

This reflection comes out of great concern as I will explain below. However, my confidence is in the God of history, and in spite of all I will cling to “BUT GOD....” (Gen 1:8; 1 Sam 22:14; Neh 9:7; Ps 49:15; Acts 2:24; etc.). He reigns supreme. I marvel at God’s sovereign grace that assures us that Jesus Christ will build His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail (Mt 16:18).

I rejoice that significant numbers of people of other religions are finding that Jesus Christ is indeed the “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). I thank God that, by His great grace, you and I have come to know the truth of John 14:6. How grateful I am, and so should we all be, that there were those who brought the truth of the Gospel to us, as well as those who throughout past centuries were faithful in passing along the Gospel message. It is nothing but a continued demonstration of the sovereign grace of God in keeping His promise to build His Church.

The God of the Bible is the One of John 3:16 and He has never changed nor will He ever change.

And yet as I review history, there is so much I do not understand. I find it hard to reconcile what I know of God’s love for mankind and what has transpired throughout the course of history. Large parts of our earth are in spiritual darkness, in bondage to demonic powers, enslaved to ‘unknown God(s)’ (Acts 17:23), especially as it concerns former bastions of the Christian Faith. Why did God permit the enemies of the Cross of Jesus Christ to silence Christian voices and just about obliterate the message of the Gospel in these countries?

Since I have been asked to present a series on Islam starting this Sept. 5th, I have been reviewing the history of Islam since its inception in the mid-7th century – it’s a history that causes me great concern. Why did the sovereign God permit Islam’s cruel march to conquer large sections of the earth? Why did the Middle East and all of North Africa – bastions of Christianity at the time – surrender so quickly to Islamic invasions? The Islamic ‘mission’ reached deep into Europe, so much so, that the Iberian Peninsula (today’s Spain and Portugal) was overrun and had it not been for Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in France in 732, the course of Western history would have been very different. Europe would also have been in the total darkness of Islamic oppression. Starting in 1345, the Ottoman Empire invaded the Balkan states, finally occupying the territory of today’s Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and parts of Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Bosnia, and Slovenia, where once Eastern Orthodoxy had prevailed and reached the gates of Vienna where, in God’s providence, they were defeated in 1683 preventing the Islamization of Europe. Could this march of history be repeated in our day or in the not too distant future? Is my concern for countries that claim a more or less Judeo-Christian value system and the voice of the Christian Church in our day groundless?

It has become quite apparent that few learn from history, as can be seen in today’s Europe, including the UK and even the USA. Islam has already established significant beachheads in all Western countries and many Western-oriented countries. A number of observers of the European scene have been predicting that large parts of Europe will be Islamic in about two decades (turningpointproject.com/europe-is-dying-but-dont-be-alarmed). In Europe, the UK and even the USA, numbers of former Christian churches are now Muslim mosques. Jim Cymbala, senior pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle, New York, wrote, “*Scotland was once home to some of the greatest revivals, most gifted pastors, best religious writers, and strongest churches in history. Yet I recently read that the Christian church in Scotland has so declined that at the current rate the church will basically cease to exist by the year 2047*” (Strong through the Storm: How to Be a Christian in the World Today, 2014:14). God forbid! Was it not John Knox whose prayers Mary Queen of

Scots feared? She said of John Knox's prayer life, "I fear the prayer of John Knox more than the combined armies of Europe." What a statement and what a testimony of a man who prayed (georgeriddell.wordpress.com/2011/03/24). Could Scotland, the UK, Europe and the USA not once again know a mighty movement of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit? May God grant it and may we seek God's gracious intervention for it.

Perhaps the question to ask is what was the 'spiritual health' of the churches in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans. And what is the 'spiritual health' of the churches in the Western world in our day? What is causing the spiritual vacuum left by an apparent powerless Christianity that allows Islam, and a multiplicity of other religions to fill it? Could it be that what happened in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain parts of France, and elsewhere be the result of a Church that lost its vision and reason for being? (Mt 28:18-20 and the Book of Acts). Could it be that the Church was (and is) but a socio-cultural club (social events are part and parcel of the average contemporary church's weekly program)? Or where religious rituals were (are) substituted for a dynamic walk with Jesus Christ and where the obvious working of the Holy Spirit was unknown? (Jn 14: 16-17; 15:26-27 and the Book of Acts). Could it be that prayer and the applied teaching of God's Word to daily life was not foundational but that whatever teaching there was was more the acquisition of Bible knowledge rather than motivation and encouragement for the Holy Spirit inspired, directed and empowered life promised in Acts 1:8? Jim Cymbal again: "*Our problem is ...a church that is increasingly prayerless, compromised, demoralized and weak. We have drifted away from the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit*" (Storm 2014:28). Was this also true for the churches of those regions where the Ottoman Empire invaded? Were they so weakened in their influence that there was no meaningful challenge to Islamic conversion?

Cymbala (2014:11) shares the research by John Dickerson: if Jesus' declaration about being the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6) is the measure, then "*the actual number of evangelical Christians is shockingly between 7 to 8.9 percent of the United States population, not 40 percent and certainly not 70 percent*" (The Great Evangelical Recession, 2013:32). With such statistics, how can the purpose for my reflections not be the concern for my family, my fellow believers and their families? How will we, as Christians and churches, withstand Islam – and the multiplicity of other religions – as it steadily fills the spiritual vacuum of our day?

Is our Christian faith but just a journey for our spiritual enjoyment so we do not miss out on heaven? Or is it "*filled with joy and the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 13:52) with the mission as described in the Book of Acts: "*And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.*' And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness?" (Acts 4:29-31).

In the Old Testament, God made it clear to Israel, why they had so little influence in society: "*But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, To walk in their own devices. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways then I would quickly subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their adversaries*" (Ps 81:11-14). Is this not God's response and exhortation for our day in the face of false religions?

Commenting on Psalm 4:3, Cymbala writes, *"I can almost hear David saying, 'You can chase me, you can persecute me, you can do anything you want—but when I call on God, you're in trouble. The Lord will hear when I call on Him'."* He continues, *"The devil is not terribly frightened of our human efforts and credentials. But he knows his kingdom will be damaged when we lift up our hearts to God"* (1997:57). John Piper underscores the vital importance of prayer: *"God has given us prayer because Jesus has given us a mission. We are on earth to press back the forces of darkness, and we are given access to headquarters by prayer to advance this cause"* (Let the Nations be Glad, 1993:47-48).

The Word of God is full of accounts describing the power of prayer. Concerted prayer has overcome enemies (Ps 6:9-10), conquered death (2 Kings 4:3-36), brought healing (Jm 5:14-15), and defeated demons (Mk 9:29). Persevering prayer has opened eyes, changed hearts, healed wounds, and granted wisdom (Jm 1:5). E. M. Bounds and others have illustrated the power of prayer that draws on the glory and might of the infinitely powerful God of the universe. Will you seek out times of corporate prayer while giving more time to seeking God's face alone on behalf of your family, your church family and the nation where you are? God grant that this will be your commitment.

Sincerely and in God's Grace,

Philip Steyne