

## Church History, Lesson 14: Lessons Learned from Church History

### 43. Summary of Church History

- a. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Church is born. The book of Acts records the first 30 years of church history; but the books of Acts abruptly ends, leaving us with “to be continued.”
- b. The Church continues, and by A.D. 70 with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Church is forced out of Jerusalem to stand on its own two legs as a religion separate from Judaism. These first 300 years are marked by a small letter c - “catholic,” which means the Church becoming united as one. Five factors cause the Church to become “catholic”: (1) the spread of the Church in the Roman Empire; (2) the persecution of the Church; (3) the growing pains in growth and organization; (4) the need for a recognized set of Scriptures, which we call the canon; (5) and the need for a common creed and doctrine to teach and guard truth.
- c. The first 300 years lead to 313, a fateful day for the Church in which the Roman Emperor, Constantine, is converted to Christianity. His conversion marks the beginning of the Christian Roman Empire. As such, the Church is not only given legal religious status, but, several years later, is proclaimed the religion of the Empire. During this time, the great doctrinal controversies of the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the nature of man are hammered out in creeds.
- d. All is going well, or so it seems. The year 590 marks a turning point in church history. When Gregory I (called Gregory the Great) is appointed bishop of Rome. Pope Gregory asserts power over the entire Church and begins to assume power over the state. As such, the next five hundred years of so called Dark Ages, the Church faces a destructive force with the rise of Islam. Though the Church survives, it sadly splits for theological, political, and cultural reasons. By 1054, a Western and Eastern Church exist.
- e. With the Great Schism of the Church in 1054, the attention for the next 1,000 years mainly goes to the Western Church. The Western Church rises to an unprecedented level of power. The Church assumes great military power with the Crusades; organizational power with the Papacy; intellectual power with Scholasticism; and serving power with two new monastic movements the Franciscans and Dominicans. With such power, Innocent III claims himself the “Vicar of God,” asserting power not only over the entire Church but over the entire earth.

- f. But God, as we see throughout history, opposes the proud (James 4:6). And, thus, the Church begins to decline by the late 13th century. Politically, the idea of Christendom—the union of church and state—begins to crumble. Ecclesiastically, the Western Church is shook by the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy—when the Papacy resides outside of Rome. The church is also shook by the Papal Schism—in which two or three bishops claims the rights to the Papacy. With Church decline, forerunners to a Reformation enter the scene. Meanwhile, the culture of Europe is changing with the Renaissance and Humanism.
- g. With all the reforms taking place in society, politics, and the Church, “The Reformation happen[s], [says one historian] mainly because it could.”<sup>82</sup> At first the Reformation is an attempt to change the Church from within. But over time it becomes clear that the Roman Church is not willing to be repaired from its theological errors. So in response to reformers, the Roman Church issues the Tridentine Profession of Faith, which splits the Western Church into Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Thus, Protestantism is born, producing the Lutheran branch and the Reformed branch. A radically wing, which is not a monolithic movement, including the Anabaptist, also emerges. England adapts its own form of Reformation called Anglicanism.
- h. In the wake of Reformation, the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries see the rise of Enlightenment and its religious counterpart—Deism. It also sees, in response to “cold orthodoxy,” the Evangelical Awakening with Pietism in Germany, Methodism in England, and the First Great Awakening in the American Colonies.
- i. The 19<sup>th</sup> century brings a world of progress to the Church, with missions, revival, social reform, theological liberalism, and various denominations in the Protestant church. Papal infallibility is confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church.
- j. In spite of all the progress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church hadn’t experienced anything like it does in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since World War I, the Church experiences massive change. Movements to mark this change are Neo-Orthodoxy, Fundamentalism, New Evangelicalism, and Pentecostalism. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church makes a series of sweeping reforms, not seen since the days of the Reformation. And the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> century produces a movement called ecumenism—a desire to re-unite the Church as one.
- k. Remarkably, the Church begins as a small group of twelve, and after 2,000 years, it claims, at least nominally, one third of the population of the world. And through all the ups and downs in the last 2,000 years, it is the Church that displays, as Paul says in Eph 3:10, “the manifold wisdom of God.”

---

<sup>82</sup> D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

#### 44. Lessons Learned from Church History

- a. We ought to learn from our past.
  - i. The often repeated line is that history tends to repeat itself because we do not learn from the past.
  - ii. We live in a a-historical age where newness and novelty win the day.
  - iii. Church history can teach us much about the church and about ourselves.
- b. “Glory days” of church history does not exist.
  - i. Some Christians tend to want to go back to the past, and particularly the first century. “The church was pure and good back then.” But no “glory days” of Christianity exist.
  - ii. So church history shows us that the Church has always been a mess, since the very beginning. Why?
    1. Satan and human nature. “‘Whenever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel close by.’ Human nature is terribly corrupt and leaves its stains on the noblest movements in history.”<sup>83</sup>
    2. Little Scripture knowledge. The first 1,500 years, the Bible is largely absent from the ordinary Christian. It’s not until the year 397, as we saw in Lesson 3, that the canon, as we know it today, was made official. And much of the medieval period, the Bible was mostly known only to the clergy (sometimes not even them).
  - iii. But throughout the history of Christianity, in the Bible and outside the Bible, God works through the mess to bring himself glory.
- c. Know what, where, and why you disagree with others on theological matters.
  - i. Jesus knew the Sadducees wouldn’t be swayed by arguments from other than the first five books of the Bible because they only held to the first five books of the Bible.
  - ii. So when Jesus spoke with them about the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33) he quoted a passage from the Torah (Ex 3:6).

---

<sup>83</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, 14.

- iii. When speaking with others we disagree with, we must know what, where, and why we disagree. If we have an understanding of church history, we will have a better grasp of this, and will be able to respond better.
- d. All of us have been influenced by Christians of the past either directly or indirectly.
  - i. I say directly or indirectly because many Christians do not have knowledge of church history. But this doesn't mean they have been influenced by people in the past; they have been influenced whether they know it (directly) or not (indirectly).
  - ii. Did each person always get everything right? No, even our heroes like Martin Luther and John Calvin were flawed.
  - iii. Nor will we agree with every person in church history, because that would be contradictory, because people disagreed with each other.
  - iv. But all of us have been influenced by Christians of the past, just like we see that Calvin, for example, was influenced by Augustine.
- e. Church history humbles us.
  - i. The men and women we have seen over the last several months are men and women with the same basic nature as us. Yet God called them for his own purposes in his own time.
  - ii. It is easy to sit back and judge those of the past. But we ought to be slow to judge Christians of the past. We weren't in their shoes and our circumstances are different from theirs.
  - iii. Furthermore, Christians 100 years from now (or even 500 years from now) are going to look back on our century and era and say, "Wow, they got it right here, but they sure missed a lot over there."
- f. No human being is above the corruption of power.
  - i. God has rightly given different powers to both the church and the state.
  - ii. However, without checks and balances in both systems, it doesn't matter who you are, no one is exempt from pride of power.

- iii. Unchecked power can corrupt anyone just like it did in the 13-16<sup>th</sup> centuries with the papacy.
- g. Christianity, at least theologically, tends to swing from one polarizing extreme to the other.
- i. See Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 3.
  - ii. “It has been aptly remarked that the history of theology consists of the flight from one error into the arms of another. One of the theologian’s greatest challenges is to avoid just this, for in fleeing the extremes of another, we all too easily cultivate extremes of our own.”<sup>84</sup>
  - iii. Why do these errors of extremes happen? One reason is because we become reactionary. “We often make the mistake, when we are in a debate, of focusing so intently on the position we are against that we simply back away from that position. Often, in the history of the church, those who do so back right over a cliff.”<sup>85</sup>
  - iv. I think Jonathan Edwards gives us a good model to follow in staying biblical. Edwards did two things in theological debates that I think are instructive for us:<sup>86</sup>
    - 1. He was able to keep the broad picture in view, while not forgetting or minimizing the details. We can get so bogged down in the details that we lose sight of the big picture. How do you keep the broad picture in view? Remember church history.
    - 2. Edwards, instead of focusing and analyzing so much his opponents position, he focused and analyzed the Scriptures.
  - v. Let me make one caveat. Church history cannot simply be seen as the swing between two opposing extremes. Church history, rather, can be organized in a multitude of ways. Church history, as I’ve already stated, is messy, which means that any attempt to organize it is a human attempt to organize God’s providence, which has the danger of oversimplifying the myriad workings and ways of God in history.

---

<sup>84</sup> Richard D. Phillips, “The Lord’s Supper: An Overview,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship, Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 193.

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Living in Light of God’s Love*, ed. Kyle Strobel (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 25.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*