

Jones, Timothy Paul

Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

27. Modern Optimism: Missions, Revivals, and the Response to the Modern Age

This chapter traces nineteenth-century Christianity through the lens of the Modern Age's optimism about human progress. It shows how that optimism fueled world missions, frontier revivals, new theologies, and social reform—and how, by century's end, it began to unravel, forcing believers to decide how to respond to the modern world.

Key takeaways

- The heart is restless until it rests in God; only He satisfies humanity's eternal longing (Augustine).
- William Carey, a failure at nearly everything, launched the modern missions movement from a snuff box collection. His secret: 'I can plod.' He translated New Testaments into 24 Indian languages.
- Carey opened the door for missionaries worldwide—the Judsons, Hudson Taylor (China Inland Mission), and women like Lottie Moon and Amy Carmichael.
- The 1801 Cane Ridge camp meeting sparked the Second Great Awakening; revival fires burned across America for 30 years.

- Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell's Restorationist movement sought unity on Scripture alone ('Where the Scriptures speak, we speak'), but splintered into many sects.
- Charles Finney's revivalism used pressure-based 'New Measures' and taught that revival was human effort, not miracle—contradicting historic theology, though he tied evangelism to social reform.
- Kant walled reason off from faith; Schleiermacher, 'father of modern theology,' made faith a feeling of dependence, opening the door to liberalism and the skeptical 'quest for the historical Jesus.'
- Social reform surged—Sunday schools, abolition (Wilberforce, Sojourner Truth), the Salvation Army—but some churches let the 'Social Gospel' crowd out evangelism. Spurgeon balanced both.
- Failed end-times predictions (William Miller, Ellen White's Adventists, Russell's Witnesses) revealed misplaced optimism.
- As optimism unraveled, leaders responded differently: Pius IX resisted (papal infallibility, First Vatican Council), Moody rejected scholarship for simple soul-winning, and 'The Fundamentals' redeemed the age—defending Scripture's inerrancy alongside serious scholarship.

Passages worth keeping

“Expect great things from God! Attempt great things for God!”

Carey's motto that reignited Baptist missions.

“Each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God... Both may be, and one must be, wrong.”

Lincoln's insight that God's reign doesn't depend on human sides winning.

How it connects

The chapter's thread is that human optimism, even when it drives good things like missions and reform, is not the same as God's Spirit at work. Carey's plodding, Cane Ridge's repentance, and Lincoln's humility all point past human confidence to a God whose purposes stand above our progress.

Scripture referenced

- **Ecclesiastes 3:11** -- God set eternity in human hearts—the restless longing only He fills.
- **John 17:23** -- Jesus' prayer for unity, the goal the Restorationists chased.
- **1 Timothy 3:1-5** -- A minister must manage his own family—raised against Carey's neglect of his.