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CHRISTIANS WHO  
CHANGED  
THEIR WORLD



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## PREFACE

NEAR THE END OF THE BIBLE'S "HALL of Faith" chapter, the author of Hebrews realizes he's running out of time. He also wants us to know about others who deserve a place in this list of the faithful ... the ones who experienced miraculous healings ... those who won unexpected victories ... those raised from the dead.

And there were others, too, who were "tortured ... [and] suffered mocking and flogging ... even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword ... destitute, afflicted, mistreated" (11:35–37).

It is a bit discomfoting just how seamlessly the list moves from miracles to persecution. The reader is offered no explanation for this. No distinction is made between those who won and those who lost, those whose faith enabled



amazing things and those whose faith precipitated their demise. There is no consolation offered, at least not in any temporal outcomes. All that we are told is that they belong to a distinct group of people, one “of whom the world is not worthy” (v. 38).

Imagine how long this same list is today. The faithful now include people across centuries, continents, vocations, and cultures. There are pastors, evangelists, sculptors, parents, entrepreneurs, activists, warriors, strategists, inventors, servants, rulers, innovators, educators, children, authors, painters, athletes, presidents, beggars, healers, storytellers, academics, practitioners, politicians, administrators, builders, peasants, accountants, and those from any other category of human activity that one could imagine. They are proof of the Church universal, which Christ, who is Lord of all, promised to build. He kept that promise, and because He did, history is full of people from every tongue, tribe, nation, and language who have declared that “every square inch” of the cosmos is His.

In a speech recorded in Acts 17, Paul described God to a group of Athenian philosophers. In it, he offered a particular detail, having to do with God’s interaction within human history, that is not articulated in the same way anywhere else in Scripture. God determines the exact time and exact place for each human being to live. Or in Paul’s words, their “allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (v. 26). Such a detail was especially important for this particular audience, which, according to Luke, consisted of Epicureans and Stoics.



## INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH A LECTURE I gave for the Centurions Program, now known as the Colson Fellows, under Chuck Colson. I was assigned the topic “Christians Who Changed Their World” for a talk to be given just before the graduating class was commissioned. That was bad enough: they had finished the program and I doubted they wanted a content-heavy lecture. Further, I knew Chuck, so I knew he expected me to do William Wilberforce, his personal hero. Others probably included Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr, . . . . I thought that would be too easy. I decided it would be far more interesting to pick people no one was likely to have heard of, who were not clergy or at least whose contributions were not in areas we normally associate with clergy, and who made contributions in a variety of fields.

Chuck loved it. He said it was the most effective way of communicating what worldview is and how it affects all of life that he had seen, and insisted I give it for all the Centurions classes. The next year, I did it again but with different people. When the staff at Breakpoint realized I could extend the series, they suggested I turn them into articles for the website. I did around sixty over the next few years, most of which were lost when they redesigned the website. I had my copies, however, and so I decided it was time to turn them into a book.

Unfortunately, most of the publishers I approached were not interested: they said no one would want a book about people they had never heard of, demonstrating conclusively that their acquisitions editors were missing the point.

When I asked Canon Press if they might be interested in publishing it, they said yes; when I explained the reasoning of the publishers who had turned it down, they shook their heads. They understood far better than the other Christian publishers I had approached the point of the book and why their audience would want to read it.

The result is in your hands.

The biographies are drawn from people living from the fourth to the twentieth century, from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, both men and women, active in a wide range of pursuits including evangelism and missions, education, fighting for human rights, government, medicine, and mathematics and science.

The selection shows us that Christianity is not an exclusively Western phenomenon, that from early days the Gospel

was penetrating and influencing people and cultures in Africa and Asia along with Europe. The biographies demonstrate that God has been working through his people throughout history to accomplish his purposes and to build his Kingdom.

And, as Chuck Colson said years ago, the stories also illustrate the power of a biblical worldview to transform lives and cultures. In the Kingdom, all that is broken is restored. As we live out the reality of Christ's lordship over every area of life, we too, like so many before us, have the opportunity to work with the Holy Spirit as agents of reconciliation and restoration in our world.

May these stories inspire us to live out the Kingdom in our own lives and our spheres of activity, whatever they may be.





## LATE ANTIQUITY & THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ERA AND FOR THE next two hundred or so years, the Roman Empire was largely at peace. The borders to the north stabilized along the Rhine and the Danube rivers, and although there were ongoing battles with the Persian Empire to the east, most of the empire was prosperous, peaceful, and stable. Christianity was growing within the empire despite sporadic, localized persecutions.

Things changed in the third century. In 235, the Emperor Severus Alexander was assassinated by his own troops. This began a period of instability in the empire that lasted around fifty years. Roman generals vied for the imperial title, with fifty different claimants for the throne during the period. The generals would pull their troops from the borders to march

on Rome, leaving the empire vulnerable to barbarian invasions and migrations. The Roman military itself was increasingly made up of Germanic mercenaries. Then in 249, the Plague of Cyprian broke out and ravaged the empire until 264. The period also saw peasant revolts, rampant inflation, and people fleeing their homes and work to escape the chaos.

The period came to an end when Diocletian became emperor. Diocletian changed Rome in fundamental ways, ushering in the period historians call Late Antiquity. He divided the empire into four administrative units, each ruled by a co-emperor, in an attempt to find a stable approach to imperial succession to avoid the civil wars that had racked the empire for the previous half century. As part of this, to overawe people with his glory so that they would not consider revolt, he changed the title of emperor from *princeps*—the first member of the Senate—to *dominus*—lord, with all the divine implications of the term. He instituted elaborate ceremonies around himself, and when the Christians refused to acknowledge him as lord, he began the Great Persecution, the most severe persecution of Christians in the Roman world.

Diocletian also instituted a number of heavy-handed laws to stabilize the empire socially and economically by prohibiting people from moving from their homes or working outside of their father's profession.

Diocletian retired in 305. Shortly thereafter, the various rulers of the different sections of the empire went to war with each other, with Constantine emerging as the victor. Constantine would convert to Christianity and declare religious liberty in the empire, thereby decriminalizing Christianity.

(Contrary to what is often claimed, he did not make it the state religion of the empire; that was done later by Theodosius I, who nonetheless continued to allow pagans to worship within Roman territory.)

Constantine divided the empire into two parts. The Eastern, Greek-speaking half was wealthier, more sophisticated, more educated, and the economic and cultural center of the empire. Accordingly, Constantine moved his capital to the ancient city of Byzantium, renaming it New Rome though it rapidly became known as Constantinople, Constantine's City.

The Latin West was poorer and much less important than the Greek East despite having Rome as its capital. It was also subject to more invasions over the next century and a half. The Western emperor became little more than a figurehead in the middle of the fifth century; real power was in the hands of the *magister militum*, the military commander of the Western empire. Finally, in 474, the last emperor in Rome was deposed and not replaced, though Roman governance and administration continued in Constantinople. 474 is thus considered somewhat shortsightedly as the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Early Middle Ages.





# ST. FRUMENTIUS & KING EZANA OF AXUM

(?-C. 383, R. 330-C. 360)

*Fathers of Christianity in Axum*

BECAUSE THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES tells the story of the spread of Christianity within the Roman Empire, we often forget that the Gospel quickly spread beyond Rome's boundaries. Among the Apostles, Thomas preached in India and Bartholomew and possibly Thaddeus in Armenia (which became the first kingdom to accept Christianity). Rome's great enemy Persia had an active church well before Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire. Overall, there were more Christians outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire than within it for the first thousand years of the Christian era.

Some of this expansion came through Roman trade and diplomatic contacts outside the Mediterranean basin. The empire had relationships with states in Asia, including the Persian Empire, Arabia, India, and China, and even with Africa, notably with the kingdom of Axum, south of Egypt in modern Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Axum was a powerful and advanced kingdom that served as a trading nexus between the Roman Empire and India. The kingdom exported ivory, tortoiseshell, gold, and emeralds to these lands, and imported silk and spices.

In about 316 AD, two Greek brothers named Frumentius and Edesius left their home in Tyre in modern-day Lebanon to accompany their uncle on a trading voyage to Axum. They stopped at a port city on the Red Sea. A brawl broke out, and the locals ended up slaughtering everyone on board the ship except the two brothers, who were given to Ella Amida, the king of Axum, as slaves.

The two brothers evidently had received a very good education at home, because they rapidly gained the king's favor and became influential figures at court even at their young age. Shortly before his death, Ella Amida freed them. The king's son and heir Ezana was a minor, so the widowed queen Sofya was named regent. She convinced Frumentius and Edesius to stay in Axum to help her educate her son and prepare him for the throne.

Along with educating the prince, the brothers did their best to encourage the growth of Christianity in Axum. Most Christians in the kingdom were foreign merchants, though there were a small number of native Christians as well. Tradition says

Groote saw education as an essential part of his greater goal of Church renewal. Although it took over a century, the education provided in the schools he inspired laid the groundwork for both reform in the Catholic church and the rise and spread of Protestantism. But the schools of the Brethren were more than nurseries for Church reform. They turned northern Germany into a literate culture for the first time in history, which developed a market for books that helped inspire Gutenberg in the creation of movable metal type and the printing press.

Groote's educational program thus had enormous implications beyond Church reform and character-building. It provided northern Europe with the tools to advance in all areas of learning, including mathematics, astronomy, law, politics, and the arts, and laid the groundwork for the spread of Renaissance ideas into the empire. Historic Christianity teaches that all truth is God's truth, all areas of life are sacred, and thus all can and should be studied as a means of honoring God. Even if it was not the initial intent, these results of Groote's education program were in keeping with his goal of reforming Church and society through a more thoroughgoing understanding of the Bible and the biblical worldview.



## ABBA ENBAQQOM/ABUL-FATH

(C. 1470 - C. 1561)

*Champion of Ethiopia*

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES in the Middle East today are under assault as never before by Islamic forces. At the same time, unprecedented numbers of Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus Christ as a result of dreams in which Issa (Jesus) appears to them. Although the pace at which these two trends are happening is accelerating, neither is a new phenomenon. Nor are Christian apologetics to Islam new; medieval Christians in the Middle East and Europe developed arguments for the truth of Christianity over Islam. All of these elements are part of the life story of Abba Enbaqqom, whose birth name was Abul-Fath.

Abul-Fath was born in Yemen to a Jewish mother and a noble father and was raised as a Muslim. Even as a young man he began to express doubts about his religion and began to investigate Islam and its literature. His doubts eventually alienated him from his parents. In 1489, he went to Ethiopia as a merchant, accompanying a freed Ethiopian captive. He stayed in northern Ethiopia for three years and then moved south to the capital for two more years.

During this period, Abul-Fath continued his religious investigations. In 1494 he received a revelation in which he was told, "You are not following the right path; go to the Abima Marcos, who is head of the priests of Ethiopia, and he will teach you another path."<sup>14</sup>

Abima Marcos thus seems to have been involved in Abul-Fath's conversion, though the most important person was Echage Petros. Echage is the title of the abbot of Debre Libanos, the most important monastery in Ethiopia, and is the second highest office in the Ethiopian church. Echage Petros taught Abul-Fath the faith and baptized him under the name "Enbaqom" (Habakkuk).

Enbaqom decided to stay in the monastery and began academic studies. He mastered Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, and Hebrew, and later added Portuguese, the Venetian dialect of Italian, and Latin. He had already learned Arabic and Ge'ez, the language of Ethiopia. Among other things,

14. Francisco Álvares, *Verdadera Informaçam das terras do Preste Joam das Indias* (Lisbon: Luís Rodrigues, 1540), translated as *The Prester John of the Indies*, ed. C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1961), 262–263.



## REFORMATION ERA

EUROPE CHANGED IN A RANGE OF ways after the chaos of the fourteenth century discussed in the previous chapter on Geert Grootte. The Italian Renaissance that emerged in the wake of the Black Death had profound effects on art and scholarship. The printing press was invented in Germany, creating a revolution in communication, education, and learning unrivaled until the invention of the internet. Portuguese explorers found their way around Africa and took control of the lucrative spice trade with Asia, beginning the Atlantic slave trade as well. Columbus linked the old world of Europe, Africa, and Asia with the new world of the Americas, a world-changing event in a way that previous voyages between the continents had not been.

All was not well in the church, however. After the Great Schism of the West, which featured two and then three

competing popes, each backed by different kingdoms, the papacy was largely seen as just another Italian principality, but one that also happened to be the head of the “universal” Church. The Renaissance papacy was a byword for corruption, with popes engaging in widespread nepotism up to and including making the pope’s illegitimate son a cardinal and seeking to turn papal lands into an independent state under that illegitimate son. The cardinals who served in the papal court were ambitious, power-hungry, and greedy for the most part, though occasionally a reformer would be elevated to a cardinalship. Bishops were typically younger sons of important nobles who looked at their position as an honorable way to make a good living and a way to enhance family power. Local priests were not allowed to marry but frequently had concubines, a fact that their parishioners found comforting because it meant they were less likely to molest or seduce their wives or daughters. Monks were proverbially drunks.

Despite the problems, the Catholic church’s position in Europe was unassailable because it had a monopoly on one product everyone wanted: salvation. As long as western Europeans believed that their only hope of salvation was the Catholic church, no matter how corrupt the church became, its position was secure.

It was secure, that is, until Martin Luther broke the monopoly with his rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Luther ignited a firestorm of controversy. His challenge to the Catholic church may have been theological, but because in this period religion affected every area of life, Luther’s



MARGUERITE  
D'ANGOULÊME (1492-1549)  
*Protector of Protestants*

CHARLES, COUNT OF ANGOULÊME, was a Prince of the Blood, that is, a member of the royal family of France descended from Charles V (r. 1364-1380). He married Louise of Savoy when she was eleven years old, though they did not live together until she was fifteen. They soon had their first child, Marguerite, and two years later, in 1494, their second child, Francis, who by dynastic accident was the second in line to the French throne should Charles VIII die without a surviving heir.

Charles of Angoulême died in 1496, leaving Louise a widow at age nineteen. Louise was an unusually well-educated young woman and particularly adept at diplomacy; she



saw to it that the same was true of Marguerite and Francis. In the course of her education, Marguerite was exposed to the Bible and developed a love of the Scriptures.

Marguerite was married at age seventeen to Charles IV, Duke of Alençon, on orders from Louis XII of France. This was a matter of political expediency: Louis XII wanted to keep the duchy of Alençon in the family. It was a poor match: Charles was close to illiterate and the couple had nothing in common.

Louis XII also named Marguerite's brother Francis as his heir and had him marry his daughter Claude. He came to the throne as Francis I in 1515. At that point, Marguerite became one of the most important women in France, second only to her mother Louise of Savoy. Marguerite became known for her learning, kindness, and generosity, and her home became internationally recognized as a center of scholarship and culture. Marguerite herself had by this time learned Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, and German, along with her native French.

In 1525, Francis was campaigning in Italy when he met a crushing defeat at the hands of Charles V's forces at the Battle of Pavia. Many of the leading nobles of France were killed and Francis himself was captured. Marguerite's husband Charles IV of Alençon led the remnants of the French forces north of the Alps. He was unfairly blamed for the defeat at Pavia and died soon thereafter.

While in captivity in Spain, Francis became gravely ill. Marguerite, now a widow, went to him, riding twelve hours per day in the middle of winter to make it to Francis before



## MODERN TIMES

AMONG EUROPEAN HISTORIANS, THE start of the French Revolution in 1789 marks the beginning of the modern world. It is impossible in a short introduction to cover even the most basic outline of the period, but a few comments will help put the following chapters in context. Within the industrial world, the intelligentsia increasingly turned away from Christianity and toward rationalism and scientism.<sup>21</sup> On a global level, the nonindustrial world was increasingly dominated by the industrialized powers, mostly Europe and America. Ultimately, both of these trends contributed to the rise of totalitarianism in Communist countries and Nazi Germany.

21. Scientism assumes that everything that happens has a purely material cause and thus that science provides the best explanation for everything. For example, love is nothing more than the feelings produced by the release of hormones triggered by your encounter(s) with another person.

But there were counter-movements to all of this. A burst of missionary activity around the world during the period spread Christianity as a global religion. While some missionaries were little more than tools of the colonial powers, others worked to modernize their mission fields to prepare them for independence. The spread of the Gospel led to indigenous Christians becoming political, cultural, and educational leaders fighting for human rights. Elsewhere, Quakers and British Evangelicals spearheaded the abolition movement in Britain and America, resulting in the end of legal slavery in much of the world for the first time in history. Many Blacks joined in this movement, not simply out of self-interest but as an expression of their Christian faith. More recently, Christians from around the world were inspired by their faith to work at great personal risk to save Jews from the Holocaust. The following chapters tell some of their stories.



# LEONHARD EULER (1707-1783)

## *The Genius Mathematician*

THE LATE 1600S THROUGH THE 1700S saw European intellectuals turn away from the darkness and superstition of the past in a movement that philosopher Emanuel Kant dubbed the Enlightenment. Also known as the Age of Reason, this period saw a growth in skepticism about Christianity, the rise of Deism and atheism, the supremacy of reason over revelation, and a movement toward irreligion, particularly among the intellectual elites.

Or so we are told in our history classes.

While there is an element of truth in this description of intellectual life in the period, it ignores a number of important points. First, there were a number of counter-movements within the churches that kept Christianity vital for many,