

1

INTRODUCTION

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (Rom. 15:4)

Church history, or the history of Christianity, is the story of the movement begun by Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament, and continuing more than two thousand years to the present. Church history deals with the people who have professed to be disciples of Christ through the ages. It is the story of challenges they have faced, and the victories as well as the setbacks they have encountered. Church history is about institutions that have arisen, and the good they have done as well as the harm they have caused. It is about doctrines that have served as guideposts for the church, including those based soundly upon Scripture, as well as those based upon human tradition.

The Value of Church History

History, of course, is not the final word in our search for truth. Only Scripture can be our guide in spiritual matters. History can, however, offer some perspective that can be helpful. A study of church history can be valuable for several reasons.

The study of church history can serve as an aid to understanding the present. Our understanding of the present is aided by some knowledge of the past. The study of church history provides perspective for understanding such things as the presence of denominationalism, differing beliefs and practices among professing believers, and church problems and issues.

The study of church history can provide some perspective on how we approach the Scriptures. While all professing Christians claim depen-

dence upon the Bible, history shows there have been wide differences in how the Bible is understood and applied. In our study of Scripture and our efforts to know its teaching on any subject, our priority is always to study the Bible for ourselves. It may also be profitable, however, to know that any question we may bring to God's word has already been asked before. Certainly, different and contradictory answers to the same question cannot all be right. At the same time, it can be helpful to know how others have approached the question, learning from them not only how they were right, but also how they were mistaken.

The study of church history can encourage us to examine what we believe. Just as the noble-minded Bereans searched the Scriptures, so should we (Acts 17:11). Our examination should include our own assumptions and beliefs as well as those of others. It should always be done in the light of Scripture.

The study of church history often motivates and inspires. The study of church history can offer edification, inspiration, and zeal for the Christian's spiritual life. The knowledge of the past gives instruction and hope (Rom. 15:4). Examples of noble lives and characters who were committed and sacrificial in their quest for the truth are encouraging, even if we do not agree with their conclusions. History is the story of people, many of whom demonstrated great faith and character. History can help us be more humble and grateful to God for who we are and what we believe, in part because of the examples of godliness that it has recorded for us.

The study of church history can also serve as a warning. Along with the many noble examples from the past, church history also shows that there have been many failures and wrong turns, reminding us of instruction found in Scripture. God's laws in Old Testament times were to be passed along and taught to the next generation, so they would "not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was

not faithful to God” (Ps. 78:5–8). Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of his day because they had forgotten those lessons, saying to them, “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers” (Matt. 23:32). Stephen leveled the same charge against his accusers: “As your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51). Events of the past were preserved in Scripture “as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). So it is with the history of Christianity since New Testament times. It helps us see the path of departure from the New Testament pattern.

The study of church history demonstrates the historical character of the faith. The story that runs through the Bible is a story set within history. It is the story of how God the Creator has stepped into history and acted on behalf of his people. When God gave his commandments and made his covenant with Israel, he said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3). The story of Jesus Christ begins with the historical fact that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The gospel message was based on that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1). So, to study the history of the church through the ages can serve as a reminder to us of the historical character of the faith we hold.

Major Periods in Church History

The division of history into major periods is in many respects an artificial and perhaps subjective exercise. History is, of course, a continuous flow of human events, ideas, and movements over time. The study of history, however, can help us discover causes and effects that connect those events and movements. Often there are major ideas, worldviews, or other defining principles that set one major period apart from others. Periodization can be a useful way to help us better understand and remember the major events of the past. The same is true for the study of church history. Generally, church history may be divided into the following major periods.

Ancient Church History (5 B.C.–A.D. 500)

The ancient period begins with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the establishment of Christianity in the first century as recorded in the New Testament. The church grew up in this period around the Mediterranean within the Greco-Roman world. Much of what we know of this period comes from early Christian writers sometimes called the Church Fathers. These writers defended the faith in the face of external opposition, and they responded to the threat of heresy. The end of persecution and the church's reconciliation with the Roman state under Constantine not only resulted in the church being dominated by the state, but ushered in a period of doctrinal controversy that resulted in the great universal councils and in the development of creeds. The church became increasingly centralized and institutionalized, a process that included the gradual development of the power of the bishop of Rome. One reaction to these trends in this period was the rise of the monastic movement, as many sought to recover a greater sense of spirituality.

Medieval Church History (500–1500)

This period extends approximately from the fall of the Roman Empire to just prior to the Protestant Reformation. During this time the center of Christianity shifted into northern and western Europe, as Charlemagne established his empire and made peace with the church. The Roman Catholic Church reached the apex of its power from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. It was the age of crusades and gothic cathedrals, as well as the age of an intellectual approach to Catholic theology known as scholasticism. During the late medieval period (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), many sought to reform a church that had become increasingly corrupt.

Reformation Church History (1500–1650)

The period of the Protestant Reformation began as the calls for reform resulted in a general revolt and the eventual formation of Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist protestant churches. The Catho-

lic Counter-Reformation resulted in reform efforts within the Catholic Church, through the efforts of the Council of Trent and the Jesuits. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) ended an era of religious warfare and acknowledged a divided church.

Modern Church History (1650–present)

Since the end of the Reformation period, the modern period has been characterized by the spread and growth of denominationalism. It also brought a new emphasis on rationalism that has at times both redefined and rejected Christianity. Revival movements throughout this period have arisen to counter the liberal trends. Ecumenical movements have sought cooperation and unity among the different denominations. Religious “awakenings” in America provided an environment for the growth of movements committed to religious unity through the restoration of primitive Christianity.

Sources for the Study of Church History

Cairns, Earle E. *Christianity Through the Centuries*. 3rd Edition, Revised and Expanded. 1954, 1981. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

Cross, F. L. and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Third Edition. 1954, 1974. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Ferguson, Everett. *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Second Edition. 1997. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

Tucker, Ruth A. *Parade of Faith: A Biographical History of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Woodbridge, John D. and Frank A. James. *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013.

Study Questions

1. In what ways does the biblical faith reflect an historical perspective?
2. Discuss how Scripture calls believers to pay attention to lessons from history (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6).
3. In what ways might the study of church history contribute to a better understanding of the present?
4. How can a knowledge of church history help us in our study of Scripture?
5. What have you found motivational from your own study of history?
6. Discuss the benefit of learning from positive examples from the past, as well as the value of learning from past failures.
7. In your view, what is the chief benefit of having some knowledge of church history?