

This Truly Is the Best of Times and the Worst of Times

Perhaps this is true at every point in the history of a God-ruled, sin-pervaded world. It was true in 1859, and it is true today.

Charles Dickens wrote *The Tale of Two Cities* in 1859. It begins,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

He was referring to 1775, the time of the French Revolution. But his point was, that period was like the present period in 1859. In the mid-19th century, “it was the best of times and the worst of times.”

In 1859, Charles Spurgeon was 25 years old, George Müller was 54, Hudson Taylor was 27. And Charles Darwin was 50 years old, John Stuart Mill was 53 and Friedrich Nietzsche was 15.

Rebellion and Revival

God was mightily at work in 1859. In *China's Millions*, the most thorough history of the China Inland Mission, Alvyn Austin wrote,

"In 1859, while Hudson Taylor was still in China [on his first missionary term before founding the China Inland Mission], a revival broke out in Northern Ireland that led to a religious movement so pivotal in British religious history that it came to be called the Revival or "Awakening of '59." ... Although Taylor missed the first phase of the revival, he arrived in Britain in time to reap its benefits. As J. Edwin Orr noted, "there is reason to believe that the whole [of the China Inland Mission's first] party [of 1866] was made up of converts and workers of the 1959 Awakening. ... It is generally agreed that "something happened" in 1859–60, and that its ripples continued to reverberate for the rest of the century." (82–83, 85)

The astonishingly fruitful ministries of Spurgeon, Müller and Taylor were riding the wave of God's great work in their day. It was the best of times.

But other things happened in 1859. Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, and John Stuart Mill, the atheist and utilitarian, published his essay "On Liberty."

So alongside growing secularism in science and politics, growing materialism in the industrial revolution, and growing self-reliance, as God was rejected by many, there was a great spiritual awakening and a great global advance of the gospel of Jesus. It was the worst of times and the best of times.

The Good

The same is true today: It is the best of times and the worst of times.

For example, historian Mark Noll points out, "In a word, the Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last 50 years than in any comparable period in its history, with the exception of the very earliest years of church history" (*The New Shape of World Christianity*, 20). He fleshes it out with concrete examples:

- At the beginning of the 20th century, about 71 percent of professing Christians in the world lived in Europe. By the end of the 20th century, that number had shrunk to 28 percent. Now 43 percent of the Christians live in Latin America and Africa.
- In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians, which was about 10 percent of the population. By 2000, the number of Christians was 360 million, about half the population of the continent. This is probably the largest shift in religious affiliation that has ever occurred, anywhere.
- There are 17 million baptized members of the Anglican church in Nigeria, compared with 2.8 million in the United States.
- The number of practicing Christians in China is approaching the number in the United States.
- Kenya has more people in Christian churches on Sunday than Canada.
- This past week in Great Britain, at least 15,000 Christian foreign missionaries were hard at work evangelizing the locals. Most of these missionaries are from Africa and Asia.

It is the best of times in the history of world Christianity.

The Bad

Or is it? Noll concludes,

Doesn't the recent history of Christianity spell out the obvious: God's in his heaven, all's right with the world? Not exactly. If our era has become the best of times, it remains also the worst of times. ... The ever-expanding numbers who are turning to Christ in the Global south constitute the great marvel of recent history, but ...

Global terrorism, ISIS, hypocrisy, colonial imperialism, racism, materialism and a kind of decadence in the West that turns our shame into our glory with historically unprecedented

audacity: calling marriage a union between two men, calling a man a woman because he wants to be one, and calling a baby's legs and arms and hearts "fetal tissue" for the taking.

It is the worst of times. And, the best of times.

The Best and Worst Today

In my lifetime I have seen a glorious and surprising revival of love for the God of sovereign grace and for his mighty gospel. Thousands of churches, seminaries, colleges, discipling centers, publishing houses, magazines, books, videos, websites, radio programs, global missions, music artists (from classical to rap), campus ministries, urban ministries, counseling centers, prolife efforts (and more) have come into being with a dynamic of God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated joy and missional courage (what we used to call evangelism) and passion for racial harmony and robust Reformed theology. And none of this is limited to one ethnicity or nation. It is the best of times.

On the other hand, I have witnessed with sometimes depressing heaviness the evisceration of the historic name "evangelical" to a meaningless conglomerate of people whose "evangelical" identity is that they all had grandparents who once believed what the reformers did. I have seen the mainline Protestant denominations collapse from gospel influence to faint cultural echoes. I have watched the rise of enormous churches and ministries who preach and export to poor nations a prosperity "gospel" that mutes the biblical teaching on suffering and reduces the glorious gospel to earthly betterment rooted in human attitudes, not the glory of Calvary.

And to mention just a few more of the many sorrows: the rise of a generation that knows little of the Bible, the disappearance of the weight of God's awesome presence in worship, the glorification of immorality in entertainment, the explosion and ubiquity of pornography, the indifference in

churches to justice for all ethnic groups, the decimation of whole neighborhoods through a dominant drug culture, the collapse of the family with the prevalence of premarital sex and easy divorce and the absence of responsible fathers.

And the rise of civic leaders who, instead of standing against the disintegration, function as cheerleaders.

It is the worst of times, and the best of times.

How to Live in a Day Like Ours

What then shall we do?

1. Don't assume any specific historical trajectory of good or evil is fixed and unchangeable. God evidently loves to do his surprising work in hard and unlikely times. Surely, this is one of the implications of the history of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament. Even great and good kings are sometimes followed by monsters. And wicked kings have godly sons. Josiah was the son and grandson of two of the most wicked kings (Manasseh and Amon). He became king at eight years old. At 16 he turned the nation on its head with a righteous reformation (2 Chronicles 34:1–4). It is unpredictable. It could happen at any moment, because God is sovereign.

2. Trust the sovereignty of God to turn the insanity of the nations to serve his purposes. In the face of deadly opposition, the early church prayed with the words of Psalm 2, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?” (Acts 4:25). In vain? They succeeded in killing Jesus!

Yes. But what had they really achieved? The praying Christians make it clear: *“Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had*

predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28).

They plotted *in vain* against the Lord and his anointed. Because, in all their fury, they simply fulfilled what the Lord had planned: the salvation of the world.

3. Let us labor to bind the minds and consciences of our young people to the word of God as infallible, and glorious, and utterly timely, and penetrating, and invincible. *“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).*

“I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” (2 Timothy 2:8–9).

4. And, as the apostle Peter says, “Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:19). Ready to suffer—for Christ’s name. Full of trust—in Christ’s grace. Doing good—by Christ’s power. He reigns over this sin-ravaged world. Therefore it is the worst of times and the best of times.
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