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Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

29. Christianity in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

This chapter surveys four trends shaping modern Christianity, opening with a warning that recent history is hard to judge fairly (like hyperopic eyes, distant events look clearer than close ones). It traces the collapse of theological liberalism, the birth of evangelicalism, the rise of Pentecostalism, postmodernity, and the shift of the world's Christian population toward the global South.

Key takeaways

- Theological liberalism erased the line between belief and unbelief (a God without wrath, a Christ without a cross); its churches steadily declined as members saw no reason to stay.
- World War I shattered the modern faith in human progress. Karl Barth broke with his liberal teachers and refocused theology on God's transcendence and self-revelation in Christ (neo-orthodoxy).
- In America the reaction took a different path: fundamentalism, which grew narrow and anti-intellectual and lost cultural credibility (e.g., the 1925 Scopes trial).

- Evangelicalism emerged in the 1940s as a middle way—keeping the Bible's truth and authority while engaging the modern world. Billy Graham drove its evangelism; Carl F.H. Henry built its scholarship.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisted Hitler, insisted following Christ means identifying with the oppressed, and was executed in 1945; his 'costly grace' warned against cheap, comfortable faith.
- Pentecostalism began around 1901 (Topeka) and 1906 (Azusa Street), emphasizing Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues, and now grows fastest in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
- Postmodernity distrusts reason, progress, and big institutions, valuing shared experience and relationships; the 'emergent church' pushed this so far some critics called it repackaged liberalism.
- Christianity's population center is moving south; by roughly 2025 most Christians will live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, reversing the old missionary flow.

Passages worth keeping

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through ... a Christ without a cross.”

Niebuhr's summary of what emptied liberal theology of its gospel.

“Cheap grace is our church's deadly enemy.... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again.”

Bonhoeffer's core challenge—grace cost God his Son and costs the believer his life.

How it connects

The whole chapter is a tug-of-war between two failures—liberalism that dissolves the gospel and fundamentalism that walls it off—with evangelicalism, Bonhoeffer's costly discipleship, and the growing southern church all trying to hold truth and engagement together.

Scripture referenced

- **1 Peter 3:8** -- Key-concept verse on unity of spirit, framing the chapter's theme.
- **John 17:21** -- Cited for Christian unity as Jesus' prayer—used in the evangelical-Catholic dialogue.