

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Columbus and Christianity: Did You Know?

Little-known facts about Christopher Columbus and Christianity in the Americas

Thomas S. Giles is project editor for Christianity Today.

Contrary to legend, Columbus did not sail to prove the earth was round. Most educated Europeans and mariners already knew that.

Columbus estimated the size of the Atlantic Ocean partially from reading his Bible. He had read in the Second Book of Esdras (in the Apocrypha) that God created the world in seven parts, six of them dry land and the seventh water. He thus calculated that the ocean separating Portugal from Cipangu (Japan) was one-seventh of the earth's circumference, or about 2,400 miles. He figured that by sailing 100 miles per day, he could reach the Indies in 30 days.

Unlike many sailors then and now, Christopher Columbus never used profanity.

During Columbus's voyages, the ships' crews observed religious rites. Every time they turned the half-hour glass (their primary means of keeping time), they cried: "Blessed be the hour of our Savior's birth / blessed be the Virgin Mary who bore him / and blessed be John who baptized him." They finished each day by singing vespers together (although reportedly they sang out of tune).

Not until his third voyage did Columbus actually land on the American mainland. Seeing four rivers flowing from the landmass, he believed he had encountered the Garden of Eden. He died in 1506 unaware he had landed thousands of miles short of the Orient.

Irish and French Catholics have argued that Columbus, who "brought the Christian faith to half the world," should be named a saint. Though the move had the approval of Pope Pius IX (reign 1846–1878), Columbus was never canonized because he fathered an illegitimate child, and there was no proof he had performed a miracle.

Between 1493 and 1820, Spain sent some 15,585 missionaries to the Americas. Typically the government of Spain paid their full expenses.

In the first fifteen years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Franciscans baptized about 5,000,000 Indians; priests in Mexico sometimes baptized thousands in a day.

Spanish missionaries attempted to establish colonies in present-day Georgia and South Carolina in 1526. In 1542, Dominican Juan de Padilla planted a cross in present-day Kansas.

Reformer John Calvin sent two Protestant pastors to accompany a Protestant expedition to Brazil in 1556. Upon arrival, however, the leader of the expedition betrayed the settlers, and the project was abandoned.

A Catholic-Protestant "holy war" nearly erupted in present-day Florida in the late 1560s. Spanish leader Menendez de Avilez attacked and murdered French Protestant (Huguenot) settlers. Later the French sent a party to kill the Spaniards.

There was an Inquisition in the New World. It was established in 1570 and lasted until the 1800s. Yet the Inquisition was relatively lenient toward Indians, saving most of its ire for Spaniards. In fact, mistreated Indians and African slaves learned to cry, "I deny God!" They would then be placed under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, which was more benevolent than their masters.

San Diego, Santa Barbara, and the rest of the famous 21 missions of California, most founded by Franciscan Junipero Serra, were not the most successful North American enterprise of the Spaniards. They established 25 missions in New Mexico and 44 in Florida.

Usually, native Americans could serve in churches as interpreters, acolytes, and even teachers, but they were not allowed to become priests or friars.

Conquistador Hernando Cortes was greedy and violent, yet deeply religious. He sometimes preached the gospel, and he allowed himself to be publicly whipped for neglecting to attend worship. He once cried upon seeing a cross beside the road.

The first Christian worship service in North America was celebrated in Florida on August 25, 1563, the feast of St. Augustine. Formally founded in 1565, St. Augustine remains the oldest continuing settlement in the U.S.

Because of Columbus's voyage and the resulting Spanish evangelistic efforts, Latin America has a higher percentage of professing Christians than that of any other region in the world.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

## From the Editor: Overlooked Questions about Columbus

Kevin A. Miller

Half a millennium ago, a longboat crunched onto the sand of a small island in the Bahamas. No one realized that first step ashore was, in one historian's words, "the most important event in human history since the end of the Ice Age." Two worlds had met—and could no longer stay separate.

With Columbus's voyages, people, animals, plants, diseases, and religious ideas passed between the continents. For example, Europe brought the horse to the Americas; the Americas gave the potato to Europe, a simple vegetable that later saved whole regions from starvation.

The history-shattering event has received a glut of media coverage—my bookshelf and file drawer are groaning under the added weight. But much of it has been simply ideological mudslinging.

Meanwhile, few have answered questions we at Christian History wondered about. Maybe you've asked them as well:

What were Columbus's religious motivations?

What kind of religious legacy did he and his followers leave?

How have those historical events affected what's happening religiously in Latin America today?

We were fascinated, troubled, rebuked, and inspired by what we found. Christian history has a way of doing that.

**I'm pleased to announce** the addition of an associate editor of *Christian History*. Mark Galli brings strong qualifications to his new position. A key one: according to our research, you've enjoyed reading his articles in *Christian History* (see "Persecution in the Early Church," "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," and "Christianity & the Civil War").

A native Californian, Mark earned his A.B. in history at the University of California—Santa Cruz. After theological training at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, he served as a Presbyterian pastor for ten years and also did doctoral work in intellectual history at University of California—Davis. He then entered the world of journalism; for the past three years he has served as associate editor of *Leadership*, a respected journal for pastors. Mark is also a husband, father of three, and neophyte fisherman. At his church, he directs the adult education program and often teaches classes—sometimes on church history.

What does he hope to bring to Christian History? "When you're lost in the wilderness, you can wander if you want, or you can use your compass, take some azimuth readings, and gain your bearings. I hope the magazine will give Christians today a compass and a sense of bearing, so they better understand their place in God's plan."

Mark's already hard at work on our next issue. It features the "father" of modern missions, William

Carey, and the dramatic missions movement he was part of.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Why Did Columbus Sail?

What your history textbooks may not have told you

Kevin A. Miller is editor of Christian History.

The bright noon sun beat down on the stone walls of the Church of St. George in Palos, Spain. Inside, in the cool quiet, knelt Cristóbal Colón, captain general of three small ships anchored in the town's inlet below. With Columbus saying confession and hearing mass, were some ninety pilots, seamen, and crown appointed officials. Later that day they would row to their ships, Colón taking his place on the *Santa María*, a slow but sturdy flagship no longer than five canoes.

The next morning, Friday, August 3, 1492, at dawn, the *Santa María* and its companion caravels caught the ebb tide and drifted toward the gulf. Their sails began to fill, and the crosses boldly emblazoned on them caught the light. Their mission—the wild-eyed idea of their foreigner captain—was to sail west, away from all visible landmarks. They would leave behind Spain and Portugal, the “end of the world,” and head straight into the *Mare Oceanum*, the Ocean Sea.

In that Ocean of Darkness, some feared, the water boiled and sea monsters gulped down sailors so foolish as to sail there. Beyond—if they lived to see it—lay the fabled island of Cipangu. There, in the land of the Great Khan, houses were roofed with gold, streets paved with marble. And this was but one of 7,448 islands Marco Polo had said were in the Sea of China. But even if they reached the Indies, how would they get back, since currents and winds all seemed to go one way?

## Why Take the Risky Voyage?

Commander Cristoforo Colombo (as he was known in his hometown of Genoa, Italy) was taller than most men; so tall, in fact, he couldn't stand inside his cabin on the *Santa María*. He'd had “very red” hair in his younger years, but since he'd passed age 40, it had turned prematurely white. His face boasted a big nose and freckles.

Columbus, as we know his name today, was an experienced mariner. He had sailed the Mediterranean and traveled to parts of Africa, to Ireland, and probably even to Iceland. He boasted later in life, “I have gone to every place that has heretofore been navigated.” He knew the Atlantic as well or better than anyone, and he probably knew more about how to read currents, winds, and surfaces of the sea than do sailors today. “He [our Lord] has bestowed the marine arts upon me in abundance,” Columbus said.

For nearly seven years, the “socially ambitious, socially awkward” Italian had become a fixture at the Spanish court, ceaselessly lobbying for his crazy “enterprise of the Indies.” A royal commission in 1490 had judged “that the claims and promises of Captain Colón are vain and worthy of rejection.... The Western Sea is infinite and unnavigable. The Antipodes are not livable, and his ideas are impracticable.” Yet Columbus had pressed on, proving, as he said, “If it strikes often enough, a drop of water can wear a hole in a stone.”

Why? Why would someone, anyone, doggedly spend years getting funding for a death-defying feat?

## The Misleading Textbook Answer

The textbook answer, as any schoolchild could recite, is that Columbus wanted to find a trade route to the Orient. Writer Robert Hughes expressed the conventional wisdom: "Sometime between 1478 and 1484, the full plan of self-aggrandizement and discovery took shape in his mind. He would win glory, riches, and a title of nobility by opening a trade route to the untapped wealth of the Orient. No reward could be too great for the man who did that."

That's true, but incomplete so incomplete it's misleading. At least later, Columbus saw his voyage in much greater terms: "Who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also the Holy Spirit who encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Scriptures, ... urging me to press forward?"

Columbus felt that Almighty God had directly brought about his journey: "With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible ... and he opened my will to desire to accomplish that project.... The Lord purposed that there should be something miraculous in this matter of the voyage to the Indies."

There may be many things we don't know about history's most famous mariner. We don't know exactly what Columbus looked like. We don't know the precise design of his three ships. And most bizarre of all, we don't know—and will probably never know—the spot where he came ashore.

But we know beyond doubt that Columbus sailed, in part, to fulfill a religious quest. Columbus's voyages were intense religious missions. He saw them as the fulfillment of a divine plan for his life—and for the soon-coming end of the world. As he put it in 1500, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John [Rev. 21:1] after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it."

### **Saint Christopher?**

Columbus was visibly and verbally "an exceptionally pious man," writes historian Delno C. West. "Throughout his journals and letters, we find him constantly in prayer, invoking the names of Christ, Mary, and the saints and solemnly giving praise to God."

It was typical for Spanish crewmen daily to recite the "Our Father" and other prayers. Columbus's men did, too. But Columbus went far beyond conventional practice.

His son Ferdinand wrote, "He was so strict in matters of religion that for fasting and saying prayers he might have been taken for a member of a religious order." He knew his Vulgate Bible thoroughly, and he probably took it (or a collection of Scriptures) on his voyages. Whenever he faced a storm, a waterspout (tornado-like whirl of seawater), or rebellious crewmen, he made vows to God. "Religion was always his first refuge in adversity," writes Columbus scholar Felipe Fernández-Armesto.

A main source for information about Columbus is his contemporary Bishop Bartolome de Las Casas. Las Casas fearlessly criticized many fellow Spaniards, yet he did little but praise the mariner: "He was calm and serious, friendly to strangers, gentle and kind to his family.... In nearly everything he undertook to plan or to accomplish, he would begin with 'In the name of the Holy Trinity I will do this or look to that.' ... He fasted most observantly on all the fast days of the church; he participated frequently in confession and Communion; he prayed at all the daily canonical hours, just as the priests and monks; ... He was extremely zealous for the honor and glory of God; with deep longing he yearned for the evangelization of these peoples and for the planking and flourishing everywhere of people's faith in Jesus Christ."

### **Medieval "Evangelical"**

The overwhelming evidence has led Delno C. West to conclude that Columbus "is best viewed as an 'evangelical' Christian—not in the modern sense of the word 'evangelical' but in the sense of the Catholic

tradition and church of the times.”

Evangelical? In 1501 Columbus wrote, “I am only a most unworthy sinner, but ever since I have cried out for grace and mercy from the Lord, they have covered me completely. I have found the most delightful comfort in making it my whole aim in life to enjoy his marvelous presence.” He constantly associated with reform minded Franciscans and spent perhaps five months at the white-walled monastery of Santa María de La Rabida. He may have been a member of the Franciscan Third Order (for lay people). At least once he appeared in public wearing a Franciscan habit and the order’s distinctive cord.

But he and his faith were wholly medieval. He died more than a decade before Martin Luther would post his **95 Theses** protesting the abuse of indulgences. In fact, advances on indulgences helped pay for Columbus’s voyage. He read from the Vulgate Bible and the church fathers but, typical for his era, mingled astrology, geography, and prophecy with his theology. Columbus and his faith reflected, to use Alexander von Humboldt’s phrase, “everything sublime and bizarre that the Middle Ages produced.”

But only in the last 40 years—and particularly in the last 10 have scholars examined Columbus’s religious motivations. Not until last year was his most important religious writing—the **Libro de las profecías**, or **Book of Prophecies**—translated into English.

Columbus’s deep Christian faith still causes academic bewilderment. Some scholars attribute his recurring encounters with a heavenly voice to mental instability, illness, or stress. Others complain that Columbus’s biographers described him as more religious than he really was. Some protest that Columbus was greedy and obsessively ambitious, so he couldn’t have been truly religious, as if competing qualities cannot exist in one person.

But why explain away his intense religious devotion, when it was obvious to those who knew him and persistent throughout his writings?

Concludes Pulitzer-Prize-winning biographer Samuel Eliot Morison, “There can be no doubt that the faith of Columbus was genuine and sincere, and that his frequent communion with forces unseen was a vital element in his achievement.”

### Reaching Land—But Where?

Columbus would need that vital element. The voyage was immediately beset by calamities a broken rudder, leaks so bad they needed immediate repair, and threatened capture by the Portuguese. A week after losing sight of the Canary Islands, the pilots discovered to their consternation that the compasses no longer worked right. (They varied a full degree at various fumes of the day, because of the rotation of the North Star, which pilots had thought was fixed in its location.)

On September 23, the ship hit a calm, causing the seamen to complain they’d never be able to get back to Spain. But later, the sea rose without the aid of any wind. This “astonished them,” and Columbus compared it to the miracles that accompanied Moses.

After going a month without seeing land, the men belly-ached about the endless voyage. But on October 11, the ship’s log records, they began seeing signs of shore: seabirds, bits of green plants, stacks that looked they had been carved, a small plank. At 10 that evening, Columbus saw a faint, flickering light like a candle in the distance. Few took it as a sign of land, but when the crew gathered to sing **Salve Regina** (“Hail, Queen”), Columbus instructed his men to keep careful lookout. He would give the first person to sight land a silk jacket and 10,000 maravedis.

Then the **Pinta** (“Painted One”), the fastest of the three ships, sailed ahead. At about 2 A.M., a

crewman yelled "Tierra!"—land.

At daylight, the wide-eyed Europeans saw people "as naked as their mother bore them" and many ponds, fruits, and green trees. Columbus and his captains went ashore in an armed launch and unfurled the royal banner and two flags. Each was white with a central bright green cross flanked by a green **F** and **Y** for "Ferdinand" and "Isabella." Columbus declared that these obviously inhabited lands now belonged to the Catholic sovereigns.

But what land was this? Where was he? The natives called the island **Guanahani**. Columbus dubbed it **San Salvador**, "Holy Savior." He probably figured he was, in one writer's words, at the "gateway to the kingdom of the Grand Khan."

Columbus had woefully miscalculated—by thousands of miles. Historian Jeffrey Burton Russell explains, "In six stages of calculations, Columbus had cooked the figures to suit himself and reduced the width of the Ocean Sea to 60 degrees, less than a third of the modern figure of 200 degrees for the distance between the Canary Islands and Japan.... Providence or fool's luck—placed America in the middle of the sea to save him."

Columbus said it was Providence. As he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella late in his life, "I spent six years here at your royal court, disputing the case with so many people of great authority, learned in all the arts. And finally they concluded that it all was in vain, and they lost interest. In spite of that it later came to pass as Jesus Christ our Savior had predicted and as he had previously announced through the mouths of His holy prophets.... I have already said that reason, mathematics, and maps of the world were of no use to me in the execution of the enterprise of the Indies. What Isaiah said was completely fulfilled."

Now here he was, standing in the distant isles of the Indies. So he called the Taino-speaking peoples of the Arawak tribes "Indians." The name, though flatly wrong, stuck.

### **Good Christians, Good Slaves**

Soon many natives gathered. They had coarse black hair—"almost like the tail of a horse"—with "handsome bodies and good faces" painted with black, red, or white paint. "I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force," Columbus concluded.

"To some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel." The natives soon brought "parrots and cotton thread in balls and javelins and many other things," which they traded for "small glass beads and bells."

"They should be good and intelligent servants," Columbus wrote, "for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak."

In other words, they would make good Christians and good slaves. The cross and sword had come together. The modern concept of separating church and state had never entered Columbus's mind. His sovereigns were Christian princes; to extend his nation's borders was to extend Christianity; to conquer and enslave new lands was to spread the gospel. Even when Columbus forcibly subjugated Hispaniola in 1495, he believed he was fulfilling a divine destiny for himself and for Aragon and Castile and for the holy church.

### **The "Christ-Bearer"**

Indeed, he saw himself on an evangelistic mission. In the prologue to his account of the first voyage, Columbus wrote to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella: "I had given [a report] to your Highnesses about the lands of India and about a prince who is called 'Grand Khan,' ... how, many times, he and his predecessors had sent to Rome to ask for men learned in our Holy Faith in order that they might instruct him in it ... and thus so many peoples were lost, falling into idolatry and accepting false and harmful religions; and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and Princes, lovers and promoters of the Holy Christian Faith ... thought of sending me, Cristóbal Colon... to see how their conversion to our Holy Faith might be undertaken."

Columbus was the advance man for a mighty evangelistic campaign. He would open new worlds and unseen peoples to the gospel. In a sense, he would be like the legendary giant Christopher, who carried Christ on his back across a wide river. He also, a **Christopher**, a "Christ-bearer," would carry Christ across the wide Ocean Sea to peoples who had never heard the Christian message.

In his later **Book of Prophecies**, he cited various Scriptures that validated that mission:

- John 10:16 "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd."
- And especially Isaiah 60:9—"For, the islands wait for me, and the ships of the sea in the beginning: that I may bring thy sons from afar, their silver and their gold with them, to the name of the Lord thy God." In Columbus's mind, the islands were waiting for him; he would bring their sons to the Lord (and not incidentally, bring their silver and gold as well).

Las Casas agreed that "Columbus showed the way to the discovery of immense territories" and many peoples "are now ready and prepared to be brought to the knowledge of their Creator and the faith." As a sign of that work, on every island he explored, Columbus erected a large wooden cross.

### **Voice in the Storm**

After ten weeks of exploring the coastline of Cuba and Hispaniola, continually trading trinkets for gold, Columbus and his men hit a problem. In the wee hours of Christmas morning, a sailor decided to catch some sleep and left the tiller in the hands of a boy. The **Santa María** ran aground.

But what most would have viewed as a calamity, Columbus did not: "It was a great blessing and the express purpose of God" that his ship ran aground so he would leave some of his men. Yes, the ship was wrecked beyond repair, but now he had lumber—lots of it—for building the necessary fort. He left a small garrison of men with instructions: treat the natives well and don't "injure" the women; explore for gold; seek a place for permanent settlement.

The **Niña** and **Pinta** sailed for home in January. On February 12, the ships encountered a frightening storm. Waves broke over the ships, sails had to be lowered, and soon they were driven by the wind until they were wildly lost. "I knew that my life was at the disposal of Him who made me," Columbus wrote, "and I have been near death so often.... What made it so unbearably painful this time was the thought that after our Lord had been pleased to enflame me with faith and trust in this enterprise, and had crowned it with victory, ... His divine Majesty should now choose to jeopardize everything with my death.... I tried to console myself with the thought that our Lord would not allow such an enterprise to remain unfinished, which was so much for the exaltation of His Church."

The storm raged on. On February 14th, Columbus gathered his crew on the heaving and rolling deck to pray and make vows. They put chick-peas in a cap and had sailors draw to see which one picked the

chick-pea with a cross cut into it. That sailor would go on a holy pilgrimage to a shrine of the Virgin Mary if they landed safely. Columbus drew the cross-marked bean.

Apparently, on that frightening day, Columbus also heard a celestial voice. In his youth, he felt God had promised him that his name would be proclaimed throughout the world. And at age 25, he had survived a shipwreck and six-mile swim—a sign, he told his son Ferdinand, that God had a plan for him. But this was different.

Although the words are recorded only indirectly, God spoke to Columbus and assured him that God would take him to safety. God had given him great favor in allowing him to accomplish this great feat. God would allow him to complete what he had begun.

The next day Columbus's men spotted an island in the Azores; less than three weeks later they landed triumphantly on the Iberian peninsula.

### **"Communion with Celestial Joys"**

When Columbus anchored the *Niña* in Palos, seven months after he'd left, shops closed and church bells rang. Columbus had forwarded a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella: "Our Redeemer has given this triumph... for all of this Christendom should feel joyful and make great celebrations and give solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity ... for the great exaltation which it will have in the salvation of so many peoples to our holy faith and, secondly, for the material benefits which will bring refreshment and profit."

Columbus was greeted in the Barcelona court as "Don Cristóbal Colón, our Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and Governor of the Isles discovered in the Indies."

According to Las Casas, "The King and Queen heard [Columbus's report] with profound attention and, raising their hands in prayer, sank to their knees in deep gratitude to God. The singers of the royal chapel sang the 'Te Deum laudamus' ... and indeed it seemed a moment of communion with all the celestial joys."

Spain had now emerged, in one historian's words, "as the greatest empire since antiquity." In "a year of marvels," to quote historian Carry Wills, three profound changes had occurred:

1. Ferdinand and Isabella, who had just united their kingdoms, soundly defeated the Moors, signaling the end of an Islamic presence in Europe.
2. The Catholic sovereigns had expelled all Jews and seized their assets. Columbus had used the port of Palós, in fact, because the larger Cádiz was flooded with thousands of fleeing Jewish refugees.
3. A Spanish pope had been elected.

And now this—a new gateway to the Indies. A new country, militantly united behind Christianity, had arisen and would dominate the world for a hundred years.

### **An End-Times Crusade**

To Columbus, all this was a sure sign of the end times.

For years a prophecy had circulated that "the restorer of the House of Mt. Zion will come from Spain." For hundreds of years, the holy sites of Jerusalem had been held captive by the infidel Muslims. But according to ancient prophecy, that day would soon end. And Columbus believed he would be part of making it

happen.

Following St. Augustine's teaching, Columbus knew that all history fell into seven ages—and he was in the sixth, the next to last. Furthermore, Augustine had said the world would end 7,000 years after its creation. That was a mere 155 years away, and much had to happen: all peoples of the world would convert to Christianity, the Holy Land would be rescued from the infidels, the Antichrist would come.

Columbus thought that Ferdinand and Isabella were God's chosen instruments to recapture Jerusalem and place the Holy City under Christian control. This was not some sidelight in Columbus's mind; it was a central passion. As scholar Pauline Moffitt Watts has written, "This was Columbus's ultimate goal, the purpose of all his travels and discoveries—the liberation of the Holy Land."

Not that he would personally lead the armies. No, he would help pay for the expensive crusade. ***The Crusaders' Book of Secrets***, written in the early fourteenth century, said it would take 210,000 gold florins to mount a crusade. If Columbus could find enough gold in the Indies especially if he could find the lost mines of Solomon, which were known to be in the East—he could pay for a Holy Land crusade.

When Columbus had left his men on Hispaniola in early January, he told them he hoped "in God that on the return ... he would find a barrel of gold that those who were left would have acquired by exchange; and that they would have found the gold mine and the spicery, and those things in such quantity, that the sovereigns before three years will undertake and prepare to conquer the Holy Sepulcher."

Columbus thirsted for gold; he was obsessed by it. When he says sincerely, "Our Lord in his goodness guides me so that I may find this gold," we cringe. But writers who accuse Columbus of raw greed miss part of the point. Columbus wanted gold not only for himself, but also for a much larger reason: to pay for the medieval Christian's dream, the retaking of the Holy Land. "The primary motivation in his quest for gold was spiritual," argues Delno C. West.

As soon as Columbus had returned to Spain, he told Ferdinand and Isabella he would provide 50,000 soldiers and 4,000 horses for them to free Christ's Holy Tomb in Jerusalem. "You are assured of certain victory in the enterprise of Jerusalem," Columbus later wrote to them, "if you have faith."

But much to Columbus's disappointment, the longed-for crusade to recapture the Holy City was never undertaken. Although Ferdinand and Isabella made military strikes into Muslim-held North Africa, they never mounted a grand crusade.

## High Point of His Life

Columbus was at the high point of his life. In his remaining 14 years, difficulties would only intensify the qualities in his life:

- His wanderlust. He took three more voyages across the Atlantic, each lasting several years and filled with harrowing storms, crew rebellions, illnesses (at one point his eyes bled), and encounters with native Americans.
- His passion for evangelism. In May 1493, he asked Ferdinand and Isabella to set aside 1 percent of all gold taken from the islands to pay for establishing churches and sending monks. They instructed him "to win over the peoples of the said islands and mainland by all ways and means to our Holy Catholic Faith" and sent 13 religious workers on his second voyage. In his will, Columbus instructed his son Diego to support from his trust four theology professors to live on Hispaniola and convert the Indians.
- His inflexibility. To his death he continued to argue (against other evidence) that he had landed in Asia. As

a colonial governor, he ruled the farmers and settlers with such a heavy hand they rebelled. Columbus was arrested and shipped back to Spain in chains.

- His drive for titles and money. Columbus became absolutely wealthy, "a millionaire by any standard." But he had driven such a hard bargain with the crown—hereditary titles and "the tenth part of the whole" of gold he found—that the monarchs continually had to limit his power and wealth. Columbus spent his last years in legal battles and worries that his estate would be whittled away.

- His encounters with the voice of God. Columbus had at least two more, both in dark hours.

In 1499, he said, "When all had abandoned me, I was assailed by the Indians and the wicked Christians the Spanish settlers who were rebelling against his inept administration]. I found myself in such a pass that in an attempt to escape death I took to the sea in a small caravel. Then the Lord came to help, saying, 'O man of little faith, be not afraid, I am with thee.' And he scattered my enemies and showed me the way to fulfill my promises. Miserable sinner that I am, to have put all my trust in the vanities of this world!"

In the Americas again four years later, he found himself alone. His worm eaten ship was trapped by low waters from getting out into the open sea. A local Indian cacique [ruler] had vowed to massacre the Spaniards. Some of Columbus's men had been killed. Feverish and in deep despair, he wrote, "I dragged myself up the rigging to the height of the crow's nest.... Still groaning, I lost consciousness. I heard a voice in pious accents saying, 'O foolish man and slow to serve your God, the God of all! What more did he accomplish for Moses or for his servant David? From the hour of your birth he has always had a special care of you.'" The voice continued at length and closed with "Be not afraid, but of good courage. All your afflictions are engraved in letters of marble and there is a purpose behind them all."

- His belief in his role in end-times prophecy. Late in life, with the help of a friend, a monk, Columbus assembled excerpts from the Bible and medieval authors. The unfinished work, titled ***Book of Prophecies***, uses Scriptures to show that God had ordained his voyages of discovery and that God would be doing further wonderful things for the church. Some have criticized Columbus for the "providential and messianic delusions that would come to grip him later in life" and accused him of megalomania.

Columbus was often egocentric and, by today's standards, loose in his hermeneutics. But he wasn't the first or last Christian to read his personal destiny into a Scripture verse. Scholar Kay Brigham writes that he was "a man who had an extensive knowledge of God's plan for the world, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and of the particular role that he was to play in the fulfillment of the divine purposes."

So why did Columbus sail? Certainly he sailed to "make a great lord of himself," as his crew members grumbled. But he sailed for far more. As Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "This conviction that God destined him to be an instrument for spreading the faith was far more potent than the desire to win glory, wealth, and worldly honors, to which he was certainly far from indifferent."

Columbus concluded the log of his first voyage with one simple desire: "I hope in Our Lord that it [the recent voyage] will be the greatest honor to Christianity that, unexpectedly, has ever come about."

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## When Two Worlds Met

The historic moment from Columbus's journal

***Columbus's journal, or Diario, has been lost for centuries. But we have an abridged paraphrase of it by Bartolomé de Las Casas. Here, Las Casas gives our best account of the momentous encounter:***

At two hours after midnight the land appeared, from which they were about two leagues distant. They hauled down all the sails ... passing time until daylight Friday, when they reached an islet of the Lucayas, which was called Guanahani in the language of the Indians.

Soon they saw naked people; and the Admiral went ashore in the armed launch.... The Admiral brought out the royal banner and the captains two flags with the green cross, which the Admiral carried on all the ships as a standard, with an **F** and a **Y**, and over each letter a crown, one on one side of the + and the other on the other.

Thus put ashore they saw very green trees and many ponds and fruits of various kinds. The Admiral ... [took] possession of the said island for the king and for the queen his lords....

Soon many people of the island gathered there. What follows are the very words of the Admiral in his book about his first voyage to, and discovery of, these Indies:

"I," he says, "in order that they would be friendly to us—because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force—to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel.

"Later they came swimming to the ships' launches where we were and brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls and javelins and many other things, and they traded them to us for other things which we gave them, such as small glass beads and bells. In sum, they took everything and gave of what they had very willingly.

"But it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything. All of them go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and the women also, although I did not see more than one quite young girl. And all those that I saw were young people, for none did I see of more than 30 years of age.

"They are very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces. Their hair [is] coarse—almost like the tail of a horse—and short. They wear their hair down over their eyebrows except for a little in the back which they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint themselves with black, and they are of the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white; and some of them paint themselves with white, and some of them with red, and some of them with whatever they find. And some of them paint their faces, and some of them the whole body, and some of them only the eyes, and some of them only the nose.

"They do not carry arms nor are they acquainted with them, because I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves. They have no iron. Their javelins are shafts without iron and some of them have at the end a fish tooth and others of other good things.

"All of them alike are of good-sized stature and carry themselves well. I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves.

...

"They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animal of any kind did I see on this island except parrots."

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Columbus's Signature

What does it mean?

Kevin A. Miller is editor of Christian History.

The month after Columbus returned from his first voyage, he began signing his name in a new way—a pyramid of dots and letters (*see above*). Although he never explained what the mysterious signet meant, he used it on nearly everything he signed until his death 13 years later. He even ordered his direct heirs to use the pattern as well.

But what does it mean?

Scholars have put forth at least eight possible explanations. One of the simplest suggests this:

**Servus**

**Sum Altissimi Salvatoris**

**Xristus Maria Yosephus**

**Xristo-Ferens**

This would read, "Servant I am of the Most Exalted Savior; Christ, Mary, and Joseph; Christ-bearer."

Other explanations say the letter **S** used three times in a pyramid represents the Trinity; the letters mean **S**anctus, **S**anctus, **S**anctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy"). Other versions take the **Y** as meaning Queen Isabella, Jesus, or John the Baptist.

It's even possible Columbus designed the signature to have multiple meanings. No one knows for sure. Like the man himself, the signature remains a mystery.

But virtually all explanations point to Columbus's deep religious devotion. And there is no doubt about the meaning of the bottom line. It is a Greek-Latin construction of Columbus's first name, emphasizing the fact that **Christopher** literally means "Christ bearer."

In the words of Bartolomé de Las Casas: "He was called Cristóbal, which is to say, **Christum Ferens**, which means the bearer of Christ. And it was this way that he often signed his name, for the truth is that he was the first to open the gates of the Ocean Sea in order to bear our Savior Jesus Christ over the waves to those remote realms and lands."

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## The Clamor over Columbus

On this hotly debated anniversary, what should Christians think?

Dr. Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor at The University of Chicago and is a member of the editorial advisory board of Christian History. He is author of numerous books, including *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: Five Hundred Years of Religion in America* (Chicago, 1984).

***"The Columbus quincentenary has been the occasion for more controversy than celebration," writes one scholar with massive understatement. From Newsweek to the Smithsonian Institution, from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to the National Council of Churches, people have loudly debated what Columbus's landing really means.***

***Was it "the expansion of Christianity into our hemisphere [that] brought to the people of this land the gift of the Christian faith with its power of humanity and salvation, dignity and fraternity, justice and love"? Or was it the beginning of "invasion, genocide, slavery, 'ecocide' and exploitation" ?***

***The editors asked one distinguished historian and friend of Christian History to venture into the fray and suggest what Christians in 1992 should think of this momentous 500th anniversary.***

***Christian History*** cannot not notice the landing of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Anyone writing world history has to regard the event among the four or five most noticeable and notable in recorded history.

***Christian History*** pays special attention to the branch of world history that deals with the story of Christianity. By bringing in Christ, his church, and the culture called Christianity, the magazine cannot avoid Columbus, 1492, and all that. His enterprise cannot be presented without reference to his faith.

Accusations against Columbus and his enterprise are manifold, and Christians today cannot escape being implicated. Whether and how the accusations are just needs some exploring.

### Picture An Islamic America

Imagining away the landings, explorations, conquests, and settlements has become a big part of the quincentenary observance: "If only Spain hadn't come to the Americas, how much better things would be for natives of the Americas" runs the sentiment. Yet consider this:

Early in 1492 the Christian troops of Ferdinand and Isabella ended an era of Islamic domain in Western Europe. Islamdom at the time was in as expansive a mood as was Christendom. Had Islam won a few more military victories—and had it commanded more nagging entrepreneurs like Columbus and his cohorts—the landscapes of the Americas would be vastly different.

Imagine a cityscape in which the minaret, not the church steeple, dominates. Picture a New York that looks like Tehran, a San Francisco that resembles Malaysian cities. Imagine a United States with 1–4 million Christians, instead of 1–4 million Muslims, fighting for attention. In neither script—the actual or imagined—do the people of the hemispheres remain unaware of each other.

Had the voyages of Columbus not been successful, certainly in 1493 or 1494 some other Spaniard would have made the crossing after which permanent contact would have occurred. Or not many decades later, England would have brought ships, troops, plunderers, and adventurers. If not Spain or England, then the Netherlands or France.

This provides a common-sense check when writers suggest that native peoples of the Americas should have been left alone. The explorers and conquerors from Spain may have done nearly everything wrong—sometimes it appears that way—but there is no way the American hemisphere would always have been left alone, free from diseases and swords, unaware of the Bible and the churches of Europe.

### **Competitive Repentance**

During this year of observance, narrators tell—some eagerly—a story of almost unrelieved exploitation, dehumanization, death, and murder. Experts in exaggeration seem to be contending to see who can bring the longest and most fierce list of charges against Spain and Europe.

But no one needs to exaggerate a story that includes rivers of blood, oceans of tears. As with the story of the Holocaust in Hitler's Germany, one is tempted to resist telling it, so inadequate are imaginations to reconceive each mother's cry, each slash of the sword, each experience of pain. Yet since most of history is suffering, not to tell the story of sufferers is to dishonor their dying, and to deprive ourselves of a fuller humanity.

So the story gets told with a vengeance, by various tellers.

Native Americans could not forget the story of this hemispheric Holocaust. And in almost every nation in which they remain a presence, from the United States to Brazil, the infliction of misery and the suppression of rights goes on.

Christians have a stake in their story, because Christianity not only did little to mitigate the horrors but also often legitimated them. In the United States Christians stole the land or bought it cheaply. They killed the Indians who were in their way, and those whom they did not kill they put on reservations. The English colonists, if anything, did less well than the Spanish and French in this respect.

Thus Christians are another major group telling the story, and among this group, one finds few defenders of the Columbus venture.

Yet are Columbus-bashing and Europe-bashing appropriate for Christians?

Ostensibly, the anniversary calls for repentance, and Christians can never get too much of that. But many churches' "Calls to Repentance" are not so much expressions of repentance as they are boasts—"We are more repentant than you" or "We are more sensitive and aware than you."

Repentance, though, is not saying "Look what *your* ancestors did!" or "Look what *our* ancestors did!" It is not even saying "Look what we, their heirs, have done!" At the center of repentance lies the cry, "Alas, what kind of people are we, that we are capable of doing bad things to the environment and the native peoples—and we are doing such things now!"—and to follow that with policy and action.

One listens and watches for such expressions—and action—but often the self-justifying or other-accusing language obscures.

### **Christian Reckonings**

Once we get past competitive repentance and actually repent, we see in bolder relief enduring issues illuminated by the Columbus events. This is not the place to resolve them (each has produced shelves full of literature), but let me offer a catalog of Christian reckonings.

**Crusade.** Medieval Christians—and Columbus was among them—did not conceive of missions as have heirs of nineteenth-century Protestant missions. But medieval Christians were good at crusading, at trying to purge sacred places of infidels and the waste places of savages—all in the interest of extending pure Christian domains. Columbus the adventurer thought that as Spain circled the world, it would pick up the riches of Cathay along the way. It could then stab the Muslim in the back, as it were, from the East, and crusade to restore the Holy Land.

Christians use the concept of the crusade, at least metaphorically, but they rarely revisit the past to see the assumptions that lie behind a genuine crusade.

**Mission.** Columbus had missionary interests. His detractors, though, see all Christian endeavor of the sixteenth century as exploitation. Though missionary friars often criticized the conquerors, everyone agrees that Catholics first and Protestants later related poorly to Indians. But many critics are hostile to all missions. The issue is quickened in 1992.

**Prophecy.** Not until recently, as historians have reread Columbus's *Libro de las Profecias* [*Book of Prophecies*], have they seen the extent to which Columbus saw his voyage as fulfilling prophecy. He read the Bible and Christian commentators to draw pictures of how the world was to end—and then sketched himself into them. Millennial readings of American history did not begin with Jonathan Edwards in the 1740s or Dwight L. Moody in the 1870s; they inspired the voyages of 1492. How to apply prophecy to current events remains an issue to ponder.

**Conquest.** Columbus and those who followed him assumed that if they came upon a place, they had a right to determine its destiny. What gave him the right to claim "Asia" (as he thought) for Ferdinand and Isabella, for pope and empire? Imperial ambition has received Christian support in the five centuries since. Debate over it comes up whenever the United States exercises its muscles, as it did recently in the Persian Gulf. The issues posed by Columbus's presumption remain on the Christian conscience.

**Stewardship.** The newcomers to the continents despoiled them. To get the quickest possible yield from mines and plains, fields and forests, and peoples, they did whatever was necessary. Five centuries later, battles over ozone layers, deforestation, and endangered species, among others, are urgent extensions of issues posed by the explorers of the 1500s. (Revisionists might remember, however, that many studies show the Indians themselves often ruined their environments and were consequently forced to move on.)

## **Double-Sided History**

Most Christians in 1492 saw native Americans as weak and evil while Europeans were right and true, servants of the Good God.

Today, some historians make Europeans all evil and the American natives all good.

Likewise, Columbus used to be overpraised as the perfect pioneer. Now he is often overaccused as the hemisphere's arch-villain.

Yet Columbus and what he did live on in billions of expressions, almost all double-sided. Christian historians, if they stay true to the record, have to show this ambiguity.

In 1992, few simply defend Columbus, his Europe, and their aftermath. But many simply attack him. These attackers might have some biblical homework to do.

God effects things in the world in ironic ways. The very pride, intellect, and virtue that motivated Columbus and his contemporaries also did them in. God inspires men and women—and also expects of them responsible action. God visits the world not only with judgment but also with mercy and motivation. That double-sided view of history, if acquired by large numbers of Christians, could be a valid legacy of the Columbus year.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Voices in the Controversy

"The greatest event since the creation of the world, excluding the Incarnation and death of Him who created it."

—*Francisco López de Gómara (1552)*

"What some historians have termed a 'discovery,' in reality was an invasion and colonization with legalized occupation, genocide, economic exploitation, and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence."

—*National Council of Churches*

"[This is] the 500th anniversary of one of the great achievements of human endeavor."

—*George Bush*

"[Based] on statistical analyses of Indian deaths, [the Spanish conquest was] the greatest demographic catastrophe in recorded history."

—*Peter Winn*

"The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."

—*Adam Smith (late 1700s)*

"Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent!"

—*Native American demonstrator*

"After 500 years the Columbian legacy has created a civilization that we ought not, in all humble piety and cultural relativism, declare to be no better or worse than that of the Incas. It turned out better. And mankind is the better for it. Infinitely better. Reason enough to honor Columbus and bless 1492."

—*Charles Krauthammer*

"If Columbus could discover a country that was already occupied, I can go into the parking lot and discover your car—with you in it."

—*Comedian Dick Gregory*

"The systematic violence, both physical and spiritual, done first to indigenous people and then to black Africans was, indeed, the original sin of the American nations. In other words, the

United States of America was conceived in iniquity.”

—*Jim Wallis*

“Should we, then, celebrate Columbus? Certainly. [His voyages’ effects?] Of course not, but then neither did many of his contemporaries.... To reject Columbus is in effect to reject the modern world.”

—*James Muldoon*

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## How Did Native Americans Respond to Christianity?

A collection of eyewitness accounts

Thomas S. Giles is project editor for Christianity Today.

An enterprising European official sailed to the Central American mainland in 1514. He hoped to settle large numbers of Spaniards there, to find gold, and to convert natives. He and his men adopted a simple approach.

They traveled by night, stopping at midnight outside a chosen village. Before they entered, they declared loudly: "Princes and Indians, there is one God, one pope, and one king of Castile, who is lord of this country. Come at once and render him obedience, or we shall make war on you, kill you, and put you into slavery."

Of course, Europeans introduced their faith in other ways. Many missionaries lived in poverty among native peoples and presented the Christian message gently.

How did the indigenous peoples respond to these widely varied missionary efforts? What did they think of the Europeans' faith—and its emissaries?

The accounts below offer firsthand glimpses into three common responses.

### Holding to the Ancient Faith

When native Americans were confronted with Christianity, some incorporated elements of Christianity into their own beliefs, creating a new, syncretistic system. Others resisted the faith of their conquerors and held fast to traditional beliefs. Among the Incas of Peru, for example, baptism was considered subjection to the invader; some Incan chiefs killed those who accepted the rite.

Opposition, however, did not always take violent forms. Soon after the fall of his people's capital (Tenochtitlán), an Aztec priest spoke in response to the evangelistic efforts of Franciscan missionaries:

Our revered lords, sirs, dear ones,  
take rest from the toil of the road, ...  
Out of the clouds, out of the mist,  
out of the ocean's midst you have appeared.  
The Omneity [God] takes form in you,  
in your eye, in your ear, in your lips.

The speaker of the world sent you because of us.  
Here we are, amazed by this.  
You brought his book with you, his script,  
heaven's word, the word of god....

You say  
that we don't know  
the Omneity of heaven and earth.  
You say that our gods are not original.

That's news to us  
and it drives us crazy.  
It's a shock and a scandal,  
for our ancestors came to earth  
and they spoke quite differently.

They gave us  
their law  
and they believed,  
they served, and they taught the honor among gods;  
they taught the whole service.  
That's why we eat earth before them;  
that's why we draw our blood and do penance;  
that's why we burn copal [a tree resin] and kill the living...  
We don't believe, nor do we mock.  
We may offend you, ...  
for here stand  
the citizens,  
the officials,  
the chiefs,  
the trustees and rulers of this entire world.  
It is enough that we have done penance,  
that we are ruined,  
that we are forbidden and stripped of power.  
To remain here is to be imprisoned....  
This is all we have to reply,  
Señores.

This Aztec priest had seen his capital destroyed and his empire crushed. He was forced to accept a military conquest, but he refused to accept a spiritual one. For generations this religious leader and his people had honored and served their gods. They would not readily renounce that faith.

### **Rejecting "Christian" Behavior**

It was not always the natives' disbelief that impeded their conversion to Christianity. In many instances, they were open to learning more about the Spaniards' God. They were even willing to accept the Christian faith. However, a number of other factors often stood in the way.

***(See "Tying Their Own Hands.")***

By far, the greatest impediment to successful evangelization was the brutality of the European settlers. In many instances, the conquistadores employed violence to force natives to accept baptism. But often this brutality only provoked dogged resistance and outright rejection of the soldiers' beliefs.

In a letter in 1601, Brother Juan de Escalona laments, "We cannot preach the gospel now, for it is despised by these people [the natives of modern day New Mexico] on account of our great offenses and the harm we have done them."

Countless Indians lost their lives through slaughter, mass suicides, and European diseases. Those who managed to survive times of war were subjected to cruel mistreatment in mines. Or they were placed under the ***encomienda*** system, a form of virtual slavery.

A Mayan objected to the behavior of the Spaniards: "The true God, the true ***Dios***, came, but this was

the origin too of affliction for us: The origin of tax, of our giving them alms; of trial through the grabbing of petty cacao money, of trial by blowgun; stomping the people; violent removal; forced debt, debt created by false testimony; petty litigation, harassment, violent removal; the collaboration with the Spaniards on the part of the priests, ... and all the while the mistreated were further maltreated.... But it will happen that tears will come to the eyes of God the Father. The **justicia** of God the Father will settle on the whole world."

In some cases, the Spaniards' brutality provoked Indians to seek revenge. On the frontier, in areas of what are now the United States (Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia), many missionary friars were killed as soon as they lacked the protection of Spanish arms.

Don Gonzalo, a 70-year-old Nicaraguan Indian, writes his opinion of Spaniards he had known: "Ultimately, it turns out that one must conclude that Christians are by no means good.... Where are the good ones? To be sure, I myself have certainly not yet known any good ones, only bad ones."

It comes as no surprise that many Indians rejected Christianity not for Christianity's sake, but for the examples of those who called themselves Christian.

### **Accepting Christianity**

What about those Indians who responded positively to the Christian faith?

Many Europeans came to the New World motivated by a sincere desire to spread their faith. Missionaries to the Americas—especially the earliest ones—often demonstrated boundless zeal, high morals, and great courage. Their charity—particularly in contrast to the conquistadores' inhumanity greatly encouraged acceptance of Christianity.

One church official asked Indians the reason why they liked one group of friars better than the others. The Indians replied, "Because these go about poorly dressed and barefoot just like us; they eat what we eat; they settle among us; and their intercourse with us is gentle."

In their efforts to expose the native Brazilians to Christianity, the Portuguese authorities and the Jesuit fathers brought them from the interior to the coastal region and concentrated them in mission villages. The following letter, written by an anonymous Jesuit missionary, describes this work: "From far away, they [the Indians] send requests for priests to indoctrinate them because they want friendship with Christians and to change their habits for ours. In this way four large settlements are already constructed for them....

"Those of São Paulo, the first settlement built, are all Christians—that is, the children up to 14 years of age—and every day more are baptized because those who are born again bring others for baptism, and there are more than two hundred of these."

Even some of the most violent conquistadores came to the New World with at least modest concern for winning souls. Despite the unspeakable violence they witnessed during the conquest, some Indians accepted the faith of their conquerors—ironically because it **was** the faith of their conquerors. It seemed clear that the Christian God had defeated their gods. Many natives willingly accepted baptism, hoping to garner the favor of the more powerful Christian God.

***Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortés talks with the people of Tlaxcala. (His native interpreter, Marina, stands in the middle.) The conquistadores' brutality alienated many native peoples from the Christian faith. Yet Cortés preached to some natives, pleading with them to convert.***

As Hernando Cortés and his men marched toward the Aztec capital (Tenochtitlán, present-day Mexico City), they were welcomed by the people of Texcoco, who had long resented Aztec domination. Below is an indigenous account, preserved in the *Codex Ramirez*, of the conversion of Prince Ixtlilxochitl of Texcoco.

"At the request of Ixtlilxochitl, Cortés and his men ate the gifts of food that had been brought out from Texcoco. Then they walked to the city with their new friends, and all the people came out to cheer and welcome them. The Indians knelt down and adored them as sons of the Sun, their gods ... The Spaniards entered the city and were lodged in the royal palace....

"Cortés was very grateful for the attentions shown him by Ixtlilxochitl and his brothers; he wished to repay their kindness by teaching them the law of God, with the help of his interpreter, Aguilar. The brothers and a number of the other lords gathered to hear him, and he told them that the emperor of the Christians had sent him here, so far away, in order that he might instruct them in the law of Christ. He explained the mystery of the Creation and the Fall, the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the mystery of the Passion and the Resurrection. Then he drew out a crucifix and held it up. The Christians all knelt, and Ixtlilxochitl and the other lords knelt with them.

"Cortés also explained the mystery of baptism. He concluded the lesson by telling them how the Emperor Charles grieved that they were not in God's grace, and how the emperor had sent him among them only to save their souls. He begged them to become willing vassals of the emperor, because that was the will of the pope, in whose name he spoke.

"When Cortés asked for their reply, Ixtlilxochitl burst into tears and answered that he and his brothers understood the mysteries very well. Giving thanks to God that his soul had been illumined, he said that he wished to become a Christian and to serve the emperor.... The Spaniards wept with joy to see their devotion.

"The prince then asked to be baptized. Cortés and the priest accompanying him said that first they must learn more of the Christian religion, but that persons would be sent to instruct them. Ixtlilxochitl expressed his gratitude, but begged to receive the sacrament at once because he now hated all idolatry and revered the mysteries of the true faith.

"Although a few of the Spaniards objected, Cortés decided that Ixtlilxochitl should be baptized immediately. Cortés himself served as godfather, and the prince was given the name Hernando, because that was his sponsor's name.... The other Christians became godfathers to the other princes, and the baptisms were performed with the greatest solemnity. If it had been possible, more than twenty thousand persons would have been baptized that very day, and a great number of them did receive the sacrament."

### **Making Crucial Decisions**

As these accounts demonstrate, Christianity was not simply thrust on an uncritical indigenous population. Native Americans viewed Christianity through a variety of experiences. They compared it to their own beliefs and saw it practiced by the people who brought it to their world. They then made crucial decisions whether to accept the new faith.

Many Indians did accept it. The fact that native Americans came to know the Christian God is testimony to more than the immense firepower of the conquistadores. It shows also the power of a faith that was able to reach people despite tremendous obstacles—not the least of which were produced by Christians themselves.



## Tying Their Own Hands

How Christian missionaries sometimes thwarted their own evangelism

Thomas S. Giles is project editor for Christianity Today.

Several factors kept native Americans from clearly hearing the gospel:

●**Restrictions on native clergy:** Until 1588, natives were barred from being ordained or joining a monastic order. This led to great racial inequality within the church hierarchy.

Throughout the 1700s, church officials usually assigned top posts to Spanish-born whites. Secondary positions went to Creoles [whites born in the New World]. Mestizo [mixed European and Indian ancestry] priests usually received difficult parishes. At the bottom of the racial ladder stood Indian priests; though Indians made up more than 44 percent of the population, they were appointed to low prestige parishes.

As a result, by the early 1800s, most priests were foreigners.

●**Loss of evangelistic zeal:** Reports of missionary work in the early 1500s, described thousands of baptisms and great fervor among the friars. During the late 1500s, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Rome moved to centralize the church's political organization. As this occurred, many evangelizing efforts seemed to lose their zeal. As one missionary complained in 1562, "The old fervor and enthusiasm for the salvation of souls seems to have disappeared." Many of the secular clergy who arrived during this period preferred to preach only to Spaniards. They despised the Indians and were unwilling to endure the hardship of ministering to them.

●**Quarrels among the clergy:** Infighting had a negative impact on the conversion of the natives. For many years orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians had been the only representatives of the church in the New World. They squabbled among themselves. But they mastered native languages and established good rapport with many indigenous communities. Naturally, they carried out parish work.

But by the middle of the sixteenth century, members of the secular clergy—who, according to canonical law, were supposed to administer parishes—increasingly sought to assert this authority. Power struggles multiplied.

●**Hostile or indifferent settlers:** Although friars earnestly sought to school Indian children, Spanish *encomenderos* [masters] often were unwilling to allow the Indians time away from their work to learn. To make the Indians afraid of Christian teaching, Spaniards in New Spain (Mexico) twice burned the church and monastery at Valladolid.

In the words of Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, "From the beginning to the present time [1552], the Spaniards have taken no more care to have the faith of Jesus Christ preached to those nations than they would to have it preached to dogs or other beasts. Instead, they have prohibited the religious from carrying out this intention, and have afflicted them and persecuted them in many ways, because such preaching would, they deemed, have hindered them from acquiring gold and other wealth they coveted. And today in all the Indies there is no more knowledge of God, whether He be of wood,

or sky, or earth, and this after one hundred years in the New World.”

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## The Great Debate

How should the church evangelize the Americas? Two strong leaders faced off over the question

### Use Force

#### *Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda*

*Sepúlveda, a distinguished scholar of Aristotle, was official historian of the Spanish crown. In 1547 he wrote The Second Democrates to defend the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. He used the substance of that argument when he debated Bartolomé de Las Casas three years later.*

### Superior Spanish

The man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. The same relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves.

Those who surpass the rest in prudence and intelligence, although not in physical strength, are by nature the masters. On the other hand, those who are dim-witted and mentally lazy, although they may be physically strong enough to fulfill all the necessary tasks, are by nature slaves.

It is just and useful that it be this way. We even see it sanctioned in the divine law itself, for it is written in the Book of Proverbs: "He who is stupid will serve the wise man" [11:29].

And so it is with the barbarous and inhumane peoples [the Indians] who have no civil life and peaceful customs. It will always be just and in conformity with natural law that such people submit to the rule of more cultured and humane princes and nations. Thanks to their virtues and the practical wisdom of their laws, the latter [the Spanish] can destroy barbarism and educate these people to a more humane and virtuous life. And if the latter [the Indians] reject such rule, it can be imposed upon them by force of arms. Such a war will be just, according to natural law....

### Barbaric Indians

Until now we have not mentioned their impious religion and their abominable sacrifices, in which they worship the Devil as God, to whom they thought of offering no better tribute than human hearts ... They placed these hearts on their abominable altars. With this ritual they believed that they had appeased their gods. They also ate the flesh of sacrificed men.

War against these barbarians can be justified not only on the basis of their paganism but even more so because of their abominable licentiousness, their prodigious sacrifice of human victims, the extreme harm that they inflicted on innocent persons, their horrible banquets of human flesh, and the impious cult of their idols....

### Merciful force

Since the evangelical law of the New Testament is more perfect and more gentle than the Mosaic law of the Old Testament, so also wars are now waged with more mercy and clemency. Their purpose is not so

much to punish as to correct evils.

What is more appropriate and beneficial for these barbarians than to become subject to the rule of those whose wisdom, virtue, and religion have converted them from barbarians into civilized men (insofar as they are capable of becoming so), from being torpid and licentious to becoming upright and moral, from being impious servants of the Devil to becoming believers of the true God?

For these barbarians, our rule ought to be even more advantageous than for Spaniards, since virtue, humanity, and the true religion are more valuable than gold or silver. And if they refuse our rule, they may be compelled by force of arms to accept it. Such a war will be just according to natural law.

## **Use Persuasion**

***Bartolomé de Las Casas***

***The Dominican friar was his era's most outspoken critic of the Conquest.***

## **Human equality**

There are no races in the world, however rude, uncultivated, barbarous, gross, or almost brutal they may be, who cannot be persuaded and brought to a good order and way of life....

Thus, the entire human race is one; all men are alike with respect to their creation and the things of nature, and none is born already taught. And so we all have the need, from the beginning, to be guided and helped by those who have been born earlier.

Thus, when some very rustic peoples are found in the world, they are like untilled land, which easily produces worthless weeds and thorns, but has within itself so much natural power that when it is plowed and cultivated it gives useful and wholesome fruits ...

## **Noble Indians**

All the races of the world have understanding and will, and that which results from these two faculties in man—that is, free choice. And consequently, all have the power and ability or capacity ... to be instructed, persuaded, and attracted to order and reason and laws and virtue and all goodness.

They are very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs, and to behave in a godly fashion. And once they begin to hear the tidings of the faith, they are so insistent on knowing more ... that truly, the missionaries who are here need to be endowed by God with great patience to endure such eagerness. Some of the secular Spaniards who have been here for many years say that the goodness of the Indians is undeniable, and that if this gifted people could be brought to know the one true God, they would be the most fortunate people in the world.

A method contrary to the one we have been defending would be the following: Pagans should first be subjected, whether they wished to be or not, to the rule of the Christian people, and that once they were subjected, organized preaching would follow.

But if pagans find themselves first injured, oppressed, saddened, and afflicted by the misfortunes of wars, through loss of their children, their goods, and their own liberty ... how can they be moved voluntarily to listen to what is proposed to them about faith, religion, justice, and truth ...?

## **Merciful persuasion**

The one and only method of teaching men the true religion was established by Divine Providence for the whole world, and for all times: that is, by persuading the understanding through reasons, and by gently attracting or exhorting the will.

Divine Wisdom moves rational creatures, that is, men, to their actions or operates gently.... Therefore, the method of teaching men the true religion ought to be gentle, enticing, and pleasant. This method is by persuading the understanding and by attracting the will.

Hearers, especially pagans, should understand that the preachers of the faith have no intention of acquiring power over them....

Preachers should show themselves so mild and humble, courteous and ... good-willed that the hearers eagerly wish to listen and hold their teaching in greater reverence.

[Preachers must] possess that same love of charity by which Paul was accustomed to love all men in the world that they might be saved: "You are witnesses and God also, how holy and just and blameless was our conduct towards you who have believed."

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Christianity Comes to the Americas

### Early Spanish Expansion and Missions

William D. Taylor is executive secretary of the missions commission, World Evangelical Fellowship.

#### First "Americans"

**Who:** Peoples from NE Asia

**When:** According to many scholars, they crossed the Bering Strait about 12,000 years ago (though scattered signs of human life predate that).

**Where:** By 9000 years ago, distinct groups were spread from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Examples of those before or at the time of Columbus: the Carib (Caribbean islands and Central America), the Nasca and Moche (Peru), the Araucanians (Chile), Guarani (Brazil and Paraguay), and the Toltecs (Mesoamerica).

#### Maya

**Where:** Mesoamerica (Central Mexico to Nicaragua)

**When:** Dominant for hundreds of years; golden era ended around A.D. 900.

**Culture:** Agricultural experts; life centered on corn as both staff of life and god. Skilled in astronomy, the arts, warfare, and math (they used the concept of zero 1,000 years before Europe). Complex writing system.

**Religion:** Highly important; rituals involved blood sacrifice.

**Encounter:** Already weakened, could not significantly oppose Spanish.

#### Aztec

**Where:** Mesoamerica

**When:** Zenith by the 1300s.

**Culture:** Capital, Tenochtitlán (Mexico City), much larger than London in 1519. Violent and highly organized. The "Romans" of the New World.

**Religion:** Highest offering to gods (corn god was central) was human heart. Motecuhzoma II's (Montezuma II's) crowning in 1502 required sacrifice of 5,000 people; dedication of great temple 20,000 people.

**Encounter:** Spaniards' smallpox and numerous wars with Cortés and native allies decimated them.

## Inca

**Where:** Empire stretched 2,500 miles from Ecuador to Chile, larger than Roman Empire. 12 million people. Capital in Cuzco— “the center of the universe”—with secondary capital in Quito.

**When:** 1400s and early 1500s.

**Culture:** 18,000 miles of paved roads. City of Machu Picchu boasted 100 acres of temples, plazas, barracks, and houses. All land held by emperor in trust for people. Communication in **quipu**, complex bundles of colored and knotted string.

**Religion:** Sun god above all.

**Encounter:** Their gold and silver seduced Pizarro, who, aided by smallpox and civil wars, conquered the empire.

## Church’s Impact

●**Spanish culture:** Charles I, king of Spain, prohibited non-Spanish clergy from going to the Americas. So Latin America became marked by the unique qualities of Spanish Catholicism.

●**Depopulation:** Spanish expansion into the Americas caused rapid depopulation. Some scholars estimate that when Columbus arrived, there were 44,000,000 native Americans. Just 150 years later, there were only 5,600,000. What caused the dramatic drop? European diseases (such as smallpox), wars and slaughters, and forced labor or slavery. Many Christians did, however, speak out against the atrocities and try to alleviate the natives’ sufferings.

●**Schools and hospitals:** By 1820, there were 25 universities and 56 secondary schools, most started and run by monastic orders, as well as numerous hospitals.

●**Church and state:** Church and state were united and controlled all facets of life. By 1805 Alexander von Humboldt estimated that in some provinces of Mexico the church directly or indirectly controlled 80 percent of the land.

●**Hierarchical society:** Society was stratified with the Spanish-born **Peninsulares** at the top; their American-born children (**Creoles**) next, the “mixed-blood” **mestizos** next; the Indians and black slaves at the bottom. Church leadership drew mainly from the top tiers.

●**Church orientation:** 500 years after the first Christian contact, the region is a strong Catholic center, with increasing numbers of Protestants.

## First Christian Missionaries

●**Who:** Bernal Buyl, vicar apostolate and representative of Ferdinand and Isabella, and 12 other churchmen.

●**When:** Columbus’s second voyage. Columbus was directed in May 1493 to convert the natives to Christianity and to establish a colony. The missionaries sailed with him that September, bringing equipment for a church (a gift from Queen Isabella).

●**Where:** La Isabela, a settlement founded on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (located between

Cuba and Puerto Rico). On January 6, 1494, first worship service held there.

●**Development:** Within a generation, members of the major orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Mercedarians, etc.) spread throughout the Americas.

### **Mission Approaches**

Early evangelization of Indians generally followed this pattern:

●**Itinerant preaching:** Clergy travel to Indian villages and speak through an interpreter (and later, in the native language, if learned)

●**Mass baptisms:** Sometimes of thousands in a day; occasionally these are supported by the military

●**Efforts to eradicate Indian idols and religious practices**

●**Churches established**

●**Schools established:** Many schools educate Indians, though some refuse Indians and children of mixed ancestry.

### **Franciscans**

**When:** Columbus's second voyage, in 1493. In 1524, the "12 Apostles of New Spain" arrive in Mexico. By 1559 the Franciscans have 80 houses and 230 religious workers.

**Where:** Largest share of conversions in Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Florida, and New Mexico.

**Emphases:** Establishing elementary schools.

### **Dominicans**

**When:** Come to Santo Domingo in 1510. Fifty years later, there are 210 Dominicans in 40 houses.

**Where:** Strongest in Peru, Colombia, and the Caribbean.

**Emphases:** Founding universities, such as the University of Lima in 1522.

### **Jesuits**

**When:** Order founded in 1540. Members arrive in Brazil in 1549 and in Peru in 1567. Two hundred years later, all 2,200 Jesuits are expelled from Spanish America. Some return to Brazil in early 1800s.

**Where:** Strongest in Paraguay and Brazil

**Emphases:** Establishing Indian communities known as *reducciones*. Starting schools. Teaching *Creoles*, children of the Spanish-born colonists.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Columbus and Christianity in the Americas: Christian History Timeline

### Spanish Developments, 1492–1810

Thomas S. Giles is project editor for Christianity Today.

#### The Americas

##### **1492–1521 Initial Contact**

**1492 Oct. 12**, Columbus lands in the Americas

**1493** Pope Alexander VI divides discovered lands between Portugal and Spain

**1502** First black slaves arrive in the Americas

**1503** Queen Isabella permits the *encomienda* system in Hispaniola

**1508** Papal bull gives Spanish crown nearly total control of the church in the Americas

**1511** Antonio Montesinos protests treatment of Indians in Hispaniola

**1514** Bartolomé de Las Casas dedicates his life to defending the Indians

**1519-1521** Cortés conquers the Aztecs of Mexico

##### **1521–1551 Early Missions**

**1524** Twelve Franciscans (“Twelve Apostles of New Spain”) arrive in Mexico; Dominicans follow within decade

**1527** Juan de Zumárraga appointed bishop of Mexico City and “protector of the Indians”

**1530** Diocese of Mexico City created; African slaves now imported in large numbers

**1531** Virgin Mary said to appear to Juan Diego, beginning cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe

**1531-1533** Francisco Pizarro conquers the Incas of Peru; Dominicans begin evangelizing Peru

**1537** Pope declares Indians are rational creatures capable of receiving Christianity

**1542-43** The *New Laws*, designed to protect Indians, enacted (but rarely enforced)

**1549** Jesuits come to Brazil and soon found *reducciones*, Indian villages

**1550-51** Las Casas and Sepúlveda debate the justice of Spain's conquest of the Americas

### ***1551–1600 Church Consolidation***

**1551** First Council of Bishops in Lima, Peru, begins organizing Latin American church

**1553** University of Mexico founded. With University Of Lima (1522), first major universities in New World

**1562** Luis Beltrán, America's first saint, begins ministry on behalf of Indians in Colombia

**1570-71** Inquisition formally set up in Peru and Mexico

**1581** Toribio Alfonso de Mogrovejo becomes archbishop of Lima and serves the Indians

**1582-83** Third Council of Lima institutes catechisms in Indian languages and other church reforms

### ***1600–1810 Resurgence & Affluence***

**1605** In Paraguay, Jesuits begin their most successful *reducciones*

**1610** Mission of Santa Fe (New Mexico) established; Pedro Claver, "Slave to the Negroes," begins ministry in Colombia

**1691-1711** Eusebio Kino works with Indians in New Mexico and Arizona

**1718** In Texas, the San Antonio mission (the Alamo) founded

**1767** Jesuits, suspected of holding too much power and wealth, are expelled from Spanish dominions by order of King Charles III

**1769** In California, Franciscan Junípero Serra founds mission at San Diego; eventually 21 missions established

**1807-08** Napoleon Bonaparte invades Spain and Portugal, becoming a catalyst for Latin American independence movements

## **World Events**

### ***1492–1521 Initial Contact***

**1492** Ferdinand and Isabella's forces drive Moors from Spain

**1500** First black-lead pencils used in England

**1512** Michelangelo paints the Sistine Chapel

**1517** Luther publishes his *Ninety-Five Theses*

**1519** Charles of Spain elected Holy Roman Emperor; Magellan begins first round- the-world voyage; da

Vinci dies

### **1521–1551 Early Missions**

**1525** In Germany, Anabaptist movement begins

**1527** Machiavelli dies

**1531** The "Great Comet" (Halley's Comet) creates stir

**1534** Henry VIII named head of English church

**1536** John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

**1540** Jesuit order approved by the Pope

**1543** Copernicus's *Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies*

**1545-1563** Council of Trent reforms the Catholic church

### **1551–1600 Church Consolidation**

**1559** John Knox returns to Scotland and begins Scottish Reformation

**1561** Tulips from the Far East first come to Europe

**1565** Teresa of Avila's *Way of Perfection*

**1567** Two million Indians in South America die of typhoid fever

**1588** England defeats Spanish Armada, marking the end of Spanish domination of the seas

### **1600–1810 Resurgence & Affluence**

**1605** Shakespeare's *MacBeth*

**1611** King James Bible published

**1620** Pilgrims found Plymouth Colony

**1648** Peace of Westphalia concludes European wars of religion

**1678** Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*

**1687** Newton's *Principia*

**1738** John and Charles Wesley's conversions

**1740** The Great Awakening peaks

**1742** Handel's *Messiah*

**1776** Declaration of Independence; Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*

**1789** The French Revolution; U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Cross and Sword

In Central and South America—an expanse two times as large as the continental United States—Spain and Portugal tried to build empires. Conquering so vast a continent seems an impossible enterprise. Only people of great ambitions could have the firmness of decision and the mystical push to face such a challenge.

The Spanish had that kind of firmness and mystical push. The Spain that sought political conquest also served as powerful patron of the Christian religion. Consequently, the vast expanse that saw cruelties of conquest and exploitation (which still affect Latin America) also witnessed heroic faith and spiritual zeal (which still cradle the popular piety and culture of these lands).

So this question puzzles us: How could one nation conquer the New World using both faith and violence, without apparent contradiction?

## The Crusades Continued

The Crusades against Islam, begun in 1096, marked the first time the people of medieval Europe attempted to act together in a Christian cause. Most of the Crusades ended in defeat, however, and the eastern campaigns were interrupted about the year 1291.

But on the western borders of Christendom the conflict with Islamic power continued for two more centuries. On the Iberian Peninsula—home of modern Spain and Portugal—the battle against Islam had started in the eighth century and continued to the fifteenth century. During eight long centuries of struggle against the Muslims, military tenacity and religious zeal melted together.

This combination of elements—political and religious—rendered possible Spain's conquest of the Americas. One writer put it this way: "The religious unity became a political program and national unity a religious passion."

John A. Mackay, in his *The Other Spanish Christ*, adds this: "The new [world] crusaders were enlisted from knights and monks who thronged the Peninsula. The souls of those classic personages had so intermingled in the long wars against the Moor, ... that the typical resultant was an ascetic paladin and a martial monk. There was a monk in every helmet and a knight in every cowl."

With the same zeal and spirit shown in the Peninsula, then, these frontier fighters crusaded against the native empires of the Americas. Subduing pagan people was considered the necessary preliminary to converting them. "Who doubts that the gunpowder against the Indians is incense to the Lord?" said one sixteenth-century Spaniard.

## Rugged Character

How could 180,000 Spanish explorers and conquerors skirt the shores from Greenland to Cape Horn to Oregon, explore large sections of both Americas, found more than two hundred settlements, and transplant bodily to more than half the New World their language, religion, social customs, and political institutions? These accomplishments can be understood only by comprehending the complex genius of

those who came from the Iberian Peninsula.

As one scholar put it, "They brought the Spaniard's intense awareness of his dignity as an individual, his quick appreciation of the dramatic and heroic, his keen sense of personal honor. They were on fire with an almost fanatical religious belief in divine mission and protection.... And they settled the New World with an imperial disregard for relative distances, perils, and hardships for which the modern world has no equal."

The early arrivals to New England were ordinary citizens. The early arrivals to New Spain, besides priests, were usually Spanish soldiers, **conquistadores**. To understand these fierce soldier/explorers is to understand the nature of the conquest.

Hernando Cortés and Francisco Pizarro led tiny bands of men against the huge Aztec and Inca empires. They could perform this incredible feat because they were unusually brave, resourceful, and religious. They were equally eager to spread the gospel, conquer new lands for their king, and to get rich. They had no difficulty combining these surprisingly different motives.

### **Love and Cruelty**

Since the early years of the Conquest, Spanish action in the Americas has caused hard discussions. The issue remains complex.

For some historians, Spanish colonization was an enterprise of pillage, inflamed and inflated by religious fanaticism and martial vanity. Other scholars point to the humanitarian laws of the Indies, the merciful attitude of more than one conquistador, and particularly the self-denying service of many priests. They intend to prove the enlightened nature of the Spanish conquest and colonial system.

In the end, we must recognize in the Spanish heritage—and the dynamic individuals who incarnated it—the spirits of both war and compassion.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Lights in the Darkness

**As sincere believers marched to subjugate a continent, other Christians had to oppose them**

Dr. Justo L. González is adjunct professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia; and a member of the editorial advisory board of Christian History. Among his numerous books, in both Spanish and English is *The Story of Christianity* (Harper & Row 1985).

It was one of the bleakest times in the history of Christianity. In the name of Christ, thousands were slaughtered, millions enslaved, entire civilizations wiped out.

When the first Europeans settled in Hispaniola, there were some 100,000 native inhabitants on the island. Half a century later, there were scarcely 500. In Mexico, in seventy-five years the population declined from more than 23 million to 1.4 million; in Peru, in fifty years, from 9 million to 1.3 million. Military conquest, new diseases, wanton slaughter, forced labor, poor nutrition, and mass suicides contributed to these gruesome statistics. Behind all of it, as ultimate justification for the enterprise, stood the name of Christ.

In the name of Christ, natives were dispossessed of their lands by means of the *Requerimiento*. This document informed the native owners and rulers of these lands that Christ's vicar on earth had granted these lands to the crown of Castile. They could accept and submit to this, or be declared rebel subjects and destroyed by force of arms.

In the name of Christ, the natives were dispossessed of their freedom by means of the *encomiendas*. The crown entrusted natives—sometimes hundreds of them—to a Spanish conquistador to be taught the rudiments of the Christian faith. In exchange, the natives were to work for the conquistador—the *encomendero*. The system soon became a veiled form of slavery. Even worse, some *encomenderos* left the natives underfed and overworked to the point of death.

It was also in the name of Christ that native women were baptized before being raped or taken as concubines against their will. After all, Saint Paul had clearly said, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

The explorers and conquistadors were not hypocrites who pretended to have faith. On the contrary, they were sincere believers. Columbus himself was something of a mystic. Hernando Cortés attended mass regularly—and especially before taking military action against the natives. The last action of Francisco Pizarro, perhaps the cruelest of the major conquistadors, was to draw a cross with his blood so he could die gazing upon it.

From their perspective, they were serving Christ by bringing millions to faith in him. They were serving the church by expanding her boundaries as never before. If, in the process, some were made to suffer, that was nothing compared to the sufferings of hell from which the natives were being saved. If, in the process, those who were bringing such great benefits to these lands became masters of the lands and their inhabitants, that was not to be begrudged. After all, "The laborer is worthy of his hire."

## Protest Erupts

That, however, was not the total picture. Many, because of their faith and their commitment to Jesus Christ, saw things differently.

Foremost among these were the Dominicans in Hispaniola. Their order had been founded by Dominic (1170–1221), who saw voluntary poverty as a means to render credible his friars' preaching. This attitude set apart his followers, when the Albigensians, among others, were cruelly being forced by the church to recant heresy. Now in Hispaniola, Dominic's spiritual descendants came to the conclusion that the often-cruel *encomiendas* were not proper means to bring the natives to Christ.

On December 21, 1511, Dominican Antonio de Montesinos mounted the pulpit. His text was Matthew 3:3, "A voice crying in the wilderness." He said the conscience of the *encomenderos* seemed to be as sterile as a desert. But even in the desert the voice of God must be proclaimed:

"I have climbed to this pulpit to let you know of your sins, for I am the voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island, and therefore, you must not listen to me indifferently, but with all your heart and all your senses.... This voice tells you that you are in mortal sin; that you not only are in it, but live in it and die in it, and this because of the cruelty and tyranny that you bring to bear on these innocent people.

"Pray tell, by what right do you wage your odious wars on people who dwelt in quiet and peace on their own lands? [By what right have you] destroyed countless numbers of them with unparalleled murders and destruction? Why do you oppress and exploit them, without even giving them enough to eat, or caring for them when they become ill as a result of your exploitation? They die, or rather, you kill them, so that you may extract and obtain more and more gold every day....

"Are they not human? Have they no souls? Are you not required to love them as you love yourselves? How can you remain in such profound moral lethargy? I assure you, in your present state you can no more be saved than Moors or Turks who do not have and even reject the faith of Jesus Christ!"

Montesinos's audience sat almost too stunned to celebrate the Mass. Then they recovered their wits and angrily demanded a retraction. But the *encomenderos* soon learned that Montesinos's sermon had been previously reviewed and signed by the other Dominicans in Hispaniola. Furthermore, their vicar, Pedro de Cordoba, followed Montesinos's sermon with harsher action: All *encomenderos* would be excommunicated until their Indians were freed.

The *encomenderos* protested before the crown. King Ferdinand was incensed. On March 20, 1512, he wrote to Columbus: "I have seen the sermon to which you refer ... and although he [Montesinos] was always a scandalous preacher, I am much surprised by what he said, which has no basis in theology, or canon or civil law, as all the learned declare, and I agree."

The Dominicans in Hispaniola did not flinch. Their provincial (immediate superior) in Spain ordered them to recant. They stood firm. Eventually, the matter came to a debate before the king, and Montesinos himself participated. As a result of that debate, a special commission issued seven principles for the treatment of the natives, and these principles became law in December 1512.

Given the settlers' greed and the difficulty of communicating over long distances, these laws were never obeyed (or, as the Spaniards said at the time, they were *obedecidas y no cuinplidas*, "obeyed but not done"). Therefore, the protest continued.

## Spreading Opposition

The best-known leader in this second stage of the protest was Bartolomé de Las Casas, also a Dominican. Las Casas had once owned an *encomienda* but had relinquished it to protest the system's abuses. He lived almost a century and traveled repeatedly across the Atlantic, going before the royal court to plead the case of the natives. He attempted to obtain new laws and rulings, then returned to the colonies—only to discover the settlers had found new ways to disobey and continue their exploitation of

the natives.

The fame of Las Casas has eclipsed that of others who took a similar stance. Decades later in Chile, for example, stood another Dominican, Gil Gonzalez de San Nicholas. Gonzalez declared that anyone who waged war against the natives (in this case, the Araucanians of southern Chile) in order to take their lands should be excommunicated and denied confession. His fellow Dominicans agreed with him, and the Franciscans followed suit. As a result, the war effort faltered for lack of soldiers, and the Araucanians had a brief respite. Eventually, Gonzalez was silenced through a subterfuge, being declared a heretic on an unrelated matter.

In Paraguay, when European settlers began invading to capture slaves, the Jesuits armed the Indians and even organized them into an army that won several important victories against the slave hunters. According to an unsympathetic witness, the attitude of these Jesuits cost the crown forty million pesos—the tax due if the settlers had been allowed to exploit the lands and the natives.

As a result, according to another witness, “[The settlers] hate the Fathers of the Company [the Jesuits], because they are convinced that it is the Jesuits that keep them from all the profit that they could obtain for their farms and settlements from [the work of] the Indians of Paraguay.”

The list could be prolonged endlessly. Many early saints of South America—Luis Beltrón, Toribio de Mogrovejo, Francisco Solano as well as hundreds of lesser figures were noted for defending the natives. Later, with the coming of black slaves, another generation of saints came to their defense: Pedro Claver and Martín de Porres, himself a mulatto.

In Spain, the question of natives’ rights in the “Indies” gave rise to a vigorous debate. Foremost among those who participated was Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican professor at the University of Salamanca, who defended the natives as legitimate owners of their lands and possessions.

### **Light in Darkness**

It is said that Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and the Spanish king, because of concern about Conquest abuses, considered abandoning the American enterprise. While that report is probably exaggerated, it indicates the impact of these voices of protest. Undoubtedly, some natives enjoyed a brief respite thanks to the work of the “lights in the darkness.”

Yet the Conquest continued. To this day the native inhabitants of these regions continue to be exploited and harassed out of their ancestral lands. The protest over the natives’ treatment was seldom translated into practical action, except in limited areas for a short time.

Still, the light shone in the darkness. It is true that the exploitation and immense cruelties of the Conquest were done in the name of Christ, but it is also true that some in the same Name chose to live in solidarity with the exploited, and they persisted in their denunciations even before kings and prelates. If it is true that the Spanish Catholic church generally acquiesced in and supported one of the most inhumane episodes in history, it is also true that it produced internal protest and self-criticism.

Protestant Europeans later launched similar colonial enterprises in the Western Hemisphere. They were similarly inhumane toward native Americans. In those ventures, though, the earlier level of internal protest was never matched.

## Columbus and Christianity in the Americas: A Gallery of Champions for the Oppressed

Courageous Christians who worked on behalf of "the least of these" in the Americas

John Maust is editor of Latin America Evangelist magazine and is author of several books, including *New Song in the Andes* (William Carey, 1992).

### **Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566)**

**"Apostle of the Indies"**

Against the dark backdrop of Spanish mistreatment of Native Americans during the Conquest, Bartolomé de Las Casas stood like a lighthouse. The fiery friar was the leading defender of the Indians against cruelty and abuses.

His father sailed on Columbus's second voyage. Las Casas himself came to Hispaniola in 1502 as a priest, but he lived as most Spanish gentlemen, with land and Indian servants.

Several factors combined to change Las Casas's life. In 1511 he heard the Dominicans' preaching campaign against Spanish mistreatment of Indians. That same year he accompanied the Spanish expedition to Cuba and witnessed its cruelty toward the natives.

Then in 1514, Las Casas, age 40, turned around. He was preparing a sermon, searching the Scriptures for an appropriate text, when he chanced on this passage from the (apocryphal) Book of Sirach: "If one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished; the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable" (34:18 RSV). The following Sunday, he announced from the pulpit that he was divesting himself of the natives entrusted to him (in effect, his slaves) and would now serve and defend the Indians.

For the next seven years, he spent most of his time traveling between Spain and America, seeking the crown's help to protect Indians. After several years of agitation, Las Casas was granted by King Charles V a territory in present-day Venezuela. There, Las Casas could test his theory that the Indians would be better evangelized by persuasion than by force. But the project failed when the Indians rebelled against the settlement.

Las Casas went through a time of self-examination, finally entering the Dominican Order in 1522. He evangelized in Santo Domingo, Central America, and Mexico, where he was Bishop of Chiapas from 1544 to 1547. Often, he met stiff opposition from Spanish land owners and even fellow missionaries.

In an age that viewed Indians as little more than animals, Las Casas passionately preached the Indians' dignity, sometimes overstating the case: "God created these simple people without evil and without guile."

Las Casas wrote various books, including the famous *General History of the Indies* and his most controversial *A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies*. He described in detail—many would say with exaggeration—the cruelty of Spaniards toward Indians. But his entries bear the horrifying and unmistakable touch of reality. Consider his description of an event in Mexico:

"Soon after [the 30,000 natives of Cholula had welcomed and offered to lodge the Spaniards,] the Spaniards agreed to carry out a massacre—or as they called it, 'a punitive attack'—in order to sow terror and apprehension, and to make a display of their power....

"The Spaniards had asked for five or six thousand Indians to carry their cargo. When all the chiefs had come, they and the burden bearers were herded into the patios of the houses....

"When they were all placed close together, they were bound and tied. At the closed doorways, armed guards took turns to see that none escaped. Then, at a command, all the Spaniards drew their swords or pikes, and while their chiefs looked on, helpless, all those tame sheep were butchered, cut to pieces.

"At the end of two or three days some survivors came out from under the corpses, wounded but still alive, and they went, weeping, to the Spaniards, imploring mercy, which was denied."

Such writings influenced Charles V in 1542–43 to approve ***The New Laws***, which were designed to limit Spanish control and abuse of Indians. Unfortunately, they had little effect.

Las Casas returned to Spain at age 73 with more battles to fight. He entered a famous debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who used Aristotle's theories to argue that the Indians were inferior people, slaves by nature who should be subjected for their own good. The controversy came to a head when King Charles V convened a formal debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas in Valladolid in 1550–1551. (**See "The Great Debate".**)

Ironically, in his eagerness to protect the Indians, Las Casas once advocated bringing in Africans to replace the Indian slaves. However, he later bitterly repented of that position.

Until his death at age 92, the so called Defender of the Indians actively lobbied in Spain on the Indians behalf, becoming increasingly radical. For example, he advocated the withdrawal of all Spaniards from the Indies.

Opponents considered Las Casas a fanatic and sensationalist. Admirers have called him the greatest philanthropist the Iberian race has ever produced.

**Pedro Claver**  
**(1580–1654)**  
**Slave of the slaves**

Members of Catholic religious orders customarily took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. But Jesuit missionary Pedro Claver pledged himself to a fourth vow: ***Petrus Claver, aethiopum semper serous***—"Pedro Claver, slave to the Negroes forever." He proved true to his word.

Born into a wealthy family near Barcelona, Spain, Claver joined the Jesuit order at age 22, and eight years later, in 1610, sailed for Cartagena in Nueva Granada (present-day Colombia).

There he was appalled by the Spaniards' treatment of African slaves. To minister to the slaves, he began boarding slave ships docked in port. He also visited slaves in the hellish warehouses where they were held. It was not unusual for Claver to find untended naked corpses covered with flies.

Claver and fellow workers would dispense fruit, clothing, and medical care, and he would preach to the slaves. Later he helped start a hospital and leprosarium.

Claver succeeded in his effort to let the slaves hear Christian preaching before their masters came to get them. He is said to have baptized up to 300,000 slaves during 40 years of ministry.

Fellow Jesuits complained when Claver insisted that slaves be welcomed into the church on equal terms with whites. And wealthy slave owners feared Claver would, by making slaves feel equal, incite revolt. On the street Claver greeted only Africans and the whites who supported his work. When wealthy Spaniards sought to make confession to him, he usually declined, saying slaves were his first priority.

In his latter years, Claver suffered paralysis. Ironically, his companions entrusted him to the care of a slave who cruelly neglected him. Yet he never complained, even when visitors stole items from his room (as relics of a saint) while he lay there. In 1896 Claver was recognized as the patron saint of missions to the Negroes.

**Luis Beltrán  
(1526–1580)  
The Americas first saint**

Luis Beltrán often doubted his missionary call. But the Dominican friar never wavered in protesting Spanish mistreatment of Indians in Nueva Granada (modern Colombia), nor in showing concern for their spiritual welfare. Beltrán made such an impact during only seven years of Indian ministry (1562–1569), he became the first canonized saint of the Americas.

Hearing about thousands of Indians without God, the 36-year-old sailed for Cartagena in 1562. He taught and baptized by day (an estimated 25,000 in seven years) and prayed and did penance by night.

He also confronted rich landlords over their harsh treatment of Indian laborers. The landlords in turn tried to impede his work among the Indians. One whom he had rebuked sent a woman to Beltrán to try to seduce him and discredit his ministry.

A great admirer of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Beltrán was deeply troubled when Las Casas challenged his practice of granting absolution to cruel landholders. Las Casas had asked him to deeply examine his conscience before doing so. Beltrán concluded he was incapable of cutting through the complexities of missionary work.

Soon thereafter, Beltrán requested to return to Spain, where he continued in ministry. His seven years of service were so impressive, though, he was declared in 1690 the patron saint of Nueva Granada.

**Juan De Zumárraga  
(1468–1548)  
"Protector of the Indians"**

While others his age began to slow down, Juan de Zumárraga at age 60 was sent to Mexico by Charles V as "Protector of the Indians" and the country's first bishop.

He quickly made his mark. The **Audiencia** (ruling council) that followed Cortés treated Indians with unparalleled cruelty, which Zumárraga publicly denounced. The Audiencia then forbade him to preach or to communicate with higher authorities, especially the Council of the Indies.

Zumárraga defied the ban and sent a protest letter to the Council of the Indies. The letter was intercepted.

The bishop then traveled to the coast and convinced a sailor to smuggle a letter (inside a cake of wax) to the Council. Because of his letter, the corrupt Audiencia was ultimately replaced.

He also founded schools for Indian children of both sexes, using education to evangelize both children and parents. He also helped start the first seminary and high school in the Americas, imported the first printing press, and helped found what became the University of Mexico.

Still Zumárraga, like many of his day, remained paternalistic to Indians. He insisted they needed some sort of compulsion to work; thus, he approved of the *encomienda* system.

The Protector of the Indians also acted as inquisitor in Mexico and processed 130 cases. On the whole, though, Zumárraga did more than most in his day to alleviate the sufferings of Native Americans. In 1547, he was named Mexico's first archbishop, but he died before his installation.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

## The Christian Conquerors

**Hernando Cortés**  
**(1485–1547)**

**Imposing leader and builder**

Hernando Cortés, the conqueror, never spoke to a priest without first uncovering his head and bowing. And he became almost physically ill at the sight of Aztec idols.

Hernando Cortés, the Christian, could draw Cholula Indian leaders into a trap and then mercilessly slaughter them.

Such was the paradoxical character of this man.

Cortés studied law briefly at the University of Salamanca in Spain, but he was restless for adventure in the New World. In 1504, though not yet 20, he was granted an estate in Hispaniola, and after joining an expedition to conquer Cuba, settled there. Then, hearing of gold in Mexico, Cortés formed an expedition. Cuban Governor Velázquez, wary of Cortés's power, forbade his departure, but Cortés left anyway.

Cortés reached Mexico in 1519 with a fleet of eleven ships and about 650 men, some of whom were troubled by Cortés's actions. Immediately, he burned all but two of the ships. He told his men one ship was for communication with Spain and the other for those who wished to return to Cuba. Cortés asked who wanted to return. Once he knew who did not fully support his mission, he burned the "Cuban-bound" ship. He now had complete psychological control of the men, a lasting characteristic of his leadership.

After five long months, Cortés reached Tenochtitlán (Mexico city), the Aztec capital. Along the way, he made alliances with Indian tribes who had suffered under Aztec rule. He also made full use of the Aztecs' belief in coming white-skinned gods. When Cortés met Motecuhzoma II (Montezuma II), the Aztec leader, he gave him a choice: submit or die. Cortés began ruling the Aztecs through Montezuma.

Cortés presented the gospel to various Indian chiefs, urging them to replace their idols with a Christian altar, cross, and images of the Virgin Mary. Once, when Cortés stumbled upon a room filled with Aztec idols—its walls stained with blood from human sacrifices—he exclaimed, "O God, why do you permit the Devil to be so greatly honored in this land?" Then he began to smash the idols with an iron bar, shouting, "Shall we not do something for God?"

In the meantime, 900 of Velázquez's soldiers had landed to capture Cortés, the outlaw. Cortés surprised Velázquez's forces on the coast and convinced them (by threatening death and bribing them with the riches of conquest) to join his men.

When Cortés returned to Mexico City, the Aztecs were restless, having suffered a slaughter at the hands of one of Cortés's lieutenants. He was forced to retreat, losing more than 400 men on what has been named **Noche Triste**, "Night of Sorrow." Over the next few months, he rebuilt his troops and weapons. With new Indian allies, he retook the island capital in 1521 after a three-month siege.

After the conquest, Cortés ruled a feudal-style lordship over thousands of square miles. He was probably the wealthiest man in the New World.

Cortés kept his men from plundering the Indians; when two of his soldiers were caught stealing from Indians, he had them hanged. He also proved energetic, erecting a palace in Cuernavaca, planting orchards of mulberry trees to help provide silk, and importing cattle and sheep.

Cortés's popularity and wealth made the Spanish crown curtail his power. Eventually, he led other expeditions to Honduras and Lower California. He finally returned to Spain, where he died in 1547. Some criticized him as evil and violent, while others lauded his achievements as greater than Caesar's.

**Francisco Pizarro  
(1477–1541)  
Repentant adventurer**

Marooned on a small island off Ecuador with 150 of his men, Francisco Pizarro became angry when a rescue ship came to take the emaciated crew back to Panama. He whipped out his sword and drew a line in the sand.

"Those on that side return to Panama to be poor," Pizarro reportedly said. "Those on this side go to Peru to become rich. Any good Spaniard will know the right choice."

Thirteen did cross over to Pizarro, and they later joined the small army that penetrated present-day Peru and conquered the Inca Empire, which stretched for 3,000 miles along South America's west coast.

Today, Pizarro's island challenge is depicted on a huge mosaic in the Cathedral of Lima, Peru, showing the tight relationship between the conquest and Christianity.

As a young man in Spain, Pizarro tended livestock and never learned to read. He became a soldier and sailed for the New World in 1502. "A grim man of few words," he became a fairly wealthy landowner in Panama, with a number of Indian slaves. But at age 50 he started south to find a culture even greater and wealthier than the Aztecs'.

After years of failures and sacrifice, Pizarro's hardened band of 170 men and 60 horses encountered the chief Inca himself, Atahualpa. The chieftain was surrounded by an army of thousands, and a young Spanish page recalled seeing "many Spaniards urinate without noticing it, out of pure terror."

Pizarro decided a bold thrust was his only hope. By plan, the Spaniards' Dominican priest, Vicente de Valverde, and an interpreter approached Atahualpa, seated upon the royal litter. Valverde delivered a summary of the Christian faith, the infamous **requerimiento**, which demanded submission to the Catholic faith and Spanish emperor.

As expected, Atahualpa was angered by the demand, and when Valverde showed him a prayer book, the Inca impatiently tossed it to the ground.

Valverde shouted, "The gospel on the ground! Christians, vengeance! Don't you see what is happening? Why dispute further with this arrogant dog! The fields are filling with Indians. At him, and I absolve you!"

A bloody route ensued, as the Incas panicked in the face of Spanish horses, trumpets, and flashing swords.

Pizarro was the only Spaniard wounded—by one of his own men when he was saving Atahualpa from attack. Eventually, Pizarro agreed under pressure to have Atahualpa killed, even after the Inca paid a ransom. The murder earned Pizarro a reprimand from King Charles.

Pizarro became governor of the conquered land, but he never tried to control the excesses of Spanish adventurers, who raped and pillaged.

Because of a betrayal, Pizarro executed one of his former allies, whose supporters then attacked the aging Pizarro. Pizarro fell, mortally wounded, and reportedly "placed his fingers in the sign of a cross over his mouth and begged confession for his sins," wrote attacker Juan Barragan

"[But I] took an urn that was full of water and smashed it from on high into [Pizarro's] cross, and said to him, 'In hell! You will have to confess in hell!'"

Today, Pizarro's bones lie in an ornate tomb in the Lima Cathedral, perhaps partly because in his will he had written, "Because of the malice, ignorance, and persuasion of the Devil, I have often offended God my Creator and Redeemer.... I repent of all these sins, which I now acknowledge and confess and for which I now beg forgiveness."

Copyright © 1988 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

## The Father of California

**Junipero Serra launched a remarkable enterprise on Spain's final frontier**

James D. Smith III is pastor of Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church and adjunct professor of church history at Bethel Seminary—West, both in San Diego, California. He is a member of the editorial advisory board of Christian History.

On the morning of July 16, 1769, on a windswept hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Father Junipero Serra celebrated High Mass before a hewn wooden cross. The Mass signaled the sunset of Spain's mission colonization of the New World but the dawn of Father Serra's greatest work.

By the 1760s Spain's empire had been drained by far-flung battles and internal decay. When the Russians began moving from Alaska down the western coast of North America, the Spanish became alarmed. In 1768, a plan to permanently settle California was formulated. This movement, spearheaded by Captain Gaspar de Portolá, would move north from Baja California to reach Monterey's bay, where a garrison would be established. Each wave of settlement, by land or sea, would pass through San Diego, with coastal mission settlements planned between the two points.

Taking seriously the name of this "Sacred Expedition" was Serra, a 55 year-old Franciscan friar who, despite a badly infected leg, insisted on making the trip: "I have placed all my confidence in God, of whose goodness I hope that he will grant me to reach not only San Diego but also Monterey." His prayers were answered.

### Giving Up Success

Miguel José Serra was born November 24, 1713, on the island of Majorca. Schooled at a Franciscan friary, he requested admission to the Franciscan order at age 16. Serra chose the religious name "Junipero," recalling the simplicity and good humor of St. Francis's early companion.

His superb teaching gifts were soon recognized and sharpened through doctoral study. But his promising career did not satisfy the young professor. Late in 1748, he requested that he and Fray Francisco Palou (his future biographer) become apostolic missionaries to the New World.

While waiting at port in Spain before the Atlantic crossing, Serra wrote a letter that spoke of the "great joy" in his heart and expressed a life theme: "Surely [my parents] would always encourage me to go forward and never to turn back.... The office of an apostolic preacher, especially its actual exercise, is the greatest calling to which they would wish me to be chosen."

In late 1749, Serra embarked for New Spain and eventually began working in the Sierra Gorda Mountains, north of Mexico City. For eight years, the slight (5-feet, 2-inch) and impatient Serra translated Christian doctrine and prayers into the language of the Pames Indians. Serra also worked alongside the Indians to build a large stone church in Jalpan that is still used for worship today. His intensity and hard work combined with an uninhibited joy and a delight in God's creation, and these qualities impressed his followers.

He was transferred to the College of San Fernando in 1758, where he earned a reputation as an able administrator and fervent preacher. Often he would dramatize his sermons by scourging himself with chains or pounding his chest with heavy stones. And he refused to have his infected leg treated—in

the tradition of the mystics, he felt pain was a delight.

## **Sacred Expedition**

In early 1767, King Charles III suddenly expelled the Jesuits from Spain and its colonies. The orphaned Jesuit missions on the parched Baja California peninsula were entrusted to a handful of Franciscans, with Fray Serra chosen **presidente** of the mission. Within weeks, his missionary band began serving the Indian population of the scattered Baja missions, which were connected only by primitive roads. The following year, Serra committed himself to propagate the faith among the unreached peoples ("gentiles") in Alta (upper) California.

This new venture was not without its costs. Two ships carrying supplies to meet Serra's overland party in San Diego lost thirty-four men to scurvy, over a third of their crew. Of forty-four Indian helpers, thirty-two died or deserted the overland party. Thus, San Diego's first institution was not a mission or presidio (military outpost) but an infirmary.

Serra's initial letter from California bore a warning: "Let those who are to come here as missionaries not imagine that they are coming for any other purpose but to endure hardships for the love of God and for the salvation of souls."

San Diego de Alcalá (in modern San Diego) was the first of twenty-one missions founded in California; Serra was responsible for nine. For fifteen years, whether by ship or, less frequently, on California's **Camino Real** (royal highway), Serra regularly traveled a five-hundred mile stretch on painful legs.

It took the San Diego mission a year before it could baptize a convert. At Carmel (the second mission established), it took Serra six months to gain a follower—and that was a child. By the fifth year, though, there had been over 900 baptisms. And by the time of Serra's death in another ten years, some 5,000 neophytes were living in the missions, along with 500 Spanish soldiers and settlers.

A great deal of that success can be credited to Serra's enthusiasm. Near the future site of San Antonio de Padua, Serra's mule train had hardly been unburdened and a bell hung from an oak when he suddenly rang the bell and shouted, "O Gentiles! Come, come to the holy church!" His companions had to remind him there was not yet a church, nor an Indian, in sight.

The missions were designed not only to convert, but also to "civilize" and educate the Indians. And once Indians joined the mission they could not leave without permission. They were expected to attend services several times daily, and they were taught basic skills of building, farming, and various crafts.

Some native Americans resisted the regimented lifestyle. Serra was known to whip recalcitrant Indians at times for their own good, he felt, since the system was moving them toward redemption.

But mission life wasn't all austere. Nearly every feast day on the calendar yielded processions, feasts, and games. The Indians were fed three substantial meals a day, which relieved them of their perpetual search for food.

## **Spiritual Sheep, Real Goats**

After Serra died in 1784, at Mission San Carlos in Carmel, the missions continued to expand both spiritually and economically. Within fifty years, another twelve missions were established, and by 1832, 17,000 Indians were attached to them. The missions that year harvested 120,000 bushels of grain and herded 150,000 cattle, 15,000 horses, and 140,000 hogs, sheep, and goats. Sixty-three years earlier

California had contained not one cow, horse, hog, sheep, goat, or grain of wheat—nor a single Christian.

After Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, and an 1834 Secularization Act that put mission property in secular hands, the missions quickly fell into decay.

Nonetheless, the missions were a monumental spiritual and organizational feat. Yet the intense, chocolate loving friar who began them observed once, "The only quality that I can feel fairly sure I have by the kindness and grace of God is my good intentions."

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

## Highlights of the California Missions

Junípero Serra and his successors established 21 missions in California between 1769 and 1823. Each mission was a combination military outpost and religious commune; together, they were a colorful experiment in missions.

Mark Galli

**(1) San Francisco Solano** (founded 1823) The last mission founded. Founder Jose Altimira flogged the Indians so often, they stormed the buildings in 1826, forcing Altimira's departure.

**(2) San Rafael Arcángel** (1817) Located in a sunny climate, this mission was a health sanctuary for ailing neophytes from the chilly San Francisco mission. On the day of its founding, 200 Indians presented themselves for catechism.

**(3) San Francisco de Asís** (1776) Its first worship service was held five days before the Declaration of Independence was signed. From 1821 to 1826, disease killed 1,570 Indians here.

**(4) San José de Guadalupe** (1797) Father Narciso Duran taught the mission Indians to read music and play European instruments, and he then formed a 30-piece band. Indians came from miles to hear the concerts.

**(5) Santa Clara de Asís** (1777) Fifty children were baptized within the first year. By 1832, this mission had recorded the most baptisms of any—8,536.

**(6) Santa Cruz** (1791) One of the least successful missions, it had only 523 Indians at its height.

**(7) San Juan Bautista** (1797) Although built on the San Andreas fault, its major buildings have survived. The 1812 sanctuary is still used for worship.

**(8) San Carlos Borromeo** (1770) Headquarters for Serra and his successor, Fermin Francisco de Lasuén. Serra was buried here.

**(9) Nuestra Señora de la Soledad** (1791) Floods, isolation, cold, and dampness caused 30 different missionaries to pastor this lonely (soledad) mission in some 45 years.

**(10) San Antonio de Padua** (1771) A bear hunt in 1772 netted 9,000 pounds of meat and saved this and Mission San Carlos from starvation.

**(11) San Miguel Arcángel** (1797) In 1831, a Mexican commissioner gave this mission's Indians the right to leave. They refused to go.

**(12) San Luis Obispo de Tolosa** (1772) Hostile Indians twice set fire to its dry roofs made from tule plants. The friars then made the first tile roofs, so characteristic of mission architecture.

**(13) La Purísima Concepción** (1787) In its first four months, 75 Indians were baptized. The 1812 earthquake and floods devastated the mission's buildings. Indians seized and held the mission for a

month in 1824.

**(14) Santa Inés** (1804) The least successful mission, gaining an average of only 45 converts a year. During an Indian revolt in 1824, the mission was burned. The rebels, though, had tried to put out the fire—they were angry with the soldiers, not the friars.

**(15) Santa Bárbara** (1786) First of nine missions founded by Lasuén, Serra's successor. Parts of the original aqueduct are still used by the city of Santa Barbara.

**(16) San Buenaventura** (1782) The last mission Serra founded. It became noted for its fruits and vegetables; ships replenished here.

**(17) San Fernando Rey de España** (1797) The last of four missions founded by Lasuen in the same summer. Rodeos were held almost daily; raising cattle was big here.

**(18) San Gabriel Arcángel** (1771) A soldier's rape of an Indian chief's wife—and the chief's death during attempted revenge—slowed evangelistic efforts here for years.

**(19) San Juan Capistrano** (1776) Its cathedral-like church took ten years to build; the 1812 earthquake demolished it in one minute. Worship was in progress at the time, and 40 Indians were killed.

**(20) San Luis Rey de Francia** (1797) Fifty-four children were baptized at its founding. By 1832 more Indians (2,788) lived here than in any other mission.

**(21) San Diego de Alcalá** (1769) Serra's first mission. It took one year to gain its first convert. Non-mission Indians attacked it in 1776, killing three Spaniards.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Protestantism Explodes

Why is a traditionally Catholic region turning Protestant?

interview with Samuel Escobar

An interview with  
SAMUEL ESCOBAR

***Since Columbus, Roman Catholicism has dominated the history and culture of Latin America. Protestantism was virtually unknown in the region until last century, and then only in a marginal way.***

***But beginning in the 1940s, Protestantism began mushrooming in Latin America. In 1938 Protestants totaled about 600,000. A decade later they had multiplied five times to 3 million. Another explosion has occurred in the last twenty years—from 15 million to more than 40 million.***

***To understand the historical causes of this extraordinary transformation, Christian History sat with Samuel Escobar, Thornley B. Wood Professor of Missiology at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.***

**Christian History: What did religious life in a typical Latin American town look like 400 years ago?**

**Escobar:** In the 1600s, the life of the town would be determined by the church. The Spanish planted their churches in the main square, right beside the government building. The church's presence was felt nearly everywhere.

For instance, people kept time by the church bells. When the bells rang in early morning, you knew it was just before six—time for morning mass. When they rang at late afternoon, it was about four—time for prayer.

The calendar was also governed by the church. In addition to Easter week and Christmas, elaborate festivities were held in each country (and many cities) to honor its patron saint. In Peru, it was Santa Rosa on August 30, and in Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 6.

The intellectual life was also thoroughly controlled by the church. Every book read and every teaching offered would be checked. The Catholic church controlled nearly every sphere of life.

**Where were the Protestants in Latin America at this time?**

The church's control was so strong, hardly any Protestants could survive. Even as late as the nineteenth century, we find stories like this: An American visits a small town in Argentina during a religious procession. Everybody kneels, of course, except this American. As a result, he is publicly beaten and jailed and left there for months—just because he didn't kneel.

Reformer John Calvin sent two Protestant missionaries to Brazil in 1556, but that experiment failed almost immediately. The Dutch occupied northeast Brazil for about thirty years. There were also experimental Lutheran colonies in Venezuela. But these are isolated cases.

**How does religious life in a modern Latin American city compare?**

Society has become increasingly secularized. When countries celebrate their independence from Spain, for instance, they also see it as a break from rigid Catholic control. In some countries, secularization has gone to an extreme. In Uruguay, Christmas is called "Family

Week," and Holy Week is called "Tourism Week."

Another example: family-planning legislation has passed recently in Peru and Mexico. In each country, the Catholic church tried to dissuade government officials from pursuing such legislation. When that attempt failed, the church began a media campaign against contraception. It showed clearly the church's voice no longer determines government policy.

Add to that the large percentage of Catholics who practice birth control, and you realize that Catholicism cannot exert its former hold over its members, let alone social institutions.

### **Then today there's more freedom to be non-Catholic?**

That's another new reality: religious competition. In the 1600s Roman Catholicism had a monopoly. Today, most countries honor religious freedom. It's a religious open market.

You see this especially in mass media. Protestantism pioneered the use of the media for religious purposes, especially in radio with the opening of radio station HCJB in Ecuador in the 1930s. The Catholic church reacted, and particularly in Brazil developed a strong radio network. But such open competition was unthinkable 400 years ago.

In Latin America, there's still an overwhelming social pressure to stay Catholic, but the church has lost the means of exerting political pressure to enforce conformity.

### **When did Protestantism first enter Latin America in a significant way?**

Not until the early 1800s, when the Latin American nations broke free of Spain and the Spanish church. That's when pioneers like James Thomson began their work.

Sponsored by the British and Foreign Bible Society, Thomson came from England to Buenos Aires in 1816 and worked until 1827. He went from Argentina to Uruguay to Chile to Peru to Mexico, just as these independence movements were beginning.

He wasn't as interested in establishing Protestant churches as in promoting Bible reading within the Catholic church. In every city he found a group of priests who were interested in promoting Scripture reading, and he even created a Bible society in Colombia.

At the end of the century, we have the famous Francisco Penzotti, an illiterate Italian who came to Uruguay, where he was converted. He started to read and study, became a colporteur, peddling devotional material, and traveled all over Latin America in the 1880s, taking Bibles with him. He went town by town on horse, from Argentina to Bolivia, then on to Peru. In many places, Penzotti was either the founder or among the founders of the town's First Methodist Church.

Once he was jailed in Peru because of his Protestantism. Some American traveler took his picture there, and it was published in a New York newspaper. Because of Penzotti's Italian heritage and his connection with the American Bible Society, the incident became an international scandal. It brought to people's attention the religious intolerance of Latin America, and it opened the door for greater religious freedom there.

### **How have Protestants evangelized in Latin America?**

Catholics aimed at the elites. They believed that if you reach the elites and educate them, the rest of society will follow.

Protestants set their sights on the people. James Thomson is a case in point.

Thomson was a member of the Lancasterian Society, which had arisen in an England that was becoming rapidly industrialized. There, crowds of children flocked to city schools, and there weren't enough teachers. What do you do then? You take the best students and make them mentors to the others, multiplying the effect of the teacher. In the 1820s, the Lancasterian system was the latest word in education.

Thomson thus became an educational adviser to many of the independence leaders. He would tell them, "You're beginning your life as an independent, democratic nation. I offer you a method to educate not the elites but the masses."

### **Why did Protestantism start mushrooming in the 1940s and 1950s?**

Generally speaking, change in social structures causes significant change in people's behavior. In the case of Latin America, the significant structural change was land reform.

In Bolivia, for instance, land was redistributed in 1952. That was the year we see significant Protestant growth among the Aymaná and Quechua tribes, the native communizes in Bolivia and Peru who descended from the Incas. Why? Before people owned their land, they had to go to the local Catholic church because the landowner was Catholic; it was the only church he would allow in his territory. After land reform, no one held enough land to control the religious environment, and so choice became a reality.

About the same time, more and more people began moving to cities. In villages, the Catholic priest remains a key person. He knows where people go, what they do. A Protestant has a difficult time getting converts because of the social coercion.

In the city, no church is able to control all that goes on. So when people move to the city, they are more free to choose their own religion.

### **What makes Protestant Christianity appealing to today's Latin Americans?**

They see a Christianity that accepts their culture. Protestants, Pentecostals in particular, have adapted themselves better to the Latin American mentality.

Chile has the largest Pentecostal denomination in Latin America—the Methodist Pentecostal Church. It began early in this century when Willys Hoover, a Methodist, had a Pentecostal experience and began a healing ministry. The Methodist Church could not handle this, so he eventually left and formed the Methodist Pentecostal Church.

These Methodist Pentecostals were less dependent on North American church practices. They created their own hymns, preached in a Latin style, were more expressive in worship. This church mushroomed. The Methodist Church they left has only 8,000 members today. The offshoot denomination has 800,000.

Second, Protestantism helps people organize their lives. Marginalized people tend to have difficulty holding down jobs, controlling drinking, keeping families intact. Pentecostals have gone to the poorest sections of cities and brought these people a Bible centered Christianity. They've gotten people to stop drinking, and taught them to read and to take family responsibilities seriously. Consequently, Protestantism has created upward mobility. As people become more self-disciplined and responsible, they start to become leaders in their businesses and communities.

In addition, such churches become places where people who are nobodies can become somebodies. People whose voice does not matter in society can prophesy in the church.

At the same time, networks are created. In a thousand-member church—not an uncommon phenomenon in Latin America today—people have a great many contacts. A businessman will naturally draw many of these people as customers. Or if you lose a job, it's likely someone in that church can give you a new one.

In addition, Protestantism is tremendously flexible. In Catholicism you need a priest to administer Communion, the most important element of Catholic piety. Protestants need only a Bible and perhaps a hymnbook. And anyone can preach or lead singing.

If we add to that the spiritual gifts the Pentecostals stress, like healing, you have a powerful catalyst for people to become Protestants.

### **What are the weaknesses in contemporary Latin American Protestantism?**

Perhaps the most troubling is the tendency to be dualist. Especially in Pentecostalism, the world is seen primarily as a fight between light and darkness, between the church and the world. Soon governments become the work of the Devil or the visitation of God.

A Baptist sociologist studied the sermons of Pentecostal pastors in Chile. He noted that when military dictator Augusto Pinochet overthrew Marxist Salvador Allende, the preachers said that the Angel of Jehovah had come to expel the Devil from the nation. Thus Pentecostals can sometimes be manipulated for political ends.

### **Protestant growth in Latin America today is phenomenal. Is it a new Reformation?**

To some extent. Just as in the 1500s in northern Europe, a spiritual and theological revival is having great social and political consequences within a Catholic environment.

There's a better historic analogy, though: the revivals under John Wesley in the 1700s. Those Wesleyan revivals took place during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization in England. Industry and urban areas are growing rapidly in this century in Latin America, and once again, Protestantism is helping people make adjustments.

That comparison, in fact, gives me hope for Latin America. The Wesleyan revivals enabled positive social change without the poor having to resort to violence. Given the power of Protestantism to improve the lives of people, I see the possibility of peaceful social change occurring in Latin America as well.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

---

## Columbus and Christianity in the Americas: Recommended Resources

Of the many books about Columbus and his religious legacy, which are most helpful? Christian History asked Dr. William D. Taylor, co-author, with Emilio A. Núñez C., of *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective* (Moody, 1989).

### Columbus

- Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (Oxford, 1991). This superb Spanish author and Columbus scholar carefully uses primary and corroborated sources to place Columbus in context. Good chronology.
- Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Little, Brown, 1942). This classic brought the author the Pulitzer Prize. Loaded with maps.
- Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, *Seeds of Change: Five Hundred Years Since Columbus* (Smithsonian, 1991). A magnificent treatment of the Smithsonian exhibit on five transforming “seeds”: sugar, maize, disease, the horse, and the potato. *Newsweek’s* “When Worlds Collide” (Fall/Winter, 1991) summarizes the exhibit and book.
- Delco C. West and August Kling, translators, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus* (Florida, 1991); Kay Brigham, *Christopher Columbus’s Book of Prophecies: Reproduction of the Original Manuscript with English Translation* (TSELF, 1991). Translations of Columbus’s unique work; they give insight into his religious mind.

### Latin American Christianity

- Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Eerdmans, 1981). Systematic, penetrating research from a Catholic, liberationist perspective.
- H. McKennie Goodpasture, ed., *Cross and Sword: An Eyewitness History of Christianity in Latin America* (Orbis, 1989). An excellent anthology of letters and documents from 1492 to present.
- Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Beacon, 1992). An invaluable look through native’s eyes.
- Charles H. Lippy, Robert Choquette, and Stafford Poole, *Christianity Comes to the Americas: 1492–1776*, (Giniger, 1992). A detailed overview of Spanish, French, and British missionary efforts in the Americas.
- John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ* (Macmillan, 1932). An unsurpassed classic, available only in libraries. Mackay asks: Which Christ came to Latin America in the Conquest?
- David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Basil Blackwell, 1991). A significant work by a British sociologist, sympathetically documenting what scholars had wished to ignore—the striking growth of the evangelical churches.

- George Sanderlin, ed. and trans., ***Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writings*** (Knopf, 1971). A good selection of Las Casas's writings, placed in proper context.

- David Stoll, ***Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*** (California, 1990). Stoll, from an anthropological perspective, analyzes the growth of evangelicalism.

Copyright © 1992 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---