

The Modern Era

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

The modern period, heralded by what is known as the Enlightenment, began in the West in the 17th and 18th centuries with the end of the religious wars that had torn Europe apart. After years of bloodshed over religious differences, 18th century Enlightenment thinkers emphasized religious toleration and the need to separate religious life from political power. They also affirmed the role of reason in religious thinking, that people had a duty to use their intellect to test their beliefs. A current of thought called Deism, for example, stressed “natural religion,” built around a creator God and universal ethics, but without many of the supernatural elements that, they believed, confounded the principles of reason. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, so prominent in framing the new American republic, were influenced by this movement. During the past two centuries, the role of reason in the realm of faith has continued to inspire and challenge Christian thinkers.

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

Biblical scholarship has also posed challenges to faith in the modern era. The text of the Bible has been laid open to study by methods of critical and historical analysis. What is the Bible? How did this

particular collection of writings come into being? How reliable is it? Some Christians maintained that each word of the Bible was the direct revelation of God, equally true across time and space. Other Christians came to view the scriptures as a collection of inspired writings that must be studied and interpreted as products of particular historical contexts, with their own historical assumptions and concerns. In the early 20th century, a movement known as Fundamentalism arose in opposition to many trends in modern biblical scholarship. Fundamentalist Christians aimed to defend the literal interpretation of the Bible from what they consider to be the undermining effects of Biblical scholarship. More liberal Christians, on the other hand, did not find that the critical study of the Bible threatened their faith, but rather enabled them to see the text's deeper truths. In many ways, these disagreements prefigured other tensions that would develop in American churches over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries: the ordination of women, attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the ethics of abortion and reproduction.

As modernity opened new fissures in Christian churches, it also created opportunities to mend ancient divisions. The second half of the 20th century saw new currents of confluence, bringing together the divided streams that have characterized Christianity for nearly a thousand years. This trend is called the ecumenical movement, from the Greek term *oikoumene*, which means “the whole inhabited earth.” The most prominent expression of this ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC), formed in 1948. Today it is a fellowship of over 300 Protestant and Orthodox churches committed to growing together in faith and working together on shared issues of justice, peace, education, and emergency relief. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council also made far-reaching contributions to Christian ecumenism, opening the door to closer cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christians. Toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople rescinded their 1000- year-old mutual excommunication and embraced.

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

that faith with others in mission. The worldwide ministry of Billy Graham, with his huge rallies and revivals, is an example of how mid-20th century evangelists made effective use of radio, television, and other new communication technologies to unite geographically separated Christians. Graham was also one of the first to help steer a new evangelical movement away from the stricter dogmatic line of the early fundamentalists, enabling cooperation across a much larger spectrum of believers.

The soaring growth of Pentecostalism is a significant part of the new evangelical wave of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Pentecostal worship emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” including speaking in tongues and healings. In many ways, the movement seems to be a repudiation of the efforts to modernize Christianity, since it insists that miracles and other “supernatural” happenings are just as likely in the present as the Biblical era. Yet it has also enthusiastically embraced modern technologies, communication methods, and cultural forms. This dynamic between the ancient and the modern has allowed Pentecostals to cultivate spirit-filled worship and vibrant Christian communities in the growing cities of Latin America, Africa, and the United States.