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# Finding Pieces of the Puzzle

*A Fresh Look at the Christian Story*

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FINDING PIECES OF THE PUZZLE  
A Fresh Look at the Christian Story

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## Introduction

**B**ESSIE WOOD KNEW IT was winter. The twenty something was standing in the snow in the middle of nowhere on the northern Prairies. She had come from the comforts of her home farther south because she believed God had called her. It was back in the mid-1920s. She and her colleague, Madge Black, were Pentecostal “lady workers.” This new revival movement made a practice of sending women into hard places to plant churches. When I asked Bessie why they did that, she snapped back, “Because women are tougher than men!”

Bessie and Madge’s story is remarkable—two young women set down in the expanse of snow, the only resident pastors for miles around to care for a homesteading rural community. No salaries, no transportation, living on care packages from their parents, surviving for part of the winter in the Orange Lodge which had no insulation and no heater, only a wood cook stove, and with a snake in the wall which once slithered out to join them. They did their pastoral calls together and on foot, particularly careful on their visit to a recently-widowed farmer. People such as these are essential to the Christian story which has routinely overlooked them.

Here is another book on the story of Christianity. How can one possibly justify it? There have been thousands upon thousands written already, and countless other thousands of monographs, articles, and essays that focussed on bits and pieces, and they continue to pour off the presses. I am impressed by the work of my colleagues. For example, there is the *Handbook of Church History* edited by Hubert Jedin and John Dolan and published in the 1960s and 70s. Originally written in German by experts in various periods and running to ten weighty volumes, it is an exceptionally helpful work. Earle E. Cairns’ *Christianity through the*

*Centuries* has been in print since 1954. It has been used as a textbook in many places around the world, and has sold as many as 200,000 copies.

The understanding of Church history is being carried deeper and deeper through ever sharper questions being directed to a continuously broadening and expanding deposit of sources of every conceivable kind. The "mine sites" are being exploited ingeniously. The vividness and clarity of the answers which are emerging are occasionally breath-taking. Christoph Baumer's *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* is outstanding as are Samuel Moffett's two volumes on Christianity in Asia, the seven volumes of *A People's History of Christianity*, edited by Denis R. Janz, and Diarmaid McCulloch's recently-published eleven hundred page book, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*.

The passion for the past grew among Europeans and their children who scattered around the globe. Jewish, Greek, and Christian influences taught them to take previous centuries seriously. Like their compatriots, the Christians of "the West," with exceptions, have been intrigued by what their ancestors and they themselves have done and were doing. They gathered eagerly around their figurative campfires to tell each other their stories. The stories tended to be of the bold and the brave, the high-powered men who strode through jungles or into the councils of the Church or across the Alpes, or who stood undaunted before hostile powers to bear witness to their faith. Granted there was the occasional cobbler or Matilda or Elizabeth whose conduct captured attention.

Over the last century those of us who revel in the past ran into a number of seemingly unrelated but powerful trends. There were organizations and ideologies that pushed the 'working class' forward. These were the people who wore blue collars and earned their livings by the sweat of their brows. The upheavals of the economic crises of the 1930s coupled with climatic disaster in parts of the world heightened the starkness of the challenges they faced. Then around the middle of that century a new wave of feminism struck the historical guild along with the rest of western culture. We had to acknowledge that the statistically dominant female component of the human family was virtually absent from our reporting. The pictures we sketched would continue to be inaccurate and distorted unless they were thoroughly revised. Finally, as the century wore on economic realities and international trade, along with the innumerable applications of technology, shrank the globe. "Globalization"

became the shibboleth of the world leaders who assembled at Davos, Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Wherever we lived, we had to concede that people not so different from ourselves lived on the other side of the blue planet and we were their neighbours. It was a bit of a shock.

All of the above, plus a myriad of other influences, have sent those interested in the Christian past, along with many of the human family, back to the sources. Holding the focus on those examining the Christian story, we can observe that the results of their research have been truly enlightening. But there is a problem: fewer and fewer care what happened in the dust-laden past. Technological development hurtles forward at an ever accelerating pace. Social networks and cool devices tumble over each other at a feverish pitch desperate to dominate enraptured markets. With everything driving on fast-forward, who has time to think about the past!

Many of us have felt a growing ahistoricism, but it was Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian Gordon Wood who put some numbers on the table: “From 1970–71 to 1985–86, years when there was a boom in student enrollments, the number of history degrees granted by all American colleges and universities declined almost by two-thirds, from 44,663 to 16,413. A drop in membership of the American Historical Association in the 1970s and 1980s was itself a sign of this weakening interest in history.”<sup>2</sup> Wood attributed much of the drop-off in interest to the approach many historians themselves were taking to their work. He saw them turning away from narrative writing toward tightly-restricted, highly-technical social and cultural issues directed to other members of the trade rather than to a wider readership. The big, beautiful books that do appear face a significant problem: how do you get people to open the covers?

I am trying to respond to that problem. I am not writing primarily for members of the “guild.” I want to bring human beings from the past and the present together. One can conceptualize history in many ways. At a very basic level, history is the examination of human behaviour. It is about “poor players who fret and strut their hours upon the stage,” but, with due respect to the Bard (Shakespeare), they do not then just

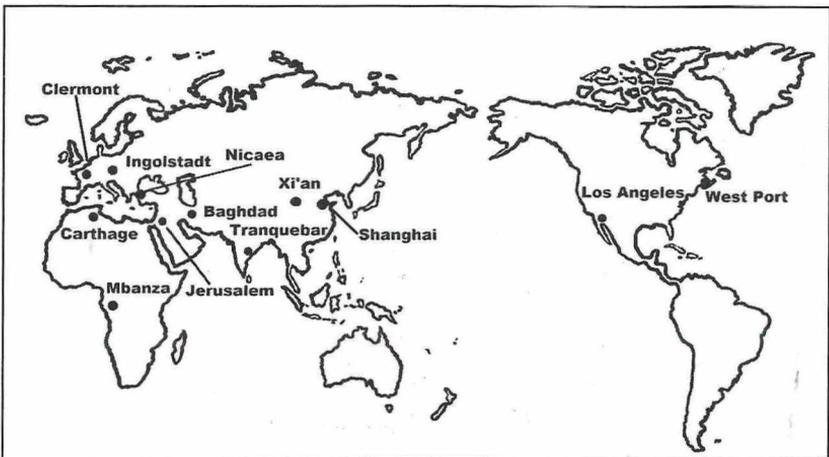
1. The World Economic Forum was founded in 1971 and meets annually in Davos. Participants include top business leaders, international political leaders, along with selected intellectuals and journalists. Their goal is to produce a better world.

2. Wood, *Purpose of the Past*, 3.

vanish. In large and small ways, they influence each other and those who come after them.

Regardless of how well-intentioned, no volume can look at every human being who ever lived or every event that ever took place. We have to choose our subjects. Every history book is selective, and this one is, too. No doubt some will feel annoyed with my choices and omissions. In broad strokes, I am writing a narrative account which focuses on Christianity—the whole of Christianity. If anything sounds like folly, that does, but let me clarify my approach further. I have selected twelve events, twelve dates, and each one is the center-piece of a chapter. A variety of criteria have suggested the dates I have chosen: historical importance, gender of participants, geographical location, race of participants, the nature of the action, and the fact that some have just been overlooked, pieces of the puzzle that slipped under the table and got lost. Admittedly, the selection is somewhat eccentric.

You will find that four chapters deal with material from what we in the trade call the *New Testament* and *Patristic* periods, roughly before about 650 AD. We will go to Jerusalem, Carthage, Nicaea, and Xi'an, China. Two chapters are *Medieval*, the eight hundred years immediately following 650. Baghdad and Clermont, France will be the venues. Two of the events come from the *Sixteenth-Century*, but one is situated outside the West. The locations will be Mbanza, then Kongo, now Angola, and Ingolstadt, Germany. The last four chapters center around events



Locations featured in this book

from the next *four centuries*. We will visit Tranquebar, India; Westport, Massachusetts; Shanghai, China, and Los Angeles, California.

My distribution of energy and space certainly is different from most of the general works on Church History that I read. In addition to the criteria above, it represents my own interests and the sources I have been able to pursue on both sides of the Atlantic. The collections of letters and documents I examined were intriguing. I happen to write my letters often by email in the twenty-first century, but that does not mean that my century is the most important or even the most interesting. To choose one example, seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, the time of the Industrial Revolutions had an incalculable impact on humanity in general and the Church in particular that has lasted to the present. Their long hand musings with quill and paper can open the door to fascinating times.

My choice of people and events also reflects the difficulties we experience when we try to organize Christian history into periods. We do it so as not to have to deal with the bulk of two millennia of human experience all at once. Roughly speaking, after the New Testament, the chronological divisions we have commonly used are something like “patristics, medieval, reformation, modern, and contemporary.” However, various historians put the boundaries in different places. Occasionally it can feel arbitrary, and, it must be added, these eras almost invariably rest primarily on the experiences of Europeans. When non-western parts of the world are taken into consideration, the historical frames become questionable and occasionally completely irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> What does “medieval” mean to a South Asian?

How does my narrative account take shape? The events and dates I have chosen are embedded in a continuous unfolding of the story of Christianity from the beginning to the present. The narrative contextualizes the events and along the way draws attention to the usual canon of personalities and stories which have appeared in histories of Christianity. This has, of course, the tendency to reduce the significance of the usual array of periods and personalities we have grown accustomed to in Church history and to create a difference balance of emphasis. For example, I am giving more attention to the period before 1500 than it usually receives.

3. Regarding the dividing of history into periods see Phillips, “Problems of Periodisation Reconsidered,” 363–77.

In particular, my approach highlights individual personalities. Each of the events I examine places one individual, and sometimes two, in the spotlight. This brings you, reader, into contact with flesh-and-blood people, women and men you can identify with, and of course, let me say again, that is the essence of history—people struggling with life. The reading of this history is intended to introduce you to historical individuals. This is an attempt to bring the text to life, and it is here where the influence of what has been called social history<sup>4</sup> is most evident. Some of the individuals we will meet were among those who lived out on the margins of their societies and who were largely overlooked. Some were women. On the other hand, some of the others I highlight were safely perched on the social and political peaks of their world, and we will try to get to know them a little better from perhaps a less “textbook” perspective.

I am working with a dominant image—a jigsaw puzzle. One begins by emptying the pieces out of the box on a table and then turning them all face up. I like to do the outside edges of the puzzle first. That establishes the perimeter. Then bit by bit the pieces begin to fit together to build the picture. Sometimes pieces go missing. They fall on the floor or disappear under somebody’s coffee cup, or sometimes they just get overlooked for a long time because of how the fit escapes our lens. Occasionally the missing piece is quite important—the eye of Frodo Baggins—but sometimes it is not—one of his friend Sam Gamgee’s toe nails. It does not matter. Important or not, if you do not find it, you are left dissatisfied with the puzzle. You need all the pieces if you are really going to catch the full impact of the picture the puzzle presents.

Clearly, the image breaks down when you apply it to the Church. One will never have all the pieces, at least not here on earth. But we can already see most of the picture; that is, we know a great deal of the story of the Church. What I am aiming to add are parts of the story that are not familiar to most people, that is, pieces of the puzzle which have been lost or overlooked. So, many of the people we will be focusing on are those who are not widely-known.

I want to be clear about the structure of each chapter. There are three parts to each of them. I will identify them as *Setting*, *Event*, and *Developments*. At the center of each chapter is an event and the person or people who were primarily involved in it. I will be approaching these in as much detail as possible. It is in these parts of the chapters that I did

4. Magnússon, “The Singularization of History,” 701–35.

the most biographical research. These are something like Facebook profiles, but of the dead. The narrative leading up to and then away from the key events will be very different. I will be painting in sweeping strokes, covering hundreds of years in just a few pages by skipping over many details. The figures we have come to love or hate in the usual historical presentations will show up here too, but we will not be spending much time with them. Some may find that troubling.

Furthermore, I am cultivating a global perspective in this study in attempting to avoid privileging western perspectives. The central stories I tell come from many parts of the world, ranging from Jerusalem to Bavaria to Baghdad to Los Angeles. The ongoing narrative reaches even more widely—from Iceland to the Caribbean, from Mongolia to Quebec. We are looking at people who were important or insignificant, but all are projected against the larger background of the world. This global focus starts with the Early Church and will be maintained throughout.

I am also interested in the intercultural experiences of Christians. The idea of mission has been characteristic of Christianity from its beginning. Living under the mandate to carry forward the message of Jesus Christ, Christians have reached into the cultures surrounding them in a wide variety of ways. Over and over again with great sensitivity, they have broken through those barriers which separate people groups. The specific stories I highlight and the general narrative of the book draw attention to the challenges inherent in doing this, whether it be Patrick in Ireland or Plütschau in India.

Many have become aware that we have to stretch the way we look at the Christian past. For example, in his recently published *The Changing Shape of Church History*, Justo L. González argued strongly that those who write Church history have got to reach beyond Europe and Europeans. He insisted upon making our treatment of the Christian story “polycentric,”<sup>5</sup> and this call is urgent.<sup>6</sup> The alternative is to perpetuate a delusion. Most of the Christian history is still done in the “West.” Happily, that is definitely changing. The ongoing western bias is in some way related to the fact that most of the research funding comes from the west. This study resists that tunnel vision.

Sweeping changes in communication and travel have had the effect of collapsing distances. People above the Arctic Circle watch “CSI:

5. González, *Changing Shape of Church History*, 15.

6. He has also added chapters to his popular text, *The Story of Christianity*.

Miami,” and the East in its millions is immigrating to the West, meanwhile the West is increasingly travelling to the East either on business or as tourists. It has become clear to me that the story of Christianity in the non-west has to take its place as an integral part of a whole story we can all tell. There are more historians than ever working on the non-west, but the fruit of their toil has to be integrated into that vast and deepening store of information we have about the Church in the west. We need as complete a picture as possible of the whole story of the whole of Christianity

There are two important reasons why this must happen. First, religion is not declining in importance anywhere on the globe.<sup>7</sup> In fact, its significance is growing everywhere. Ruling elites, policy makers, the people who gather at Davos, must take religion with absolute seriousness or their projections will be cripplingly flawed. As I write Egyptians have taken to the streets by the million to challenge their government. Religion will play an important role in the way these events play out.

Second, Christianity is the largest religious family in the world, and it is found throughout the world. This makes it doubly important that the fullest possible understanding of Christianity be available to the greatest number of people as the globe tries to deal with the twenty-first century and its challenges. The responsibility on the shoulders of the historian of Christianity has never been more pressing. Ultimately, we are not talking about personal satisfaction or the approval of one's colleagues. We are talking about life on the planet.

There is an even larger question I have not addressed yet: what kind of a story or puzzle is this? I believe the story of Christianity is the central part of God's working out His love for humanity and His will for the universe. It is God's story, but it is God's story as God relates to His world. To us it is a puzzle. We are called to faith.

I close with a word about the format of dating. I will use the traditional designations of BC and AD. BCE and CE was a generous gesture, but it is still western with an imperialistic flavour. It suggests that the “common” era only came into existence with the birth of Christ and the addition of another religion. Does that mean that before the birth of Christ there was only one religion and not a common era? In fact, there were many religions then. The designation Common Era could be applied equally well to the whole of recorded human history. If one is going

7. See p. 241–42 below for relevant discussion and statistics.

to divide time around Christ, as BCE and CE does, it is less confusing to use BC and AD.