Church History Overview

slide – how I used to see church history
- my whole view of the church and my place in it was radically altered by studying church history in seminary
- excited to share an overview of that history with you
- first… the reason we study history…

Why study church history?
• Humbles us
  o From church history, we learn that no church in the last 1900 years can claim to be the exclusive descendent of the 1st century church
    ▪ the history of the church is like the branches of an oak tree
    ▪ there’s not one true branch going all the way back to the trunk, with all other branches being deviants
    ▪ there’s a plethora of unique, diverse branches that all trace back to the trunk
  o Therefore, there is not one “right” way to do church – there are many diverse, godly attempts to do church – all with strengths and weaknesses
    ▪ One of my favorite parts of church history was discovering there’s really good stuff in Eastern Orthodoxy, RCC, Luthernism, Quaker movement, Charismatic movement – we aren’t the one, true church! So many other valid branches to learn from.
  o Related humbling truth we discover: every movement in the church has been influenced by church history and world events more than the participants ever realized
    ▪ Biggest reason Lutheranism took off in Germany: not b/c Luther was so awesome, but b/c a guy named Gutenberg invented the printing press!
    ▪ 2nd Great Awakening in America in early 1800’s in America – the beginning of revivals and massive growth of Baptist and Methodist congregations – it was partly driven not by theology but by Romanticism – a whole philosophical movement sweeping the Western world and emphasizing emotions and intuition.
    o The more you study church history, the more you are humbled by the realization that we are ALL finite, fallen humans trying as best we can to follow Jesus while being pushed and pulled by the currents of our society in ways we’re not even aware of!
    o Read Gonzalez pg xvii (orange)
• Warns us
  o Our decisions today can have major, unexpected consequences for millennia!
  o A medieval pope calling an army of Christians to take Jerusalem back from Muslims – has fueled 1000 years of hostility b/w Muslims and Christians that still makes evangelism to Muslims hard today
  o A German monk named Luther posting a piece of paper on a church door listing what he thought was wrong with RC led to the Reformation - which radically changed religion, politics, and philosophy throughout the Western world
  o Church history puts us on our knees in prayer whenever we face a major decision b/c it reminds us that no one can foresee all the consequences of their decisions – we NEED God desperately to protect us and lead us
• Guides us
  o It provides guidance in evaluating beliefs and ideas
Helps us spot fads, novelties, and rehashed errors
  - If someone’s advocating a theological position that runs contrary to what the church has believed for the last 2000 yrs, we ought to be awfully careful
  - More than likely, that new idea will simply be a repeat of some old idea the church has wrestled with before
  - E.g. when Jehovah’s Witnesses burst on the scene in America in the late 1800’s teaching that there’s no Trinity – there’s God the Father – the one absolute God who created Jesus, a lesser God – that’s just Arianism – a heresy the church dealt with decisively 1700 years ago! Wasn’t new at all!
- Church history also guides us by helping us spot the historical forces that have shaped our church
  - When we think about how can GBC become more racially diverse – we can’t answer that question accurately w/o studying the last 200 years of racial relations in America or w/o studying the history of the black church in America – we’ll actually study some of that the 3rd week
- Studying the past helps you make better decisions in the present
  - Encourages us
    - There are going to be a lot of tragic things we talk about in this study b/c there are a lot of tragedies in the history of the church – some inflicted on us, some inflicted by us
      - crusades, inquisition, heresies, divisions…
    - And yet despite all of that, the church still exists and is still growing!
      - The church continues despite all the mistakes Christians have made
    - That’s so encouraging!

**Ground Rules**

- This is PROTESTANT church history
  - There are many branches of church history we simply don’t have time to cover: Eastern Orthodox, African, etc.
  - My presentation of history will be biased!
    - Historical facts are neutral - unbiased
    - But every presentation of history is inherently biased by the presenter: what people and events I include and how I explain them is colored by my perspective
  - E.g. Roman Catholic believers would not agree with how I talk about the Reformation
- Historical transition came gradually
  - Even though we will talk about specific dates, changes usually took decades
  - As a result, key leaders rarely had any idea of how big an impact they’d have – e.g. Luther nailing protests on a church door had no idea what that would launch
- Doctrine developed only as need arose
  - Dozens of theology textbooks on my shelf; GBC has a 6-page long doctrinal statement
  - That’s not how it’s always been!
  - That doctrinal development only occurred when threats forced the church to clarify and carefully explain what it believed.
    - Paul doesn’t clarify the church’s relationship to the Law till Judaizers attack
    - Early church doesn’t clarify Trinitarianism till Arianism etc. attack
  - Doesn’t mean the early church didn’t believe Jesus was God – means they didn’t feel the need to write long explanations of those beliefs until they were challenged
- Beliefs of past leaders must be analyzed in their context
E.g. You cannot go back to 300 AD and ask if Augustine was a RC or Protestant – those words and debates didn’t exist in his day. Some of what he wrote seems to favor RC, some Protestant.

- Don’t want to be anachronistic – force ancient writers to answer our debates, questions, and issues – that’s not appropriate
- We must analyze their writings in their own context – in view of the questions and issues of their day

- I am NOT a historian… learn from my teachers
  - I’m not an expert in church history! Don’t rely on my or what I teach – go deeper – learn from the experts I learned from
  - “Church History in Plain Language” by Bruce Shelley
  - “The Story of Christianity” Vols 1 & 2 by Justo Gonzalez

**Church History Outline**

1. Ancient Church (Pentecost till 600)
   - Apostolic Age (Pentecost till 100)
   - Church Fathers (100 till 150)
   - Apologists (150 till 300)
   - Theologians (300 till 600)

2. Medieval Church (600 till 1500) *note – not “mid-evil”!!*
   - Catholic Medieval (600 till 1054)
   - Roman Catholic Medieval (1054 till 1500)

3. Modern Church (1500 till 1900)
   - Reformation (1500 till 1700)
   - Enlightenment (1700 till 1900)

4. Postmodern Church (1900 till today)

**Divisions of the Church**

- “Catholic” = united – no denominations
  - 1 overall church
  - Big cities might have many house-churches, but all part of 1 church in that city
- 451 - Council of Chalcedon – disagreement over how you explain the unity of Jesus’ divine and human natures leads to first split
  - Coptic/Ethiopic = sometimes called the Oriental Orthodox Church
  - Large in Northern Africa and the Middle East today – ~76M members today
  - Heavily persecuted
- 1054 - Great Schism
  - divides the Latin speaking Roman church from the Greek speaking Orthodox church
  - had argued and butted heads for centuries, but broke and damned each other in 1054
- 1517 – Luther nails a list of criticisms against the RCC on a church door in Germany
  - No one realized a Reformation was beginning – it started small and quiet
  - But in the decades that followed – led to biggest split in Western church
  - Roman church formalized what we think of as the RCC
  - Protestants launched multiple new reformation movements including…
    - Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, Anabaptist, etc.
Ancient Church

1. Apostolic Age (Pentecost – 100AD)
   - This is the age of the New Testament letters.
   - The apostles:
     - lead the various churches
     - wrote letters that came to be viewed as scripture
     - trained up the leaders who would follow them in the age of the Church Fathers
   - Won’t spend much time here since this is the one you already know best!

2. Church Fathers (100 – 150 AD)

Issues facing the church
- Lack of a NT canon to guide the church
  - New Testament books not yet collected
  - letters gradually circulating around Roman empire
  - no one is addressing the question of canonization yet b/c heresies are not yet opposing NT books or proposing new ones
- As in the apostles’ days:
  - False teachers continued to threaten the church
    - Beginnings of theological heresies that would grow
  - Envy and pride continued to divide Christian communities
  - Persecution of Christians
    - At first by Jews only, as in NT era
      - Xianity too small and too Jewish to attract Roman attention
    - As Gentile converts grew and Judaism shrunk, Rome took notice
      - Judaism on decline b/c Jerusalem destroyed & nation dispersed by 134
      - biggest issue = refusal to participate in emperor worship
    - Persecution neither constant nor widespread yet

Who led the Response? Church Fathers
- Writers and bishops (head elder / leader) of the churches directly following the apostles
- In the West (Latin Fathers)
  - Clement, bishop of Rome
- In the East (Greek Fathers)
  - Ignatius, bishop of Antioch
  - Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna

Characteristics of these Bishops
- Did not claim to be apostles; writings not considered scripture
  - They may have known the apostles well, but they were not themselves apostles, and knew it
  - Despite that, they did possess authority in the churches, generally serving as the head elder of a city = the bishop
- Primarily pastoral writings, not theological or apologetic. They wrote in order to:
  - Warn of false teachers
  - Encourage perseverance in suffering, morality amidst a corrupt culture, and unity among believers
- Kept Jesus at the center of everything
  o Worship services were joyful and focused on Jesus’ death, resurrection, and return
  o Worship centered on celebrating communion together
- Theology not developed or systematized because false teachers also lacked developed theology
  o Remember, theology rarely develops apart from a threat to the church
- They joyfully embraced the persecution and martyrdom of this time period
  o E.g. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna – discipled by John the Apostle
    ▪ Arrested by Roman authorities at age of 86
    ▪ Commanded to curse Christ and worship the emperor, “86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”
    ▪ Burned at the stake and then stabbed with a spear

3. Apologists (150 – 300 AD)

Issues Facing the Church
- Increased Roman persecution
  o Increases as Christianity grows throughout the empire
  o Occurs b/c Romans view Christians to be immoral, foolish, and stubborn
    ▪ immoral:
      • cannibalistic (eating body and blood of Jesus)
      • incestuous (marrying your “brother” or “sister”)
    ▪ foolish: believing in “ridiculous” things like resurrection
      • Christianity tended to attract the lowest members of society – the outcast, slave, poor – so the elite tended to look down on it as uneducated
    ▪ stubborn:
      • refused syncretism (blending religious views)
      • accused Christians of being “atheists” b/c they rejected all other gods
      • Romans didn’t have a problem with claim that Jesus is Lord… cared about claim that Jesus “alone” is Lord
      • crux issue: emperor worship – woven into fabric of society – refusal meant rebellion
  o Still periodic in nature – not all the time
    ▪ worst under emperors Severus, Decius, and Diocletian who tried to annihilate Christianity throughout the empire
      • Xians beheaded, burned & boiled alive, thrown to lions and gladiators, drowned, clubbed to death
      • Those not killed had “their eyes gouged out, their hands cut off, their feet amputated, their noses or ears severed”
      • Christian men enslaved to work in mines; Xian women made sex slaves
- Increased Theological Threat
  o From outside - Gnosticism
    ▪ Christian vocab with non-Christian definitions
    ▪ Denied Christian essentials
    ▪ Salvation through secret knowledge
  o From inside - Marcionism
    ▪ An anti-Jewish, anti-material Christian heresy that threw out the OT as useless and only accepted a limited number of our NT books
Who Led the Response: The Apologists
- Writers who defended Christianity against false accusations, Roman intellectuals, and heretics
- The apologists wrote in order to:
  o Gain toleration for Christianity from the Roman society.
    ▪ Refute false charges by explaining what exactly Christianity is.
  o Defend the faith against the false teachings of Gnosticism & Marcionism
- Western (Latin)
  o Irenaeus
  o Tertullian
- Eastern (Greek)
  o Justin Martyr – foremost apologist
  o Clement of Alexandria
  o Origen

The Church’s Response
- Gradual recognition of the NT canon to counter heretical books
  o By 200AD the formalized NT included the 4 Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s epistles
  o The final list as we have it grew slowly – not be completed till the early 300’s
  o So the NT was never bigger than your NT – it started smaller and slowly grew
- Creation of the earliest creeds to define the faith
  o Started out as baptismal formulas to make sure people knew the essence of the faith
  o Most famous example = Apostles’ Creed
    ▪ Don’t know who wrote it, probably not the actual Apostles
    ▪ Don’t know when it was written or what the exact text was – different versions
    ▪ *read*
- Rise of the bishop and Apostolic Succession
  o The office of a single bishop over each city → became the last line of defense
  o Authority based on a direct discipleship succession from an Apostle
    ▪ John → Polycarp → Irenaeus → etc, etc.
  o So now we’ve moved from each church led by a group of elders to a whole city worth of churches led by 1 guy who can trace his spiritual lineage to an Apostle
  o To us, this looks like a bad idea… but it was done for good reason – protect the church from heresy when there was not yet a completed NT!
- New apologetics wedding Greek philosophy and Scripture
  o Especially Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen
  o They employed Greek philosophy to help them bridge the gap between Biblical truth & Roman culture
    ▪ showed how Christianity agrees with and explains much that Greek philosophers had been writing about for Centuries – especially Plato and the Stoics
  o This wedding of Biblical truth to Greek philosophy has shaped many of the church’s core beliefs, in both good and bad ways, for the last two millennia
    ▪ e.g. devaluation of the physical body in Christian thought
    ▪ e.g. reinterpretation of the land promises to Israel as metaphorical
- Development of the major churches: Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome
  o Jerusalem in decline
  o Big 4 churches not always unified – grow more competitive with time
- Reverence of martyrs
Not everyone stayed faithful when persecution came
Those who were faithful were revered
Those who were unfaithful were shamed
Led to decades of debate: What should we do with Xians who recant under persecution?
  - Some said restore them if they repent, others said or excommunicate them

Read quote (blue) from Gonzalez pg 101 on ordinary Christian life in this era

4. Theologians (300 – 600 AD)
- Something incredible happens in the first few decades of this era that changes EVERYTHING
  - During the reign of Diocletian – when the church faces the worst ever persecution
  - Actually 4 emperors simultaneously – divided empire into 4 – coexisted peacefully…
  - For a few years – then Civil War broke out as it always did
  - One of the 4 claimed to have a vision where he heard Jesus promise him victory
  - = Constantine – sure enough… he won the whole empire
  - And as soon as he did, he formally approved Christianity
  - Date = 313AD – Christianity now allowed and honored as a valid religion
  - Two generations later, emperor Theodosius made Xianity THE religion of the empire
- Hard to overestimate the effect of that rapid change
  - Before Constantine, the state was always the enemy of Xianity
  - With Constantine, the state became the benefactor of Xianity

Issues Facing the Church
- Massive New Opportunities
  - Tens of thousands of new converts practically overnight!
  - Ability to gather the leaders of the church to resolve debates and clarify Xianity
  - Ability to launch missions to the barbarian tribes
- Massive New Challenges
  - Increased secularism
    - All those new converts overwhelm limited discipleship abilities
    - Lots of pagans join the church just for the political cred
    - Christianity becomes characterized by wealth and power instead of humility and poverty
  - Increased opportunity for heresy to develop & spread
    - W/o sufficient discipleship, congregations are easy targets for heresy
    - Some heresies succeed in swaying political leaders who then persecute faithful Christian leaders
    - most serious: Arianism = Jesus is a lesser god created by the One Almighty God ("there was a time when He was not")

Who led the Response? The Theologians
- Bishops & writers who clarified core Christian doctrines in the face of various heretical teachings and secular threats
  - Athanasius (vs Arianism)
  - Three Cappadocians (vs Arianism)
  - John Chrysostom (vs secularism)
  - Jerome (who translated the Bible into Latin so the Western church could read it)
  - **Augustine
    - vs Manichees – taught that there is no freewill
o vs Donatists – used violence to enforce their view of Xianity
o vs Pelagianism – taught that salvation is by works: learning to overcome sin
o Wrote “Confessions” and “City of God” as the Roman empire collapsed

The Church’s Response
- To Heresy: Church Councils
  o Before Constantine, all the bishops could not gather in one place to work out their beliefs – that would be far too dangerous – round them all up and kill them!
  o Constantine suddenly makes councils possible… and even calls the first himself!
  o Nicea in 325AD
    ▪ Arianism had taken off in Africa – threatened to divide the church
    ▪ Constantine was not ok with division in his empire – called all bishops to Nicea
    ▪ Addressed a lot of issues such as what to do with Christians who buckled under persecution
    ▪ But focused on Arianism – embraced Trinitarianism
      - read Nicean creed
    ▪ Unfortunately, didn’t sufficiently define terms, and Arianism came raging back when the next emperor, a fan of Arianism, threw the political weight of the empire behind the heresy – biblical Christianity was almost destroyed
    ▪ Fortunately, he died before he could succeed
  o After him another council was needed: Constantinople in 381AD
    ▪ Thanks to the tireless work of Athanasius and Three Cappadocians… clarified the Nicene creed in favor of Trinitarianism and outlawed Arianism
  o Chalcedon in 451AD → Christology
    ▪ Did Jesus have 1 unified nature, or 2 separate natures?
    ▪ Led to first church split in 553 AD → Ethiopic & Coptic church splits off

- To Secularism:
  o Many withdraw to monastic life
    ▪ believe holiness comes through separation from the world & its corruptions
    ▪ first hermits living in solitude in the deserts of Egypt
    ▪ then organized monastic communities – separate male and female
    ▪ many of the great Theologians either were monks or were taught by monks
  o Bishops given more power to enforce orthodoxy
    ▪ when discipleship doesn’t keep up with growth more power gets vested in a few
    ▪ and as the empire and the church get blended together, the political hierarchy of the state begins to work its way into the church – the church begins to look and function more and more like the empire!

That’s where we’ll leave off tonight…
• things were about to change – the stability of the Roman Empire was collapsing and a new world order was on the way
• we’ll pick it up next week with the medieval era