

*Growth of the Christian Church***Garth M. Rosell, Ph.D.**Professor of Church History and Director
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Greetings once again in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In our last lecture, we began to explore the amazing story of Pentecost in Jerusalem and the beginnings of that very first church. In our lecture today, we want to continue that story as that first great missionary taskforce drawn together by the Spirit of God in Jerusalem carried the gospel literally around the world. Before we do so however, I would like to invite you to join me in prayer asking that God would be, by His Holy Spirit, among us to teach us what He has for us today. And for our prayer, I would like to use the words of the apostle Paul. We find them in the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians, and I'm going to begin reading at verse 9, this marvelous prayer of the apostle. Let us pray: *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. Amen.*

In his recent book, *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, uses the famous 16th-century Bunting Map (B-U-N-T-I-N-G) to illustrate his argument that the study of Christian history has tended to focus on Europe and North America to the virtual exclusion of its growth and development in the Middle East, in Africa, and Asia. "For nearly a thousand years, [he suggests] Christianity's actual center of gravity was in those other areas, namely, in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, with significant communities extending as far as China." Heinrich Bunting, the one who produced the map and whose name is on the map, that 16th-century Protestant pastor and theologian, knew very well of course that the world did not actually look like the woodcut map that he produced in 1581. It looks like a kind of three-leafed clover with Jerusalem at the very center, of course, and with one of the leaves of the clover labeled Asia to the east, and a second leaf of the clover titled Africa to the south, and a third titled Europe to

the north and the west.

Like many symbolic mapmakers before him, reaching back at least as far as St. Isidore in the seventh century, he was aware, as a map lover himself, that the continents actually had an irregular shape and size. Rather, his symbolic clover-leaf map, with Jerusalem at the very center, was drawn to make an important point, namely that the early missionary growth of Christianity was not essentially Eurocentric, as we often think of it, but rather had taken place quite literally in every direction to the east, south, north, and west. Jenkins makes use of this Bunting map to raise an important and sobering question, namely “How can our own mental maps today be so radically distorted?” After all, much of what we today call the Islamic world was once actually Christian. The faith originated and took shape in Syria, Palestine, and in Egypt; and these areas continued to have a major Christian community and presence long after the Arab conquests in the seventh century. As late as the 11th century, for example, Asia was still home to at least a third of the world’s Christians; and perhaps a tenth of all Christians still lived in Africa, a figure that that continent would not reach again until the 1960s. Even as late as the 13th century, it still made sense to think of a Christian world stretching east from Constantinople to Samarkand, at least that far, and south from Alexandria almost to the equator.

Jenkins begins to lay out his argument in the first chapter of his fascinating book, and I hope that many of you will pick that up and read it; and in that chapter, as you’ll see, Jenkins takes us back to the early ninth century, about 800 AD when the Frankish king, Charlemagne, was crowned emperor by the pope and began his consolidation of much of Western Europe under a single blending of church and state. But the story of the European Christendom, Jenkins claims, is only a single part of a much larger Christian story. Indeed when we speak of the Christian church in the Middle Ages, from the fifth century to the 15th century, we are usually referring to conditions in Western Europe and not to the much wealthier and even more sophisticated Eastern world centered in Constantinople: the Eastern Orthodox or Seleucia on the Tigris River, namely the Nestorians and the Jacobites. The latter represented a vast complex realm that stretched deep into Asia. To illustrate his point, Jenkins compares three contemporary leaders: the Roman pope in Europe, the Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople, and the patriarch of the Church of the East in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Seleucia. While all three exerted significant influence and enjoyed great power,

Timothy, the patriarch of the Church of the East, was arguably the most significant Christian spiritual leader of his day; much more influential than the Roman pope at that time and clearly on a par with the Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople.

Perhaps a quarter of the world's Christians, Jenkins has estimated, looked to Timothy as both their spiritual and political head—quite remarkable. The sheer scope of his influence was immense. Timothy personally presided over 19 archbishops, what they called metropolitans, and 85 bishops in nearly a hundred ecclesiastical centers from Arabia, Syria, Armenia, and India to China and Tibet; and tens of thousands of parishioners speaking languages as varied as Syriac, Persian, and Turkish, Sogdian, and Chinese. While we tend to think that European Christendom represented virtually the whole of medieval Christianity, it's surprising and rather disconcerting to learn that between 30 and 50 percent of all Christians during the first thousand years of the church's existence actually lived outside of Europe. We're fortunate that this lost history, so-called, is starting to be reclaimed. A growing literature by scholars working on Asian, African, and Middle Eastern topics is now finding its way into journals, magazines, and books. For example, Professor Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity on my own campus is teaching courses now on the Silk Road and producing reliable demographic studies on which others are beginning to build. Christians can be found today in every country in the world.

Todd Johnson and Sandra Kim recently reported in a demographic study that they publish for *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (you can find it in the April 2005 issue): "From Jerusalem, Christians began to spread in several directions while the growth was never uniform [Johnson and Kim report]. Indeed it eventually expanded more to the north and northwest than to the south or east. Christianity remained strong in Asia with millions of followers along the Silk Road, stretching from Syria into China." In more recent years, as reflected in the amazing maps and narratives in *The Atlas of Global Christianity*, which Johnson and Ross edited and published in 2009 through the University of Edinburgh Press: "The center of gravity [as they call it] for the Christian church has moved from Europe down into the very heart of Africa not far from Timbuktu; in short, from Europe to the global south." These shifts have prompted historians and missiologists like Andrew F. Walls, professor emeritus from the Center of the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World in the University of Edinburgh, to suggest that the most striking

feature of Christianity at the end of the second millennium is that it is predominantly a non-Western religion. On all present indications, the numbers of inhabitants of Europe and North America who profess faith are declining as they have been for some time; while the churches of the other continents continue to grow. Already, more than half of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin, and Caribbean America and the Pacific; and if this present trend continues, at some point in the 21st century the figure will be two-thirds of all Christians.

It seems that the representative Christianity of the 21st century will be that of Africa, Asia, Latin, Caribbean America, and the Pacific; rather than North America or Europe. It took Christianity a long time to become a Western religion, let alone *the* Western religion, Andrew Walls has argued. Indeed, it did not begin as a Western religion in the usual significance of that word, and it took many centuries to become thoroughly appropriated in Europe. It was still later that Christianity became so singularly associated with Europe and Europe alone as to be thought of as a European religion. It was not until comparatively recent times, around the year 1500 he argues, that we find a Europe that was essentially Christian and a Christianity that was essentially European. Indeed, if we look at the eastward and the westward Christian movements, and look at it on the grids of Persian and Chinese empires as well as on the grids of the Roman Empire itself, it's evident that there was almost a millennium and a half of Christian history in Asia before ever Western Christian missions to Asia began. It is equally evident that the early Christian history of Asia is not a marginal or ephemeral one, but a substantial one. Moreover, Walls contends, Africa has a continuous Christian history since sub-apostolic times, a history that antedates not only Western missions to Africa, but also the Islamic presence there in the seventh century and following. You can find his argument in a wonderful little article called "Eusebius Tries Again", Andrew Walls in the *IBMR* issue for 2000.

If Jenkins, Walls, Johnson, and many others are correct in their argument, as I've been trying to give it to you here, that Christianity began as a global religion, continued as a global religion for well over a millennium, and has only recently during the past few centuries started to regain its prominence as a global religion, we might well want to ask: "What happened in the Christian community during the centuries between about 1200 and 1800?" This of course is a major question for us to address later in the course; however, both Walls and Jenkins provide some useful

initial reflections. Jenkins, for example, proposes the helpful but rather frightening thesis, as he bluntly phrases it, that “religions die.” Some just seem to run out of gas, and others are destroyed by their opponents. Asia Minor, for example, shrank from 373 bishoprics, and virtually 100 percent of the population, to three bishops and less than 15 percent of the population between the 11th and the 15th centuries. It’s amazing. Meanwhile, the number of Asian Christians fell precipitously from 21 million in 1200 AD to only 3.4 million in 1500 AD. And Northern Africa, a region that was overwhelmingly Christian, with tens of thousands of believers, hundreds of churches, literally dozens of the most important pastors and theologians that the early church produced—folk like Augustine and Cyprian and Tertullian and Athanasius and so many others—that part of the world was quite literally overrun by the spread of Islam after its founding in the seventh century.

While it’s true that Christianity remained strong in southern India, Jenkins concludes, the church of the East largely ceased to exist and virtually all of its once famous cities and centers, now stand in territories that are largely or even exclusively Muslim. This was due, he suggests, to a brutal purge of Christianity, most spectacularly in Asia but also in Africa and the Middle East. The destruction wasn’t total, he argues, but whole areas were swept clean of Christian communities, and believers elsewhere were reduced to a tiny fraction of the population. To borrow the image of the medieval maps, the three lobes of the clover leaf became just one lobe. So if we look at the whole Middle East broadly defined from Egypt to Persia from Turkey to Arabia, then by 1900 this region had about five million Christians total, or about nine-tenths of 1 percent of world Christianity, which was then overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe and its overseas settlements. In absolute numbers, that means that there were fewer Christians in the entire Middle East than there were in Oceania; and most of these were in the new colonies of Australia and New Zealand.

In our day, thanks be to God, Christianity is once again flourishing and growing in these very regions, as it did in the early centuries of Christian history. You’ll remember that after the birth of the Christian church in Jerusalem in the first century, that amazing missionary taskforce carried the glorious gospel outward in every direction. Their Lord had commissioned them to go into all the world to make disciples, to teach the faith, to live lives of obedience to God’s law, to baptize, to form new communities of Christ’s followers—and they took up that joyous task with

remarkable enthusiasm and zeal.

Three vignettes might help to illustrate this work that went on in those early years; and let me talk with you about those three, beginning in India and then moving to China and finally to Africa. Starting in India, although the beginnings of Christianity in the subcontinent of India are difficult to trace with any precision, one of the oldest and strongest traditions of Christian history is that the apostle Thomas was the one who first carried the gospel into India and perhaps China as well in that first century. The symbolism is powerful, isn't it? The one called "the doubter," when his doubts were resolved by the resurrected Lord, became the disciple who carried the faith farther in a geographical sense than any other member of Christ's original disciples. I remember how deeply moved I was personally when I had the privilege of standing on that hill known as "Little Mount" outside of Madras, now known as Chennai, where the believers of South India believed that Thomas was martyred for the faith. We have a number of sources available to us for that early story: *The Acts of Thomas*, *The Lyrical Sagas Oral History*, palm leaf copperplate stone inscriptions—and these indicate that the apostle Thomas, after staying at Malabar, sailed around the cape of Kanyakumari and up the coast to the Madras, now Chennai, and eventually, some have argued, into China.

Thomas then returned to India, as the accounts give it to us, sometime between 52 and 58 in the first century and established Christian congregations in Malankara, in Niranam, Paravur, Palayur, and other places. The historian Bob Frykenberg, in his chapter on Indian church history in *The World History of Christianity*, puts it this way: He says, "There is a strong tradition that during his ministry in India, Thomas was blessed by God with a healing and deliverance ministry resulting in 230 healed from leprosy, 220 healed from paralysis, 250 cured of blindness, 260 delivered from demons, and 94 raised from the dead. While there will likely be continued debate as to the meaning and authenticity of these traditions, two things I think are beyond dispute: Number one, Thomas' missionary travels closely match the trade routes, both by land and sea, that he is reported to have followed; and two, there's been, from the very first century, a large and flourishing Christian community in South India continuing to this very day, folks who are convinced that Thomas was the one who first planted the church in that place. In fact, on July 3rd each year, the Thomas Christians always sing the prayer that they believe Thomas uttered just before he was martyred—around 69 in the

first century on a little mount—when a group of angry Brahmins attacked and slew him for his unwillingness to participate in a blood sacrifice to the goddess Kali.”

So we turn to our second vignette, relating to the growth of the church in China. Samuel H. Moffett provides us with a window into this development of Christianity through the Middle East and into China through his two wonderful books on the history of Christianity in Asia: volume 1 published by Harper Collins in 1992 and volume 2 by Orbis in 2005. The author, who was born in Korea himself of American missionary parents, taught himself for four years in China and later joined the faculty at my own seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Moffet argues, as did Jenkins, that Christianity moved east across Asia as early as it moved west into Europe. Western church history tends to follow Paul to Philippi and then to Rome and on across Europe to the conversion of Constantine and the Barbarians, Moffett contends, and only intermittently has the west looked beyond Constantinople into Asia and given much attention to the long proud traditions of a Christianity that chose to look neither to Rome nor to Constantinople as its center. It was a Christianity that has for centuries remained unashamedly Asian. But Moffett reminds us, [these are his words] “The church began in Asia, its earliest history its first centers were Asian. Asia produced the first known church building, the first New Testament translation, perhaps the first Christian king, the first Christian poets, and even, arguably, the first Christian state. Asian Christians endured the greatest persecutions. They mounted global ventures in missionary expansion the West could not match until after the 13th century. By then the Nestorian church, as most of these early Asian Christian communities came to be called, exercised ecclesiastical authority over more of the earth than either Rome or Constantinople.” While Paul, and other Christian missionaries were preaching to Greeks, Romans, and the Barbarian tribes of Europe, missionaries from the church of the East were establishing Christian centers in Persia, Afghanistan, India, the Mongolian Steeps of Central Asia, and by the seventh century China, where they competed with other religions and experienced both the favor and persecution that one might expect of expanding and growing faith.

But when exactly did Christianity arrive in China? When the Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the 16th century, they found a colony of Jews but no Christians, leading some of them to imagine that they might have been the very first. And then in the early

17th century, a remarkable discovery was made. Workmen digging near the ancient Tang Dynasty capital of Chang'an uncovered a great stone more than 9 feet high and 3 1/3 feet wide of black granular limestone, beautifully inscribed in Chinese characters beneath the design at the top centering around a cross rising from a lotus blossom. Large characters under the cross proclaimed it to be a monument commemorating the propagation of the Syrian luminous religion in China. It was a monument erected in 781 telling of the arrival of an historian missionary in the Chinese capital in 635 AD; and it contains more than 1,756 Chinese characters, about 70 Syriac words together with a list of the names of the Persian and Syrian missionaries that arrived there.

During the three and a half centuries of wars and disorder that began with a decline of the later Han Dynasty, which ran from about 200 before Christ to about 220 after Christ, the empire's northwest frontier shattered into tribal fiefdoms and the empire itself became a patchwork land of the 16 kingdoms. Outside of the Great Wall, Asia belonged to the nomads, not to the Chinese; and it was through these tribes of wild horsemen that, beginning about the sixth century, Christianity came irregularly and with varying effect into contact with the Chinese. The pattern of expansion, Moffett believes, was the complete reversal of the missionary efforts in Europe. There the gospel moved centrifugally out from a fading Roman center to win the Barbarians on the fringes of the empire. In East Asia, on the contrary, the faith came centripetally from the Barbarian outer land to reach the very heart of civilized China, an interesting contrast. Trade, of course, had been taking place intermittingly and somewhat infrequently between China and the West, along what we know is the Old Silk Road, since the very earliest centuries.

Two sixth-century Western historians relayed a report that in 551 Nestorian monks brought silk worms concealed in a bamboo tube to Emperor Justinian in Constantinople. The Chinese had long exported silk to the West, but closely guarded the secret of how to produce it. Where they secured the silk worms is not revealed, but it's possible that Persian Nestorian Christians might have actually been in China in the fifth or sixth centuries. The first actual or verifiable Christian mission to China was conducted in the seventh century by Alopen traveling along the Old Silk Road and arriving there in 635. This is the mission that is celebrated in the famous Nestorian Monument that we just talked about. The emperor received Alopen as an honored guest, in part it's assumed, because of his great interest and learning in the arts.

He's the one, after all, who built near his palace a library of some 200,000 volumes; and he was the patron of 18 distinguished scholars who were working in the library on a new edition of Confucian texts and commentaries. This in part made possible the building in 638 of the very first known Christian church at the capital, Chang'an, probably then the largest city in the world. And there are records of at least 11 more churches having been established there in the capital, along with other Nestorian monasteries, though it's possible that there were a great many more. Such tolerance however did not last long after the emperor died, as persecution once again did its damage to the Christian church, and it happened in other parts of the world.

Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great mission's historian, explains to us that there was this kind of decline in Asia as well. These are his descriptions: "Beset by an advancing Islam in the east, having lost the larger proportion of its wide-flung communities in Asia, and suffering from corruption and indifference in the church which represented it in the west, about 1500 AD, Christianity did not seem to face a very promising future. The coming centuries might well have appeared to belong to Islam. Muslim merchants were in charge of most of the trade route to the Malay Peninsula and to the islands of the east. Christianity was slowly yielding its remaining foothold in Asia and was confined almost entirely to Europe."

We'll come back to that in just a moment, but just a brief word on Korea and Japan. On the Korean peninsula, Christianity seems to have been first introduced in 1603 through the writings of the Jesuit missionary to China, Matteo Ricci. Although it may have actually made its way to Korea much earlier, by 1945 only about 2 percent of the population was Christian. By 1991, however, 34 percent of the population had become Christian, an amazing story that we'll pick up later in the course. In Japan, as a contrast, the usual dating of the first contact with Christianity is 1549 when Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary, first arrived; although some historians believe that Nestorian missionaries actually arrived in Japan via China to plant the first churches sometime during the tenth century. One final note on Christianity in the Middle East: Christianity originated in the Middle East of course in the first century, and it remained the major religion in that region until the Arab Muslim conquests of the mid- to late-seventh century. Christians now make up about 5 percent of that overall population, which is down from 20 percent in the early 20th century—the largest Christian groups in the Middle East

now being the Egyptian Copts of about 6 to 11 million people; the Lebanese Maronites, about a million; Syriac Christians, 2 to 3 million; Armenian Christians, about half a million; and Greek Christians, about a million.

Let's turn to our final vignette. Having looked to India and then into Asia, let's look southward now into Africa as we conclude our time together in this lecture. In the book of Acts in the New Testament chapter 8, we read the amazing story of Philip and his encounter with Queen Candace's chief financial officer from Ethiopia. It's an amazing story of God's grace, and it reflects some of the first fruits of what would become an enormous Christian presence on the African continent. Indeed, it is from cities like Carthage, Alexandria, and Hippo—regions we now know as Ethiopia, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—that God would provide His church with some of its choicest and most notable leaders, theologians, monks, bishops, and martyrs. From its inception, argues Jacqueline Winston, a historian of early Christianity, "Christianity was nurtured on the African continent." Most people today, British historian Niall Finneran, has suggested, "think of northern and eastern Africa as solidly Islamic, but Islam reached these areas only in the seventh century. Prior to that, North Africa was home to one of the most dynamic, vibrant, numerous Christian populations anywhere in the Roman Empire."

Throughout this semester, we'll be returning again and again to the stories that emerged out of Africa, as we talk about monasticism with some of its most important figures in developments coming from Africa—such as St. Anthony and St. Pachomius—or about martyrdom, and those who—like Perpetua and Felicitas and Saturus and others—were put to their death for their faith in the Carthage Coliseum. And when we talk about Christian theology, we'll be returning to African leaders and theologians like Athanasius and Augustine and Tertullian and a host of others. And when we look at the Ecclesiastical Debates, we will return to the story of the debates with Adonitus and others. If we look at scholarship, we'll visit the great library and university in Alexandria. Or if we look at biblical interpretation, talking about the interpretation of the Bible that came into play during early ancient councils of the church, we can add much more as well. At this juncture however, perhaps it's sufficient to introduce Mark. Considered by some historians to have been the apostle to Africa, Mark, as some of you will know, was a cousin of Barnabas, and he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

He was also a sometime companion of Peter, as we read in 1 Peter 5:13, and most notably he was the author of the gospel that bears his name.

According to Michael Glerup, the executive director of the Center for Early African Christianity, Mark had been born in Libya, in North Africa; and his family had migrated to Jerusalem about the time that Jesus began His public ministry. Encouraged by his mother, he was educated in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Gradually the family developed a close friendship with Jesus and His disciples; and they would use Mark's family home on occasion as a meeting place, a hiding place, or a place for prayer and refreshment. Following the ministry of the early church, as described in the book of Acts, Mark visited Rome, while Paul was still a prisoner there. Not long after, he returns to North Africa to share the gospel, perform miracles, and establish the Christian church in what we know as Libya. As an itinerant evangelist, he preached and taught in Alexandria and elsewhere. Following Peter's death, Mark penned his gospel account under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, returned to Alexandria, and was there martyred for the faith. Dragged through the cobbled streets of Alexandria, he died on April 26th in 68 and was buried in a cow pasture that later became the site of Alexandria's most important Christian church. One might ask, as we did of the Christian communities in the Middle East and Asia, "What happened? How could such a vigorous Christian community seem to evaporate from the face of the earth?" While many factors likely contributed to the decline, the rise in military, political power of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries is certainly part of that story.

In our next lecture, we'll turn our attention to a much more familiar story, one that is modeled after the book of Acts itself: the movement of the church from Jerusalem into the Roman Empire, the church in the west. And we'll explore some of the elements of that important and compelling story. But we need to remind ourselves, as we continue our study here of the church toward the east and the south, that in fact equally early to the spread of the gospel westward and northward, came the glorious spread of the gospel as Christians following the command of their Lord carried that message into the very heart of the global communities in every possible direction; and, of course, we are the recipients of the blessings that come from that.