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## Defending the Faith: Yesterday

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# Looking Back



## Defending the Faith: Yesterday

by Ed Hindson

**T**he church of Jesus Christ has always had to fight a war on two fronts. Outwardly, the church has had to defend itself against the onslaught of paganism and secularism. Inwardly, Christians have had to fight to preserve the purity of doctrine within the church. From the very beginnings of church history, we see the early Christian leaders defending the "faith once delivered to the saints."

### Apologists and Polemicists: Defending and Defining

Many of the great church fathers, as they were often called, defended Christianity with an apologetic to the unbelieving world of this day. They sought to establish the legitimate credibility of the Christian faith to the Roman world. Men like Justin Martyr and Tertullian argued that Christians made better citizens than pagans and that Christianity was morally superior to the Greek and Roman religions. Eusebius wrote a detailed history of the church up to A.D. 324, and Augustine proposed a Christian view of all human history in his magnificent *City of God*.

In the meantime, polemicists wrote to expose heresy within the church. They quoted extensively from the Old and New Testaments as the basis of their authority in defining the true doctrine of the church. Men like Irenaeus and Origen wrote against the encroachment of such heresies as Gnosticism, Manicheism, Neo-platonism, and Monarchianism. Other controversies emerged related to the correct date for the celebration of Easter and the issue of what to do with compromisers within the church who capitulated during times of persecution. They defended the inspiration of Scripture, the Trinity, and the deity of Christ.

### Successes and Excesses

Like all fallible men attempting to defend and define the

infallible, these early leaders made grave mistakes in attempting to defend the truth. They were successful in clearly defining the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ and the relation of the members of the Triune Godhead. However, they were not without their overreactions. In an attempt to avoid the excessive eschatology of Montanus, many neglected the second coming of Christ altogether. Attempting to defend Christianity against Greek philosophy, some imbibed too much of matters to which they objected. Wanting to emphasize the spiritual meaning of Scripture, Origen popularized the allegorical method of interpretation that became so destructive to genuine biblical research. Hoping to combat heresy within the church, Cyprian argued for the autocratic authority of the bishop that eventually led to the hierarchial structure based on the supposed primacy of Peter. Hermits denying materialism wandered half-naked in the Near Eastern deserts in total isolation from people. One extremist, Simeon Stylites, after remaining buried up to his neck in the ground for several months, spent thirty years living atop a sixty-foot pillar near Antioch.

### The Protestant Reformation

By the Middle Ages, it became obvious that the church was badly in need of spiritual revival and reform. Mystics like Thomas a' Kempis (1380-1471) and Savonarola (1452-1498) tried to get the church back into a personal and spiritual relationship with Christ. Early reformers like John Wycliffe (1328-1384) and John Huss (1369-1415) defied the ecclesiastical system at the threat of their lives. With Martin Luther (1483-1546) in Germany, John Calvin (1509-1564) in Switzerland, and Menno Simons (1496-1561) in Holland, the

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The larger the number of schools that we have, the greater threat we are going to pose to public education. I see the battle is to keep ourselves in a balanced posture where we keep a balance between academics and spiritual things. Soulwinning and evangelism must remain prominent in the Christian school. We need to strive for academic excellence, but never at the expense of our spiritual goals and priorities.

**Q:** If you were giving advice to young pastors just starting out, what would you tell them?

**A:** I would say that the most important word in the Christian minister's life is the word *balance*. I think one

must be balanced so that he is able to keep his prayer life and his work life balanced. Don't work all the time, but don't pray all the time; keep balanced. Don't just go out and knock on doors all the time, study the Bible as well. Study and work must be balanced. In your church, don't let the bus ministry become the major program of the church. Don't let the choir become the major program of the church. Don't even let the Sunday school become the major program of the church, or visitation, or Bible study. The main problem that I see with young ministers today is they are not able to have a discerning spirit about keeping all of these areas of their life balanced. Keep your family life balanced. Don't try to save everybody else's kids, and let your own kids go to

hell. Don't try to save everybody else's marriages, and let your marriage go to pot. The family has to have its proper priority, the church its proper priority, the choir its proper priority, the bus ministry its proper place, and the key word is *balance*. If we fail to have a holistic approach to life we will have an unbalanced ministry. Some fellows get a lot of people down the aisles who go out the back doors as quick as they come in the front door. Some fellows have a great Sunday night Bible study, but no children in Sunday school. Some people have a bus ministry that overbalances their budget, their buildings, and their teaching staff. I think balance is the most important thing for a young preacher. □

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Reformation reached a climax as their writings exposed heresies that had developed over the centuries related to the issue of salvation by faith as opposed to salvation by works. Among the Puritans in England there arose the demand for a "pure" church and the opportunity for independent and separatist congregations. Many fled to America for their own religious freedom. Others sought to change the church from within. Later, John Wesley (1703-1791) remained within the Church of England, while his followers, known as Methodists, withdrew.

### Revival or Revolution?

While the Reformation put preaching back in the pulpit and the Bible into the hands of the people, it also evoked an explosion of religious wars and denominational conflicts. Luther and Zwingli split over their view of the Lord's Supper; Calvinists and Arminians divided over the issue of election; Wesley and Whitefield split over the same issue; and the Puritans subdivided into Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Separatists. At one point Zwingli's followers drowned Anabaptists because of their insistence on baptism by immersion. Zwingli (1484-1531) himself was killed while attempting to take the city of Geneva by force. Excesses by Anabaptists included: Melchior Hoffman's prediction that Christ would return to Strasbourg, France, in 1533 to establish the Millennium; Jan Matthyszoon proclaimed himself to be Enoch; and John of Leyden decreed polygamy to be legitimate and married seventeen wives. "Heretics" were burned at the stake on all sides and virtually everyone in Europe fought over religion.

### Rise of Rationalism, Deism, and Secularism

In seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, philosophical rationalism began to threaten all forms of Christianity. Natural laws discovered by reason and scientific investigation began to become the basis of factual knowledge. Soon reason stood above revelation as the vehicle of man's knowledge about the world. The empiricism of Francis

Bacon(1561-1626) and John Locke (1632-1704) denied the existence of fixed ideas and made all "facts" dependent upon verifiable experimentation. Descartes, Leibnitz, and Spinoza argued for man's ability to attain knowledge by unaided reason and scientific method. In an accommodation to naked rationalism, some religionists adopted Deism, the belief in God which insists that He is above and beyond His creation.

Many rose to defend Christian orthodoxy during this period. William Law wrote *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) but also wrote *The Case for Reason* (1732), in which he argued that human knowledge alone cannot comprehend the whole knowledge of God. Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* (1736) attacked the very basis and rationale of Deism. In the meantime, the great revivals exploded in Europe, England and America. On the Continent, the Pietists and Moravians established Bible schools and missionary training centers. The Wesleyan Revival in England countered the moral corruption of the Industrial Revolution, and the Great Awakening in colonial America established the spiritual foundation for the United States.

### The Twentieth Century

By the end of the nineteenth century, the church stood to defend itself against the "modern" foes of criticism, commercialism, and evolution. Following the logic of Kant and Hegel, so-called higher critics began to deny the authorship, unity and authenticity of the Bible. Some went so far as to deny the integrity of the New Testament, the miracles and deity of Christ, and the nature of the atonement. Charles Darwin wrote the *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) in which he argued that humankind had descended from animals. In the meantime, Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which he argued that the ultimate realities were material and not spiritual.

The combined effect of these concepts molded the philosophical basis of modern theological liberalism. Liberals (modernists) attempted to remain within the church, while

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