

Church History, Lesson 1: Why Church History Matters

1. Introduction

a. Warrant for church history

- i. The historical nature of the Christian faith. The core of our faith—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is historical (cf. Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31). If Christ’s atoning work was a myth, Christianity would cease to exist. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it were proved by someone that the man Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels were a figment of the writer’s imagination. For the Sermon on the Mount would still be true to me.”¹ What is wrong with Gandhi’s statement is that you cannot separate *what* Jesus said from *who* Jesus was. Studying church history shows the historical nature of Christianity because church history deals with real people in real time in real places.
- ii. The Bible itself is a historical book. The majority of the Bible is history. History of creation; history of God’s covenant people; history of Jesus’ life and ministry; history of the beginning of the church.
- iii. Church history is God’s story (cf. Isa 46:8-11). The cliché is true: it is “History.” Church history is just as much “history” as the history recorded in the Old and New Testaments. The difference between the biblical history and church history is the biblical history is inspired and inerrant; church history records are not. Church history is limited in this sense. We don’t have all the records and what records we do have contain the biases of the individuals writing the records. Nevertheless, through church history we have the opportunity to see God’s unfolding plan of redemption.

b. Benefits of church history

- i. Church history helps us see where we are going. In order to know where we are headed, we have to know where we came from. This is the value of history in general. This is why basic to any child’s education is history. So basic to any Christian’s education should be church history.

In an earlier age adherents of one faith seldom encountered adherents of another. Few required to defend their religion against the criticisms of a rival

¹ Quoted in: Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, fourth edition, revised by R. L. Hatchett (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008, 2013), 49.

faith. In our day, however, when mass media make the world our neighborhood, the ignorance of Christians [of church history] is hard to justify.²

- ii. Church history helps us read the Bible and interpret it more accurately. We can get lost in our own time and place. But reading about church history helps us see how people in the past understood the Scriptures, consequently, helping us to be more accurate.

In varied forms, all Christians testify to their dependence upon the Bible, yet as even the briefest reflection indicates, there are vast differences in how the Bible is understood and used. Studying the history of Christianity provides guidance in several ways for discovering the meaning of Scripture. . . .

If a contemporary believer wants to know the will of God as revealed in Scripture on any of these matters, or on thousands more, it is certainly prudent to study the Bible carefully for oneself. But it is just as prudent to look for help, to realize that the question I am bringing to Scripture has doubtless been asked before and will have been addressed by others who were at least as saintly as I am, at least as patient in pondering the written Word, and at least as knowledgeable about the human heart.³

The best way to guard a true interpretation of Scripture, the Reformers insisted, was neither to naively embrace the infallibility of tradition, or the infallibility of the individual, but to recognize the communal interpretation of Scripture. The best way to ensure faithfulness to the text is to read it together, not only with the churches of our own time and place, but with the wider 'communion of saints' down through the age.⁴

1. Church history helps us formulate sound theology. Church history helps us to see how others have formulated theology in the past so that we learn how to do it ourselves.
2. Church history helps us discern orthodoxy from heresy. It guards and protects the truth.
3. Church history helps protect against the individualism so prevalent today. No one interprets the Bible completely objectively. Everyone brings experiences, cultures, time periods, and beliefs that inform their interpretation. Church history helps us be more balanced. Church history makes us more self-

² Ibid., 517.

³ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 16.

⁴ Michael Horton, "What Still Keeps Us Apart?," in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, edited by John Armstrong (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 245-66 (http://www.the-highway.com/Horton_cath.html).

conscious of the presuppositions we bring to the Scriptures. Church history helps us see our blind-spots. Charles Spurgeon once said, “It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.”⁵

4. Church history helps us see what is fundamental, basic, and essential to the Christian faith as opposed to doctrines that are more or less ancillary. Church history helps us see the doctrinal threads that re-emerge time and time again as important doctrines not fads.
 5. Church history helps us as we formulate beliefs and practices in the church. Rather than asking, “What works?” We should ask, “What have Christians understood in the past about the nature and practice of the church?” This avoids fads, errors, and ties us to the people of God of the past. It also helps us to see what we really need.
- iii. Church history helps us interpret the world more objectively. The issues that we face today: the role of the church in the culture; the role of the church in government and politics, are issues that have been faced in the past.
 - iv. Church history gives us models of faith, hope, courage, and love that inspire us in our Christian walk. Reading stories of men and women who have sacrificed and exercised great faith encourages us to do the same in our contemporary world.
 - v. Church history helps in our spiritual growth of godly character.
 1. Church history will humble us. We should recognize how dependent we are on others for the beliefs we hold today. We stand on the shoulders of giants. We should recognize that we aren’t the first person to arrive at a certain interpretation of the Scriptures. (See cartoon on page 6.)
 2. Church history will fill us with gratitude. We will see all those that have gone before us and sacrificed even their lives to get us where we are today.

⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commenting on Commentaries* (London, Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), 1.

3. Church history will give us hope. Church history will give us hope that God is fulfilling all his promises to his people—church history bears witness to this fact. The church of Jesus Christ is being built as Jesus promised (Matt 16:18).

c. Church history and historical theology

- i. Sometimes you may hear the term “historical theology.” Some distinguish between historical theology and church history; some argue that they are not two distinct disciplines.
- ii. For our purposes in this class, “historical theology” is the study of the beliefs and doctrines by the church of the past.
- iii. But these two terms are not mutually exclusive. “Historical theology” arises out of the context of “church history.” And any good “historical theologian” does his work in the context (e.g., people, places, events) of “church history.” Historical theology is grounded in the story of church history.
- iv. Historical theology and other theological disciplines:
 1. Where do exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, practical theology fit into historical theology?
 2. Historical theology serves as a check against the other four disciplines of exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. (See diagram on page 7.)
 3. Thus, an understanding of church history/historical theology is absolutely essential for any Christian to do any aspect of the theological enterprise. If you want to read and interpret the Bible, you should know church history. “To be disrespectful of tradition and of historical theology is to be disrespectful of the Holy Spirit who has been actively enlightening the church in every century.”⁶

To treat the church’s historical understanding of Scripture lightly is to forget that it is the believing body that, through the centuries, carries on the theological enterprise with the Word in hand and accompanied by the enlightening Spirit. Thus, the largest part of any theologian’s work comes from reverent consideration and response

⁶ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986), 12.

to the Christian theological tradition. The creeds of the church, the results of serious spiritual and theological strife, are more important than the views of individuals. We should begin our discussions with the assumption that *the church is probably right*, unless exegetical or theological study compel us otherwise.⁷

d. Goals for the class

- i. Church history would change your life, in terms of all the benefits we talked about.
 - 1. Church history should change how you read your Bible.
 - 2. Church history should help you understand better why you believe what you believe.
 - 3. Church history should help give you a better defense of your faith because you will know where your beliefs have come from.
 - 4. Thus, church history, as a result, should change how you live.
 - ii. For you to grow in your love and appreciation of church history because it is God's story of redemption.
 - iii. You would receive a general knowledge of church history that would give you a structure to pursue a deeper level of knowledge in certain aspects of church history.
- e. Definition of church history: "Church history, . . . is the study specifically of the church's past in order to understand the church's present and to improve the church's future."⁸
- f. Summary: "The story of Christianity deeply affects every believer in Jesus Christ. The history of the Christian faith affects how we read the Bible. It affects how we view our government. It affects how we worship. Simply put, the church's history is our family history. Past Christians are our mothers and fathers in the faith, our aunts and uncles, our in-laws and—in a few cases—our outlaws!"⁹

⁷ S. Lewis Johnson, "Role Distinctions in the Church: Galatians 3:28" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 164 (italics in original).

⁸ Robert Rea, *Why Church History Matters: An Invitation to Love and Learn from Our Past* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 24.

⁹ Timothy Paul Jones, *Christian History Made Easy*, Rose Bible Basics (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2009), Introductory matter.



