

CHURCH HISTORY

Introduction to Church History

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Early Church History, part 1

I. DEFINITION OF CHURCH HISTORY

- A. “The spiritual side of the history of civilized peoples ever since our Master’s coming” (H. M. Gwatkin).
- B. “The story of the Christian community and its relationship to the rest of the world throughout the ages” (A. M. Renwick).
- C. “Church History, then, is the interpreted record of the origin, progress and impact of Christianity upon human society, based upon organized data gathered by scientific method from archaeological, documentary or living sources. It is the interpreted, organized story of the redemption of man and the earth” (E. E. Cairns).

II. DEFINING AND DISTINGUISHING THE CHURCH

- A. *Introduction:* A distinction must be made between Christendom, Christianity and the church; yet all three are definitely related.
- B. *Christendom:* The part of the world where the fact of Christ predominates. This would be related to culture, especially in the western world. There is a sense in which everyone in the western world has been affected by Christianity but they are far from Christians. Christendom began at the first advent and will continue until the second advent of Christ.
- C. *Christianity:* The part of the world in which mass numbers make a profession of belief in Christ and are inside the visible, organized church. This began at the first advent and will continue until the second advent of Christ.
- D. *Church:* The true, invisible Church is composed of all God’s redeemed people, beginning at the Day of Pentecost. Not all scholars agree that the church began on the Day of Pentecost, but most see the Day of Pentecost as the beginning of the full development of the church. All biblical Christians distinguish

between the true, invisible church as an organism, and the professing, visible church as an organization.

III. PURPOSE FOR STUDYING CHURCH HISTORY

- A. *Missions*: Church history is primarily a record of how Christ's disciples throughout the last 2,000 years have taken the gospel to the nations in obedience to the Great Commission to make disciples and instruct them in the Lord's commands. Church history is also a record of how individuals, groups and movements have failed in their faithfulness to the Great Commission.
- B. *Doctrine*: Church history enables the Christian to see the development of doctrine throughout the years within Christianity. This will enable the student to determine more accurately those doctrinal systems that are more closely related to the Bible and gain personal convictions on the mainstream of Christian doctrine. Thus, a study of church councils and the theological thinking of various men becomes important. Church history will also give one a tolerance of others who do not agree with him doctrinally.
- C. *Heresy*: While this is closely related to doctrine, it should be kept distinct, for there has been a development of heresy throughout the history of the church. Many of the heresies that confront the church today are merely repetitions of earlier heresies met and exposed by the early church. There continues to be a great need today for men to be able to distinguish truth from error.
- D. *Church Organization*: This shows how the church, which was few in number, developed into a mighty organization. Church history exposed the Roman Catholic system as a later development in church organization. This study reveals how the Roman Catholic, episcopalian, congregational, and presbyterian forms of government developed. No student can become well grounded in his beliefs about church authority without a study of church history. It also helps one understand the history of denominationalism, especially in America where there are great multitudes of different groups of professing Christians.
- E. *Great Men*: Church history is a record of great men of the Faith — theologians, preachers, laymen, etc. Much of church history is a study of men and their exploits for the resurrected Christ. Most of the orthodox Christian teachings that are taken for granted today are the products of great men who struggled with, fought for, and even died for, Christian doctrine.

- F. *Persecutions*: No one can read church history without being impressed by the fact that multiplied thousands have given their lives for their Christian beliefs. The Lord Jesus Christ said that the world would hate the Christian and that Christians would suffer much for their faith, and many have taken this word as great comfort into their martyrs' deaths.
- G. *Movements*: Church history is a record of numerous Christian movements that have sprung up inside and outside the organized church. Some of these movements are good and others quite harmful to the church as a whole.
- H. *Effects on Human Life*: The lives of innumerable individuals and of many nations have been transformed by the mighty power of the Cross. Christian education and philanthropic agencies have exemplified the love of Christ to men, raising many people to a new moral plane. God, in every generation, has touched people with the good news of Christ and has never left himself without a witness.
- I. *Conclusion*: "Church History provides a synthesis of the past, an explanation of the present, a guide to correct conduct, and inspirational motive to good, practical illustrations for the preachers and it is a liberatizing [broadening] study" (Cairns).

IV. IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

- A. In the Old Testament there are a number of historical books to record the history of Israel.
- B. In the New Testament Luke saw fit to write a history of the first century church. Thus, in the Book of Acts we have a history that is essential to our understanding of Christianity. We should notice from this that God thinks history is important, and therefore so should we. The difference between Old Testament history and present church history is that those early writings were inspired. Today there are no inspired church historians or church histories.
- C. *Conclusion*: We need to study history in order to learn from the church's past successes and failures. Those who do not study history are condemned to repeat it!