THE REFORMATION: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

he Reformation caused a huge change in all of Western society. Before the Reformation, everyone in the west went to the same church, called the Catholic (universal) church. After the Reformation there were two churches: the Protestant Church (protesting against the Catholic Church) and the remaining Catholic Church. It didn't happen all in one year. Instead there were a series of events in different countries that led to the entire period called the Reformation.

The man who started it all was Martin Luther, who lived in the German state of Saxony. Martin's father wanted him to be a lawyer. However, Martin's life took a very different turn. One night as he was traveling home from university, a terrible thunderstorm began. Martin was out in the open with no place to take shelter while the lightening was striking all around him. He was very frightened and he began to pray very hard, asking God to protect him. He even bargained with God: if God would keep him safe through the storm, Martin would give up his law studies and become a monk. Martin survived the storm and kept his promise to God, even though it angered his father.

Martin joined the Austen Friars monastery. Soon the abbot realized that Martin was very bright and should continue his university studies, but this time in theology. By the time he finished, Martin became a university professor and was ordained as a priest. However, even though he had all that knowledge in his head, Martin didn't understand the Gospel. He thought he had to work as hard as he could to please God and only then would God forgive his sins. But it did not work. Martin knew he was still sinful. Then one day, while he was preparing his lecture on Romans for his students, God suddenly gave Martin clear understanding. He read, 'The righteous shall live by faith'. Faith in Jesus Christ, not the works of Martin Luther, brought salvation! From that day, Martin knew God's peace in his soul, and now he could teach his students and his congregation the true Gospel.

The next year Martin heard a disturbing rumour. The pope had sent Johann Tetzel, a Dominican Friar, to the towns and villages to raise money for the church. Friar Tetzel was selling indulgences, pieces of paper that told people their sins were forgiven, as well as the sins of their loved ones in purgatory. Many people believe Tetzel and bought the indulgences. But when Martin heard about it he was angry that so many people were being fooled about God's salvation. So he sat down and wrote out all the reasons that selling indulgences was wrong. He ended up writing 95 theses, or reasons, and he nailed the list to the church door, where everyone could read it. He also sent a copy to the church leaders, and eventually the pope himself received a copy.

Pope Leo was not pleased to receive criticism from an unknown priest and university professor, although Martin was surprised that the Pope and other church leaders were so angry with him. He had thought they just needed to be reminded of what God's Word taught and they would stop the selling of indulgences. Instead, they told Martin he was wrong and eventually put him on trial for heresy and excommunicated him. However, the Duke of Saxony sent soldiers to rescue Martin and hid him in a castle for a year. During that time Martin translated the New Testament into German, so people could read God's Word for themselves. Then the Duke of Saxony invited Martin to live and teach in Wittenberg once more, where Duke could protect him from the pope.

Martin Luther's actions officially began the Protestant Reformation. He protested again the wrong teaching of the Catholic Church leaders, and a split in the western church became official.

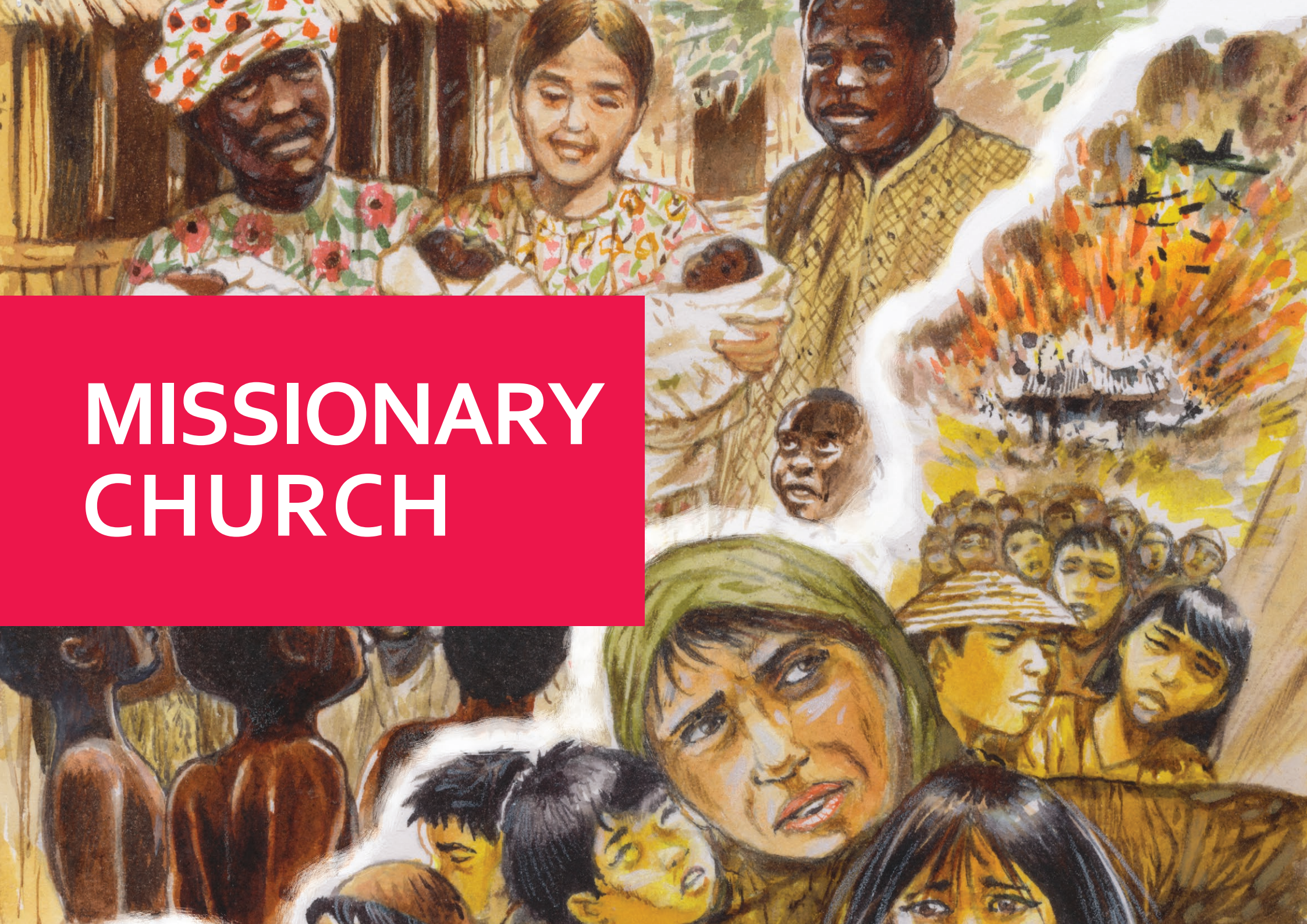
TRANSLATING THE BIBLE

The Bible was originally written in the Hebrew language (Old Testament) and the Greek language (New Testament) because those were the languages that people spoke at that time. However, as the Romans took over the known world, Latin became the common language of the people, and the Bible needed to be translated into Latin. Pope Damasus asked Jerome, a monk and well-known scholar, to begin translating the New Testament in 382 A.D. Twenty-three years later Jerome completed both the Old and New Testaments. This Latin Bible was called the Vulgate, which meant 'in the common language.'

For many years only the Latin Bible was available even though the common language began to change as the Roman Empire began to break up. During this time of change and upheaval, few people were educated or could read so there was not a demand for the Bible in other languages. The priests and bishops learned Latin in order to read the Bible and then they would tell their congregations what it said.

During the Middle Ages some translations were made of various books of the Bible. Books, however, were expensive to make at that time because they were copied out by hand a page at a time by monks and nuns in the monasteries. So it was more common to have one book of the Bible or selections of Psalms and prayers in a book for wealthy people to buy. In the 14th century an English priest and scholar, John Wycliffe decided to that the English people needed the entire Bible in their own language. He began his project with the help of his students at Oxford University, but died before it was completed. Fortunately his students carried on and in 1396 the entire Bible had been translated into the common language of the people.

Translating God's Word wasn't just an interesting project for scholars. They knew that the Bible was the most powerful book in the world and that people needed to be able to read it. With the Bible more available, God began to stir people's hearts toward reforming the church. Church leaders had drifted away from teaching God's truth and became more interested in power and wealth. With the Reformation, came the realization that more translations were needed. All people, regardless of which language they spoke, needed God's Word. So God raised up men like Luther, William Tyndale and others to translate His Word into the common languages of their century.



MISSIONARY CHURCH

GOD'S WONDER OF THE AGE

When George Whitfield was growing up in Gloucester, England, his dearest wish was to be an actor. He often skipped school to practice for his schoolboy performances. His mother wanted him to go to Oxford University but his parents didn't have the money for the tuition. So George paid for his own education by working at the university as a servitor. He waited on wealthy students by taking care of their clothes, bringing them meals and even helping them with their assignments. In between seventeen year old George attended classes.

George became interested in the reading the Bible when he was 15, but it wasn't until he met John and Charles Wesley that he began to realize he needed 'the new birth.' He decided to join the Wesley's'"Holy Club," which was a group of university students eager to explore the Bible and live to please God. During that time, George experienced a conversion or what John Wesley called 'the new birth.' George was ready to dedicate his life to serving God. The following year in 1736, George was ordained a minister in the Church of England.

George's training in the theatre helped to make him a good preacher. He had learned how to project, or make louder, his voice so that even in crowds of 20,000 people, everyone could hear him. And many crowds that size often gathered in outdoor places to hear George present the Gospel. When he preached, no one stirred or made a noise. Even people who didn't want to know about God came to hear him because of his gift of oratory, and they got the Gospel too.

George, however, didn't think that God was calling him to a single church to pastor. Instead he was called to evangelize, which meant he travelled from place to place preaching, always preaching. On horseback or in a carriage, George travelled up and down England and Wales many times, preaching every day. He visited Scotland 14 times and Ireland twice. Then he turned his sights on the American colonies, which he visited seven times. Visiting all thirteen colonies, he travelled over 1100 miles (approximately 1770 km) over dirt roads, going through forests and taking canoes along the coast line if there were no roads. For thirty-four years George preached the gospel until he literally wore out his body. Doctors told him to slow down, but he said: "I would rather wear out than rust out."

God used George to bring many people to faith and influence others to serve God. Jonathan Edwards, after hearing George preach, was encouraged to keep preaching to his congregation. Very soon afterwards the First Awakening began. William Wilberforce heard George Whitfield preach when he was boy. As an adult, Wilberforce helped to have slavery banned in the British Empire. Many other people were also converted who then went on to be missionaries to many countries.

MODERN CHURCH

REVIVAL IN KOREA

IT ALL STARTED WITH A PRAYER MEETING.

estern missionaries had been working in Korea for many years. By 1906 they had some converts and had built a few churches in the main cities and mission stations in the rural areas. In that year some Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries, who lived and worked in Ping Yang, decided to start praying together regularly at noon. After a month, when nothing out of ordinary began to happen, one of them suggested they stop because it interrupted the missionaries' work. But rather than stop, the group decided to move the prayer meeting to 4 p.m. and pray until suppertime. They prayed every day for six months, asking God to bring revival to the Korean churches and bring about many conversions in the cities and countryside.

In January 1907 something happened during a special week of prayer at Central Presbyterian Church in Ping Yang. Right in the middle of the service, Elder Keel stood up. Everyone was startled at the interruption and even more startled when he began to speak. He told the church that he was like Achan from the Old Testament, who had stolen money and clothing when the Israelites had conquered Jericho. Elder Keel said that God would not bless the church until he confessed his sin: he had stolen money from a widow and he now promised to give it back. After he sat down there was silence, and then slowly others in the congregation stood up one at a time. They each confessed how they too had sinned against God. The church service, which had begun at 7 p.m., didn't end until 2 a.m. the next morning. Over the next few month people began to change. They returned what had been stolen.

They forgave those who had hurt them. Even a known robber turned himself into police after he was converted.

By the middle of the year over 30,000 people had been converted to Christianity and the churches in Ping Yang were overflowing. The revival spread out to the rest of the country. Missionaries were overjoyed. Just like at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples meeting in the upper room, so the Holy Spirit was convicting and calling thousands of people to repentance and faith. Churches were so full they had to have several services each day. Whole villages in the rural areas were converted.

When the news of the Korean revival reached Manchuria, two missionaries traveled down to Ping Yang to find about it. When they asked what special things the missionaries had done to bring about the revival, the answer was "prayer." When they asked about how the Gospel was spread, the answer was "every Christian evangelizes his neighbour."

CONCLUSION

Christ's church is more than 2,000 years old. She has experienced times of persecution and times of difficulty with heretics within, along with times of great blessing. Yet, the church still exists today. Many kingdoms have come and gone and many leaders have lived and died throughout human history. Nothing that is started by people is permanent. But Christ's church is different. The kingdom that Jesus established with his death and resurrection is a permanent one, because God himself is the founder. His kingdom will not pass away as human ones have, but will continue until Jesus returns.

We can learn many lessons from our past, from zealous Christians who have tried to live as God commands us, and from those opposed God's kingdom. We can see what is right and what is wrong. We should also be encouraged that even when the church is under attack from people who think they know better, God is still in control. Jesus gave this promise to the Apostle Peter and to every Christian down through history:

[16] Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
[17] And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.[18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:17-18