



BUILD THIS HOUSE

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*"Who commanded you to build this house,
and to make up these walls?"*

(Ezra 5:9)

The Church in North Africa

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THE CROSS TRIUMPHANT

The early Church in North Africa

A North African carried our Lord's cross when He was crucified. North Africans were present at Pentecost.

North Africans were among the first preachers of the gospel.

One of the greatest of the New Testament preachers, Apollos, came from North Africa.

Yet today you may wander in Sabratha, in Carthage, in Timgad, in Djemila, in Volubilis, and your Moslem guide—a friendly, genial soul, for he expects a generous tip—will show you, with quiet satisfaction, the ruins of your Christianity.

How did this come about? Why did Christianity collapse so ignominiously? What happened in those early days?

The seed of the gospel took root quickly in North Africa. Mark tells us that Simon of Cyrene carried our Lord's cross. Cyrene is in the modern Libya. Simon's two sons, Alexander and Rufus, became well-known in the early church. The gospel spread to Egypt, and westwards across Mauretania and Numidia.

North Africa, as did so many other parts of the Roman Empire, produced its heroes and its martyrs. From the Nile to the Pillars of Hercules, Christians went undaunted through torture and death as persecution grew in extent and ferocity. Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage, and later Cyprian, were among the great host including patricians, soldiers, shopkeepers, farmers and slaves who "met the tyrant's brandished steel, the lion's gory mane" rather than deny their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The North African Church, too, was foremost in its contributions to Christian thinking and writing. Clement of

Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, and, above all, Augustine of Hippo, built "gold, silver, precious stones" upon the only sure foundation—Christ Himself.

So the church grew in strength and stature. The moral bankruptcy of paganism became more and more evident. The Christians, remembering their Lord's words (John 18:36), did not revolt; they did not fight; they simply endured. At last the Roman Empire acknowledged defeat. Constantine was proclaimed Emperor in A.D. 306 and accepted Christianity, which was formally admitted as a permitted religion, and, soon after, as the state religion.

The persecution was over; the churches flourished; the clergy grew in importance (and often, alas, in pride) and multitudes flocked to be baptized. Yet many thoughtful observers, both then and since, have believed that the apparent victory was in fact a greater spiritual disaster than all the preceding persecutions. It became too easy to be a nominal Christian, without regeneration of heart and life.

The Roman Empire, too, began to disintegrate, partly because of internal decay, partly because of barbarian attacks from without. In this time of trouble, when men's hearts were failing them for fear, they turned to the Christian message for help. When at length the Eternal City was taken and sacked by Alaric the Goth in A.D. 410, it was to North Africa, to Augustine, that the world in the West looked for moral strength and leadership. The publication of Augustine's book, "The City of God," is a landmark in Christian thinking.

Yet the North African church had "no deepness of earth." The first Bible published in the Western world came from North Africa, but it was a Latin Bible. The civilization was a Roman civilization imposed upon North African Berbers, not rooted in their hearts. Augustine himself, "one of the greatest men who ever wrote Latin", was a Berber, born in Souk Ahras (in what is now Algeria), and spending the greater part of his life in North Africa. It remains an inexplicable tragedy that when the Roman Empire began to crack and totter to its fall, the North

African church was left without root among the people, without a Bible in its own tongue, without the fire of evangelism.

ANOTHER GOSPEL

The Arab Conquest

In Arabia, a man brooded, pondered, prayed. He was bitter of soul because of the idolatry around him. His family was of high degree. He was strong, virile, sensuous, nervous and desperately earnest. With all this, he had a clear business head. He had travelled beyond his own country, and had made contacts with Greek and Syrian merchants as well as with Roman and Byzantine administrators. He sought the truth sincerely, but no light shone and at times he was in utter despair.

At such times he used to seek solitude in a cave in Mount Hira, near Mecca, and it was here, in A.D. 610, on the night of Al Kodr, "The Night of Power", that Mohammed believed he saw a vision—"one mighty in power . . . appeared in the highest part of the horizon . . . and he revealed unto his servant that which he revealed" (Sura 53). So began the compilation of the Koran, the sacred scripture of Islam.

We may take this opportunity to sketch very briefly some of the main elements of the faith which Mohammed proclaimed, in its completed form. His message was based on what he believed to be progressive revelations, and the Koran bears unmistakable marks of development.

Islam can be divided into two heads:—

"Iman" — Faith

"Din" — Practical religion

"**Faith**" is, essentially, belief in one God, all-knowing, all-powerful, and in Mohammed as His prophet. This is expressed in the shortest creed in the world—and the most

frequently repeated! "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God". It also includes belief in the Koran. The Arabs believe that the Koran is in heaven at the right hand of the throne of God and that this holy book was only *dictated* by the angel Gabriel to Mohammed. Any thought of error or revision is therefore blasphemy, and even translation from Arabic, "the tongue of the angels", has been accepted only with the greatest reluctance.

"**Practical Religion**" consists of five main duties—

"The Five Pillars of Islam". These are:—

1. The Witness. Repetition of the creed above.
2. Prayer, with the appropriate washing.
3. Fasting, during the month of Ramadan.
4. Almsgiving.
5. The Pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once, if possible, in a lifetime.

It will be noted that in all this there is no mention of a mediator between God and man, of a Saviour, or of the forgiveness of sins. Islam denies the cross, the deity of Christ, His death, and, consequently, His resurrection.

After considerable opposition and persecution, Mohammed withdrew with his little band of followers, from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622. In November, A.D. 623, his followers first used the sword, and in March A.D. 624 there was fought the battle of Badr. Thenceforward the progress of Islam was swift and irresistible. In A.D. 630 Mohammed re-entered Mecca in triumph. He died in A.D. 632, but Islam had already set out on the road to world dominion.

The Moslems captured Damascus in A.D. 635; by A.D. 639 they controlled Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Babylonia. Egypt fell to them in A.D. 640. Carthage was first attacked in A.D. 648, but the Greeks and Berbers resisted stubbornly and Tunisia was not completely subjugated till A.D. 693. By A.D. 708 the whole of North

Africa was under Moslem rule. In A.D. 710 the Moslems crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, and it was not until they were defeated by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in A.D. 732 that the westward tide of invasion was finally stemmed. The Moslem empire stretched from the Pillars of Hercules to the borders of India, and these lands have remained Moslem ever since.

Yet the Christians were not massacred because they were Christians. They were penalized and taxed and their spiritual life was quietly strangled by a social pressure which was too strong for them. Israel survived and lives on still in Moslem lands, but the Christian church failed.

These were the dark ages in Europe. In the West, the last remnants of Roman civilization were collapsing and the new mediaeval structure had not yet arisen. In the East, the Byzantine emperors looked fearfully across the Bosphorus at the growing power of the Caliphs. In the south of Italy and in Sicily an uneasy and uncertain armistice lasted for a time; here, as in Spain, contact was long maintained between the life and thought of the East and the West.

At length Europe took breath again and the Crusades were launched—and failed miserably. The Turks established a foot-hold in South-East Europe. Italy and Sicily came finally into the European framework. The Moors were ultimately driven out of Spain. The stalemate was complete.

THE ANGRY SILENCE

The Moslem Domination

For many centuries there was little or no contact between Europe and North Africa. The Moslem considered that North of the Mediterranean there lived a race of idolaters who worshipped images and believed blasphemously that God had begotten a son; a race backward in culture, and savage and treacherous in war; and he could marshal facts in support of his opinion.

The European viewed the peoples South of the Mediterranean as the followers of a false prophet who denied the deity of Christ, who practised polygamy and degraded womanhood; a cruel breed with little love and no pity; and he, too, could quote facts to prove it. The slaves condemned to the galleys by the Inquisition must needs have felt that they had much in common with those who rowed under the lash of the Barbary corsairs.

And, meantime, what of the commission given to the Church? The command to preach the gospel had not been withdrawn, but Christendom was too occupied with internal strife to heed it. One man alone calls to us from those dark days, as he called—but vainly—to his own generation. Raymond Lull was born in Majorca in A.D. 1235. Converted at the age of 32, he sold his property and gave the proceeds to the poor. He then settled down to a course of study, mastered Arabic, and at 40 entered on his life-work of carrying the gospel to Moslems. But the voice of Lull was a voice crying in the wilderness. Kings and courts, priests and people were alike deaf to his pleadings on behalf of the missionary cause. At 56, he set sail for Tunis alone, was cast into prison and nearly lost his life. At 72 he sailed again, this time to Bougie in what is now Algeria, and preached boldly in the market place. Again he was imprisoned and banished. At 79 he returned to Bougie, and, after teaching in secret for 10 months, showed himself openly. He was stoned to death on 30th June A.D. 1315 in his eightieth year. No one followed him!

The Barbary States pursued their own course, isolated geographically and politically; their main contact with the West, piracy; with the East, a constant reassertion of independence. As Europe grew in power and influence, the depredations of the corsairs became more and more intolerable. At length, in 1830, France invaded Algeria, captured Algiers and deposed the Bey. Gradually France gained control, directly and indirectly, of all North-West Africa. The angry silence was ended.

THE MESSAGE OF LOVE

Modern Missions

The first renewed attempt to carry Christianity to the people of North Africa was made by Cardinal Lavigerie. The Rev. J. J. Cooksey, for many years a missionary in North Africa, wrote:—"The special type of Christianity presented by the Roman Catholic Church in North Africa is a hindrance to Moslems accepting Christ. There is a pronounced antipathy especially to the mass, confession, celibacy of the clergy, and the use of images; an inheritance of the great Islamic revolt of the seventh century against similar usages then current in the Church." Nevertheless, the self-sacrificing devotion of the White Fathers of those days remains an inspiration and an example to missionaries everywhere.

In 1881, Mr. George Pearse, Mr. Edward Glenny and Dr. Grattan Guinness founded the Mission to the Kabyles, which quickly expanded into the North Africa Mission. By 1900 the North Africa Mission had 100 missionaries in the field. They were men and women of exceptional character and linguistic ability and all their gifts were needed. They established mission stations in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Other missions followed them, so that it was possible for the North Africa Mission to concentrate its work in the Barbary States. The Bible Society began work in 1882, the Christian Brethren in 1884, the Southern Morocco Mission and the Algiers Mission Band in 1888, the Gospel Missionary Union in 1895.

Such a brief sketch of achievement may be deceptive in its omission of the difficulties which had to be overcome in these early days. Listen to Miss Trotter, founder of the Algiers Mission Band: "We steamed into the bay of Algiers . . . three of us stood there, looking at our battlefield, none of us fit to pass a doctor for any foreign missionary society, not knowing a soul in the place or a sentence of Arabic, or a clue for beginning work on untouched ground. We only

knew we had to come. Truly if God needed weakness, He had it!"

Listen, too, to Mr. Reid of Tripoli. "The work of the Christian amongst this people is very difficult indeed. And after fifteen years of work amongst them, it seems true that the only way to win them is by personal influence—the influence of men and women filled with the Holy Ghost—the power of the Holy Ghost in the personal life and character of the missionary. And in order to exercise this power he needs to get into close contact with the people . . . When acts of kindness and love are done to him (a Moslem) he is sure to suspect that I am doing it, not for his sake and because of simple disinterested love, but for some reason of self-interest known perhaps only to myself. He does not know such love, and cannot believe his eyes when he sees what looks like it in another. He thinks I have come to heap up merit to balance an old account of evil doing. I am well paid for it. At best I am doing it in order to win him from Mohammed to Jesus Christ, and even this is perceived to be an interested motive . . . Continuance in loving, patient, helpful sympathy will find a way—for there is always a way—through the high wall of fanaticism to the heart of even a Moslem. Once show him that I love him for his own sake, and that I am glad to help him apart entirely from whether he believes my message or not, and the chord of love that is still to be found in the heart of the lowest will respond . . . In the past there has been too much preaching and too little practice of positive Christianity."

The battle does not grow less, but, the gospel proves to be, as ever, the power of God unto salvation. At first individuals, and now little groups of believers may be found scattered across North Africa. Thirsty souls come to drink of the Water of Life. Sinful men and women have found that "the Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth from all sin", and there have been not a few who, faced with tribulation and persecution, have been 'more than conquerors through Him that loved them'.

AND YET IT IS NOT FINISHED

The Present Scene

The aim of the missionary is not to "Christianize" a country, but to make the Lord Jesus known, and so to be used in the building of the Church. This work is being carried on by personal witness, through medical work and classes, through bookshops and literature stalls at industrial fairs, through visitation and children's camps. Yet the work is barely begun. Thousands and thousands have never heard the gospel in its fulness and purity. The main difficulties are these:

- (a) The prejudice of all Moslem people against the preaching of the Cross and the deity of Christ.
- (b) The close-knit social structure which makes it so difficult for a Moslem to confess Christ without becoming a social outcast.
- (c) The Moslem's unwarranted suspicion of the Western missionary.
- (d) The apathy of Christian people at home.

It should be emphasized that the Christian Missionary has no political aims whatever. He is always an influence for peace and stability. The following is quoted from the Principles and Practice of the North Africa Mission: "Respect must be shown toward all in authority, and must be manifested in speaking of them, as is required by the Word of God. It is important to recognize the responsible authorities, to approach them when opening a work in new places, to appreciate their difficulties, to pray for them, and support as far as possible any public spirited enterprise which they may undertake".

So the building, begun so long ago, continues—still unfinished. "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ". Still, as in the days of old, "great stones, hewed stones, costly stones" are built into the fabric. And still the lesser builders can see the vision of glory afar, and look for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

