

Study of Church History

To augment this course you could use both the course syllabus and *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1*, by Justo L. Gonzalez. There are certain themes I will try to emphasize in this survey course. There are many things I could talk about. I will not even get to everything that is important in ancient and medieval church history. But there are certain themes that I am concerned about. We will be learning dates since there is no way we can study church history without having some appreciation for the dates of church history. I remember a few years ago a man who was giving a concert was talking about a song based on the life of Saint Brendan of Ireland. He said, “St. Brendan lived in the sixth century...or in the eighth century...or in some century!” We need to be a little more precise than that in identifying the flow of church history. Dates are important, and making a timeline, which is something the students of this class are required to do, helps you learn those dates and see them in relation to each other.

We will now begin the first lecture for this course, “Centuries deep and continents wide: the study of church history.” For each lesson in this course I will include a Scripture text or two, verses that have particular reference to the theme we are discussing in that lesson. These verses will come up over and over again. I will close each of the lessons with one of these verses. The verse for this lesson is from Hebrews 12:1: “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.” We are concerned with church history not only to learn what has happened in the past but also to be able to understand that God has given us a work to do as well. Church history goes on today in our lives, and we must run with perseverance the race God has marked out for us. Sometimes I will close with another verse because often in church history the story is not encouraging or inspiring. Often it is, but it is not always that way. Sometimes we will see the church in the depths of failure, large parts of the church having backslidden and turned away from the truth. Those lectures will often end with this verse from Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” We will see that even in the church the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the truth of God, the word of God, marches on, and sooner or later it is picked up by some other more faithful group and begins to make its way again in the world. All of church history is overwhelming simply because so much has happened in its history. We will study 1500 years of history in just 35 lessons, so we will be moving quickly over the subject matter.

The prayer for this lesson comes from a modern church historian, Dr. Ford Lewis Babbles. He was a Rhodes Scholar who studied with C. S. Lewis. He taught church history for most of his career at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He is best known as the translator of Calvin’s Institutes in the McNeal and Babbles’ edition of the Institutes. We will start with this prayer from Dr. Babbles. Let us pray together.

“Oh 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. Oh Father, teach us to impart that faith to Thy people. These petitions we lay before Thy presence in the name of Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.”

As we think about studying church history we need to give some thought to the basic question, what is church history? I saw a definition of history that said “history is what historians do.” I suppose if that is

right, which it must be, then church history is what church historians do, what you and I will do in this class. If that is the case, then the word “church” is very important. What is the church? We are studying the history of the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, gives us this important definition of the church, both visible and invisible. We will study the visible church, since it is hard to study the invisible church. But it is important to understand what the invisible church is because that will always be there as the standard, the ideal—what God expects of the church. The church will always fall short of the perfection of the invisible church until it is united with the Lord in heaven. But we will study the visible church, which consists of all those throughout the world who profess true religion. The Westminster Divines meant Christian religion—and even the protestant religion—by that phrase, “true religion.” But we will study the history of the Christian church from the post-Apostolic period nearly to the time of the Reformation, approximately to the birth of Martin Luther. In a separate course, Reformation and Modern Church History, we study the rest of the church, the 500 years since the Reformation to the present time. The Confession says concerning the church, “Unto this catholic [that is, universal], visible church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints.” I think that is probably a good, short definition of what I would like us to do together during this course, and that is study the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of the church, how the church functions in its worship and ministry. I would also like for us to study the gathering of the church, how the church grew from a very tiny group of people in an out-of-the way province, part of the Roman Empire, to a mighty movement that compassed many parts of Europe and reached out to Asia, Africa, and Latin America even in the years before 1500 AD. We will also study the perfecting of the saints, the spiritual progress of God’s people through the years. As we study we will see that at times the church seems to be making progress and at other times it does not. But we will look at the ministry, the growth, and the spiritual progress of the church.

Where do we begin with all of this? Let us look at the opinions of this from two students of church history. One young student, in writing a paper on church history, decided that it was necessary to go back to the very beginning, which is a good thought. But then she began her paper by saying, “Our pastor was born in 1930...” It will be necessary to go back further than that. Heinrich Bullinger, the successor to Zwingli in Zurich during the Reformation, wrote a book called *The Old Faith*. This book was a polemic against the Catholics who had been telling the Protestants in Switzerland that they had created something new while the Catholics were holding on to the old church. Bullinger was not going to let that accusation go without an answer, so in *The Old Faith* he goes back to Adam and Eve to show how they would have been Protestants. Whether or not he succeeded in that he did make a good point, showing that church history begins at the very beginning, with the creation of Adam and Eve. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith the whole number of the elect are included in the church and that includes people all the way back to Adam and Eve. But we will not go back that far in this class. Rather, we will start in the post-Apostolic period, about the year 100 AD. Then we will trace the history of the church throughout the two millennia in the two courses, Ancient and Medieval Church History and Reformation and Modern Church History. Sometimes people have called church history the Third Testament. The Old Testament is the First Testament, the New Testament is the Second Testament, and church is the Third Testament. I rather like that way of looking at church history because it does continue the history of the church that begins in the Old and continues in the New Testament. All three are a record of God’s faithful people and those people who prove to be unfaithful. The Old Testament has many of those, as do the New Testament and church history. Of course, we do not think that books of church history are in any sense on the same level with the inspired Word of God as recorded in the Old and New Testaments, but the history of the church continues, as the New Testament makes very clear. And as the history of the church continues we continue to study the record of God’s work in the midst of His people.

Now, church history is fun, I think, and intriguing. We are studying about real people facing real problems and trying to solve those problems one way or another. Those people are very much like us, and those problems are very much like problems we face today. I think as we get into church history we will feel a connection with our extended Christian family, not only extended now throughout the world but also extended through the past. We will discover our ancestry and our roots, Christian people who have gone before us and who have run the race with perseverance that God set before them. But there are some problems, too, which I want to talk about for a moment.

One is the problem of selection. As we study church history we study, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith's definition, all those throughout the world who confess the true religion. That is a big order, and it is impossible to do. The history of the church is everybody throughout the world who is a Christian. Professor Gonzales, the author of the church history book we are using, has had to select certain topics as he deals with church history. And I also have to select topics, themes, and people whom I will focus on. That means I leave out much of the history of the church. *Christian History* magazine some years ago did a fairly careful survey of church history teachers, pastors, scholars, and lay people, and they came up with a list of the 100 most important dates in church history. I thought it was very wise of the editors of this list as they presented this list to write this sentence: "We would not be at all surprised if someday we find out that God's list differs significantly from our list on the 100 most important events in church history."

I remember when Edith Schaeffer was speaking and was asked the question, "Who is the most important Christian in the world today?" Without much hesitation she said, "I do not know, you do not either, and probably no one does." We can think of some big names who seem important to many people, but I think Mrs. Schaeffer was wise in observing that we do not have that kind of wisdom. In saying that, I want to stress that many people who should not be will be left out of this story. If God were teaching this class they would not be left out, but I do not know who those people are. So I have to do the best I can. I will talk about the people who seem significant to me as well as to others. Some will be those who would be on nearly anyone's list, such as Saint Augustine, who gets three lessons. Nobody else in all church history gets three lessons, and I think we will see why as we come to him. But I do want to try not to forget those who could be called "the forgotten people." It is too easy to teach church history and focus on the people who wrote the books, preached the sermons, and did the apparently important things. Church history is not only the preacher preaching the sermon, but it is also the person listening to the sermon. That means that we need to at least be aware that church history is much bigger than it is usually presented. I think that means many things practically. It means that we must work hard to make sure that we talk about the contribution of women in the history of the church. Women have been and continue to be very much a part of the church and very important in the history of the church, but so much of the story of women has been left out until recent years when there has been relatively greater interest in women's contributions. The same could be said for children. Certainly there are other people in church history, slaves, serfs, and others of lower socioeconomic status who have been very important in church history. But we have to work hard to include those people because they did not write the books. There are ways historians can try to recover what the "forgotten people" were thinking and saying. Read the poem, "A worker reads history," and you will see that point made in a very gripping way.

We are trying to study the history of God's people, the visible church throughout the world. So often church history, particularly as it is taught in the United States, can focus too narrowly on Europe and North America. I remember reading an account from Professor Andrew Walls who taught at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh in Scotland for many years. Walls was at one time a missionary in Africa. He said that as he began to teach church history in Africa he followed the traditional Scottish

method of church history, which involved three years of studying. In the first year they studied the early church, in the second year the Reformation, and in the third year Scotland. He became quickly aware that teaching church history in this fashion in Africa left much out. This helped him to reorient his thinking about the history of the church. Much of what we will study will of necessity focus on Europe, but we need to also be aware of the developments of the history of the church in Asia, for example. Fortunately, a new book by Samuel Moffat (a long-time missionary in Korea) called *A History of Christianity in Asia*, among other such books, help us to understand that the church developed not only in the West but in the East and Far East as well. We need to also be aware of the developments of the church in Africa. I am particularly delighted with the book by Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A short history of African Christianity*. These books are listed in the syllabus with their bibliographic information. I am still looking for a good book on the history of Christianity in Latin America. The text we are using for this class was written by a Cuban, Professor Gonzales. He wrote it originally in Spanish and it was later translated into English. This is an interesting way for a church history textbook to come to a protestant seminary in the United States. I think you will enjoy reading this book if you are able to access it. Gonzales is an excellent writer. He keeps the story moving, makes it interesting, and almost always records the history accurately. I disagree with him on one or two points and I will try to make that known as we go along. But this is a good, lively history book. Even if you really do not like history I think you will like this book. If you do like history you will probably love it and want to read others.

So selection is one problem we will face in our study of church history. We will try to be broad enough, to have an understanding of the whole history of the church within the compass of a very quick overview. Another problem is the problem of mixture and error. The Westminster Confession of Faith notes that “The catholic (that is, universal) church has been sometimes more and sometimes less visible, and particular churches which are members thereof have been 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.” This means that as we study church history, at times we will see the church at a very high point and we will celebrate that, rejoice in that, and be moved by it. At other times we will see that the church seems to be no church at all, given over to greed, selfishness, war, unbelief, and apostasy. That is something that is true of the history of the church and there is no way we can change it. Indeed, there is no way we would want to change it because we want to study what is true. When I was teaching this class some years ago a women said to me at the end of the course, “Dr. Calhoun, this class has been a real encouragement to me. I learned something I did not know. I have been so discouraged about my church because it is in such a mess and there are so many problems. But now I know that the whole history of the church is like that.” Well, that was not the only point I wanted to get across but it is an important point. The history of the church is a history of even the best churches being subject to both mixture and error. This means that while there is much to celebrate, there is also much to forgive. We can forgive the past and realize the errors of people in the past who did things they should not have done. Someone once asked Roland Bainton, the great church historian at Yale, “Dr. Bainton, how can you know so much church history and still be a Christian?” Sometimes that discouraging thought may come to you when we study the Crusades, for instance. Not much good came out of that and much harm came that we still live with, and it was all done under the sign of the cross and in the name of Christ. There is, however, also much to celebrate. We will often see that people did run the race with perseverance, people who have left us an example to follow.

Another problem we will face is the problem of meaning, or interpretation. It is hard enough to know what really happened, and the problem of interpreting those events is even more difficult. I will sometimes disagree with Gonzales’ portrayal of events in his book, though that will not happen often, and I do think it is a trustworthy account of what happened. But that in itself is a struggle because people

have different ideas of what happened. The only way we can deal with that is by doing the hard work of research and study, talking together and comparing texts and so forth to try to answer the question, “what really happened?” But the other question, “what does it all mean?” also must be dealt with. What is the significance of the events in the history of the church? There are differing answers to this question as well. Historical study in our time in the modern West is in a rather confused and troubled condition, it seems to me. There are currently many different approaches to history. If you studied history at the university you may be familiar with three theories, which are generally viewed as antagonistic. These include the pre-modern or ideological idea of history. This idea says that history is studied with an assumption already in mind that history is used to prove, undergird, and establish. The first church historian was Eusebius of Caesarea. We will study Eusebius a little later. Jaroslav Pelikan, the great modern church historian who in his old age converted to the Orthodox Church from Lutheranism, said, “Eusebius is a historian who does not believe in history.” By that he meant that Eusebius had an assumption that he was working from and the facts were then marshaled to buttress his argument. Then we came into a period that we could call modern or scientific history. Historians felt that the way to really do history was to divorce oneself from any ideological conviction and to try to ascertain exactly what happened, as we do with the physical sciences, and to avoid all questions about meaning. The true historian now is not the man with a thought in his mind, which he proves through history. The true historian now is the person who can become objective, detached, and neutral about everything. One writer has said that to be a good historian it is necessary to be without religion, without country, without profession, and without political party. People thought they could do that but we have discovered that you cannot do that. It is impossible to write history in that sort of vacuum. We bring ourselves to the task. When I study history I am very aware of my personality, background, training, and job. All those things impact the way I look at and study history. This modern approach to history has been pretty much discarded and we have moved to the postmodern or deconstructive period of the study of history. This idea says that historical writing has never been objective. It has always been full of values or bias. Thus the traditional quest for the truth is impossible. We cannot really study history anymore in a broad or general way. We have to talk about whose history we are studying— is it the history of men? White Anglo-Saxons? The history of women? The history of any group, according to this theory, will be a different history. But this leaves us in a rather dismal place where no one can talk about history in any sort of overarching sense, as each person’s history is personal, directed toward their group, not toward (as in our case) the whole church.

What are we going to do? It seems to me that we can use, to some extent, all three of these approaches. We do have convictions as we start this study. We do want to be as fair as we can be. And we do realize that certain people have been left out of the recorded history of the church. Thus, with the help of two great angels, as Martin Lewis Dabney put it—research and meditation—we will try to do this task of studying the history of God’s people for these 1500 years. What are the rewards? There are great rewards: God’s glory as we are brought into worship, our profit as we are led into greater sanctification, and for the good of the church, which will direct us into ministry.

“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)