

## PRE-REFORMATION HISTORY

### Lesson 1 – Why Study Church History?

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Ten reasons why a course in church history is essential to your Christian education:

#### 1. Because most Christians are clueless about church history.

- Most American evangelicals know very little about the history of Christianity.
- Even in Reformed circles, a knowledge of church history usually only goes back to the Reformation.
- But the history of the Gospel spans back long before that. The 1,500 years between Pentecost and the Reformation include many significant people and events, whom God used in strategic ways to advance His kingdom purposes.
- The church today has a great deal to learn from the early church; and we do ourselves a great disservice if we simply choose to remain ignorant.

#### 2. Because God is at work in history. Conversely, history is a testimony to God's sovereign providence.

- It really is *His story*, in the sense that everything is working according to His plans, and He is orchestrating all of it for His eternal glory (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20–28).
- **Isaiah 46:9–10**: “Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

#### 3. Because Christ said He would build His church. To study church history is to watch His promise unfold.

- **Matthew 16:15–18** — He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”
- **Ephesians 2:19–22** — So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.
- **cf. Isaiah 40:8** — The grass withers, the flowers fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

#### 4. Because church history is our history as members of His body.

- When we study the history of the church, we are not merely studying people, places and events, we are studying the history of the Bride of Christ. And we are part of that bride. So when we study church history, we come to see who we are, where we've come from, and how we fit into flow of God's kingdom work in the world. Jesus Himself cares deeply about His bride (cf. Revelation 1–3), and we should too.
- **Ephesians 5:25–27** — Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the

washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

- **Revelation 19:7** — “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”

#### **5. Because the truth has been preserved and passed down through history.**

- When we study church history we not only confirm the fact that what we believe today is what the apostolic church believed; but we also see how the truth was preserved throughout history.
- **From Christ to the Apostles: John 15:26–27** — “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you *will* testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.
- **From the Apostles to Their Disciples: 2 Timothy 2:2** — “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”
- **To Future Generations of Non-Eyewitnesses: 1 Peter 1:8** — “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.” (cf. 2 Peter 1:19–21)

#### **6. Because, just as we are encouraged by the history of truth, we are also warned by the history of error.**

- The New Testament is full of warnings about false teaching, both refuting it in the first century and warning that it would come in the centuries that followed. When we study church history, we not only learn the history of the truth but also the history of error. We see where the cults originated; and we have the benefit of seeing orthodoxy defended and the truth being preserved.
- **Acts 20:28–30** — “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.
- **1 Timothy 4:1** — But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men* who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.
- **2 Timothy 4:3** — For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.
- **Jude 17–18** — But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were saying to you, “In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.”

#### **7. Because we have much to learn from those who walked with God (cf. Hebrews 11)**

*Regarding Faithfulness in Spite of Persecution:*

- **John 15:18–20** — “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”
- **2 Timothy 3:1, 10–13** — But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ... Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, *and* sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium *and* at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me! Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed *from bad* to worse, deceiving and being deceived.
- **Hebrews 12:1–3** — Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

#### *Regarding an Eagerness for Christ’s Return*

- **1 Peter 4:7** — “The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober *spirit* for the purpose of prayer.”
- **2 Peter 3:3–4** — Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with *their* mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.”
- **1 John 2:18–19** — Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

#### *Regarding Faithfulness to the Gospel*

- **2 Timothy 4:7–8** — I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

### **8. Because we likewise have much to learn from those who failed at various points.**

- Those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.
- In church history, we see examples of all kinds of spiritual failure. There are those who fell into heresy, those who gave way to corruption, those who denied the faith, and those who fell morally. The lives of such individuals serve as a warning for us.
- **cf. 2 Corinthians 10:6 – 12** — “Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.’ Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as

some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

- Church History is proof that spiritual failure can come quickly with devastating results.
- **cf. Galatians 1:6–9** — I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

## 9. Because being a faithful apologist often includes being a good historian.

- The New Testament calls all Christians, and elders especially, to be able to defend the faith.
- **Titus 1:8–10** — [An elder must be] “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”
- **1 Peter 3:15** — “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence”
- This defense is primarily built on the Scriptures. But church history also serves as a valuable (albeit secondary) apologetic tool.
- *For example:*
  - Knowing a little church history quickly silences silly allegations against Christianity (like those made by *The Da Vinci Code*)
  - Knowing a little church history is especially helpful in witnessing to Roman Catholics, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of other pseudo-Christian cults
  - Knowing a little church history is even helpful in defending key areas of doctrine— showing that a contemporary evangelical understanding of Scripture has not deviated from the teachings of the apostolic church

## 10. Because history helps twenty-first century pastors have a right perspective about their own place in the church age.

- To realize that we are not the first generation to “get it right,” and to remember that earlier generations of Christians (especially those of the first few centuries) lived much closer to the times of the apostles – thus, we should treat their writings seriously and take the time to learn from them
- To realize that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, our local congregation, or even the evangelical movement as it exists today; the history of Christianity spans two millennia, of which we are but a momentary blip
- To realize that what God is doing in the American church today is only a small part of what He has done in the world since Pentecost; and that He could just as easily work through another nation to reach the world
- To realize that every generation of believers is greatly affected by the time and culture in which they live, such that they themselves do not even realize the affects; and then, in turn, to ask ourselves what affect our culture has on our own application of biblical truth
- To remember that Christ is the Lord of the church in every age; and to remind ourselves of what a great privilege it is to minister in His service

\* **Note** that there are limits on our study of church history:

1. **Selection:** Church history, in its truest sense, would include the history of every member of the invisible church. We are only able to discuss a few members of the visible church—men who have distinguished themselves in some way to us.
2. **Objectivity:** We all come to history with preconceived ideas. While we do our best to uncover the facts, we naturally view those facts through the lens of our faith. (Note the difference between *pre-modern*, *modern*, and *post-modern* approaches to history.)
3. **Pride:** The temptation might be to think that “modern” is better; that we have nothing to learn from history. But the truth is we have much to learn.