

Why Church History Matters

Church History is sometimes seen as an optional rather than essential part of training for ministry. In this article Richard Lee gives us a bird's eye view which suggests that church history actually matters a great deal!

"Our next lesson is history", my friend informed me. "Oh no; can't we get out of it?" I asked anxiously. "History is so boring!" This was my view of history at the age of eleven.

I have a suspicion that you might have a similar response. "Why bother with the history of the Church? What has it got to do with me? What is the point of learning about a lot of dead people?" Does Church History really matter? Can we dismiss the history of the church as "about a lot of dead people"? I am reminded of a poignant statement found in Hebrews 11:4, "Being dead he still speaks." Perhaps the dead can speak to us; maybe the past does have something to tell us!

Prefacing the Acts of the Apostles Luke wrote these words when referring to his first volume, the Gospel, "I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach..." (Acts 1:1). The implication here is that in his second volume, known to us as *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke is portraying what Jesus continued "to do and teach". I am not suggesting that the Church History records are divinely inspired as is the Acts of the Apostles. Nevertheless, I venture to suggest that Church History is really a continuation of what Jesus has done and has taught.

Someone once said, "History is really His – Story". It is an account of God's involvement in the lives of men and women, as the history of redemption – begun in Genesis – continues through till the day Jesus returns in glory. It is the story of God; the story of His gathered Church.

Jesus said, "I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). Why does that Church History matter? Because it tells the story of Jesus building His Church.

Let me give you a brief synopsis of the story of the Church from the New Testament days to the present.

When would you have liked to live?

Would you have liked to have lived in the days of the Apostles? If not, perhaps in the years following when the Apostolic Fathers became Church leaders: 95 – 105 AD. Sadly, they failed to repeat the NT Apostles' freshness, originality, depth and clarity of evangelical teaching and doctrine. Salvation was attained through keeping the Law. An evangelical legalism was formed.

If you had chosen to live in the following three centuries you might have found yourself caught up in the great controversies dealing with the Trinity and the deity of Christ, as these years witnessed the hammering out of these most vital doctrines with the success of the orthodox teachings we have today.

The days of Augustine of Hippo

However, you may have liked to live in the days of Augustine of Hippo (North Africa, 354-430AD) and attended his Church where he would have expounded the true biblical doctrines of sin, grace and predestination. But then you might have been influenced by the teachings of the heretic Pelagias who emphasised free will, grace as merely a prop, and sin which was not inherited from Adam.

The Middle Ages

On the other hand, perhaps your choice would have been the Middle Ages (Fall of Rome in the 5th Century to the 14th Century) and witnessed the development of the Roman Catholic Church. As an alternative, however, you might have wanted to join the non-Roman Catholic Christian groups of the Middle Ages, such as the Bogomils from Bulgaria and Bosnia, or Albigenses, or Waldensians. Later during this period, in the wake of William the Conqueror, in 1093 a French monk called Anselm became Archbishop of Canterbury. He made a dramatic change to the teaching of the Atonement. Until then Origen's (Apostolic Father) teaching of the "*Ransom to the Devil*" held sway. Anselm emphasised the objective nature of the cross as the means of satisfying the demands of a holy God. We owe much to Anselm.

The Reformation

Or would the turbulent years of the Reformation period of the 15th – 17th Centuries be more attractive to you? Martin Luther was the father of the Reformation; Ulrich Zwingli the radical Reformer, and John Calvin the theologian of the Reformation.

But what is known of the Ana-Baptists? A much misunderstood group in their day, but which later research has discovered them to be a necessary addition to the progress of the Church. Hated by the Reformers and Catholics alike, the Ana-Baptists were Christians of the Reformation who felt that Baptism was for believers only. They believed the Reformation had not gone far enough. They also saw in the scriptures a Church completely independent of the State – a free evangelical Church.

The Reformation in England began under Henry VIII in the 16th century. His divorce from Catherine of Aragon –advised by Thomas Cranmer, a Reformer who was later to become Archbishop of Canterbury – led to England becoming severed from Rome. The Synod of Whitby in 664 AD had marked the beginning

of Roman Catholic England. But, with the stroke of a pen held by Henry VIII, a thousand years of Catholic domination came to an end and has never been restored.

The Tudors produced a succession of monarchs after Henry, from among whom Edward VI – a young and physically frail King – sought to further the Reformation in England throughout his short reign. Mary, an ardent Catholic, put a complete stop to the Reformation and began a system of public burnings of the Reformers and many other Protestants. Over three hundred men, women and sometimes children, went to their fiery grave through Mary's reign. She well deserved the title, "*Bloody Mary*".

The Puritans

Many of us I think may have wished to live during the Puritan period of the 17th century. Elizabeth I, whilst not a direct supporter of the Puritans, sought to redress the balance between Catholicism and the Protestants, and tolerated the progress of the Reformation. It has been said that James I, who followed Elizabeth, made only one meaningful contribution to the Reformation, and this was the production of the Authorised Version of the Bible in 1611. He did not like the Puritans and during his reign three hundred left England aboard the *Mayflower* and sailed to a new life of religious freedom in America.

Charles I, the son of James, unleashed a severe persecution of the Puritan ministers. A further four thousand escaped across the Atlantic to America. Charles, however, over-reached himself when he tried to force his Episcopal forms of Church life upon Scotland. The result was the Civil War during which Oliver Cromwell became a prominent leader introducing the Protectorate after the execution of Charles. Puritanism was now able to flourish.

Whilst Cromwell displayed a powerful leadership, his son Richard was unable to follow in the same path. The majority of the population wanted the return of the monarchy, and so in 1660 Charles II was crowned king of England. Persecution of the Puritans was repeated. Two thousand of England's best ministers left the country to go to a new life of freedom in America.

18th Century Revivals

It is probable that the 18th century with its various spiritual revivals under the ministries of Whitefield, Harris, Grimshaw, the Wesleys and many others, would have beckoned us as an age in which to live. Of course, we would have had to suffer the physical privations of that age in which the revivals were born, such as the gin age, widespread immorality, fears created by the French Revolution across the Channel, a wide gulf between rich and poor, and general lawlessness and violence.

19th Century Mission

C.H. Spurgeon, the “*Prince of Preachers*” of the 19th century would have captured my attention. I would have rejoiced at the success of William Wilberforce and the Clapham sect in their victory over the slave trade. Furthermore, I would have liked to attend the very first of the Keswick Conventions in 1875. I would have been excited at the formation of the College and University Christian Unions in 1876, and the commencement of many missionary societies such as the London Missionary Society and the Baptist Missionary Society, and faith missions such as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (then known as the China Inland Mission).

Yet, the 19th century also struggled with a new form of theology emerging from Germany known as ‘Higher Criticism’ which removed the supernatural from the Bible to make it more appealing to modern man. It also had to contend with the Oxford Movement, originating under John Henry Newman, which led to the High Anglo-Catholic Church, not to mention the rise of Darwin’s teachings.

Today

In the sovereignty of God I was born in the 20th century and continue to live into the 21st century. Yet, when I look back I praise God for the long and successful history of the Church. I am an inheritor of all that has gone before because it has been the story of Jesus successfully building His Church.

Moses told the leaders of Israel to have a story in answer their children’s questions, “*When in time your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him...*” (Exodus 13:14). Of course, as the OT progressed the story became longer and longer until by the time of the completion of the NT the story was much extended. But why should the story terminate at the end of the Acts of the Apostles? Should not our children know the story of the Church and how it has progressed through a further two thousand years?

Yes, Church History does matter. After all, it is His Church, His-Story, and His Building.

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