On October 31, 1517—nearly five hundred years ago—Martin Luther tacked his Ninety-five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, Germany, and sparked what we know as the Protestant Reformation. Soon the gospel—salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—was being trumpeted all over Europe. Is that correct? Yes. Then came a tremendous explosion of missionary expansion in the wake of the Reformation, as missionaries almost immediately began to go to the ends of the earth. Correct? Wrong.

**WHY MISSIONS WAS MISSING AFTER THE REFORMATION**

William Carey did not launch the modern Protestant missionary movement until 275 years after the Reformation began. Virtually no Protestant missionary activity took place between 1517 and 1792. Yet those years constituted the golden age of Roman Catholic missions. The Roman Catholic Church was sending missionaries all over the world, whereas Protestants were sending almost none. Why is that? [1]

Theological reasons account partly for this phenomenon. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and even the Anabaptists—though their writings contained materials on which it would be possible to construct a theology of missions—had relatively little vision for missions. In fact, Luther taught that the Great Commission had already been fulfilled. Christ, Luther said, gave the Great Commission to the apostles. And they preached the gospel throughout the world. Since that was done, no longer is the church responsible to carry the gospel to other lands. So Luther said, “There is no need for missions.” John Calvin was responsible for sending four missionaries to Brazil in 1551. Nevertheless many hyper-Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed there was no basis for missions. Missionary activity, since it involved human initiative, was an affront to the sovereign predestination of God. Missions was simply not on their agenda.

Then the Anabaptists, believing that Christ would soon return, and facing severe persecution, had little time for missions. So, as a result of the belief that there was no need for missions (Luther), no basis for missions (Calvinists), and no time for missions (Anabaptists), virtually no Protestant missionary activity took place for over two hundred years. Yet meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church was engaged in missions. In fact one of the apologists of the Roman Catholic Church, Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), used to argue that the Roman Catholic Church is the true church because it sends missionaries and the Protestants do not.

Roman Catholics believe in apostolic succession, the view that all priests and bishops can trace their lineage in unbroken order back to the apostles through the laying on of hands. Because of the supposed unbroken line of succession, they believe theirs is the true church. But in the years after the Reformation, Roman Catholics spoke of the apostolic nature of the church in a different way. They reasoned that since the word “apostolic” comes from “apostles,” meaning “sent ones,” the church should be a sending church.
They reasoned, “Since we are sending out missionaries, and Protestants are not, we are the true apostolic church.” So, amazingly, the early Protestants, who believed the Bible and its gospel message, still lacked a sense of God’s global purpose.

Besides theological reasons, there were geographical reasons for the Protestant lack of missions involvement. Central Europe, where the Reformation took root, was not in touch with the rest of the world. Until Holland and England rose as sea powers years later, countries in Central Europe had little contact with Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Nations that were in touch with the non-Christian peoples of the world were Spain and Portugal and, to a lesser degree, Italy. Aware of the masses of non-Christians around the world, those were the nations that desired to communicate the Christian faith.

There were also ecclesiastical reasons. Many Protestants were absorbed in seeking to maintain the gains they had made earlier in the Reformation and define themselves over against the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestants. On the other hand in the Counter Reformation, a number of Roman Catholic leaders, including Francis Xavier, Ignatius Loyola, Bartholomew de las Casas, and some popes, had a concern for the spread of Catholicism. They were missionary in their orientation.

Another factor that accounted for absence of Protestant missionary activity was organizational. Before the Reformation, monastic orders carried on missionary activity. When people in those orders took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they constituted a highly mobile missionary force. They were not married, and having taken vows of obedience, they constituted a highly mobile missionary force. They were not married, and having taken vows of obedience, they could readily go wherever the church decided to send them. However, because Martin Luther believed in the priesthood of all believers, he saw no need for the monasteries. Thus by closing down monasteries he dismantled a potential sending structure for Protestant missions. For 275 years, until the time of William Carey, Protestantism failed to develop a missionary structure that was reproducible and sustainable. Protestants had no structure through which to send missionaries.

**WILLIAM CAREY AND MISSIONS**

William Carey was born in England in 1761. [2] As a teenager he was converted to Christ and joined a dissenting group. At the age of twenty-six he was ordained to the Baptist ministry and assigned to a church that could not support him. So he earned his living making and mending shoes. But his mind was active and curious. He taught himself Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Dutch, French, and Italian. As he read *The Last Voyages of Captain Cook*, Entic’s *The Present State of the British Empire*, and Guthrie’s *Geographical Grammar*, he became aware of the vast non-Christian populations of the world. He was faced with the theological question, “What responsibility do I as a Christian have for communicating the gospel to these people?” He concluded that Christ’s Great Commission is indeed binding on the church. So he wrote a book with a rather long title: *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens in Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the*
World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Future Undertakings Are Considered. [3] This eighty-seven-page book is the Magna Carta of the Protestant missionary movement, and it is probably as significant in the history of the church as Luther’s Ninety-five Theses. No student should graduate from seminary without reading it.

In this book Carey surveyed the advance of Christianity through the centuries, discussed the religious state of the world, and then addressed every conceivable objection people might raise against the sending of missionaries.

This book met with keen opposition. It was highly controversial because of three words in the title: “to use means.” Carey was a Baptist, and almost all Baptists at that time were hyper-Calvinists. Calling themselves “Particular Baptists,” they did not believe missionary societies should be formed to send missionaries. So at a Baptist ministers association meeting Carey proposed that they debate the thesis, “Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.” John Ryland stood up and said to him, “Young man, when God wants to convert the world, He’ll do it without your help or mine!” The prevailing opinion was that if God meant to convert people who were not in touch with the gospel, He would predestine them to be saved. And whether they became saved was not the concern of Baptist ministers.

Carey, however, persisted. In 1792, at another Baptist ministers association meeting, he preached a sermon based on Isaiah 54:2-3, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords. Strengthen your stakes” (NIV). He concluded that message with the words, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” He pressed for the formation of a Baptist missions society, but his plea for action was tabled until the next meeting. Finally, in the fall of 1792 a small group of Baptist ministers and laypeople agreed to found the Baptist Missionary Society. After 275 years, at last the Protestant Church had a sustainable, reproducible instrument for sending missionaries.

Not surprisingly, Carey volunteered to be the first missionary sent by that society. He went to India, where he labored for forty-one years without taking a furlough. When Carey was about to depart India, he gave a speech in which he drew on the imagery of the early industrial revolution with its mining industry. In the primitive mining industry miners were lowered into dangerous holes in the ground with ropes. If danger occurred, the mine workers were pulled up by those ropes. He said, “Yonder in India there is gold. I descend to India to mine for souls. Hold the ropes.” That was to be the responsibility of the mission society.

In India, Carey developed a missions strategy that historian Stephen Neill summarizes in five points: widespread preaching of the gospel by every possible method, distributing the Bible in the languages of the people, establishing a church as soon as possible, studying the background and world views of the people, and training indigenous leaders.
[4] Even now one is hard-pressed to prove on that strategy of more than two hundred years ago.

Where did Carey’s ideas come from? In the 275 years from Luther to Carey there were some helpful developments in Protestantism. From these planks he constructed the platform from which he launched the modern Protestant missionary movement. These three planks were Pietism, Moravianism, and Puritanism. These movements each contributed to modern missions and also are relevant to the church today. (A following article will discuss Moravianism and Puritanism.)

PIETISM AND MISSIONS

For thirty years (1618-1648) Protestant princes fought Catholic leaders. When the Thirty Years War ended and the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648, Europe was in shambles. The land was depopulated, the people dehumanized, and morality dissolved. Rigid class distinctions characterized society. Aristocrats would not allow their children to be baptized with the same water that was used in baptizing peasant children. The line between clergy and laity was sharply drawn. In fact one woman had to ask her bishop for permission to give spiritual consolation to her neighbor, because to give spiritual consolation was the prerogative of the clergy alone. Philosophers viewed the universe as an impersonal machine, and the church was primarily concerned about doctrinal purity. Emphasis on faith as intellectual assent to sound doctrine overshadowed the focus on faith as heart-felt trust in a living God. [5]

In 1651, just three years after the Peace of Westphalia, the highly influential and respected Lutheran faculty of the University of Wittenberg issued a classic statement about the continuing validity of the Great Commission. This became the dominant view in the Lutheran Church and many of the Reformed churches for the next 150 years. That statement emphasized three points. [6] First, only the apostles were privileged to fulfill the Great Commission. Therefore missions is not the responsibility of the church.

Second, no person is excused before God because of ignorance of the gospel. Those who do not believe are presumed to have rejected the gospel when it was preached to them by the apostles during New Testament times, and God is not obligated to give them a second chance. Therefore European Christians have no need to assume responsibility for the lostness of the heathen.

Third, rulers are responsible to propagate the gospel in their own territories alone. The Wittenberg fathers were satisfied that the rulers had faithfully carried out this duty.

From the ashes of this situation a movement called Pietism began to emerge. Today the word “pietist” suggests pretense rather than righteousness, hypocrisy rather than holiness. But Pietism was an international, interdenominational movement of evangelical renewal that arose in the mid-1600s in attempt to complete the Protestant Reformation. In other words Pietism did not try to undo or disown the Reformation; Pietism tried to complete
the Reformation. The church had had a reformation in doctrine; now it needed a reformation in life.

Two streams of influence fed the development of Pietism. The first flowed from Johann Arndt, a German Lutheran pastor and then district superintendent, who lived from 1555 to 1621. Emphasizing the believer’s new life in Christ, he insisted that pastors must be models of the Christian life. A contemporary said of him, “He was tireless in reconciling those at enmity, rousing the lukewarm, instructing the ignorant, and rebuking the perverse.” [7] His sermons continued to be reprinted for more than one hundred years after his death, and he wrote *True Christianity*, one of the most influential books of his time.

A second stream flowed from Justinian von Welz. In three pamphlets written in 1664, he boldly set forth the missionary duty of the church. He called for the formation of a society for extending the gospel among non-Christians and establishing a college to train missionaries. He set before the slumbering conscience of the church these three questions: (1) Is it right that evangelical Christians hold the gospel for themselves alone and do not seek to spread it? (2) Is it right that theology students are not encouraged to labor for Christ in other lands? (3) Is it right to spend so much money on dress and on delicacies in eating and drinking but give no thought to the spread of the gospel? [8]

Theologians rebuked von Welz, calling him a dreamer, a fanatic, a hypocrite, and a heretic. How absurd, they said, to cast the pearls of the gospel before the heathen, the holy things of God before such dogs and swine. [9] But von Welz was not deterred. The church in Germany would not ordain him, but the church in Holland did. Only two years after going to Surinam as a missionary, he died of a tropical disease.

Arndt and von Welz were forerunners of Pietism. Pietism took its definitive form in the year 1675 when German pastor Philipp Jacob Spener wrote *Pia Desideria*. [10] In English the full title of that Latin work is *Heartfelt Desire for a God-Pleasing Reform of the True Evangelical Church together with Several Simple Christian Proposals Looking toward This End*. Spener discussed the defects of the civil authorities, the clergy, and the common people, described the potential that he saw in the church, through four editions and sold 80,000 copies, an amazing large number for seventeenth-century Germany. [11] Not until 1964, when the North American church rediscovered church renewal through small groups, was the book translated into the English language.

In his call for reform Spener focuses on six points. [12]

1. Pastors should preach from the entire Bible, and intensive individual and group Bible studies should characterize the congregation. The Scriptures were to be more than a place to find proof texts to buttress one’s theology. Instead the Scriptures are to be seen as a vehicle through which God speaks to believers personally.

2. Lay participation with renewed emphasis on the priesthood of all believers would be emphasized, while differences between the laity and the clergy should be minimized.

3. More attention should be given to cultivating the spiritual life; theological knowledge is secondary to the practice of love toward God and humankind.
4. Evidence of Christianity in the lives of Christians through prayer, moral living, loving deeds, and persuasive witness is more convincing than theological argument.

5. The training of candidates for ministry should include both small groups for the cultivation of their devotional life as well as personal Bible study. (Spener said, “Study without piety is useless.”) Seminaries should be workshops of the Holy Spirit.

6. Sermons should not be occasions for displaying the preacher’s learning. They should edify believers by building them up to produce works of faith and love.

These proposals received a mixed response. In fact Spener was forced to leave the church where he was pastoring. He moved to Berlin, where he became a pastor highly influential throughout Germany. He established the University of Halle near Berlin. He was responsible for the conversion of a close friend by the name of August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), and Francke became the leader at the University of Halle.

Francke was an outstanding educator, an organizational genius, a magnificent teacher, and a spiritual giant. Around the university he organized an orphanage, two homes for widows, a school for poor children, a ministry for feeding needy students free of charge, a home for beggars, a hospital, and a ministry to provide free medicine for the poor. He also made regular visits to prisons and hospitals, and he encouraged Christians to care for the handicapped. His orphanage was developed on the basis of faith, and it was from him that George Mueller got the idea for his orphanages. And from George Mueller, J. Hudson Taylor got the idea for faith missions.

Francke established schools, including a school for poor children, called a charity school, that enrolled 2,200 children. The concern for universal education stems not from the Reformation but from Pietism. Also Spener established a “Bible institute,” which was a print shop and a center for distributing Bibles. The Pietists had a great passion to get the Scriptures into the hands of common people. Through Francke’s correspondence with Cotton Mather, many of Francke’s ideas spread into American Puritanism.

Spener, and particularly Francke, had a great heart for missions. Lutheranism evangelized Colonial America through graduates of the University of Halle. Six thousand ministers graduated from that university, including Henry Muhlenberg, after whom a university in Pennsylvania is named. However, a problem arose when the Pietists wanted to send missionaries. The German church refused to ordain people for missionary service because of the opinion of the faculty at Wittenberg. So the Pietists had no way to send missionaries to the non-Christian world.

Then one of the most remarkable incidents in missions history occurred. Denmark’s king, who was a Christian and a Pietist, saw that Roman Catholic princes were sending out missionaries. He said, “We Protestants ought to be doing that. Let’s find some missionaries here in Denmark to send to our colonies.” But they could not find any. Then the king’s court chaplain, a graduate of the University of Halle told the king he knew of some people in Germany who wanted to become missionaries. So the king got in touch with Francke, who found Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau, who were
willing to go as missionaries. Here was a strange Phenomenon: the Danish king using state funds to send German missionaries to Danish colonies in India!

When Ziegenbalg and Plutschau arrived in Tranquebar, India, in 1705, they shared the gospel with Hindus. Ziegenbalg and Plutschau thus became the first Protestant missionaries to Asia. Over a period of years they developed a missions strategy from which William Carey later benefited, because Carey read almost everything Ziegenbalg wrote. Their strategy consisted of five principles. First, they educated the people. Pietists established schools wherever they went because they believed people should be taught to read so that they could read the Bible. Second, they made the Bible available in the language of the people. Within six days after arriving in India, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau began to study the Tamil language. At first they sat on the ground with native children and drew pictures in the sand to seek to comprehend the rudiments of the Tamil language. Ziegenbalg, a gifted linguist, was fluent in Tamil in eight months and by the end of his third year he translated the New Testament into the Tamil language. In its revised form, that translation is still used today by the Tamil-speaking people.

Third, they sought to know the culture. Pietists insisted that missionaries learn the language and the culture of the people with whom they worked. Pietist missionaries sometimes wrote lengthy descriptions of their host cultures in order to instruct new missionaries. But people back home did not like that. They said, “Why are you wasting your time studying heathen religions and heathen cultures? Your business is to rout Hinduism from India, not to propagate heathen superstition in Europe.” But they persisted in emphasizing the importance of learning not only the language but also the culture and the mid-set and religions of those to whom they went.

Fourth, they preached for personal conversion. Just a few months after they landed they baptized five slaves of Danish masters. A few months later they baptized nine former Hindus.

Fifth, they advocated church indigenization. Pietists moved quickly to establish local congregations led by native pastors. They were well ahead of their time in this respect. When Ziegenbalg died in 1719, he left behind a native church with its own ministry as well as a Christian community of about 350 people.

Ziegenbalg and Plutschau took the only furlough of their career in 1714, and in Denmark they started a college for the training of missionaries. They had a strong influence on the students at Halle as they visited there. They helped start the first student mission movement in Protestantism and they asked the arch-bishop of Canterbury and the king of England for support from the English-speaking world for their mission.

Why, then, is Carey called the father of modern missions? Should not Ziegenbalg and Plutschau be known as the founders of modern missions? The answer is that the Danish-Halle mission was a unique missionary expression. It could not be reproduced. And it ceased to exist by the 1830s. Yet the Pietism of Germany—which Cotton Mather called...
the “flame of God which burns in the heart of Germany”—paved the way for modern missions. [15]

Here was a small-group renewal movement; that is what Pietism essentially was. People went to church, they heard sermons, they took the sacraments, they learned the catechism. Then they gathered in small groups and discussed the sermon, heard reports on spiritual biographies, read the Bible, applied it to their lives, and held each other accountable. They prayed for one another and encouraged each other in faith and good works. They became involved in good works in their community and in praying for missionaries around the world. They called this strategy ecclesiola en ecclesia, “The little church in the big church.” It was a small-group movement for the nurture of piety.

Pietism, an authentic renewal movement, put missions on the church’s agenda. Twenty years ago Peter Wagner wrote a book on church growth in which he identified several church-growth “diseases,” [16] one of which he calls “koinonitis” or “inflamed koinonia.” It is fellowship that has become so all-consuming that the church turns inward on itself rather than facing outward to a world in need. Pietism, on the other hand, teaches that authentic renewal looks outward to the ends of the earth as well as inward to spiritual renewal. Pietism was an essential plank from which William Carey launched the platform of modern missions.

In studying the Scriptures, defending the inerrancy of Scripture, and being committed to theological orthodoxy, believers dare not let the Great Commission become the “Great Omission” in their lives and ministry. May every believer’s faith be so stretched that in the words of Carey, each one can say, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”

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Notes:


[9] Ibid. Also see Kane, A Global View of Christian Missions, 76.


Pietism (/ˈpaɪɪtɪzəm/) is a movement within Lutheranism that combines its emphasis on biblical doctrine with the Reformed emphasis on individual piety and living a vigorous Christian life. Although the movement initially was active exclusively within Lutheranism, it had a tremendous impact on Protestantism worldwide, particularly in North America and Europe. Pietism originated in modern Germany in the late 17th century with the work of Philipp Spener, a Lutheran theologian whose emphasis on personal piety led to transforming the organization of religious life. He started a movement which became known as Pietism, and this movement was active among other groups such as the Moravians and the Puritans. 