

A Long Preface: Introduction to Reformation and Modern Church History

We are going to be studying Reformation and modern church history. The texts that supplement the lectures for this course are the hefty course syllabus and *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2*, by Justo Gonzalez. Each lesson will have a title, like a sermon title, which will present in concentrated and attractive form what will come in the lesson. That “long preface” means a long preface to our lives, as we are looking in this study of history for the background and context in which we have come to be Christians. This history represents something of our own story.

I will also choose a Scripture text for each lesson that is somewhat relevant to the topic being covered in the lesson. For this lesson there are three texts: Hebrews 12:1, Isaiah 40:8, and Hebrews 11:31. I will end each lesson with either the Hebrews 12 passage or the Isaiah 40 passage. Hebrews 12:1 says, “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.” I will use that verse particularly when we have studied someone whom we admire. As we see the examples of great Christians of the past, we should go out reminded of the fact that we have a race to run, too. Not all of the lessons will have that outlook, however, because some things we will study will be sad. There were times when the church veered away from the truth of the Gospel. There were times when the culture impacted Christianity in such a way that the message of grace was obscured. Those lectures will end with the text from Isaiah 40:8, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever.” We can be confident in that statement. I use another passage when I am frustrated that I cannot say all I want to say. Hebrews 11:31 says, “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about...” I do not have time to tell about all of the Westminster divines. I do not have time to tell about all of the great missionaries of the nineteenth-century missionary movement. I am tempted to use that verse at every point. Yet I will use those other two texts as our closing words from God at the end of each lesson.

I will also include a prayer at the beginning of each lesson that we can pray together. The prayer usually comes from the person whom I will be talking about in the lesson. I would like to lead us now in prayer, although this prayer for this first lesson comes from Solomon, which he uttered at the dedication of the temple. The temple was the visible center of the Old Testament church, so I think it is an appropriate prayer for us to pray for the church as we think of our study of church history. The prayer of Solomon says that God’s name was at the temple. As we study the Lord’s church, the Christian church, God’s name is there. The prayer from Solomon also prays for forgiveness. The church is of course far from perfect. At times it is so far from perfect that we wonder if it is still there at all. So the prayer for forgiveness is also appropriate as we think of the study of church history. Let us pray together this prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the temple:

“O Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May Your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.” Amen.

I am going to talk about why we study church history. Some people study church history in seminary because it is a required course. I think there should also be some deeper reasons for the study of church history. It is not the Old Testament, nor the New Testament. It is what somebody has called the “third testament.” It is on quite a different level from the Old or New Testament, but there are some important

reasons for Christians to be concerned about the study of church history. One reason is simply to know the past. The past is not irrelevant. It is not unimportant. In one of William Faulkner's novels, one of his characters said, "The past is never dead. It is not even past." That is true. The past is still with us. Karl Barth has said, "Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Luther and all the others are not dead, but living. They still speak." One thing we are going to try to do this semester is hear some of these people speak. We will not only hear about them, but we will also hear some of their own words. The present still has within it the past, so it is important for us Christians to know something about the past.

Not only is the past still with us, but the past also has unusual power. There is a struggle today for who is going to claim history. It is important for Christians to know the power of the past. It is also important that we be sure that as we study history we are not merely creating a usable past, something that we can use. It is something that we can use. Yet we also need to be sure that we learn an accurate past. We must do our best to be honest and open in our study of history. We must not romanticize or glamorize it. If there is sin in an era, and there is plenty of that, then we ought to face up to it. An accurate past is our goal. We will not ignore the wart on Cromwell's nose. Yet following B. B. Warfield, neither will we look at that only. We will not merely look for the mistakes. We will acknowledge the mistakes, and at the same time we will acknowledge the great things people have done in the past.

The study of church history seems to me to be something of a counter-cultural activity in today's time. When I first started teaching church history, it seemed rather sedate and safe. It did not create much controversy. It is more common today, however, that a course such as this is viewed as going against the grain of our culture and our present history. I read recently about a Duke University professor of literature who made news by confessing in class that he loves literature. That seemed so startling to people—that someone who taught literature would love it—that it created something of a stir. That is a strange sentiment in literature departments today, and it may even be subversive. Well, I love history. I want to try to instill that love in you. Many of the people we will talk about are dead, white, European males. I still love them—Luther, Calvin, and others. There were also women, people from other areas of the world besides Europe. As we study this history we will find resources and strength for the present day in the people and events of the past.

Along with the presence of the past, the power of the past, and the purpose of the past, another reason we study the past is to know who we are. As I mentioned before, history is a long preface to our own life stories, which is something Justo Gonzalez said in his book. One of the great early books of church history that we will talk about in one of our later lectures is John Foxe's *Act and Monument*, which is usually known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. In that book, John Foxe said that the history he was writing was a continuation of biblical history, which made it part of our story. Our story goes back through all of that history, into the New Testament and into the Old Testament. We want to know who we are.

Another point that I have made in several ways already is that we need to learn from history. We need to learn from both the good things and the bad things. William Faulkner wrote, "No man can cause more grief than that one clinging blindly to the vice of his ancestors." Those points need to be identified, and we need to learn, through the study of history, what not to do as well as what to do.

While history can be fascinating by learning what happened long ago, it is also important in order to expand the present. A Russian proverb says, "Dwell on the past and you will lose an eye. Forget the past and you will lose both eyes." We are not going to dwell on the past, but we certainly are not going to forget it either. We must realize that all of history has significance for our present. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones was a pastor and also a fine historian. He was a man who combined two important callings: preaching and understanding history. He said, "The only justification for looking to the past is that we

may learn great lessons from it and apply them.” Studying the past ought to help us expand the present and give us the opportunity to see further. Each of us is from a certain place, and we represent a certain tradition, a certain part of the church. By studying church history, we can travel all over the world. We can see how Christians in other countries, times, and traditions have viewed the faith.

Along with all of these reasons for studying church history, another one is to help shape the future. There is a famous saying that “those who fail to remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” That is true. Sometimes heresies appear on the scene as new truth, and people do not realize the church has already dealt with them. Sometimes the same heresies are dealt with many times over. There are good answers that many people who have fought previous battles have given. Since many people do not know church history, they often get in the same battles over again. We want to avoid the mistakes of the past. That famous saying is often credited to George Santayana. I have created my own proverb: “Those who fail to remember the past are condemned not to repeat it.” We study the past not only to avoid the mistakes of the past, but also to be challenged by some of the great things that have happened in the past. Justo Gonzalez, the author of one of the textbooks for this course, said, “Both by our action and inaction we are making history.”

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).