

# Church History - 19th and 20th Centuries

by David Guzik

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*This sermon explores the major trends and movements in the church since the Reformation, including revival, philosophical challenges, theological liberalism, social reform, and the missionary movement.*

**Duration:** 31:46

**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:8, Matthew 28:19

**Topics:** "Church History", "Missionary Movement"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the optimism and progress of the 19th century, which he refers to as 'The Great Century.' He highlights the missionary movement during this time, with notable figures such as William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Livingston, and Hudson Taylor making significant impacts in India, Burma, Africa, and China respectively. The spread of the gospel was facilitated by advancements in transportation and the opening up of more parts of the world. However, the 20th century brought disillusionment and a sense of dependence on technology, leading to a decline in reliance on God.

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## Transcript

What we're talking about here again is this period of church history and what happened after the Reformation. Now, we talked about it last week with the Five Points and Calvinism and how things developed along doctrinally there. Now, one of the things we talked about in our whole discussion of the Reformation was how the Reformation was not, strictly speaking, a revival.

Now, it's a little hard to pin down an exact definition of revival. Let's talk about revival as featuring three points. Number one, the church is awakened.

In other words, believers get on fire during a time of revival. Number two, sinners are saved. And I mean, not just a few, large numbers of people are brought to Christ.

Number three, society is impacted. In other words, there's a difference in society. Alcoholism goes down.

Literally, in times of revivals, jails are closed. Police officers are laid off because that's much less crime going on. So, I would say these three things here really characterize a time of revival.

The church is awakened, sinners are saved, and society is impacted. Now, strictly speaking, the Reformation wasn't much of a revival. The Reformation was an absolutely necessary and beneficial transformation of doctrine and getting back to the Bible.

But what the Reformation did, which was absolutely essential, was it laid the groundwork for later revival. I don't think you could have had these significant later revivals unless you had the Reformation before it. And so, in the centuries after the Reformation, in the 1700s, late 1600s, 1800s, you've got these remarkable men who lead these remarkable revivals.

People like George Whitefield. People like John Wesley. People like Jonathan Edwards and the great awakenings in America.

You have the English Evangelical and Methodist revivals. You have the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening under Charles Finney. This is in the 1800s.

And each one of these men were at the forefront of what we would call, or deeply involved in, revivals. Now, what's interesting is that though a lot of the foundation for all this was laid by the Reformation, people like John Wesley and Charles Finney were not reformed in their doctrine. They were very Arminian.

And we talked about the rise of Arminianism last week. They were very Arminian. Very much of a stress on man's free will, man's own choice.

And men like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards saw revival from a Calvinistic or a Reform perspective. And what that means is their idea was revival is the sovereign work of God that you have to pray for and God just pours out as He pleases and as He desires. People like Wesley and Finney more so saw revival as a cause and effect kind of thing.

You do A, B, C and D and God will send revival. And, you know, so there was a difference in perspective there. Ever since Finney, most revivalists, most revival movements have had more of an Arminian base than a Calvinistic base.

An approach based on the idea that it's just a cause and effect thing and we do A, B, C and D and God will send revival. This is one significant trend. Really what I'm going to talk about here in the remainder of our time together is important trends and movements in the church since the Reformation.

So one important trend and movement is the phenomenon of revival. Another very significant movement or issue in the church since the Reformation has been philosophical challenges. And what do I mean by philosophical challenges? Well, from the rise of Christianity through the immediate post-Reformation era, the basic questions that Western society asked were the same.

What were the questions? How can I be right with God? Now, Catholics and Protestants had different answers, right? But they were asking the same question. How can I be right with God? Or how about this? What is true Christianity, right? That's an important question. And so Catholics and Protestants had different answers but they were each asking the same question.

Now, beginning in the 1700s, you might say everything changed or a lot changed. Because beginning with the 1700s, people started asking different questions. And different questions started becoming important to society.

And these different questions were things like, Is there even a God? How do we know there is a God? Now, that's a pretty substantial different question, right? Or what is man and this and that? And this really has to do with an intellectual, with a philosophical movement, which really, you might call, many people

call the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a very optimistic, very progressive, very energetic confidence in man's ability to seek out these questions and to answer their questions. It kind of forms the basis for modern science, modern medicine, modern progress.

Let's go out and do it. We can make the world a better place. We can do these things.

Now, the problem with it all, the problem with the Enlightenment, and what kind of makes the Enlightenment really the endarklement, is because it's all very man-centered. The Enlightenment made incredible contributions to culture, to science, to industry. But at its basis, it's a crass naturalism that denies God in his saving revelation.

The Enlightenment, philosophically, is a way that man could gain the whole world and lose his soul. Education, culture, learning, progress, economic progress, all these things, it all contributes together and this has a lot to do with the Enlightenment. Now, some of the things or ways or philosophies that the Enlightenment philosophy expresses itself, for example, is rationalism.

What is rationalism? Rationalism puts the emphasis on human reason rather than on the scriptures. How can we know truth? Well, I believe a true Christian would say, you want to know truth? You start with the Bible. The rationalists say, no, no.

You start with your own reason, with your own understanding. With man's rational capability, that's how we understand truth. And so, atheism grows out of rationalism.

Deism, the idea that there's kind of this God who made everything in motion and then just left it. The clockmaker God. God created everything and then he leaves it alone.

You say, well, how could anybody think that? Well, I'll tell you how they think it. Anybody met God today? Anybody walk down the street and meet God? No? I mean, I read in the Bible all about these amazing miracles. God came down and spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Did that happen to anybody today? No? Well, I guess God isn't doing that anymore. That's what they would say. See? He set everything in motion and then he just left it alone.

Rationalism expresses itself in deism, expresses itself in atheism. It also expresses itself in agnosticism. Do you know what agnosticism is? Atheism says there is no God.

Agnosticism means we can't know. We can't know. Maybe there is a God, maybe there isn't, but nobody can know.

So, I'm not saying that there is a God, I'm not saying that there isn't, but what difference does it make because nobody can know whether or not there is a God. Rationalism, very important movement. Now, there's another movement, philosophically, and that's the, again, coming out of the Enlightenment, the movement of scientism.

I'm not talking about science. I'm talking about scientism. And again, this has to do, in some ways, with the emergence of the scientific method.

The first aspect of the scientific method is you question everything. And you don't believe anything that can't be proved in a laboratory. If you can't prove it in a laboratory, you don't believe it.

All this works out, there's aspects of it that are good, right? You want your doctor to use the scientific method. But the problem is, is not in using science, the problem is in scientism. Where you let that be the philosophy that rules everything in your thinking, everything in how you approach the world.

And this, because of progress, because of the scientific method, really made a huge impact on society. As technology improved and as progress was made, one of the things that really evaporated from society was the sense of dependence upon God. Who's going to depend on God more? Who's going to be more of a man of prayer? A fisherman in a sailboat, or a fisherman in a motorboat? The motorboat guy, he can depend on technology, right? And do you see how the fisherman in a motorboat would be, in some ways, more distant from God? He doesn't have to think about God anymore.

He doesn't have to say, oh God, send the right winds today. If you don't send the right winds today, then I can't do anything. The guy in the motorboat is like, and he goes out and he does his fishing.

Now, the progress is good, right? Nobody's going to say, let's wipe out all the motorboats so that we can depend on God. But you see that the progress has a spiritual price to pay with it. Now, a third thing that emerged, you know, rationalism, scientism, then you also have secularism.

Now, secularism just basically means non-religious-ism. The idea of it is that religion and God just don't matter. You know, you can believe in God if you want, that's fine.

But your belief in God is about the same relevance as somebody else's belief in Cinderella. You can have your own little fairy tale, and if it comforts you, sometimes that's great. But it doesn't really matter.

We don't need God. We don't need religion. And so, in a lot of ways, secularism forms a large part of the foundation, for example, for communism.

For western materialism. You don't need God. You have the state, you have your things.

And so all of these things have a huge influence, these philosophical challenges. Because when people start changing the questions, it changes everything in society. And now, the changing of the questions is so deeply ingrained in our western thinking, that it's hard for us to even imagine it being different.

A fish doesn't question the water it swims in. It's just natural. It breathes it in and out.

In the same way it is with this kind of thinking in our mind. How many people do you know that really go around wondering about this question? How can I be right with God? There are not many people who go around thinking that. And it's strange to us to think that that used to be an important question to people.

We were talking hundreds of years ago. But hundreds of years ago, that was a very important question. The kind of questions people ask today are, How can I be happy? How can I be a better person? How can I find fulfillment in life? Those are the questions people ask today.

When Christians live to ask and answer those questions, How can I be happy? How can I be better? How can I find fulfillment in life? I think in some ways we're in a losing battle. I mean, if we could do anything, Instead of wishing we could answer the questions that society has today, Which we can. It would be even better if we could change the questions that they ask.

C.S. Lewis said this, I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew that a bottle of wine could do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity.

I mean, that's what he said. But you see, there's a problem here. When we present Christianity to people as the answer to the question, How can I be happy? Then what happens when they go through a significant trial as a Christian? Their feeling is, this don't work.

Come on. So, these very important issues, Very important issues. A huge thing, this whole philosophical challenge of the changing of the Christian mindset.

Now, let me talk about a third development. And that is, we've got one, two, Number three here is the rise of theological liberalism. Now, theological liberalism in many ways grows out of these philosophical challenges.

And theological liberalism basically was a redefinition of Christianity. One of the leaders in this movement in the year 1799, A guy named Friedrich Schleiermacher, He gave a speech that said, Religion, speeches to its culture despisers. He said that the essence of religion is not doctrines or theologies, But feeling.

True religion, he said, is sense and taste for the infinite. Now, it's important for us to say that Schleiermacher didn't just say that religion was more than knowledge and action. We believe that, right? Christianity is more than just correct doctrine.

But he basically said that true religion is distinct from ideas or action. This way he said, quote, Ideas and principles are foreign to religion. If ideas and principles are to be anything, They must belong to knowledge which is a different department of life from religion.

Basically what he said is that Christianity, and all religion for that matter, Is a feeling of dependence upon God. And really nothing more than that. Now, you might say, man, that's way out there.

Do you realize how much people are influenced by this thinking today? How massively people are influenced? Don't you think that most people in our culture today would agree to this question? It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you really sincerely believe it. That's this, isn't it? That's exactly it. As long as you have that feeling of dependence upon God, It doesn't really matter what you believe.

That's exactly what Schleiermacher was saying. And so this whole distinction was made, Saying that doctrine and truth, that's not important. It's just the feeling of it.

Now, one of the reasons why it was redefined Was because some of the doctrines of Christianity, Some of the teachings, Can be considered offensive or troubling to some people, right? Pick up your cross and follow me. You know, you've got to be crucified with Christ and all these other things. Instead of defending those things, What they've basically said is, Well, all that stuff doesn't matter.

What matters is your own personal feeling of dependence upon God. And so this whole idea of liberalism came forth, Where they deny the deity of Jesus Christ, They deny the divine trinity, They deny the inerrant scriptures, They deny the fall of man, They deny the wrath of God, They deny the only salvation through the atoning blood of the cross. Now, can anybody consider any of that Christian? We would say no.

But they would look you in the square in the eye and say, I'm a Christian. Now, theological liberalism and liberal churches today Are dying like crazy. I mean, it is just about dead, The whole liberal theological movement.

You know why? Because there's no life in it. You take away the truth from Christianity. About the only place theological liberalism lives today, In any strength, Or at least in its classic form, There's modifications of it that are kind of alive and well today.

But in its classic form, Theological liberalism lives today in elite seminaries. Princeton, Harvard, the seminary department, The religion departments are there. And there you'll find theological liberals, Again, it's not about truth.

It's not about this. It's about the feeling that you have. That's why, for example, A theological liberal will come along and say, Jesus didn't say the stuff that's in the Bible.

Jesus didn't do those things. Come on, those are just legends. Do you know one of the reasons why a theological liberal says that? Because he doesn't care.

For him, who cares if Jesus said or didn't say it? All that matters is the feeling he has inside of him. So, it doesn't matter. Theological liberalism made big influence here.

A few more important trends, And that would be social reform. Christianity and social reform. In the centuries after the Reformation, One of the huge contributions that Christianity made to the world Was by inspiring and pushing on important reform movements.

Such as the abolition of slavery. How did slavery ever get to be abolished? Christians led the way. Both in the United Kingdom, You know, in Great Britain and that whole empire.

And in the United States of America. Abolitionists, who were prompted by Christian motives, Who just saw it as an offense to the gospel, That black people should be enslaved like this. Or things like prohibition of alcohol.

Women's rights. Modern medical movements. Education.

All these different things. Christianity had a huge impact on social reform, Because people were saved, And wanted to do good and right things for the world. Huge, huge phenomenon.

In the centuries after the Reformation. Alright, let me give another. Fifth important trend.

In the centuries after the Reformation. And that would be the missionary movement. And here you're really talking about the 19th century.

Christians started changing the questions that they asked in the 19th century. They used to ask, What is going to become of the heathen, If we don't take the gospel to them? That's what they used to ask. Then they started asking, What will become of us, If we don't take the gospel to the heathen? In the 19th century, there was a huge explosion of missionary activity.

I have in my library a collection of books, By Kenneth Scott Latourette. One of the great, great historians of Christianity in this century. And he has volumes, And this set is called, The History of the Expansion of Christianity.

It's really a detailing of the missionary movement, From the beginning of the church to modern times. He has different sections for different, The first century has its own volume. The next couple centuries have its own volume.

Then you have a volume that covers more than a thousand years. And it's a pretty thin volume, Because not much missionary activity is going on. He has three volumes on the 19th century alone.

And the title of each one of those volumes is, The Great Century. That's what he called it as far as the missionary movement. And you can see why.

Because it was an amazing time, Where God sent out missionaries. William Carey to India, Adoniram Judson to Burma, David Livingston to Africa, Hudson Taylor to China. Amazingly, God raised up remarkable men, Who inspired hundreds, thousands of others, To go out into the mission field, And make an impact for Jesus Christ.

And because of transportation, Because of the fact that the Islamic tide had been turned back, And much more of the world was open than ever before, The gospel spread out in the 19th century, Like never before. You come to this, number six, Let's just call it 20th century developments. In the 20th century, You have something very unique happening.

It's hard to relate, How much disillusionment there was, In the first couple decades of the 20th century. You see, You had this huge missionary explosion, In the 19th century. So as the 1800s are coming to a close, People are confident in the progress, And in the moving forward of the church.

And as a matter of fact, At the end of the 19th century, There came out a journal for Christians, A magazine. And the title says everything. It was titled, The Christian Century.

By the way, this magazine still exists, And it's one of the most theological, liberal, Magazines that you could read. It's just a wasteland. But, just think of the title.

The Christian Century. Well, at the end of it, They were looking forward to, That's what they were saying, That the 20th century would be. It's like us saying, That the next century, That we're on the brink of right now, That's going to be the Christian century.

That's what they were saying. And you could see why they had this kind of optimism. Progress.

Missionary movement. Inventions. I mean, you're talking about a world, That changed tremendously.

Rail travel. Ship travel. Things were being revolutionized.

The automobile. Telephony. All these things coming forth.

Amazing time of progress, And innovation, And all these different things. Just an amazing, amazing period. People were confident, And expectant, And they had a real thirst, And Christians were especially pumped up.

And they looked ahead, At the coming 20th century, And they said, The Christian century. Then, you know what happened? World War I happened. And World War I, Was, in some ways, The most ghastly war, You can imagine.

The sheer carnage of World War I, Had never, ever been seen. Basically, what you had was, You had wars being fought, With 19th century rules, With 20th century technology. Now, the old method of warfare was, You get a huge army of guys with guns, And you rush them at your enemy, And overwhelm them on the field of battle.

Well, you know what? When your opponent has machine guns, And airplanes that can drop bombs, And things like that, It just doesn't work like that anymore. But believe me, It took them a long time to figure that out. And the greatest disappointment of World War I, Was it just seemed so pointless.

It seemed to accomplish nothing. Nothing. Oh, there was a winner and there was a loser.

But it just seemed to accomplish nothing. World War I set in a huge sense of disillusionment. Hopes were so high at the beginning of the century, That after World War I, they crashed low.

And there was a great sense of disillusionment. And so, this sort of set a tone in many ways for the church, In having to deal in a society immersed in this. And you had so many challenges.

The challenge of modernity, The philosophical challenge, The existentialism, The pragmatism. But the church really did a lot of great things. I mean, one of the interesting phenomenons of the church in the 20th century, Is the rise of parachurch organizations.

I mean, it used to be that things were done by churches. Now, we have huge parachurch organizations. Somebody give me an example of a parachurch organization.

How about Focus on the Family? Focus on the Family has huge influence in the Christian community, All over the world, right? I mean, especially in the United States, but even internationally. Let's just say in the United States. Huge! I mean, if there are any, there are not many churches that have as much influence as Focus on the Family.

Right? Okay? Now, is Focus on the Family a church? No, it's a parachurch organization. Campus Crusade for Christ. It's not a church, but a huge organization.

And you can just go down the list and name many. The Navigators. Christian Publishing Houses.

Record Industries. All these different things. They're Christian organizations, but they're not churches.

This is largely a 20th century phenomenon. They existed before the 20th century, but now they have matured and flowered and come into their own. And is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Well, in some ways it's good, in some ways it's bad.

I mean, it's great that people are out there doing the work and that this work is getting done and all that, but you can see a potential danger to it, right? I mean, it's not the church. Another very significant development in the 20th century are the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Huge development in the church.

I mean, groundbreaking in what it's done in changing the church's perspective towards the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Another phenomenon you have in the 20th century has to do with the tremendous revivals and the tremendous persecutions in the 20th century. Did you know that statisticians will tell you that more Christians have died in the 20th century for their faith than previous centuries combined? Now, you know why? Because a lot of times what you have in the 20th century is mass liquidation of Christians.

For example, not too long ago in this whole thing in Rwanda, you had Muslim militias looking for communities of Christians and just going in there and wiping them all out. So, there's definite reason to believe that persecution and people who have died for Christianity, they number more in the 20th century

than in all previous centuries combined. You don't hear much about it, do you? But it's true.

But there's been tremendous revivals in the 20th century. Are you aware that right now in the world there's incredible revivals going on in Africa, in Latin America, in China, and in India? The church in China is growing incredibly fast. I mean a 5% growth rate in China is incredible when you think of the numbers that they have.

India, other places, the church is experiencing incredible revival and people are coming to Christ. And new churches are being founded. So, the church really is moving on rapidly as we get ready to start the 21st century.

But it really, the modern church has its foundations, whether it realizes or whether it's true to many theological things or not, really has its foundations back to this time of Reformation and these developments that grow forth in the centuries afterwards. Father, we thank you for this time together and thank you for all that you've taught us in this time through church history. We thank you for your word and all your goodness in our life, Lord.

We praise you and thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

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