

# An Introduction to Church History

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – an introduction to an overview of church history and its importance to modern church life
2. aim – to cause us to reflect upon the history of the church and to see our beliefs in its past

### b. outline

1. What Is Church History?
2. Why Focus on Church History?
3. What Is Gained by Studying Church History?

### c. overview

1. introducing a new Wednesday Evening Teaching Series
  - a. a *reprisal* of a series I originally started in 2011, but was forced to abandon in 2012
  - b. a *recalibration* of that series into a new, simpler, and more specific (yet longer) format
  - c. this series is based on the book *The Story of Christianity* by Justo L. González
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## I. What Is Church History?

### Content

#### a. a definition of “church history”

1. **church history** = the providential movement of the Holy Spirit through human history to establish the Christian church as a part of the Kingdom of God
  - a. providential – the work of *the Holy Spirit*; the continuation of the Book of Acts *to the present*
  - b. human history – in time and space, as a literal series of physical events
  - c. the Christian church – the distinct body of believers with its corresponding beliefs and practices
  - d. the Kingdom of God – the ultimate goal of God to rule over his creation through his people
2. some **realities** of church history – because it is about human beings:
  - a. its “growth” (or maturity) is not linear – sometimes truth “loses” and heresy “wins”
  - b. its history is filled with ugly (sinful) events – Christians can be ugly in their struggle to power
  - c. its unity is rare – **the church is divided more often than it is united**
  - d. its purpose is often lost – the church will lose track of her goals much of the time
3. some **glories** of church history
  - a. we are here – Christianity was never lost; there is always a faithful remnant
  - b. the Bible is here – the providential hand of God never lost his Word
  - c. the Church is here – the work of the Holy Spirit to bring his elect to himself never stopped

#### b. an outline of church history as we will overview it

1. the **Early Church** (Pentecost ~30 → Edict of Milan 313)
  - a. events: Fall of Jerusalem, persecution of the church, Gnosticism, Montanism, Manicheism
  - b. people: Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Marcion
  - c. importance: the completion of the canon of Scripture and its proliferation under persecution
  - d. downside: the persecution of the church
2. the **Imperial Church** (Constantine ~306 → Augustine ~430)
  - a. events: Nicea, Arianism, Eusebius, Constantinople, the Papacy, Monasticism, Donatism
  - b. people: Constantine, Arius, Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Pelagius
  - c. importance: the establishment of several key Christological concepts in the church
  - d. downside: the devaluing of Christianity due to its inherent connection to the political world
3. the **Medieval Church** (Fall of Rome 410 → Pope Leo X ~1513)
  - a. events: Fall of Rome, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Islam, Great Schism, Crusades, Church of Rome
  - b. people: Mohammed, Charlemagne, Anselm, Abelard, St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas
  - c. importance: the finalizing of several key *theological* concepts in the church (early)
  - d. downside: the virtual loss of the central *soteriological* and *ecclesiological* elements of the church

4. the **Reformation** (the 95 Theses 1517 → Edict of Nantes 1598)
    - a. events: discovery of America, 95 Theses, Diet of Worms, Augsburg, Jesuits, Trent
    - b. people: Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, John Knox
    - c. importance: the recapturing of the *solas* lost during the Dark Ages
    - d. downside: the terrible loss of the Church of Rome in its failure to reform itself
  5. the **Enlightenment** (Jamestown 1607 → The Great Awakening ~1734)
    - a. events: Jamestown, Synod of Dort, Arminianism, Baptists, Aldersgate, Puritans, Deism
    - b. people: Cromwell, Bunyan, Locke, Hume, Wesley, Jacob Arminius, Roger Williams
    - c. importance: the advancement of reformation principles throughout Europe and to the New World
    - d. downside: the inability of a reformed theology to retain a high view of God in the church
  6. the **Modern Church** (United States 1776 → End of World War II 1945)
    - a. events: Industrial Revolution, 2<sup>nd</sup> Awakening, SBC, German Liberalism, Communism, Vatican I
    - b. people: Charles Finney, Napoleon, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Marx, Barth, Bonhoeffer
    - c. importance: the establishment of W civilization in a fundamental Christian worldview
    - d. downside: the inability of the church to retain a high view of Scripture in the church
  7. the **Postmodern Church** (Fundamentalism ~1920 → the Pandemic 2020)
    - a. events: Vatican II, Stockholm Conference, WCC, Chicago Declaration, YRR, Obergefell, CRT
    - b. people: Niebuhr, Bultmann, Sunday, Graham, Piper, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis
    - c. importance: the establishment of fundamentalism and evangelicalism
    - d. downside: the transformation of the church to a social justice engine based on emotionalism
- c. some things we will *not* focus on in this course**
1. we will not attempt to overview *every event or person* in these past 1991 years
    - a. we will focus on specific *watershed* events and people that have influenced the church greatly
    - b. we will highlight those people and events that lead *specifically* to Baptist faith and practice
  2. we will not spend *any time* reviewing events in the Book of Acts
  3. we will not spend *much* time in the history of the Roman Catholic church *after* the Reformation
    - a. we *must* study church history within Roman Catholicism prior to the Reformation (by definition)
    - b. but, we will focus on the movement of Christianity through *Protestant* circles leading to *us*
    - c. and, we will review some of the most *significant* post-Reformation councils and decrees
  4. we will not cover the history of *schismatic* groups from the western church (*i.e.* Eastern Orthodoxy)
    - a. although, we will certainly identify their primary characteristics at the Great Schism
  5. we will not cover the history of *historical* events outside of the church (unless directly related)
    - a. we will focus on secular events that are *intertwined* with the history of the church (*i.e.* empires)

## II. Why Focus on Church History?

### Content

#### a. reasons for studying church history as a church

1. because *I* want to learn church history better in order to serve the church better
  - a. in order to ascertain if our practices are *consistent* with an historical view of them
2. because our faith and practice are the formulation of *centuries* of dialogue and debate
  - a. theology is an *on-going dialogue* that we are only *now* entering into (*e.g.* Reformed Theology)
3. because failing to understand history means we *will* be forced to repeat it
  - a. the failings of the modern church are similar to failings of past generations (*e.g.* Gnosticism)

## III. What Is Gained by Studying Church History?

### Content

#### a. valuable lessons to be learned from this overview

1. greater understanding of specific historical events and people
2. greater understanding of who we are and what we believe (*i.e.* as Baptists)
3. greater understanding of *unorthodox* beliefs and practices (*i.e.* discernment)
4. greater understanding of similarities and differences with other Christians (*i.e.* denominationalism)
5. greater faith in the providential work of God down through time *and in our own lives* (**Luke 1:1-4**)