CHURCH HISTORY
Week One: Introduction to Church History

Most of all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.

– C.S. Lewis

Introduction

The final quarter of the Theology and Church History BFL track is dedicated to a survey of the history of Christianity from the end of the first century AD to the present day. Over the next three months, we’ll learn about some of the most important figures, movements, controversies, and events in Christian history. We’ll cover topics such as the early church fathers, the development of medieval Catholicism, the Protestant Reformation, the great awakenings, the spread of global Christianity, and the history of the Southern Baptist Convention. This week, we’ll begin the series with an introduction to church history.

The Bible and History

One of the great contributions of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a linear view of history. According to Jews and Christians, history isn’t just a series of cyclical events captive to fate or controlled by naturalistic forces, but history is purposefully moving forward to an ultimate goal according to the sovereign plans of God himself. Christianity is at root a historical faith, meaning that our religion is grounded in events that Christians believe to be real historical occurrences.

For example, Christians believe that at particular points in history Abraham migrated from Ur to Palestine, Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, David became the king of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth preached and was crucified, and Paul established churches all over the Roman Empire. The figures spoken of in the Scriptures were real people who lived real lives—just like you and me.

Christians also believe that the Bible records miracles and other mighty acts of God, each of which is just as historical as the everyday, “mundane” events recorded in Scriptures. For example, we believe God really did speak the world into existence, the Israelites really were fed manna from heaven in the wilderness, the prophets really healed sick people, Jesus really walked on water, God really did become a man, and most important, Jesus really did come back to life after being dead for parts of three days.

Because we take biblical history seriously, we also take the things we will learn in this BFL class seriously—Christianity is a historical faith.
History as God’s Story

Though Christianity is a historical faith, it isn’t merely historical in the sense that it simply recounts bare facts—Christianity, and all of history, is part of a particular story. The Scriptures record for us a grand biblical narrative (GBN) in four movements: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. This GBN is God’s Story—it has aptly been called “the true story of the whole world.” The Bible recounts the “Story of Stories,” and our own individual stories only truly make sense when we realize we are bit players in the true story of the whole world.

The GBN records for us everything that God has done through Jesus Christ to reconcile unto himself lost sinners and ultimately the entire created order. Everything we’ll discuss in this track occurs at a particular point in the GBN: the time “between the times,” the period between redemption and consummation. Church history is the continuation of the part of God’s Story that begins in the New Testament and continues until the end of the age—the same God who inspired the Scriptures continues to work through his people, the church.

Presuppositions and History

There is no such thing as pure, neutral history—every event that has ever occurred must be interpreted. All historians interpret history according to their presuppositions. At FBC Durham, we are evangelical Christians in the Baptist tradition—this identity lends itself to particular presuppositions that will inform how we’ll interpret the events of church history.

As Christians, we believe that God is acting to redeem lost sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ. We further believe that God has never been without a true Christian witness from the time of Christ to the present day. We’ll read every event in church history—even the ones we aren’t particularly proud of—through our Christian lens.

As evangelicals, we believe that the Bible is God’s trustworthy written word, that the perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation, and that all Christians are called to proclaim this gospel to all the peoples of the earth. We’ll read many controversial doctrinal developments in church history through our evangelical lens.

As Baptists, we believe that New Testament churches were covenanted, local assemblies that were comprised of believers who had been immersed in water following their conversion to faith in Christ. These churches were ruled by Christ through his chosen apostles, governed by their members, led by their elders (or pastors), and served by their deacons. We’ll read developments in church structure, leadership, and the ordinances (or sacraments) through our Baptist lens.

A key biblical passage that informs how we’ll interpret church history in this BFL track is Galatians 4:4–5:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (ESV).
These verses argue that Jesus was born in “the fullness of time”—Jesus was providentially born at just the right time. He was born when the Jews were subject to the Romans and could not execute criminals without Roman permission, when most all Jews and Gentiles spoke Greek, when the Roman road system made travel easier than it had ever been, etc. All of these factors contributed to the spread of the Christian movement. The same God who providentially sent his Son in the fullness of time continues to work that way—he brings all his purposes to pass, according to his perfect timing, using whatever means he wants. We’ll see this again and again as we study church history.

**Studying Church History**

As we study church history together this quarter, it’ll be helpful if everyone is on the same page in terms of how we’re defining some key terms. For our purposes, *church history* is the study of the beliefs and practices of professing Christians from the end of the New Testament era to the present day. A *Christian* is any individual who claims that title for himself—as a general rule, we won’t be making final judgments about people’s regeneration. Many other key terms will be defined along the way.

Church history is typically divided into four main time periods:

1) The Patristic Era (ca. 100–600 AD)
2) The Medieval Era (ca. 600–1500)
3) The Reformation Era (ca. 1500–1650)
4) The Modern Era (ca. 1650–present)

In addition to these periods, there are other divisions used by church historians. These include the study of Christianity in particular regions or nations (e.g. American church history), key topics (e.g. history of missions), or specific denominations or traditions (e.g. Baptist history).

**Why Church History Matters**

Some people like to learn about history, while others don’t; the same is true of church history. But church history matters for contemporary Christians. There at least seven reasons that Christians should learn about church history:

1) Church history reminds us that Jesus is building his church. It tells us about how Jesus is saving people from every tongue, tribe, language, and nation as his gospel is preached to the ends of the earth. It tells us about how Jesus has saved individuals from our particular people group(s) in our particular context. Church history is our history.

2) Church history helps to rescue us from the tyranny of the present. This is what C.S. Lewis was getting at in the quote we cited at the beginning of this lesson.
3) Church history tells us how we got where we are today. It helps us to understand why we have all these different denominations and traditions. It reminds every tradition, including Southern Baptists, that the church is bigger than any particular Christian group.

4) Church history gives us examples from which we can learn. It provides us with plenty of examples of Christians from all walks of life who were trying to follow Jesus in different contexts. We can learn from all of them—even the negative examples.

5) Church history helps us to confront challenges we face today. Many of the questions and challenges faced by contemporary churches were encountered and dealt with by saints from bygone eras—in them we have guides and teachers to help us as we journey through the Christian life.

6) Church history compels us to worship the Lord who reigns over all of history. “The sheer fact of believers across centuries and continents worshiping God reminds us that our Lord is over all and everywhere. A poem scratched out by a persecuted Christian in prison or the testimony of a missionary’s communion with Christ as he faced imminent martyrdom or the story of whole peoples in Burma coming to Christ all point to the God who alone can satisfy every human heart.”

7) Church history is fun. You may not believe it now—but you’ll figure it out at some point during the next three months!

Recommended Resources

In 2001, Andy Davis taught an overview of church history on Wednesday evenings at FBC Durham. You can listen to his lessons and download his handouts from the media library on the FBC Durham website (http://www.fbcdurham.org/sermon/sermonArchive.php).

Reformed Theological Seminary makes many of their outdated course lectures available for free download in iTunes U. This includes Church History I and Church History II, taught by Dr. Frank James. This is free seminary lectures—without the papers and exams!

Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd ed. (Word, 1995). This is the best single-volume introduction to church history. It’s written for college courses.

Timothy Paul Jones, *Christian History Made Easy* (Rose, 2010). This is a popularly written church history survey intended for use in local churches.

Diana Lynn Severance, *Feminine Threads: Women in the Tapestry of Christian History* (Christian Focus, 2011). This is a fine treatment women in church history. The author is a credentialed historian who holds to traditional biblical gender roles.

Stephen J. Nichols and Ned Bustard, *The Church History ABCs: Augustine and 25 Other Heroes of the Faith* (Crossway, 2010). This is a wonderful tool for teaching church history to children.

* Additional resources are available at http://fbcdurhamtheology.wordpress.com.
Notes:


3 The following list is developed from Dan Barnes, “From the Pastor’s Desk… Why read Church History?” Blog of Dan (November 24, 2011), available online at http://blogofdan.co.uk/?p=6992, and Mark Rogers, “Eight Reasons to Read Church History,” Andy Naselli: Thoughts on Theology (October 11, 2011), available online at http://andynaselli.com/eight-reasons-to-read-church-history.

4 Rogers, “Eight Reasons to Read Church History.”