

More than 1200 years after his famous discussions with Caliph al-Mahdi, Patriarch Timothy I still stands as a shining example of a man deeply committed not only to Christian orthodoxy, but also to reflecting the mercy of his Lord in the way he related to the Muslims among whom he lived.

### **Samuel Zwemer: Apostle to Islam**

In 1867, nearly 1100 years after Timothy's dialogue with Caliph al-Mahdi, Samuel Marinus Zwemer was born in the small Dutch community of Vriesland, Michigan. Sensing a call to Christian mission during his studies at Hope College, Samuel was swept up by the momentum of the Student Volunteer Movement. He continued his theological education at a Reformed seminary and went on to receive practical medical training under a physician in New York. After deciding with a classmate to "get something definite underway," Samuel departed for Arabia in June 1890. The motto of his new Arabian Mission was Abraham's prayer for his son in Genesis 17:18: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee."

His  
kingdom  
is  
without  
frontiers.  
—  
Samuel  
Zwemer

Little did he know then that this prayer would absorb the rest of his life—nearly 62 years. Zwemer saw his life's work not as a struggle "against the Ishmaelites" (a term often used in the past to refer to the Muslim community), but as a struggle for them. Like Patriarch Timothy I, Zwemer viewed his call to engage Muslims not as an adversarial enterprise, but as an undertaking whose goal was to secure the blessings of God upon Muslims wherever they may be found.

Zwemer's approach focused on language, literature, and scholarship. Taught early on that "the learning of Arabic is a seven-day-a-week job," Zwemer devoted himself to the task, and he was later called upon to lecture and preach not only in his native English and Dutch, but also in the language of the Muslims to whom he was called. He founded the respected journal *The Muslim World* (still published today), wrote and distributed numerous books and articles aimed at bridging gaps of understanding between Christians and Muslims, and labored tirelessly to mobilize a generation of Christians to engage Muslims peacefully.

Living and traveling throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the entire Muslim world for decades, often under the worst of circumstances, Zwemer modeled the qualities of persistence and personal sacrifice (he buried three of his children in Arabia) that led eminent historian Kenneth Scott Latourette to state, "No one through all the centuries of Christian mission to Muslims has deserved better than Dr. Zwemer the designation of Apostle to Islam."

Though Samuel Zwemer was separated from John of Damascus and Timothy I by more than a millennium, he shared with them a deep commitment to orthodoxy and to intentional, peaceful engagement with Muslims. All three men possessed the cultural and linguistic skills as well as the willingness to engage in intelligent dialogue with Muslims. In the case of John and Timothy, these Muslims were their immediate neighbors; in the case of Zwemer, they lived on the other side of the world. Timothy and Zwemer accommodated their unwaveringly orthodox message to Muslims in ways

that were both relevant and respectful, and their example calls us to do the same as we engage Muslims today in our own and distant lands.

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## **Christianity and Education**

### **By David Feddes**

The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2).

Education matters to most of us. Most parents want a good education for their children because they believe an educated person has a better future. Most politicians want to be known as friends of education because they believe education is an issue that wins them the vote. But many parents and politicians who favor education don't know where the drive for education originally came from. They benefit from institutions of learning but don't know how such institutions got started. They say no child should be left behind but don't know the source of the idea that education should include the masses and not just an elite few.

Not enough people know that our widespread emphasis on education grows out of Christian roots. Did you know that Christians began the movement toward education for all children, girls as well as boys, poor as well as rich? Did you know that Christians kept higher learning alive during dark times, saved many classic books from disappearing forever, and renewed learning and civilization? Did you know that Christians took the lead in starting school systems? Did you know that Christians founded most of the world's great universities? These things may surprise you, but they are true. Widespread education might not exist at all without the influence of Christianity.

Is this news to you? Perhaps you've never heard these things before, and the reason you've never heard is that nobody told you. Your education didn't teach you the Christian roots of education. Many institutions of education that owe their very existence to Christianity no longer speak of their Christian roots. They may even send the opposite signal and leave the impression that faith and learning are unrelated or even opposed to each other. Many public schools nowadays deliberately separate education from Christianity and say nothing about Christianity's foundational role in education. Many universities that were started by Christians and still have Bible verses engraved on old buildings and campus monuments have classrooms that now ignore or attack Christianity. Even so, these educational enterprises owe their very existence to the influence of Jesus Christ and the cultural impact of Christianity.

### **Jesus the Teacher**

To see why this is so, let's begin by focusing on Jesus himself. Jesus was the greatest teacher the world has ever known. Even though Jesus was not formally educated by any of the leading teachers of his time, he showed stunning insight already as a youth. At age twelve Jesus discussed important issues with prominent teachers. "Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47). When Jesus became an adult and began teaching large crowds, people "were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having studied?'" (John 7:15). Some said, "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46).

Jesus wasn't just a scholar playing games with vague ideas or bits of research. He spoke with authority. He knew the truth, and he could communicate with power.

People sensed that he really knew what he was talking about. "The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus knew God, he knew the world, and he knew human nature as no one else did. As a teacher, Jesus offered insights nobody else could match.

Jesus was so brilliant that he could stump the smartest scholars, but his brilliance didn't prevent him from connecting with ordinary people. "The common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12:37 KJV). Jesus didn't use jargon aimed only at scholars. He used stories and words that got through to less educated people and even to little children. Jesus welcomed all to hear his teaching. You didn't have to be part of the upper class; poor people and slaves could listen too. You didn't have to be a grownup; children could listen too. You didn't have to be a male; females could listen too. Other teachers might bar women from learning or refuse to teach children or slaves, but Jesus taught people of every kind. No wonder the common people heard him gladly! And no wonder Jesus' followers in later years were leaders in education for the masses and not just for the elite.

Centuries before Jesus came to earth, a prophet spoke of the coming Savior and said, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2). Jesus, as the Son of God, was perfectly in tune with God the Father and the Holy Spirit of God. All Jesus' wisdom, understanding, and knowledge were taught to others through the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Jesus promised that after he himself returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit would carry on his teaching ministry. "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes," said Jesus, "he will guide you into all truth... the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (John 16:13,15). The Holy Spirit would truly be the Spirit of education.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus kept his promise and poured out his Holy Spirit on his followers. He gave them power to know his truth and to communicate it to others. Shortly before this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus commissioned his apostles, "Go and make disciples of all nations ... *teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). After telling his disciples to teach, Jesus ascended to heaven and then poured out his Spirit of truth to empower them to teach.

What were the disciples supposed to teach? Everything Jesus commanded. This included Jesus' own words and all the words of the Bible, for the whole Bible was the message of Christ and was inspired by the Holy Spirit. The early Christians believed that teaching was necessary to change the world. They sought to conquer all nations, not through warfare, but through truth. They believed that truth, taught and applied by the Holy Spirit, is the mightiest weapon in the world. They counted on "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The early Christians didn't just focus on feelings and rituals. They had a message to teach, a message from the Holy Spirit. This message came from their supreme teacher, Jesus Christ, and was recorded in the supreme book, the Bible.

It was important to get this message right. Teaching had to be accurate. Doctrine mattered. Truth had to be kept pure and had to be taught to others. The Bible ordered that pastors and elders must "be able to teach" and "must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith" (1 Timothy 3:2,9). These deep truths focused first of all on God's rule over



all things, on salvation through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, and on how to live a godly life. By valuing truth so highly and teaching it to others, the Spirit-led Christians guided many people to faith in Christ. In the process, they also had a huge impact on education in general.

### **Christianity and Education**

Jesus and most of his early followers were Jewish. Many Jewish families emphasized education and wanted their sons to learn a trade in order to earn a living, as well as learning to read and study biblical writings. The early Christians carried on this emphasis and expanded it. They expanded it to non-Jewish people, as well as Jews, and they expanded it to include girls, as well as boys. They wrote instruction manuals for new Christians and for children to prepare them for church membership. Christians may have been the first to teach both sexes in the same setting, and in this, they were simply following the lead of Jesus himself.

The early Christians believed in basic teaching for every church member, whether a child or a new convert. They also wanted church leaders to be well educated in God's Word to have a solid grasp on the workings of God's world. This led to them to establish schools. The schools focused mainly on Christian doctrine, but some included mathematics, medicine, and others subjects as well.

In fact, when the Roman Empire fell apart, much of classical learning might have vanished without the activity of Christians. Thomas Cahill's popular book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* doesn't just tell how Irish people in general saved civilization but how Irish *Christians* saved civilization. In a time of cultural chaos, collapsing civilization, and contempt for learning, when illiterate tribes were looting cities and destroying books, some Irish Christians preserved not only the Bible but also many books of history, philosophy, legal theory, science, and literature. They labored to make copies of these books for future generations and made possible an eventual revival of education and civilization.

Throughout the centuries, as Christian missionaries carried the gospel to various people of different languages, they found that many were illiterate. It wasn't just that people had not learned as individuals to read and write. In many cases, the language itself had no writing at all. The missionaries worked hard to change this. Reading the Bible was a vital part of knowing Christ and hearing the Holy Spirit's message, so the missionaries learned the spoken languages of these illiterate tribes and set those languages to writing so that the people could have the Bible in their own language and be able to read it for themselves. In tribe after tribe, in language after language, literacy and education came as a byproduct of Bible translation. Many missionaries also established schools which not only taught the Bible but also helped people to learn more about the wider world. This process began in the early centuries of the church, and still today, missionaries bring literacy and learning to new tribes that were previously unable to read and write.

Christians haven't been perfect, of course, and have sometimes betrayed their principles. At times church leaders fell away from the love of Christ and the love of truth. They didn't study the Bible carefully themselves, and these leaders even tried to prevent ordinary churchgoers from reading the Bible. But whenever the Holy Spirit brought reformation and revival, people had a fresh desire to read the Bible, and preachers

taught the Bible's truths with new vigor. During the great Reformation of the 1500s, led by Martin Luther and John Calvin, there was not only a renewed emphasis on teaching the Bible in the churches but also a drive to give children a solid education.

Luther said that it was "shameful and despicable" for parents not to make sure their children got a good education. Luther may have been the first to press for public schools funded by government and to insist that every child should have access to a good education. At the same time, Luther said, "I am afraid that the schools will prove the very gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures and engraving them in the hearts of the youth."

John Calvin promoted elementary education for all children, including reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and religion. Calvin also led a movement toward secondary schools to train people for leadership in church and government. Calvin believed firmly in the Bible as God's Word and as the only final measure of faith and life. At the same time, Calvin saw that people who did not follow Christ or believe the Bible sometimes made important contributions to knowledge, and he believed Christians should learn these truths as well. All truth is God's truth, even if some truths were discovered by people who don't know God. As Calvin put it, "If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God." Calvin insisted that Christians could learn much about law from lawyers, philosophy from philosophers, speech from orators, medicine from doctors, math from mathematicians, astronomy from astronomers, and so on—whether these people knew Christ and believed the Bible or not.

The Christian approach to education combined a rock-solid confidence in the Bible with an eager curiosity to learn about the world and a glad willingness to learn from many different sources. This was a way to honor the Spirit of God as the source of all truth. Education flourished wherever people had this hearty confidence in Scripture and this healthy curiosity about the world and its people.

One of history's most important advances in education was the printing press of Johannes Guttenberg. The very first book Gutenberg printed was the Bible. The love of books and knowledge in general flowed from a love for the supreme Book that gives the knowledge of God.

Still another area of Christianity's impact on education has been providing learning opportunities for people with disabilities. Jesus was very concerned and helpful to such people. He gave hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind. His followers didn't have that miraculous power, but they loved the deaf and blind and made education available to them. Christians build homes for the blind. Louis Braille was a dedicated Christian, and he saw it as his God-given mission to develop an alphabet of raised dots which would make books available to blind people. A Christian priest in Paris invented sign language for school use so that deaf people could have an education and be taught the gospel. A Christian pastor opened the first school for the deaf in the United States and also established a college.

One important educational innovation after another has come in a Christian setting. The idea of education for all children arose among Christians. The idea of a child moving from one grade level to another arose among Christians. So did kindergarten. Christians began Sunday schools to help poor, non-Christian children who

had little access to a good education. More recently, Christians have been pioneers in the home schooling movement. Some of these innovations may be better than others, but they are all evidence of the fact that Christians are constantly looking for better ways to teach and learn.

### **Checking Our Foundations**

If we zero in on education in Canada and the United States, we find that the foundation has been Christianity. Education was a high priority in North America from the time the first Christian settlers arrived. These Puritan Christians, strongly influenced by John Calvin's ideas, passed a law requiring every township to provide an educator who could teach children to read and write. The law became known as the Old Deluder Act, because it spoke of "the Old Deluder, Satan," whose main goal is "to keep man from the knowledge of the Scriptures." North America's first schools were established to enable everyone to read the Bible so as to defeat Satan's lies and to know the truth of Christ.

Nowadays, it's common to separate faith and education, but earlier generations had a very different view. They saw faith as the foundation of education and the main goal of it. After the United States gained independence, an early act of Congress declared in 1787, "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

It's odd when universities and professors despise Christianity or see it as an obstacle to learning, when the fact is that the world's great universities were established by Christians. Bologna, Oxford, Paris, Cambridge, Heidelberg, and Basel were started by Christians and focused on Christian thought as their chief subjects. D. James Kennedy points out that "almost every one of the first 123 colleges and universities in the United States has Christian origins."

Harvard University got started with a donation of money and books from Rev. John Harvard. The main goal of education at Harvard was this: "Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ ... as the only sound foundation of all knowledge and learning."

Yale University began in 1718 with a donation from Elihu Yale, who was urged on by Rev. Cotton Mather. Yale's purpose was that "Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences, who through the blessings of Almighty God may be fitted for public employment both in Church and Civil State."

Much of the push to make schooling humanistic instead of Christian came from John Dewey, an education professor at Columbia University during the early 1900s. Dewey was a humanist who rejected Christ, but that doesn't change the fact that Columbia University, the place where Dewey spread his anti-Christian ideas, was originally built on a Christian foundation. One early advertisement for Columbia declared, "The chief thing that is aimed at in this college is to teach and engage children to know God in Jesus Christ."

Princeton University was also started by Christians. An early president of Princeton, Rev. John Witherspoon said, "Cursed be all learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ."

Many universities later betrayed their Christian foundations and so did public schools. Public schools were originally called "public," not because they were government-controlled, but because they were open to the public, to people from every segment of society. These early "public" schools were mostly run by parents or churches and emphasized Christ and the Bible as the foundations of education. When a movement got underway to separate schools from Christianity and tie them to government control, Princeton professor A. A. Hodge saw what was coming. He wrote in 1887, "I am as sure as I am of Christ's reign that a comprehensive and centralized system of national education, separated from religion, as is now commonly proposed, will prove the most appalling engine for the propagation of anti-Christian and atheistic unbelief, and of anti-social nihilistic ethics, individual, social and political, which this sin-rent world has ever seen." Education is not an end in itself. It must have a solid foundation and a sound purpose. Otherwise education teaches people to live by Satan's lies instead of by the Spirit of truth.

The best foundation for pursuing education is the conviction that there is such a thing as truth and that truth is worth knowing. If there is no truth or if truth doesn't matter, then education is pointless. But if truth is real and precious, then education is important. This is why Christianity has been such a powerful force in education. People who know Jesus are certain that truth matters more than anything else in the world.

Jesus himself said, "I *am* the truth" (John 14:6). "If you really hold to my teaching ... you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). When Jesus walked this earth, he had "the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord." Now that Jesus reigns from heaven, he gives that same Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth," to guide people to the Savior and live by his truth.

Jesus compared God's kingdom to yeast that changes an entire lump of dough (Matthew 13:33). One way this has happened is that the Christian commitment to truth has resulted in the advancement of education in general. But Jesus also warned of another kind of yeast, the yeast of false teaching, of education that was not in tune with God's truth (Matthew 16:12). Now that we've looked at the impact of Christ and his Spirit on education, let's give thanks for these blessings. At the same time, let's not squander those blessings by accepting godless education. And let's never make the fatal mistake of thinking that formal learning is more important than living by faith in Christ and in God's Word, the Bible. Education is a byproduct of Christian influence; it's no substitute for a personal relationship with Christ.