

Lecture 1-Centuries Deep & Continents Wide: The Study of Church History

It is always essential for us to supplement our reading of theology with the reading of church history... If we do not, we shall be in danger of becoming abstract, theoretical, and academic in our view of truth; and, failing to relate it to the practicalities of life and daily living, we shall soon be in trouble."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Can We Learn from History?" The Puritans, pp. 215-16

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Hebrews 12:1

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever. Isaiah 40:8

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about... Hebrews 11:31

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—chapter 1

Key Terms

Church - visible & invisible, history

Objectives

- Define, "What is the church?"
- Identify difficulties in defining 'history'
- Identify methods of interpreting history

Class Prayer

*"O Father, we have not always been faithful to Thy Word;
We have not always taken up our cross to follow Thy Son;
And too often we have forgotten the church we are called to serve.
Renew in our hearts and in our minds
The faith that was in Peter and Paul,
The faith that strengthened the ancient martyrs,
The faith that moved the pens and lips of the fathers,
The faith that built cathedrals and universities,
The faith that moved the Reformers to renew the church in their time.
O Father, teach us how to impart that faith to Thy people.
These petitions we lay before Thy presence in the name of Thy Son our Lord. Amen."*
Ford Lewis Battles (1915-79)

Centuries Deep and Continents Wide: The Study of Church History

I. What is the Church?

"The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof...The visible church ...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion...Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the

saints...”

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, 1-3

II. Where Will We Begin?

A. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Old Faith*

B. The post-apostolic period (c. 100 AD) to modern times

C. “The third testament”

III. What are the Problems?

A. The problem of selection—“*all those* throughout the world that profess the true religion”

1. “The 100 most important events in church history”

2. The forgotten people:

A Worker Reads History

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?

The books are filled with names of kings.

Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?

And Babylon, so many times destroyed,

Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima’s houses, that city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?

In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished

Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome

Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song, were all her dwellings palaces?

Young Alexander plundered India.

He alone?

Caesar beat the Gauls.

Was there not even a cook in his army?

Philip of Spain wept as his fleet

Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?

Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who triumphed with him?

—Bertolt Brecht

3. “The visible church consist of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion”

a. Europe

b. Asia

c. Africa

d. Latin America

B. The problem of “mixture and error”

“This catholic church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible, and particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure.”

“The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ.”

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, 4 and 5

C. The problem of interpretation - what does it all mean?

1. Approaches to history

a. “Pre-modern” or “ideological” history

b. _____ or “scientific” history

c. _____ or “deconstructive” history

2. Research and meditation

From Robert Lewis Dabney’s inaugural address as professor of ecclesiastical history and polity at Union Seminary: “De Quincey has said, ‘Two strong angels stand by the

side of history as heraldic supporters: the angel of research on the left hand, that must read millions of dusty parchments and pages blotted with lies; the angel meditation on the right hand, that must cleanse these lying records with fire, even as of old the draperies of asbestos were cleansed, and must quicken them into regenerated life.”

Johnson, *Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 140

IV. What are the Rewards? (*The Present Past* by David B. Calhoun)

- A. God's glory
- B. Our profit
- C. The good of the church

For Further Study

Clarke, Kenneth. *Civilisation: A Personal View*. 1969.

An overview of western history with special emphasis on the arts and a humanistic interpretation of what it all means.

McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 1994.

Historical theology presented ably and as simply as possible.

Moffett, Samuel H. *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*. 1992.

The first of two masterful volumes covering the neglected story of Asian Christianity, this history traces the spread of Christianity to Persia and India, and then overland to China, where evidence exists of Christian activity dating from the 7th century.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (5 vols.)

The *magnum opus* of a great scholar (a Lutheran who recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy).

Potok, Chaim. *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews*. 1978.

A wonderfully written story of the Jews by an acclaimed novelist.

Schaeffer, Francis A. *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. 1976.

Schaeffer's influential study of the rise and (mainly) the decline of western thought.

Shaw, Mark R. *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*. 1996.

Part 1 covers the church before the emergence of Islam; part 2, the medieval centuries of Islamic domination; part 3, the missions and colonial eras; and part 4, the remarkable story of twentieth-century African Christianity.

Williams, Charles. *Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*. 1939.

Idiosyncratic, brilliant, perplexing, and illuminating history. Eugene H. Peterson wrote in *Take & Read*, "When I started reading [Charles] Williams [*The Descent of the Dove*], I was a sectarian, 'related' only to a small coterie of people who lived and thought and prayed like me. When I finished, I was part of a congregation centuries deep and continents wide" (p. 1).

Wanted: a good general history of Christianity in Latin America.