

# shifting

The Western Canadian District



## A History of “Christian Shifts”

**Kyle Jantzen, Ambrose University**

Over the past year, one of the words I have used and heard used the most is *unprecedented*. Often, it seemed like the only word that made sense of the radical shifts we were enduring—the disappointments and frustrations of such an unpredictable and discouraging time. Moreover, we could never quite figure out when it might end. We still can’t. But the idea that we Christians and our churches are undergoing an unprecedented challenge only sounds true if we choose not to look beyond our own life experiences. In this paper, I will share some historical precedents for our “unprecedented” times. Indeed, the problem is not finding situations in which the Christian Church—or better, Christians and churches—were forced to shift, but choosing which ones to consider. Time and again, powerful forces—biological, technological, cultural, military, political, and economic—have pressed in against churches, causing shifts—shifts in thinking, shifts in believing, shifts in behaving. And just as we see around us today, the Christians and churches of the past have responded in many different ways: sometimes defensively, fearful about what might be lost; sometimes inconsistently, unsure of the way forward; sometimes sacrificially, suffering for the faith; sometimes hopefully, optimistic about the opportunities to be seized.

### **Roman Persecution**

Christianity was still in its infancy when faced with its first great political challenge: Roman persecution. In the year, 64, the Roman Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fires that burned his capital city, arresting, torturing, and killing scores of believers—quite possibly including the Apostle Peter. As the Roman historian Tacitus explained, Christianity was a “deadly superstition” and Christians were guilty of “abominations” and “hatred of the human race.” Nero’s punishment of the Christians was ferocious: “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”

Persecution was neither constant nor universal in the Roman Empire, but rather periodical and regional. It resurfaced under Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 161, after Christians were blamed for natural disasters because they refused to worship the Roman gods who were believed to protect communities. Around this time, Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, was martyred. At his trial, the elderly bishop was urged to “swear by the genius of Caesar” and to “curse Christ,” whereupon he would be released. His reply? “Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Condemned to death, Polycarp was set on fire.

Roman persecution peaked in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. In Carthage, North Africa, masses of Christians were martyred, including Perpetua, a young mother whose lofty visions and grisly death were recorded to inspire other believers. Around 250, under Emperor Decius, the Bishops of Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch



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were all martyred, along with Christians across the empire. Writers reported that “all covered with fear,” many fled, and even the Bishop of Smyrna—declining to follow in his predecessor Polycarp’s footsteps—sacrificed to the Roman gods. Indeed, this was the goal of the Roman persecution: to divide the Church by creating apostates.

Soon after, Emperor Valerian persecuted Christians in North Africa, seizing property and executing church leaders, including Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, the outstanding Early Christian theologian. Conspiracy, illegal association, and hatred towards the gods of Rome were the charges against him.

The “Great Persecution” took place under Emperor Diocletian and his deputy Galerius at the beginning of the 300s. Churches were burned, sacred books were seized and destroyed, worship services were banned, and eventually, Christians were given a choice: hand over your Scriptures or face execution. Many betrayed their faith in order to live. Faithful Christians condemned these as traitors (*traditores*, “those who handed over the holy things”), destined for eternal damnation. The issue split the North African Church for several hundred years. Meanwhile, further east, in Egypt, whole villages were massacred for being Christians.

Either despite or perhaps because of these persecutions and the mixture of responses—fear, suffering, and hope—Christianity grew throughout the Roman Empire. Christians made up 10 to 20 percent of the population, and in some regions comprised a majority. Well-organized and confident, Christians were known for their vibrant worship, simple message, and strong sense of calling.

## **Roman Favour**

But if Roman persecution presented Early Christians with a high-stakes crisis of conscience, an even more dramatic shift occurred when—at this very same time (312)—the new emperor, Constantine, had a vision that he would win in battle through the Christian cross. As the tradition has it, defeating his rival the following day, Constantine marched into Rome, seized power, and promptly outlawed the persecution of Christians. Constantine soon showered the Christian Church with lavish gifts: church buildings, official holidays (Easter and Sundays), valuable property, tax exemptions, and political status. Multitudes of new converts joined the Church—some from conviction but more from opportunism. Indeed, it was because of this cultural favour and the rapid growth of Christianity that standards for baptismal candidates were dramatically lowered.

By the end of the 300s, Christianity had become the official state religion and spread throughout the Roman Empire. On the one hand, Christians seized the opportunity to plant new churches and define their creed (Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381)). On the other hand, they also began to persecute their rivals: pagans, heretics, and Jews. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea captured the triumphalist mood of the period, depicting Constantine as God’s model Christian ruler and the Roman Empire as God’s kingdom on earth: “And thus,” he proclaimed, “by the express appointment of the same God, two roots of blessing, the Roman Empire, and the doctrine of Christian piety, sprang up together for the benefit of men.”

In this Christian Roman Empire, powerful Christian leaders ruled in church and society, not least Ambrose of Milan, a Roman governor made bishop against his will (so he wrote) and before his baptism! Soon,



however, everything would shift unexpectedly. In 410, the Goths, a Germanic tribe led by the warrior Alaric, sacked Rome, traumatizing Christians who were convinced that the Roman Empire would live on eternally as God's divinely appointed kingdom. It was Augustine of Hippo, the brilliant North African bishop, who showed the way forward. In *The City of God*, he explained that earthly and divine kingdoms existed in two separate realms. Here on earth, Christians would have to persevere through suffering. The Church, not the empire, would be God's instrument for the salvation of the world.

## Rise of Islam

If the collapse of the Western Roman Empire was not enough of a shock, the breathtaking conquest of the Middle East and North Africa by seventh-century Islamic armies marked another dramatic shift in Christian fortunes. Islam sprang up in Arabia under the Prophet Muhammad. After his death in 632, his followers soon conquered Arabia, spreading Muhammad's teachings and building an Islamic empire (the caliphate). Under various caliphs (deputies), Muslims routed Byzantine (Eastern Roman) armies in Syria, conquered Armenia, and crushed the shah of Persia. Damascus, Jerusalem, Ctesiphon—the great cities of the Middle East—fell to Muslim armies. In less than a century, Muslim armies swept across North Africa and, by 712, much of Spain. In the East, Islamic armies reached the gates of Constantinople, the centre of Eastern Christianity, in 717.

Christians vastly outnumbered Muslims in most of Islam's new territories. Instructed by the Quran to treat Christians and Jews ("Peoples of the Book") humanely, Christians became *dhimmi* (protected people) under *sharia* law—provided they paid substantially higher taxes. Over time, however, Christians languished as second-class subjects. Suffering under this pressure, reactions varied. Some embraced sacrifice and suffering, like the Nestorian Christians, faithfully present amongst their Muslim neighbours. Most Christians abandoned hope, converting to Islam. Still others called on their fellow Christians in Europe to rescue them, sparking several largely unsuccessful crusades to recapture the Holy Land for Christendom. For a time (1099-1291), Christian kingdoms ruled much of the Holy Land. Ultimately, all this was lost, along with the lives of European Jews and Middle Eastern Muslims, slaughtered in the name of the Christian God.

One exception to this story was Ramon Llull, a poet and court official on the island of Mallorca. In 1266, Llull had a vision of Jesus on the cross—a calling to devotion and mission. He learned Arabic, wrote widely about Christianity and Islam, and advocated conquering the Holy Land not by force of arms, but "by love, prayers, and the shedding of tears and blood." Llull built schools to train missionaries. With no church support, he persevered in hope, journeying three times to North Africa to engage Muslim religious leaders in dialogue. On his last trip, he was martyred, stoned to death by a mob in Algeria.

## Black Death

Though we might be tempted to think of our Covid-19 pandemic as unique—or perhaps only comparable to the "Spanish Flu" of 1918-1919—in fact, epidemics have been a persistent feature of human society. In Europe alone, there were 16 waves of plagues between 541 and 767. Medieval clergy called on Christians to repent—sometimes in ways that hindered the efforts of physicians trying to treat victims or government officials trying to contain epidemics. Quarantine (Italian for "forty days") was developed to



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cope with the Black Death, which spread through Asia in the early 1300s, was carried by traders to Italy, and ravaged all of Europe in 1348-1349, killing about one-third of the population. Whole communities were wiped out. As one survivor remembered: "There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world." In fact, the plague was a regularly recurring problem in Europe from the 1300s to the 1800s. In Venice, for instance, there were 22 outbreaks between 1456 and 1528 alone.

Whether the Black Death, syphilis, smallpox, or cholera, Christian leaders have consistently reacted defensively, blaming epidemics on sin and proclaiming repentance as the cure. In the Middle Ages, flagellants penitently beat themselves in imitation of the scourging of Christ. Others dipped cloths in the blood of flagellants, clutching them as amulets. Another response to the Black Death was antisemitic violence, as European Christians massacred Jews whom they accused of poisoning wells and infecting Christians. More recently, as one U.S. Presbyterian paper put it in 1835: "We regard cholera as the judgment of God upon a sinful nation, an intemperate, ungrateful Sabbath-breaking nation.... Cholera will go where it is sent. Best advice: Be ready for death. Death stands at your door. Repent of your sins."

But throughout history, other Christians have responded to epidemics sacrificially and hopefully. Early Christians cared for plague victims, supported the poor, and took in orphans. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory of Nyssa described medicine as philanthropy (love of humankind) at its highest, "an example of what God allows humans to do when they work in harmony with him, and with one another." His contemporary, Basil of Caesarea, added that "God's grace is just as visible in the healing power of medicine and its medical practitioners as it is in miraculous cures." During the Black Death, Catherine of Siena cared for plague victims and buried the dead. The Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli cared for plague victims and wrote a hymn of courage, asking God for perseverance, joy, and healing. The American Puritan Cotton Mather advocated inoculation. Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity to care for the poor and diseased in India. Throughout the modern era, Catholic orders and Protestant volunteer societies have sprung up to care for the sick.

## **Modernity**

Moving forward into the modern world, perhaps the greatest challenge to Christians and churches has come from the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, which demythologized the world and elevated rationalism and empiricism as the universal arbiters of truth. As Alexander Pope put it in the early 1700s, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, The proper study of mankind is man." Roughly 150 years later, Friedrich Nietzsche argued, "God is dead and humans have to fill the void by asserting themselves, becoming "Supermen" or masters of their own fate." No longer were humans to be understood as children of God. For René Descartes (1596-1650), the human was the autonomous rational self ("Cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am"), using individual experience and skepticism to determine truth. For Karl Marx (1818-1883), the human was the product of economic forces, engaged in the class warfare of industrial society. For Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the human was the product of evolutionary forces—natural selection culling the weak in the survival of the fittest. For Sigmund Freud (1856-1903), the human was the product of unconscious drives, a war between the id, ego, and superego in which repression replaced sin and redemption became an illusion.



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For Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the human was the self-realizing individual, trapped in an absurd world without God, forced to make her own meaning and bear the burden of her own absolute freedom.

As faith in science and reason displaced faith in God, Christians were challenged to shift the ways they thought, believed, and spoke to the world around them. Some acted defensively. In 1864, Pope Pius IX issued the “Syllabus of Errors,” in which he famously rejected the idea that he should come to terms with “progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.” Others feared the power of reason, subjected everything about Christianity to its judgment, and abandoned any hope in the supernatural. Still others were unsure, retreating into pietistic bubbles and ignoring the powerful cultural currents swirling around them. And some chose hope, optimistic that Christianity and intellectual life could coexist. Leaders as diverse as John Henry Newman, Abraham Kuyper, and Charles Malik argued for Christians to embrace universities as legitimate places in which Christians can engage the modern world as believers, integrating their biblical and theological convictions with the knowledge and theories of the modern (and later, postmodern) world.

There are many other historical “Christian shifts” we could study:

- the pressure of the dominant Greek intellectual culture, which reshaped and threatened to altogether distort the fundamental beliefs of the Early Church, forcing Christians to grapple with how best to articulate their faith;
- the impact of the early modern print revolution in Europe, which opened access to the Bible for ordinary Christians and undermined the authority of Roman Catholic clergy in the time of the Protestant Reformation, compelling Christians to make hard choices about what they believed and prompting church leaders to include lay ministry;
- the crushing of Christianity in Japan during the rule of the Tokugawa Shoguns of the 1500s and 1600s, and the difficult decisions they imposed upon Christians: martyrdom, public denial of faith, or secret Christianity;
- the anticlericalism of the French Revolution, which forcibly restructured the Catholic Church, nationalized church property, held public elections to elect clergy, and conducted a virulent campaign of atheism under the banner of the Cult of Reason, all of which prompted a century-long battle between church and state in France over education, marriage law, and political power;
- the disruption of British industrialization, which rendered rural Anglican parishes increasingly irrelevant but produced novel urban Christian movements like the Salvation Army and new Christian charitable societies like the Society for the Bettering of the Condition of the Poor (spiritual and material aid) and the National Society (education of the poor);
- the Chinese Communist campaign against Christianity and foreign missionaries, driving Christians into difficult choices between the official Three-Self Church, which many regarded as a compromise, and the often persecuted house church movement;
- the German Church Struggle in Nazi Germany, which divided Protestants between pro-Nazi “German Christians” and the traditionalist Confessing Church, struggling to remain faithful to the Bible and the Reformation confessions of faith, though mostly failing to oppose Hitler or rescue Jews;





- the pressure of Islamicization against Coptic Christians today in Egypt, or against Eastern Christians in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, places where Christians have suffered the loss of their homes, jobs, businesses, property, legal rights, churches, communities, children, and, in some cases, their lives.

## ***Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms***

So far, the “Christian shifts” we have explored occurred long ago and far away. In contrast, our final example is recent and local. It is the legal revolution created by the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, ushering in a new age of individual rights and freedoms in Canada—at the expense of Christian privilege. And it has challenged Christians to shift their thinking, their believing, their worshipping, and their ministering.

This story goes beyond the *Charter*, though. Dechristianization and religious diversification have been features of Canadian life ever since the 1960s, when the longstanding partnership between Canadian governments and Christian churches began to erode. Before that time, national and provincial leaders believed that a specifically Christian society was the best way to serve the public good and preserve social stability. Ordinary Canadians would develop Christian moral character in their homes and churches. Governments, schools, and other public institutions would then be filled with Christians of high moral standing. It was this Canadian consensus around Christian values that made possible both the religious rhetoric and the political success of prominent Christian politicians like William Aberhart, Ernest Manning, J. S. Woodsworth, and Tommy Douglas.

In the 1960s, both the “Catholic establishment” in Quebec and the “Protestant consensus” in English Canada collapsed. During the “Quiet Revolution” in Quebec, the provincial government assumed responsibility for education, health care, and social services, which had previously been provided (and controlled) by the Church. French language and Quebecois nationalism rapidly replaced Christian faith and church institutions as the basis for political identity in Quebec. In the rest of Canada, large-scale immigration, urbanization, suburbanization, social liberalization, consumerism, and multiculturalism all eroded Anglo-Canadian Christian culture and the mainline Protestant churches which supported and were supported by it. During this same time, following the British example, the Canadian government amended the criminal code, pulling Christian morality out of laws relating to divorce, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and lotteries. The principle of individual freedom now held sway. Canada would be a secular society.

Out of this trend came the 1982 *Charter*. Although its preamble states that, “Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law,” and although “freedom of conscience and religion” was the first of four fundamental freedoms outlined in the Charter, more important to the future of religion in Canada was the inclusion of the fundamental principle of equality under the law. This included the removal of disadvantages “because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability,” opening the door to legal challenges to existing Canadian laws, government programs, and public activities which infringed on the rights and freedoms of Canadian individuals and minorities.



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In the four decades since the adoption of the *Charter*, court challenges have:

- dismantled Christian legal privileges (Sunday store closures, marriage law, and civic prayer),
- excluded religious concerns from medical ethics (abortion, euthanasia)
- constrained religiously-based education (school prayer, Protestant school systems), and
- restricted or broadened freedom of religion (blood transfusions, Canada Pension Plan, photo ID, Sikh kirpans and turbans, religious symbols)

While certain issues are still unresolved, the overall pattern has been the steady dechristianization of the public sphere. There is little reason to think this will change. Fights to preserve special privileges for Christians and churches now increase the unpopularity of Christianity among the general public. While some Christians perceive this process as persecution (if not quite martyrdom), secular Canadians still see Christian exceptionalism as a threat.

This is the context in which the general public sees the diverse responses of Christians and churches to the Covid-19 pandemic.

How are Canadian Christians and churches choosing to respond to this shift?

I am convinced that, as throughout the history of Christianity, it is only through sacrificial service that Christians and churches will win back credibility for Christianity. I am convinced that this is what faithful presence and redemptive engagement look like in our post-Christian society. I am convinced that this is what it means to shift well in times of pressure. May the Spirit of Christ strengthen us for this task.



## A History of “Christian Shifts”: Further Reading

The following books and articles are starting points for the further investigation of the ideas presented in “A History of ‘Christian Shifts.’”

### Early Christianity

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Jantzen, Kyle. "Propaganda, Perseverance, and Protest: Strategies for Clerical Survival Amid the German Church Struggle." *Church History* 70, no. 2 (June 2001): 295-327.  
<https://kyletjantzen.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/propaganda-perseverance-protest.pdf>.