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Years in Spain: Columbus Finds a Sponsor

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CHAPTER FOUR

Years In Spain: Columbus Finds a Sponsor

The Lord purposed that there should be something clearly miraculous in this matter of the voyage to the Indies . . . I spent seven years here in your royal court discussing this subject with the leading persons in all learned arts, and their conclusion was that it was vain. . . . But afterwards it all turned out just as our redeemer Jesus Christ has said, and as he had spoken earlier by the mouth of his holy prophets.

—Christopher Columbus

In 1485 Christopher Columbus, in company with his young son, Diego, took passage on a ship from Lisbon to Palos, Spain. As their ship neared its destination, it passed by a beautiful monastery located on a bluff overlooking the sea. This monastery, named La Rábida, soon became an extremely important sanctuary for Columbus. It served as a home for Diego while Christopher was away promoting his plan (Ferdinand 37). It was here that Columbus was also befriended by influential and learned churchmen, such as Antonio de Marchena and Juan Pérez, who were sympathetic and helpful to him in his inspired cause (Morison 1:108; see also Taviana, *The Grand Design*, 168–70; 433–38). And equally important, La Rábida became a spiritual refuge for Christopher himself.

A Desire to Spread Christianity

With this religious setting as a backdrop, it now seems appropriate to consider one of the most important, yet least discussed, themes in Columbus' life: his spiritual motive for sailing to the Indies. It has become the vogue in this materialistic age to say that Christopher's primary motivation was economic. For example, a recent article in a popular American magazine maintains that "the Enterprise of the Indies . . . was a business trip. His chief motive was one of the oldest and most powerful of all: money" (Carlinsky 52). Columbus was a complex individual and, no doubt, had multiple motives for what he did. After all, people rarely have only one motive for the things that they do in life. However, simply to say that Christopher's chief motivation was economic distorts the truth and hides from the reader an important role that he said he played, that of being the "Christ-bearer."

Sources on Christopher's life are replete with evidence that one of his major motivations to sail to the Indies was to spread Christianity. He once wrote the following to Amerigo Vespucci (the explorer for whom America is named): "I feel persuaded by the many and wonderful manifestations of Divine Providence in my especial favour, that I am the chosen instrument of God in bringing to pass a great event—no less than the conversion of millions who are now existing in the darkness of Paganism" (Lester 79).

Many of the books that Columbus read and annotated addressed this theme. In the prologue in his personal copy of Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, its translator, Francesco Pipino, argued the book's usefulness for converting "pagans" (Jones 2:557).

Columbus' copy of *Imago Mundi* by Pierre d'Ailly contains a number of ideas which greatly influenced Christopher's thinking. He read there that the earth, as we know it, would have a lifespan of 7,000 years: "Saint Augustine says that the end of the world will take place in the seventh millennium after the age

of the creation of the world. The theologians of the Church follow this view, in particular, Cardinal Petrus Aliacus [Pierre d'Ailly]" (West and Kling 109). After reading the Cardinal's estimate of the number of years from the creation of the world until Jesus' mortal ministry, Columbus added the years from the time of Christ to his own time. He then concluded that a little more than a century and a half remained before the end of the world. This deduction gave him a sense of great urgency because he had read in the Bible that Christianity would need to be taken to all nations, kindreds, and tongues before the end of the world. The fact that Christopher was obsessed with the final conversion of all the world before the Second Coming of the Savior is reflected in his repeated attention to John 10:16, which he was fond of quoting: "And other sheep I have that 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" (Watts 93; West and Kling 229).

In his two letters to Columbus, Paolo Toscanelli spoke of the importance of spreading Christianity. In the first letter, he said that the predecessors of the Great Khan of Cathay (China), "greatly desired to have friendship and dealings with the Christians, and about two hundred years ago they sent ambassadors to the Pope, asking for many learned men and teachers to instruct them in our faith; but these ambassadors, encountering obstacles on the way, turned back without reaching Rome" (Ferdinand 21). Toscanelli claimed, however, that "in the time of Pope Eugenius there came to him an ambassador [from China] who told of their great feeling of friendship for the Christians" (Ibid). In his second letter, Toscanelli maintained that the Enterprise would "be a voyage to kings and princes who are very eager to have friendly dealings and speech with the Christians of our countries. . . . They are also very eager to know and speak with the learned men of our lands concerning religion" (Ibid 22).

Contemporary accounts of Columbus spoke matter-of-factly of his going to the Indies to carry the message of Christ

to the inhabitants of the lands he encountered. Las Casas proclaimed that, “the discovery of the New World was one of the most outstanding exploits reserved by God for the propagation of his holy Church over so extensive a part of the universe hitherto hidden, and for the resplendence of His holy Faith among an infinite number of nations” (Las Casas 30).

It seems clear that the Spanish monarchs also shared at least a part of Columbus’ enthusiasm for spreading the message of Christ. The first entry in Christopher’s journal of the maiden voyage stated, “Because of the report that I had given to Your Highnesses [Ferdinand and Isabella] about the lands of India and about a prince who is called ‘Grand Khan’ . . . Your Highnesses . . . lovers and promoters of the Holy Christian faith . . . thought of sending me, Christóbal Colón, to the said regions of India to see the said princes and the peoples and lands . . . *to see how their conversion to our Holy Faith might be undertaken*” (Dunn and Kelly 17, 19; emphasis added).

While Columbus did not have access to the fulness of the Restored Gospel, his efforts, nevertheless, would result in the reintroduction of Christianity to the descendants of Lehi then living in the Americas. This missionary effort, as we know, helped prepare the way for eventual acceptance of the fulness of the gospel after it was restored in the latter days. In this way, Columbus’ proselyting ambitions helped to accomplish the Lord’s purposes.

Elder B.H. Roberts wrote of the role played by people of other faiths in the accomplishment of the Lord’s designs, making it clear that he believed contributors from outside the Church assist in divine purposes: “God raises up wise men and prophets here and there among all the children of men . . . speaking to them through means that they can comprehend; not always giving a fulness of truth such as may be found in the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ; but always giving that measure of truth that the people are prepared to receive.” He also noted that “Wherever God finds a soul sufficiently enlightened and pure; one with whom his Spirit can communicate,

lo! he makes of him a teacher of men.” (Roberts 512–13; emphasis added). An official statement of the First Presidency in 1978 further validates this view. Issued during the administration of President Spencer W. Kimball, this declaration clearly states that great men and women in the history of the world have “received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals” (Palmer 208). Given his desires to spread the message of Christ and his part as the initiator of Christian missionary work in the New World, Columbus surely fits into this classification of inspired individuals who have helped lay the foundation for the fulness of the Restored Gospel.

In Search of a Sponsor

Feeling enthusiastic about spreading Christianity and optimistic about obtaining sponsorship in Spain, Columbus presented his plan to the Spanish crown in 1486. At that time, King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile were ruling over much of the land that has since become Spain. Their marriage, in 1469, was an initial step in the eventual creation of a unified Spain. They were usually referred to as the Spanish monarchs or the Catholic sovereigns. These two monarchs would eventually play a vitally important role in the Enterprise of the Indies, and their names would go down in history, forever associated with that of Christopher Columbus.

Isabella was a beautiful woman with a healthy, clear complexion, auburn hair and blue eyes. She was a truly religious person with uncommonly high morals. The queen’s gracious, dignified and tactful manner endeared her to her subjects and helped make her an exceptionally capable ruler. She did, in fact, rule Castile while Ferdinand ruled Aragón (Phillips and Phillips 112–13). Isabella and Columbus were the same age and seemed to like each other, and his desire to spread Christianity appealed to her pious nature (Morison 1:114–15).

Ferdinand, on the other hand, was not as genial as Isabella, but was a strong, energetic, ambitious ruler who prided himself on being a shrewd diplomat; he played a role in virtually every political alliance on the European continent (Morison 1:114). Columbus would attract Ferdinand's attention by projecting the political and financial rewards to be captured by the Enterprise.

In May of 1486, Columbus approached the Crown with his grand idea. The monarchs received his presentation open-mindedly and referred his recommendations to a maritime commission headed by Fray Hernando de Talavera, the queen's confessor. Columbus appeared before the commission, but a division among the involved scholars prevented a quick answer on the matter. After months of dawdling deliberation, the commission eventually issued its first unfavorable decision. As a result, the Crown ruled that the Enterprise should be postponed indefinitely, but Columbus was retained in 1487 as an agent of the court at a salary of approximately 1000 maravedis per month (Morison 1:117-18). An important consideration in the decision was, no doubt, the fact that Spain was deeply involved in a war to remove the Moors from Granada in the south of present-day Spain; King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were generally preoccupied with this campaign and were uncertain of the country's ability to finance other ventures at this same time. Thus began a six-year waiting period for Columbus, a time which was, perhaps, the most difficult of his life because of the uncertainty of the fate of his plan and his career.

The year 1488 was one of turmoil and frustration for Christopher. By June, the Spanish monarchs had apparently lost interest in him and his plan; they terminated his retaining fee, an action that possibly persuaded him to accept King John's invitation to return to Portugal. In the middle of this latest setback, Columbus' second son, Ferdinand, was born in August 1488 to Beatriz Enriquez de Harana (also spelled Arana), to whom Columbus was never married. Although there is much conjecture on the matter, no one knows why they never married.

The records do show that Columbus did have their son declared “legitimate” and provided for Beatriz in his will (see Morison 1:111–13; Taviani, *Grand Design*, 468–72; and West and West 35).

By December of 1488, we see Columbus back in Lisbon promoting his plan among the Portuguese. As it turned out, he returned to Lisbon at a most inopportune time. Bartholomew Dias had just returned from his successful circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, a maritime breakthrough of major proportion: that provided King John with an ocean route to India. Consequently, the Portuguese court lost enthusiasm for Columbus’ theoretical western route (Morison 1:118).

Almost simultaneously, Christopher dispatched his brother Bartholomew to the court of Henry VII of England, in hopes of persuading the British to sponsor the Enterprise. Finding Henry to be either apathetic toward the plan, or stubborn in bargaining over the price of the expedition, Bartholomew evidently left England and proceeded to the court of King Charles VIII of France. Apparently, Charles also had little interest in the Enterprise, but his sister, Anne de Beaujeu, the king’s regent during his minority, reacted favorably to Bartholomew’s propositions and encouraged him to stay in France, retaining him as a mapmaker (Morison 1:118–19).

While Bartholomew courted the monarchs of England and France, Columbus returned to Spain from Lisbon and, in 1490, made another appeal to Ferdinand and Isabella. According to Las Casas, they referred the proposal to Talavera and his committee again who, after a cursory review, declared that the idea was “impossible and vain and worthy of rejection” (Morison 1:131). The monarchs, however, did not act on Talavera’s report, but rather advised Christopher that he should again submit his proposal at a more timely juncture—namely, at the conclusion of the war in Granada.

Columbus waited several more months for the opportunity to re-submit his plan, but then lost patience with Ferdinand and

Isabella. Dejected he decided to go to France to join his brother in soliciting Charles' support for the Enterprise. However, while Columbus was at the monastery of La Rábida, where he had gone to visit his son Diego, Fray Juan Pérez persuaded him not to abandon Spain, but to make one more attempt. Pérez, who had previously served as the queen's confessor, then arranged for another audience with the Spanish monarchs in 1491. Isabella sent a letter requesting Columbus' presence at court, also forwarding a sum of 20,000 maravedis for him to procure some presentable clothes and a mule for transportation (Morison 1:133).

Dressed in a new suit, Columbus arrived at the Royal Court, this time at Santa Fe, in August 1491 or soon thereafter. He again made the now-familiar presentation of the Enterprise of the Indies, including his demands for formal hereditary titles and financial remuneration, all to be conferred on the successful completion of the expedition. Among other things, he asked for the following: first, the hereditary titles of Viceroy and Governor over all lands to be discovered on the voyage; second, the office of Admiral of the Ocean Sea, also to be passed on to his descendants forever; and, third, one-tenth of all the gold, silver, pearls, gems, spices and other merchandise produced in the lands to be discovered (Curtis 1:182; see also Morison 1:139). Once again, the monarchs referred the plan to a committee.

Columbus had every reason to believe that the king and queen would finally accept his grand idea on this attempt. On 2 January 1492, while he was waiting for an answer, Spain defeated the Moors in Granada. This, at last, made it possible for Ferdinand and Isabella to give their attention to other matters. They probably would have accepted Christopher's proposal this time but they thought his price was too high, his demands for hereditary titles and revenues being too extravagant (Ferdinand 42). Consequently, Ferdinand and Isabella rejected the plan once again. This was the last straw for Columbus; he decided to leave Spain forever and join his brother in France.

He packed his new mule and rode for Cordova, planning to work his way to France if he hadn't saved enough of the queen's present to pay for passage. However, providence intervened, stopping his flight and changing his fortune forever. As Columbus fled the court in Santa Fe, Luis de Santangel, financial advisor to the crown, persuaded Queen Isabella to change her mind at the last moment. He reasoned that the Enterprise, "offered so little risk yet *could prove of so great service to God and the exaltation of His Church*, not to speak of the very great increase and glory of her realms and kingdoms" (Ferdinand 43; emphasis added). The queen was so impressed with Santangel's enthusiasm and sincerity that she even offered to pledge her jewels in order to finance the Enterprise. The finance minister assured her that so great a sacrifice would not be necessary, and the monarchs finally approved the plan (Ferdinand 44). In the end, the crown granted Columbus everything he had asked for all to be conferred, of course, upon the successful completion of the Enterprise. Columbus' achievement was made all the more incredible by the fact that he was not even of Spanish birth.

After eight years of frustration, dating back to his first attempt to gain financial backing in Portugal, Christopher Columbus had a royal sponsor for his grand idea. Providence had finally blessed his dogged determination. He attributed the monarchs' capitulation to divine intercession, exclaiming, "I spent seven years here in your royal court discussing this subject with the leading persons in all the learned arts, and their conclusion was that all was in vain. That was the end, and they gave it up. But afterwards it all turned out just as our redeemer Jesus Christ had said, and as he had spoken earlier by the mouth of his holy prophets" (West and Kling 107). Christopher was now ready to embark upon the most celebrated sea voyage theretofore attempted in the history of the world, his Enterprise of the Indies.