

LESSON ONE – Church History: An Introduction

I. What is Church History?

A. Theological

The study of the Church is the study of the one people of God beginning with Adam and Eve and ending with the last person to be saved at the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean to suggest the church was in the Garden, but it does suggest the one people of God began in the Garden and those people have come from every tongue, tribe, nation, and people.

Jesus initiated the Church of the New Testament. It was formally brought about in the Book of Acts.

B. Historical

See further Handout – CHURCH HISTORY TIMELINE

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C. Geographical

II. Why Study Church History?

“You may have heard St. Jerome’s famous line, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” I would say the same thing about history and the Church: Ignorance of history is ignorance of the Church. It is only in history that we see how God has been working out salvation for his people through all of the ups and downs, raising up great saints, and overcoming many crises. God teaches us about how to be holy in the world by looking back at the witness of the Church.”¹

“Christianity earnestly speaking, is basically or fundamentally a historical religion. Church history is [a] matter of profound interest to the Christian who desires 1) to be enlightened concerning his spiritual ancestry, 2) to emulate the good examples of the past, and 3) to avoid errors that the Church has frequently made. The importance of the study of history cannot be over-emphasized as each generation is of necessity to or must know with regard to people, events, and notions of previous generations suitable or with the intention to produce wise choices or judgment in the present. [In addition,] **the prime value of church history** is that ‘it links the past factual data of the church gospel with the future proclamation and application of that gospel in a present synthesis that creates understanding of our great heritage and inspiration for its further proclamation and application. It has also shown that studying

Christian heritage **dispels the sense of loneliness and isolation** in an era that stresses the peripheral and sensational and also guides in the correction of existing evils within the church.”²

“While [we] bring some basic assumptions (and standards of historical research) to any historical study, studying and teaching church history is a profoundly theological enterprise.”³

Ten Reasons as To Why the Christian Should Study Church History

A. Church History reminds us to REMEMBER.

Remembering is vital. “Irish statesman Edmund Burke is often [quoted] as having said, “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.” Spanish philosopher George Santayana is credited with the aphorism, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” while British statesman Winston Churchill wrote, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”⁴

“Though there is much wisdom to glean from our long Christian history, undeniably, the Church has been involved in great sin throughout the years. Every church is made up of sinful men and women, and this sin can so often multiply. The horrors of the crusades or the persecution of minorities in communities across the Christian world, are just some of the many obvious transgressions. Though at times the Church was a great force for good with regards to the despicable practice of slavery, at times it supported and endorsed this endeavor. More locally, stories of abuse of power and manipulation can rock church families for decades. A better understanding of Church History, the good and the bad, will equip us to resist repeating the errors of our forebears.”⁵

“Throughout Scripture, rightly remembering is critical to faithfulness [and sanity]. As early as Eden, Eve listens to the serpent, succumbing to faulty interpretations of the past and of God’s revelation in particular.

[The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that “nothing new is under the Sun.” What has been, will be. Nothing in the present hasn’t already happened in the past.]

Throughout the Old Testament [I.e. Deuteronomy], God calls his people to recall and retell his gracious saving acts. Yet Israel repeatedly forgets, fails, and strays. The New Testament is also clear: Historical events are at the heart of the good news [1 Corinthians 15].

Our mission is to recount that history and call the nations to repent and believe in the Christ. Even the development of post-apostolic doctrine involved history. The early church fathers and councils had to determine, for example, what it meant to say with historical confidence that Jesus was both God and man.”⁶

B. Church History Reminds us of GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY Over All of Creation Past and Present.

"If you were to spend just one hour reading an accurate overview of church history, you might wonder how the church has continued to exist at all. From the Roman persecutions of the first three centuries to atrocities of today, the church has undergone tremendous opposition. The study of Church history reminds us of Christ's words: "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18, Cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 27)."⁷

"God's sovereignty is total. Scripture tells us this and history, again, shows this to be wonderfully true. What a blessing to know a God who keeps His people, and who holds all of creation in His hands! When we dig into the history of the Church, we see again and again how God worked to raise up men and women for the moments required. We see a history not of heroes, but of weak and feeble people being used by a powerful and mighty God. Church History is incredible because it allows us, time and again, to see the evidence of God at work."⁸

"A study of history enhances the believer's conviction there is a sovereign God who is working "all things" after the counsel of His own will. Individual pieces when viewed might give the impression the vessel is broken and fragmented but when put together just right and viewed from a divine point of view there is a wonderful vessel which is perfect and fit for the Master's use. God knows what He is doing and if every has His perspective they would agree. Sense would be made out of much that appears to be irrational."⁹

C. Church History reminds us her History Is A CORPORATE HISTORY

Every era of church life is part of a larger story. Each church is a legacy church. No church is an island unto itself.

"We are part of the story of the Church. Learning about our past helps us to understand our identity. Having received such a rich legacy from the Church—her saints, art, and learning—we are privileged to enter into this tradition, to appropriate it in our lives, and share it with others. We are links in a great chain that stretches back to Christ, who stands at the center of history, and continues on until the end of time. When we study Church history, we get perspective on where we are now and how we serve as a link to the future. It grounds our identity and purpose within this larger story, giving us a firm anchor in God's plan of salvation."¹⁰

No matter your nationality, ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status, if you're in Christ church history is the story of your true community and family. This belief runs contrary to how we often understand ourselves. My brothers and sisters from the 16th century, for example, compose my spiritual family. Though separated by time, we share one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:5). The bond we share in Christ is more real and enduring than the connection we have with our families in the flesh.

Although the church tends to draw theological lines and categories, every believer is a brother or sister in Christ, even those whom we believe are wrong.

“A serious study of “His-story” will kindle within the believer a spirit of toleration. Far too many believers feel they have exclusive possession on ultimate truth in all areas of biblical knowledge, which is not the case. Many denominations exist as a reaction or a response to other factors, which must be understood. There is room for respect to be shown for different conservative theological positions, all the while identifying the crucial doctrines and holding fast to the faith. The area of prophecy, for instance, has divided many sincere Christians over details which only time will prove which position is correct.”¹¹

“Humility and empathy are required. Before we too easily judge motives, prejudices, or intentions, we must ask how we would fare in others’ shoes. Honesty compels us to speak plainly when previous generations of Christians have erred (for example, anti-Semitism, persecution of religious minorities, slavery, white supremacy, and so on). But it should also cause us to speak with charity and empathy, recognizing we are not much different from them.”¹²

D. Church History Reminds us her history is **A GLOBAL STORY**

“If the people of God come from every tribe and nation,” Mark Noll writes, “so then should a history of the people of God try to take in every tribe and nation.” Church history can’t be limited to Western or English-speaking peoples. One of the great stories of the past 50 years is the spread of Christianity throughout the Global South. This story has marked the return of the faith to regions that had been reached with the gospel in the first millennium.

E. Church History Reminds us of **GOD’S PROMISE TO KEEP** His church

“Though the Church is made up of men and women, it is kept by the sovereign God of history. Christianity is a historical faith, and our Scriptures are historical texts. In the New Testament, God promises to keep His Church. He promises that the Church will endure, until Christ returns.

As we explore Church History, we see not only that this promise was kept, but just how wonderfully God kept it. In times of trial, error and loss, God has been faithful to His people. When we look at the long story of the Church, we see that glorious truth again and again.”¹³

“To study church history is to study God's unbending faithfulness. Christians must regularly reflect upon this truth in a world where there is increasing persecution of the church and the future seems uncertain. Like the psalmist, we must "recount all of [God's] wonderful deeds" to remind ourselves that He will never leave us or forsake us (Ps. 9:1; Heb. 13:5).”¹⁴

“Church history gives us reason for optimism.”¹⁵

F. Church History ENCOURAGES HER PEOPLE TO PERSEVERE IN PERSECUTION

“By studying Church history, we also gain perspective on the many trials Christians must face before Christ fully inaugurates His Kingdom.”¹⁶

“No one can read church history without being impressed by the fact that multiplied thousands have given their lives for their Christian beliefs. The Lord Jesus Christ said that the world would hate the Christian and that Christians would suffer much for their faith, and many have taken this word as great comfort into their martyrs' deaths.”

G. Church history reminds of how the history of THE CHURCH IS A MISSIONAL HISTORY.

The church is ever expanding until it covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Church history is primarily a record of how Christ's disciples throughout the last 2,000 years have taken the gospel to the nations in obedience to the Great Commission to make disciples and instruct them in the Lord's commands. Church history is also a record of how individuals, groups and movements have failed in their faithfulness to the Great Commission.

H. Church History Reminds us how THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT Doesn't Happen In A vacuum

Understanding the historical circumstances surrounding doctrinal formulation should make us better theologians. Truth might be new to you, but truth has always been and will be.

“Church history enables the Christian to see the development of doctrine throughout the years within Christianity. This will enable the student to determine more accurately those doctrinal systems that are more closely related to the Bible and gain personal convictions on the mainstream of Christian doctrine. Thus, a study of church councils and the theological thinking of various men becomes important. Church history will also give one a tolerance of others who do not agree with him doctrinally.”

“For most of our history, the church has maintained the “rule of faith.” This means that we have already settled on the major doctrines of the faith, whether it be the Trinity, the divine inspiration of Scripture, original sin, the Incarnation of Christ, or the atoning death of Christ and his resurrection. The confessions of the church (e.g. the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, and the Westminster and Belgic Confessions) helpfully summarize the church's rule of faith for us.”¹⁷

“God's Word is meant to be interpreted within the community of faith. When an individual just runs away from the church and doesn't listen to instruction from others, he usually starts a cult. We must interpret the Bible as we bounce ideas and interpretations off one another. And we

don't just bounce ideas off of those around us. We use the larger community of faith including the writings of Christian brothers and sisters who have passed away."¹⁸

Theocast calls this, "Basement Theology." Basement Theology is independent and isolated "new" truth springing from one's own personal study. It does not and cannot stand up under the scrutiny of biblical [meta-narrative], historical [creeds, councils, and confessions] or contemporary [peer review].

I. Church History Reminds us to **DEFEND AGAINST HERESIES AND CULTS**

"While this is closely related to doctrine, it should be kept distinct, for there has been a development of heresy throughout the history of the church. Many of the heresies that confront the church today are merely repetitions of earlier heresies met and exposed by the early church. There continues to be a great need today for men to be able to distinguish truth from error."

"Familiarity with the history and theology of the early ecumenical councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451), for example, helps to protect individuals and churches from unwittingly believing ancient Trinitarian and christological heresies. Furthermore, careful reflection upon revivalistic movements such as the Second Great Awakening warns us not to abandon biblical ministry for manipulative methods and quick numerical growth. The study of church history, therefore, preserves both orthodoxy (right doctrine) and orthopraxy (right practice)."¹⁹

"Take Athanasius. He fought a vigilant battle in the 4th century against the teachings of Arius, who denied that the Son is essentially equal to the Father. In the mind of Arius, Christ was neither fully God nor fully man, but belonged to an entirely different category. Athanasius argued that only by the real Godhead coming into union with the full manhood in Christ could fallen men be made right with God. In other words, Jesus can only save if he is God. Given that the Jehovah's Witnesses are modern-day, self-conscious followers of Arius, understanding Athanasius' arguments (especially in his book *On the Incarnation*) is extremely valuable today."²⁰

J. Church History Reminds us to **RESIST BEING CAPTIVATED BY FADS**

"Many churches today are desperately trying to overhaul their image to be more hip. Churches seek to impress by embracing cultural fads of style, technology, music, movies and even shock-jock approaches to sexuality."²¹

Church history helps us guard against reading our culture onto the biblical text.

"Church history helps us see how other cultures have interpreted the Bible and see where some of our biases and prejudices pop up. For example, the topics of homosexuality and gender roles are rather controversial subjects today but almost completely agreed upon throughout most of church history. If we are teaching about these subjects in new ways, this should cause us to ask if we are reading our culture onto the Bible and making it say what we think is important today instead of what it actually says. Another example is that in America many Evangelicals think

drinking alcohol is sinful. Seeing that this is a unique idea in post-prohibition America (and is not thought to be sinful in almost all other times and countries in church history) helps us put this issue in perspective.”²²

¹ <https://sjvlaydivision.org/study-church-history/>

² <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/Iwati/article/view/210138>

³ Matthew J. Hall <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/13-reasons-we-need-church-history/>

⁴ <https://liberalarts.vt.edu/magazine/2017/history-repeating.html>

⁵ September 4, 2020 <https://ivpbooks.com/blog/10-reasons-to-read-about-church-history.html>

⁶ Matthew J. Hall <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/13-reasons-we-need-church-history/>

⁷ William Boekestein <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/six-benefits-of-studying-church-history>

⁸ September 4, 2020 <https://ivpbooks.com/blog/10-reasons-to-read-about-church-history.html>

⁹ <https://www.ichthuspublications.com/blogs/news/10-reasons-all-christians-should-study-church-history>

¹⁰ <https://sjvlaydivision.org/study-church-history/>

¹¹ <https://www.ichthuspublications.com/blogs/news/10-reasons-all-christians-should-study-church-history>

¹² Matthew J. Hall <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/13-reasons-we-need-church-history/>

¹³ September 4, 2020 <https://ivpbooks.com/blog/10-reasons-to-read-about-church-history.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/why-study-church-history>

¹⁵ <https://www.knoxseminary.edu/blog/5-reasons-to-study-church-history>

¹⁶ <https://sjvlaydivision.org/study-church-history/>

¹⁷ <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/why-study-church-history/>

¹⁸ <https://gcdiscipleship.com/article-feed/2015/08/04/9-basic-reasons-to-study-church-history>

¹⁹ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/why-study-church-history>

²⁰ William Boekestein <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/six-benefits-of-studying-church-history>

²¹ William Boekestein <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/six-benefits-of-studying-church-history>

²² <https://gcdiscipleship.com/article-feed/2015/08/04/9-basic-reasons-to-study-church-history>

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