

A Global Vision of the Gospel and **Europe's Strategic Importance**

A Global Vision of the Gospel

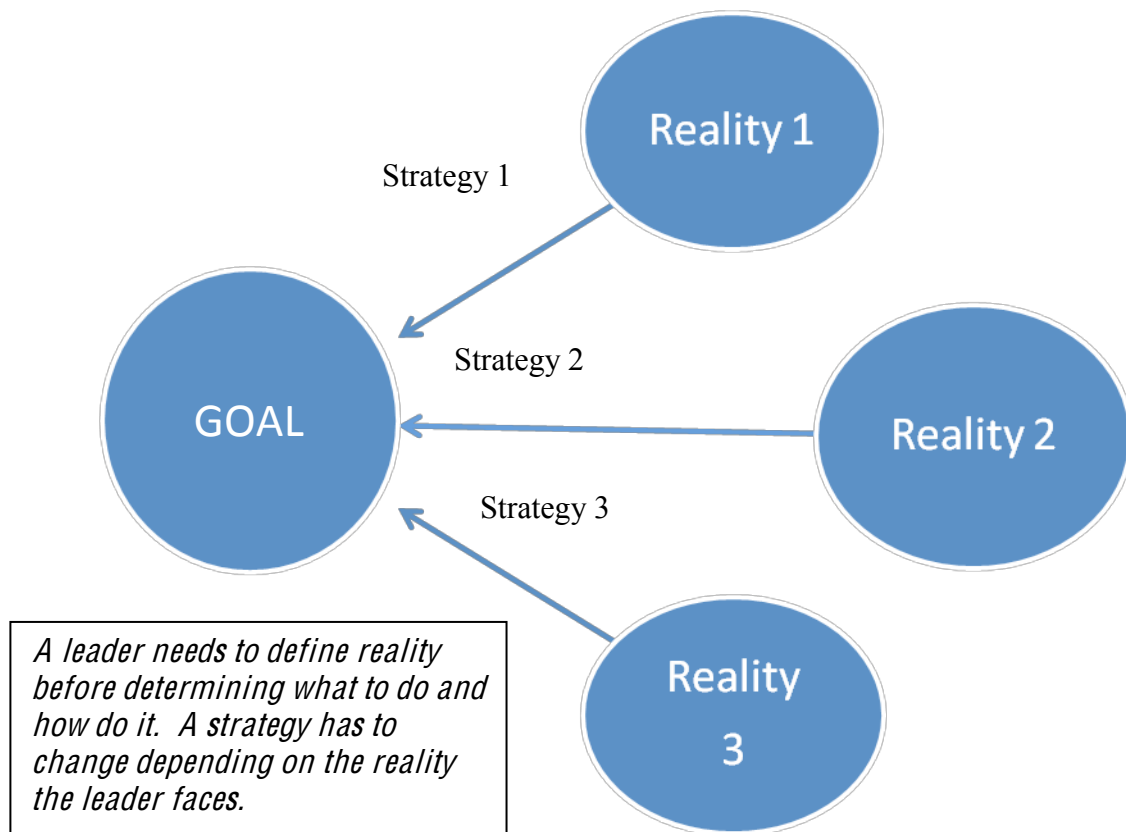
A popular anecdote is often told about the management guru Peter Drucker. He was asked to teach and mentor eight or ten Fortune 500 CEOs for a day. At the beginning of the day Drucker asked the CEOs, “What is the most important task of leadership?” One responded, “Leadership development” and Drucker said “No.” Another CEO suggested “Strategic development,” and Drucker responded “No.” A third answered, “Allocating resources to the growth path of the organization.” Yet again, the response was, “No.” After the CEOs exhausted their suggestions, one CEO dryly commented, “Okay, Peter, you have got our attention, what is the most important task of leadership?”

Drucker answered, “Defining Reality.”

Drucker’s point was that before a leader can develop a strategy, that leader first needs to understand the circumstances he or she faces, including:

- What elements of the broader context will impact the organization?
- What are the challenges and opportunities he faces?
- What does a leader currently not understand—that he needs to?

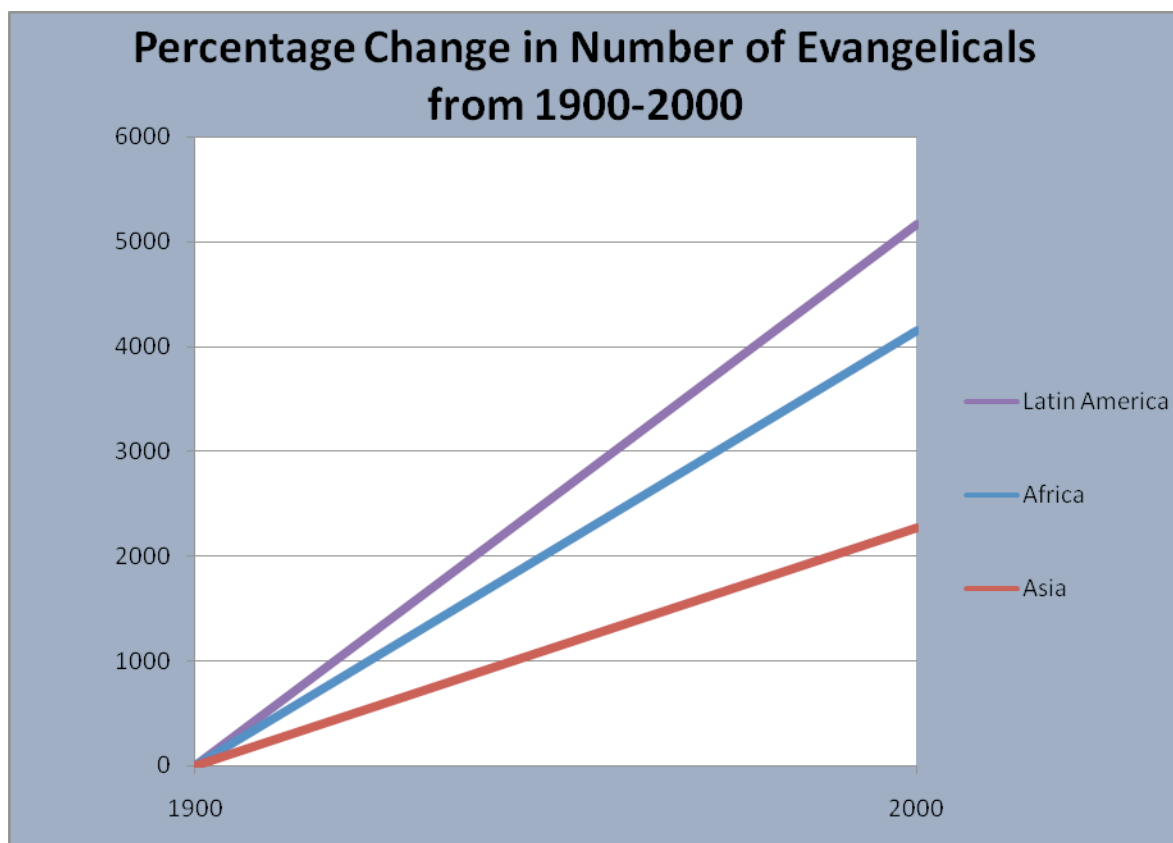
In short, defining where you are will shape strategic development, leadership development, allocating resources and all other key leadership tasks for your organization. The chart below pictures how defining reality affects leaders’ strategies.



Defining Reality from a Gospel Perspective: The Growth and Decline of the Church

How do we ‘define reality’ from a biblical or Gospel perspective? The first question many intuitively ask is, “Are people coming to Christ?” The answer to this question, as seen from a global perspective over the last 100 years, is simply stunning.

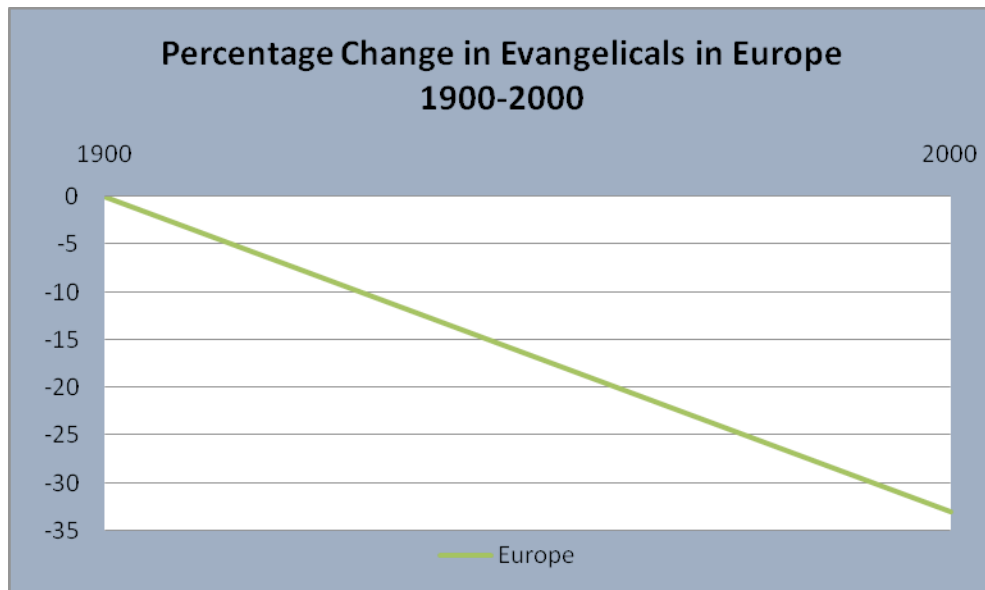
On the one hand, the evangelical church has seen enormous growth in the Two-Thirds World. The Latin American evangelical church has increased by 5,164 percent over the last 100 years. Evangelical Christianity has also exponentially increased across Africa by more than 4,154 percent during the same time period. Asia has also seen enormous growth, resulting in a growth rate of 2,265 percent during the 20th century¹. We see this historic growth shown in the following graph.



Reference 2

On the other hand, Europe, the very heart of historic Christendom, has experienced a hemorrhaging of the faithful. For 19 centuries, Europe was the primary home of Christian life and mission. *World Christian Encyclopedia* notes on its first page the startling news of the devastating de-Christianization of Europe in the 20th century: “No one in 1900 expected the massive defections from Christianity that subsequently took place in Western Europe due to secularism, (and) in Russia and later Eastern Europe due to Communism.”³ This startling contrast between the life and vitality of the evangelical church in the Developing World and the

depressing and empty cathedrals of Europe is widely known and is depicted in the following figure.



Reference 4

But Why Did this Happen?

Even a quick look at the data raises serious ‘why’ questions:

- Why are we seeing growth in the Developing World?
- Why did the European church experience such devastating losses?
- Will the struggles of the European church one day impact the church in the Developing World?

If we are to effectively lead, we need to answer these sorts of “Why” questions. They help us to define reality and thus clarify what strategy or leadership is best or most needed. Without answering these questions, we are not in a place to answer “What should we do?” and “How should we do it?”

Why Did the European Church Experience Such Devastating Losses?

Imagine walking into a doctor’s office and, before he examines you or runs any tests, he immediately says, “You need brain surgery. Lie down on this table and let me get my drill.” Obviously, before a doctor can prescribe, he needs to carefully diagnose. The same is true in the spiritual realm. The first step in solving any problem is to realize that you have a problem and to understand it. Without truly understanding Europe’s condition, we will probably not be able to find a solution. How can we begin to understand the situation before us?

We need a bird’s-eye view.

A Bird's-Eye View

At the Pentagon, a staff worker spent two years researching the possible effect of a military attack on the communication system of the United States. As a base of knowledge, he used information that many of us know already, or could easily find out. When he submitted it to his superiors, they immediately slapped a "Top Secret" label on it and destroyed other copies so that only a handful of people in the world could read it. The author himself was not even allowed to read it. He had taken a bird's eye view of the situation and had simply explained what he saw. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "The Ultimate Secret: A Pentagon Report Its Author Can't See," a spokesman for the government reported: "When you put things together you sometimes get a whole that is more sensitive than any of its parts."

One of the best ways to get this bird's-eye view is to examine our situation from a historical perspective. What period in church history faced challenges or opportunities that most parallel our own? A review of John Wesley and the Great Awakening in England can be particularly instructive for world Evangelicalism in the 21st century.

John Wesley and the English Great Awakening

God used John Wesley 270 years ago to start a spiritual awakening. The Great Awakening in England, from 1740 to 1850, provides an uncanny historical parallel for the Developing World's evangelicalism from 1900 to 2000, and it also helps us to understand Europe's current condition.

Wesley ministered during a time known as "the Gin Age," in which drunkenness reached epidemic proportion. Eighteenth-century England was characterized by aristocratic indulgence, lower-class poverty, religious compromise and negligence, and widespread immorality. Sexual promiscuity was commonplace among all classes of English culture: half of all babies were born out of wedlock. Popular sports were characterized by cruelty, coarseness, and the torture of animals such as cockfighting and bear-baiting⁵.

It was to this culture and people that John Wesley communicated the truth and led a renewal movement. Wesley's message was a response of truth to the difficulties and problems he faced. That message emphasized these points:

- In response to the unrealistic optimism toward human nature, Wesley taught on the sinfulness of humanity.
- In response to the then-current view of salvation by works, Wesley taught salvation by faith.
- In response to the moral disorder of a gin-drinking, gambling and lewd society, Wesley taught the importance and imperative of holiness.
- In response to the social problems of materialism, slavery and exploitation of workers, Wesley taught the biblical value of each person.
- In response to a spiritual deadness in the church, Wesley taught and lived a reality of an experience with God.

God used Wesley to lead an enormous expansion of the Gospel and the changing of a culture. By the time of Wesley's death, there were more than 100,000 Wesleyans meeting regularly in small groups for spiritual growth. By the end of Wesley's life this evangelical revival had changed the culture. Eventually slavery was eliminated not only in England, but also the rest of the British Empire. Laws to protect children and prevent cruelty to animals, as well as dozens of other initiatives, were passed for the first time in Parliament. Over the course of 100 years of evangelical renewal, the Gin Age was transformed into the Victorian Age, during which many families regularly gathered for daily devotions.

Modern-day Wesleys in Today's Developing World

God has raised up many contemporary Wesleys in today's Developing World. These people are:

- Communicating the Gospel effectively
- Planting churches by the hundreds
- Leading thriving national movements
- Developing lay-leadership training initiatives
- Confronting cultural evils like sex trafficking, prostitution, etc.
- Leading political initiatives to reflect Christ's character

In short, we see local, national and regional movements in the Two-Thirds World that are addressing the very issues that Wesley addressed in his day.

Wesley is a valuable model for the developing world to study because of his great success. But he is even more important to study *because of his great failure*.

What Happened to the Great Awakening?

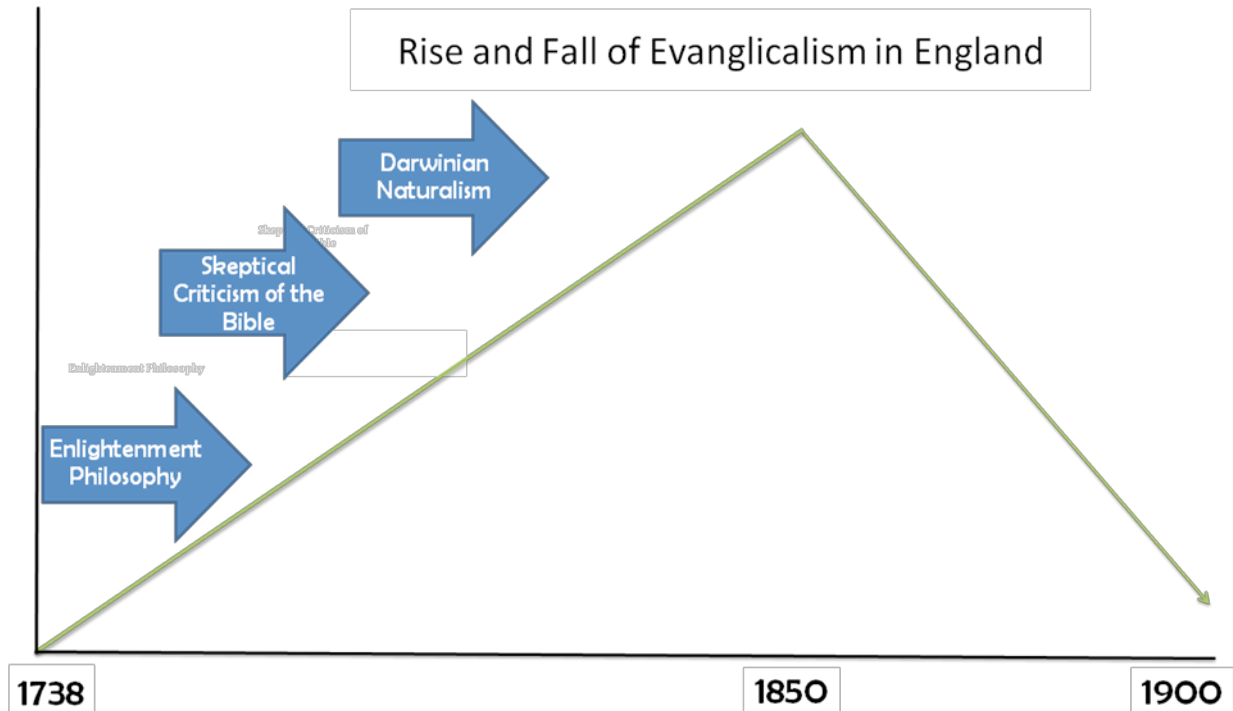
Wesley did not prepare the church for the challenges that eventually destroyed it. His focus was on popular evangelism, spiritual growth for believers, and cultural change.

Wesley's goal was to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." He was very effective in this. Like spiritual ivy which spread quickly, the Gospel took root and grew widely in the lower classes of English society.

The Great Awakening was enormously successful. In 1850, 50 percent of Anglican leaders were evangelical, and this does not count the widespread growth of the Evangelical Free churches. But by 1850, these challenges to the Gospel began ripping up the evangelical ivy. Just as quickly as the Gospel ivy had spread, it was also torn from its shallow roots. The next generations of evangelical Christians lacked adequate answers for the new questions that confronted them. Today the evangelical church in England is small and weak. What happened after 1850?

Three Intellectual Earthquakes Shook the English Church

Three new developments were critical for the English evangelical church, and the results are indicated in the following figure.



1. Enlightenment Philosophy

In its early days, the Enlightenment was not a rebellion against theism but was in many areas inspired by the Christian faith. Many of the early members of the British Royal Society, which led the first stage of the scientific revolution, were orthodox believers. Others like Isaac Newton were convinced theists who sought to understand both “God’s book” (the Bible) and “the book of nature.” Properly understood, Christianity was the mother of the scientific revolution.

But as the Enlightenment grew, it became more deistic and agnostic in outlook. Diderot, one of the leaders of the French Enlightenment, ends his book with an agnostic prayer: “O God, I do not know if you exist... I ask nothing in this world, for the course of events is determined by its own necessity.”⁶ According to this Enlightenment perspective, God is probably not there, but if He is, He is irrelevant. Kant, who is described as “the philosopher who summed up the achievement of the Enlightenment,” argued that the very category of ‘knowledge’ was only possible with sensory objects. Viewed through the prism of the Enlightenment, the Christian God was distant, unknowable, and irrelevant—if He existed at all. The idea that someone could know Him or truth about him was defined as impossible.

2. Skeptical Biblical Criticism

As the influence of the Enlightenment philosophy spread, other fields of thought began to operate from these new philosophical presuppositions. One of the most significant fields of influence of the Enlightenment was filtered thought through the prism of skeptical biblical criticism. One leading scholar summarizes this influence:

(B)iblical criticism has been a principal tool in the critique of classical theology by forces of the Enlightenment. By subjecting the Bible to humanistic presuppositions and treating it as a merely human text under the control of our superior techniques, we have seen the message relativized and debunked time and again.⁷

Skeptical biblical criticism, shaped by the Enlightenment's presuppositions, treats the Bible as one more human book and presupposes that God could not give revelation in the Scripture.

Perhaps more than any other single factor, skeptical biblical criticism has attacked the idea that God has revealed His truth in the Bible. Like an axe that cuts the main root of a tree and leaves the tree to slowly rot, skeptical biblical criticism undercut Christians' faith. Instead of the Bible being a respected, even authoritative, voice, it becomes one more object to be scrutinized by an Enlightenment-based philosophical method.

3. Darwinian Naturalism

Darwin's theory of evolution broke apart the last foundations of a Christian worldview in England. By the time Darwin wrote *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859, the Enlightenment's ideas had already permeated the educated classes. Many found in Darwin the explanatory mechanism for the naturalistic worldview that they already believed. Darwin argued that all species of life have common ancestors and evolved by a process of natural selection. Within his own lifetime, his ideas were widely accepted by the academic and educated elite. To this day, Darwin's ideas are pervasively influential in the scientific world. One modern leading advocate of evolution correctly understands that Darwinian naturalism was a "universal acid" that dissolved the Christian worldview. If people are only animals who are the result of an evolutionary process of time and chance, there is no basis for belief in God or for objective standards of right and wrong. Even to this day, many people across Europe believe that science has buried Christianity.

The Crisis of Faith and Birth of Modern Unbelief

During the second half of the 19th century in England, an entire generation of Christians was swept off its feet. The effect of the Enlightenment philosophy, skeptical biblical criticism, and Darwinian naturalism seemed overpoweringly. *Anomie* is the word commonly used to describe the disorienting experience of a lack of meaning in one's life. Sociologist Peter Berger defines anomie as "a condition of rootlessness, disorientation, of no longer feeling at home in the world"⁸. The root of the word anomie is *nomos*—the Greek word for law. To lose one's worldview is to be left lawless or without norms. One who experiences anomie feels disoriented and becomes correspondingly more open to considering a new worldview. The basic worldview

convictions of evangelicals who were being educated in these academic centers of Enlightenment thought were undermined. This process subtly pushes believers toward the untenable position of having one foot on their Christian worldview with the other foot on the Enlightenment worldview—with the two slowly being pulled apart. In this situation believers felt a cognitive dissonance and as a result were tempted to accept one of these alternatives:

- a) Convert to agnosticism
- b) Adopt much of the Enlightenment’s worldview, but seek to retain Christian terminology in what came to be called ‘liberal theology’
- c) Retreat into a fideism, or privatized faith, and reject the idea that Christians are called to persuasively communicate why the Gospel is true

All three of these occurred. Many Christians became agnostics, others became liberals seeking to keep the Christian language, but without its historic content, and those who remained orthodox often withdrew from the world in pietistic huddles in their attempts to remain faithful. As a result, all the English church denominations have been declining over the last 150 years.

What is the Lesson from the Failure of the Great Awakening?

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In other words, either you learn from history, or you stumble into the same mistakes or failures of those who went before you.

In 1850 the British evangelical movement was on the verge of collapse, yet its members didn’t know it. They had witnessed an amazing 110 years of evangelistic success and social renewal. Wesley focused his attention in the typical evangelical direction of evangelism, spiritual growth, and social concerns. In the process, he did not develop solid leaders (the spiritual “oak trees”) who could withstand the storms of the 19th century. These gales and tornadoes ripped up the evangelical ivy, and England was left with a devastated church.

In short, the English evangelical church failed in these critical areas:

- Doing the difficult work of building solid leaders (spiritual oak trees) to protect the evangelical laity (spiritual ivy) from the storm of unbelief
- Developing an adequate response to these new challenges
- Loving God by mentoring the most academically gifted younger believers to develop their callings as faithful Christian researchers, teachers and writers

The Developing World from the Bird’s-Eye View of the Great Awakening

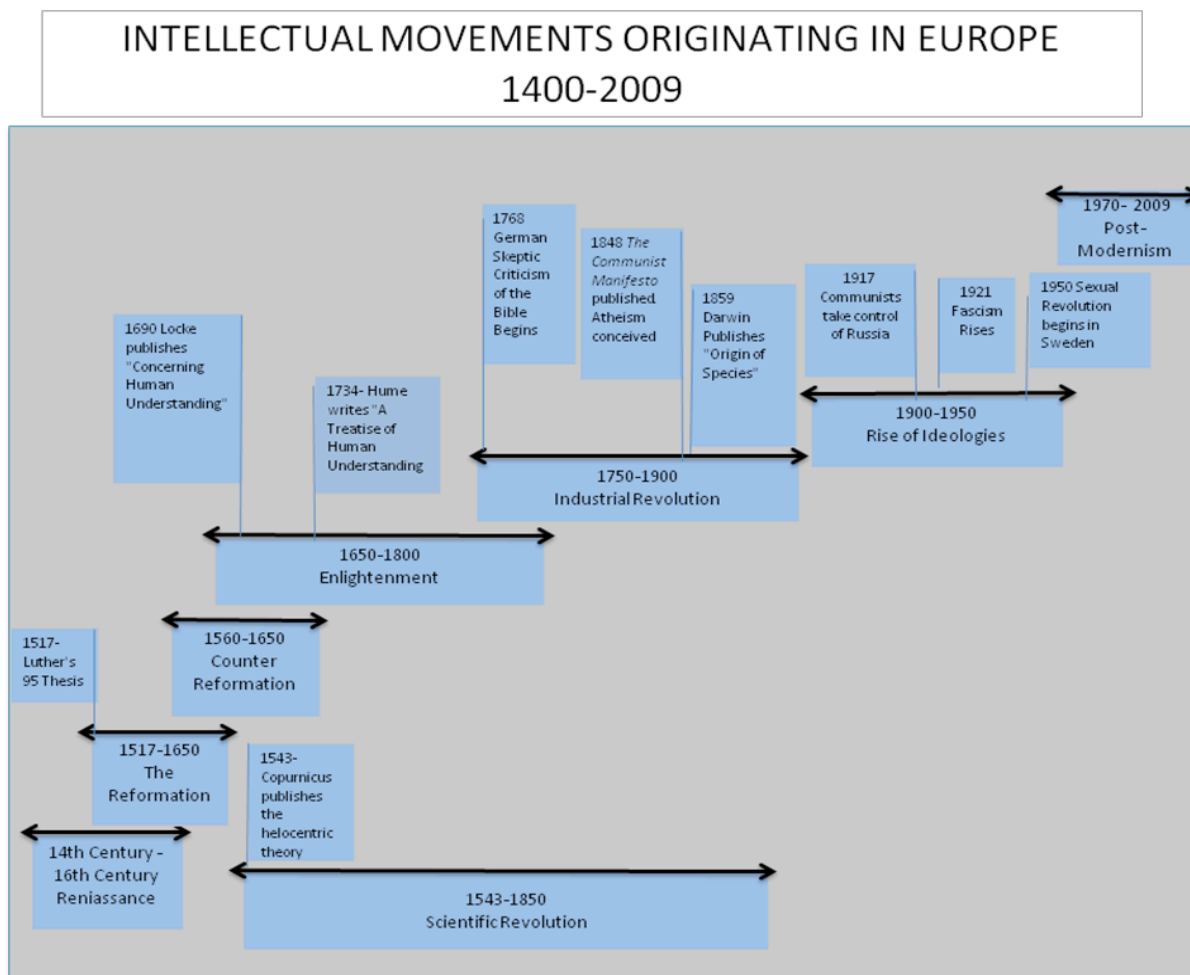
Today the situation of the developing world’s evangelical movement is startlingly similar to that of British evangelicalism in 1850. The Gospel has exploded across the Third World over the last 100 years, causing the evangelical church to grow enormously. But the foundations of this worldwide church growth are weak. Like fast-growing ivy, evangelicals specialize in quick growth which spreads fast but, also like ivy, it has shallow roots and can be quickly ripped up.

Today's evangelical movement in the Developing World is vulnerable to the same attack that hurt the British evangelical movement after 1850.

The Great Awakening in England from 1740 to 1850 provides an uncanny historical parallel for the Developing World's evangelicalism from 1900 to 2000. It also helps us to understand Europe's current condition and why we need to invest in Europe for the sake of both Europe and the world. These points summarize the rationale for this:

1. Europe has Powerfully Influenced the World

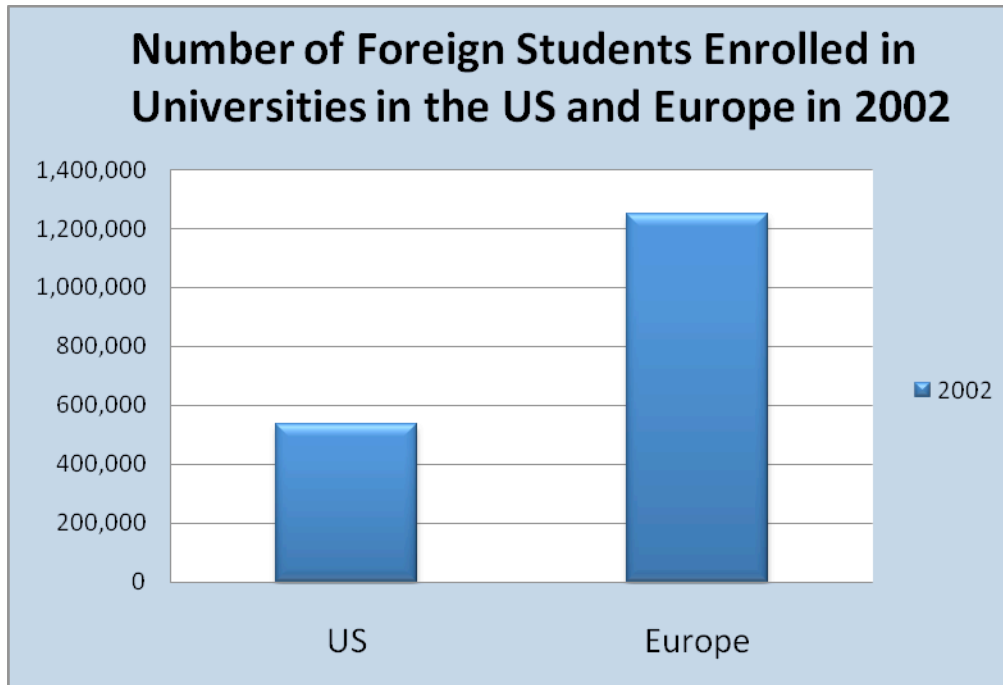
For the last 500 years, most of the world's leading movements came out of Europe. This is extraordinary. The Renaissance, Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment (and all the new academic disciplines), Scientific Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Romanticism, Existentialism, Marxism, Nazism and Post-Modernism all have their roots in Europe. These have dominated modern universities, caused worldwide wars, framed ideologies for countries controlling hundreds of millions of individuals, and shaped generations of leaders. If the church is going to understand and know how to respond appropriately to these and other new movements emerging from Europe, we need to invest our time and energy in understanding them *in Europe itself*. This is especially true because many of these movements are not neutral in their response to the Gospel.



To effectively communicate the Gospel to those who have been influenced by these movements, we need to understand them and find way to show them the Gospel's truth and relevance.

2. Europe is the Leading Educator of the Rest of the World

Europe is not only the origin of the world's most dominant ideas, but it is also currently the leading educator of the world's leaders. Twice as many international students are being educated in Europe as in the U.S. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this has only increased because obtaining student visas for the U.S. is becoming more and more difficult.



Reference 9,10

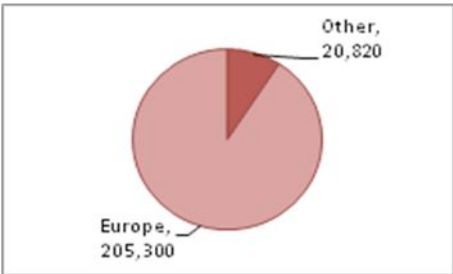
The ultimate status symbol in the Developing World is a degree from a premier Western university. A friend who recently traveled across Africa was struck by how often those in the most influential leadership positions have such prestigious western degrees. He then commented, "When a PhD from Cambridge speaks in Africa, everyone listens." The ladder to success in the developing world is education, and the means to such status there is a prestigious degree. Europe's influence in the developing world is growing because of the influx of European-educated leaders.

3. The Fastest-Growing Religion in the World (Unbelief) Comes from Europe

Evangelicalism is often described as the most dynamic and fastest-growing religious movement in the developing world. But modern evangelicalism is Reformation-European Christianity which has been transplanted into the developing world. Likewise, the Roman Catholic Church is the single largest body of faith and its roots are also in Rome, in Europe. What most people don't realize is that neither Evangelicalism nor Roman Catholicism is the world's fastest-growing religion.

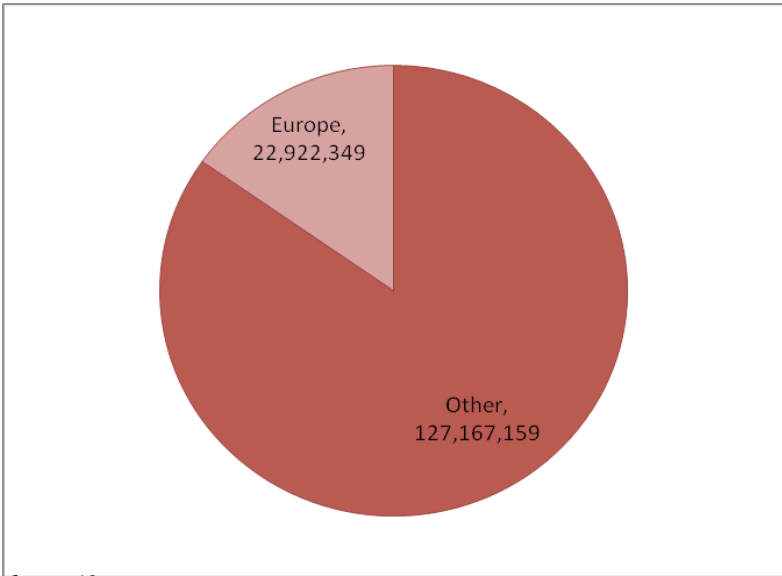
The growth of unbelief (atheism and agnosticism) is the fastest-growing religion in the 20th century. In 1900, atheism had approximately 225,000 adherents worldwide, and 90 percent of them lived in Europe. By 2000 this small group had grown to more than 150 million worldwide—but only 18 percent of these unbelievers live in Europe. What started as a uniquely European idea has now become a worldwide tidal wave. These atheists influence a much larger group of agnostics toward unbelief. In 1900 there were approximately three million agnostics in the world and by 2000 there were more than 750 million¹¹. The following graphs show atheism’s extraordinary growth over the last 100 years.

Total Number of Atheists in the World in 1900



Reference 12

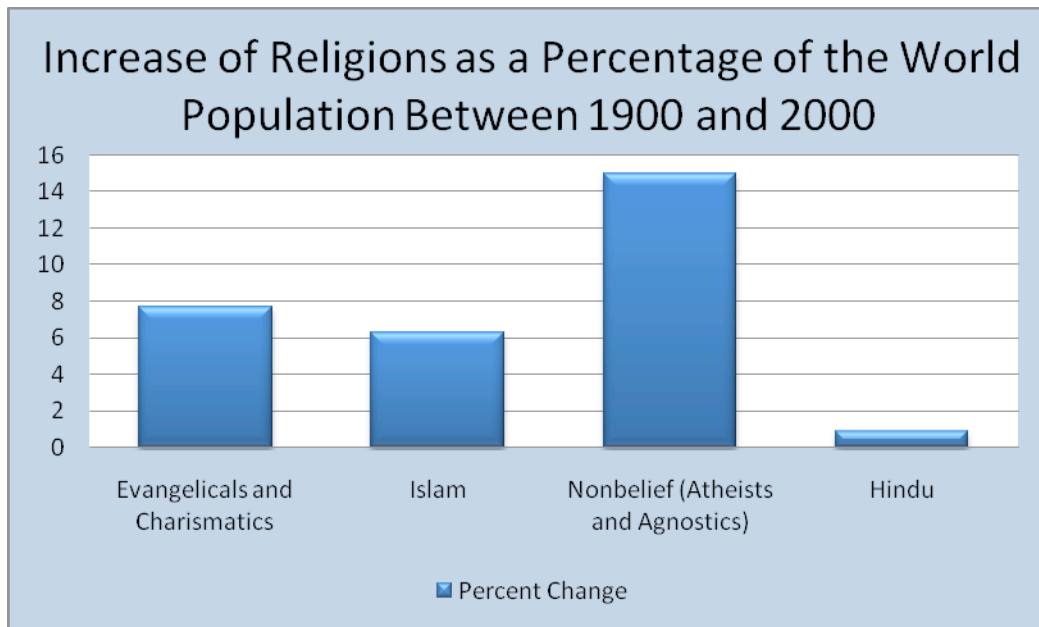
Total Number of Atheists in the World in 2000



Reference 13

The Enlightenment’s disease of unbelief (atheism and agnosticism), described above, has now infected the world. We live in a globalized world with international travelers circulating like blood in the circulatory system. One of the greatest fears in the last 10 years has been that some

form of avian (bird) flu might spread around the world and infect untold millions. In fact, this has already occurred spiritually: *the Developing World has already caught the deadly European spiritual virus of unbelief.*



Reference 14

4. Europe is the Place Where the Global Battle for the Gospel is being Fought

The Gospel’s most dangerous opponent is not Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. The greatest challenge to orthodox belief is the European unbelief (atheism & agnosticism) that is growing much faster than evangelical faith. If the church in Europe, and indeed the world, is to be helped, antidotes to Europe’s unbelief must be found in Europe and dispersed around the world. Leaders from around the world must be equipped and mentored in order to understand and dismantle these modern objections to the Gospel. In other words, evangelicals need to focus on Europe (especially its educational opportunities and its unbelief worldviews) as the central battleground on which to combat this problem and to train the next generation of global evangelical leaders.

What happens when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) determines that a dangerous virus has an outbreak somewhere in the world? The CDC immediately flies its team of investigators and scientists to that site in order to isolate the earliest possible form of the virus and determine how to defeat it. In other words, the CDC doesn’t just wait to begin treatment at the borders of the U.S.; it goes to the disease-ridden area and tries to find a cure there. Once the treatment is effective there, various immunization initiatives can be transplanted locally, regionally and internationally.

Similarly, a cure needs to be found in Europe for unbelief on that continent, rather than delaying a response until it has already infected a new area.

How Should One Invest in Europe?

If what has been stated is true, how can we respond? The model of Great Awakening makes us become aware of both the problems of Europe's situation and of the vulnerability of the Developing World to Europe's disease of unbelief. But another period of church history can provide a positive model for how to strategically respond to the problems described so far.

An Alternative Future: The Model of the Early Church

In the first three centuries, the early church saw the same increase in numbers and spiritual vitality that we have observed in 18th century England and 20th century Latin America and Africa. But unlike England in the 18th century, no decrease occurred after the first 100 years. Why did the growth continue, even when the church was under siege and often persecuted?

One historian answered this question with this summary statement: *"The early Christians out-thought and outlived their contemporaries."*

1. The Early Christians Out-Thought Their Contemporaries

Today's Western-educated elite is profoundly and fundamentally antagonistic to the Gospel. Pluralistic, relativistic worldviews and virulent anti-Christian philosophies rule the influential cultural centers, both in Europe and now much of the Developing World. The same was true in the first centuries of church history. Few Christians led Roman legions, educated the Roman elite, or led Roman institutions.

What should faithful believers do in such an antagonistic environment? We should imitate the Apostle Paul and the early Christian leaders.

When Paul went to Athens, he faced non-Christian thinkers in the marketplace and explained why Christianity is true. In Acts 17, Luke reported how Paul was explaining, arguing, proving and persuading. In short, Paul persuasively communicated the Gospel, arguing that Christianity was true and that Jesus was the Christ. The early followers of Jesus did not place an appeal to faith in opposition to reason; they argued that Christianity was true. As Luke describes, Paul customarily went into the synagogues and showed from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. When speaking to Greek audiences, he used their language and cultural allusions, explaining that the 'Unknown God' whom they worshipped was the God of the Bible. In other words, Paul communicated in the language and cultural concepts of his audiences why Jesus was the Christ and why Christianity was true. For the next 300 years, we see this same commitment to persuasively communicating why the Gospel is true.

2. The Early Christians Outlived Their Contemporaries

Some of the strongest evidence of Christians' love and care for others comes from the Gospel's strongest opponents. The pagan Roman Emperor Julian complained that Christianity was growing so fast because Christians "rendered loving service to strangers" and that Christians "care not only for their own poor but for ours as well." Early Christian leaders explained that the truth of Christianity was visible by how Jesus' followers loved and cared for both fellow

believers and nonbelievers. One teacher wrote that followers of Christ “obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require.” He explained how Christians are a source of life to the broader culture: “What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world.”

Early church leader Tertullian wrote “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” and explained that more and more nonbelievers were coming to faith because so many Christians were willing to die for their Christian faith. Without this spiritual reality, even correct doctrine or teaching seems stale and artificial. But with the reality of changed lives and the persuasive communication of the Gospel, Christianity spread quickly across the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

Leaders of the church in Europe and around the world, need to pray for and work to raise up the next generation of European evangelical leaders who will confidently live their faith, communicate the Gospel with power and conviction, faithfully lead evangelical churches, schools, denominations and organizations, and give their very lives for the Gospel. This European movement is desperately needed for Europe and for the world.

G.A. Pritchard, PhD - contact@euroleadership.org

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