

7. Knowing church history helps us better understand the Scriptures.

- a. Church history is a helpful guide, but not our final authority (see Mark 7:6-9).
- b. Just as we learn by listening to good sermons, and we sharpen ourselves by studying and discussing Scripture with other Christians, so we can listen to those who have gone before and “dialogue” as we read them.
- c. For example, the interpretation of the end times has gone through several stages of development over the course of church history. Knowing the major interpretative options and how they developed helps us ask better questions about our own interpretations and see where we fit into the big picture of church history.

#### **Recommended resources:**

An overview of church history can provide a map so that you can see where you are and how you fit into the overall scheme of things.

*Church History 101*, by Ferguson, Beeke, and Haykin

- Short, simple overview of church history

*Church History in Plain Language*, by Bruce Shelley

- Single volume, comprehensive overview of church history

And read old books: “People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes.”

- C. S. Lewis

# **The Story of the Church**

*Class 1: Why Study Church History?*

*December 1, 2024*

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## **Christianity has always been historically-oriented**

“History and theology are inextricably intertwined in the gospel of our salvation, which owes its eternal and universal validity to certain events which happened in Palestine when Tiberius ruled the Roman Empire.” - F. F. Bruce

## **Why Should We Study Church History?**

1. Studying church history stirs us to praise God.
  - a. All things work according to the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11), which reminds us that church history is not mere coincidence. Psalm 78:4-8 commands God’s people to “tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of the LORD,” so that they will learn to “set their hope in God.”
  - b. See Psalm 111, especially v. 4. As we remember God’s works, even after the close of Scripture, we can trace how he has cared for his people. Our theology is a theology of remembrance (Deut 6:12, 20-21; 7:18; 8:2, etc.).
  - c. 1 Corinthians 1:25-31 teaches that God has chosen mainly the weak, simple, and despised to make up his church, in order to shame the proud, mighty, and self-assured. So let us boast in the Lord!

2. Church history is our family's story.
  - a. The men and women who have gone before us are like fathers and mothers in the faith to us. There is much we can learn from their teaching and their lives.
  - b. Even when we differ from them, we can learn from those outside our theological tribe. For example, Augustine believed that there was no salvation outside of the church, Calvin thought we should baptize infants, and Ryle thought we should use the book of common prayer with its memorized, repeated forms. Each of these pastors loved the Lord, and believed in the authority of Scripture.
3. Through church history we may grow in humility as we learn.
  - a. Church history can help us understand ourselves better. Our beliefs have an intellectual heritage. None of us springs up into the church out of nowhere, pure and undefiled. Like it or not, we have inherited the thoughts and beliefs of others. Our interpretations have a context and a historical lineage. If we are not aware of that context and lineage, we are less able to see ourselves clearly.
  - b. For example, why do we talk about "making a decision" for Christ? This language isn't anywhere in the Bible. It was a development of certain Christian groups in the mid-1800s. Until you know the basic outline of where this term came from, you might not even be aware that it is only one way of thinking about how people become Christians. Without a grasp of history, we aren't even aware of where our blind spots are. But understanding church history allows us to "place ourselves" in the flow of Christianity, to know why we believe some things and reject others.
4. Understanding church history can guard us from repeating errors from the past.
  - For example, there have been cases where Christians wedded their faith so closely with their patriotism that the church fell when their nation's leadership changed.
5. Knowing church history can guard us from accepting bad history.
  - a. With the rise in self-publishing, much of what is taught and published is erroneous, even from those inside the church.
  - b. In order to identify error, we have to know what is authentic.
6. Church history can provide inspiration, encouragement, and hope.
  - a. Church history provides role models, although not authorities.
  - b. For example, John Bunyan spent more than 12 years in prison, and yet he never denied Christ but only grew stronger in his faith and love for Christ.
  - c. When things seem hopeless, and despair is all around, it is helpful to see how church history confirms God's love, strength, and trustworthiness. For example, when Luther was condemned after the Diet of Worms, things looked so dire that he was kidnapped by his own prince in order to protect him. While in hiding, he translated the New Testament into German, a move that helped spread the gospel to many more people.