

**THE EQUIP INSTITUTE**

**Theme: Christian Heritage**

**Topic: Introduction to Church History**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Semester / Spring 2024**

**Introduction**

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topic tonight is an introduction to church history.

**Introductory Reflections**

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, "Learning in War-Time"

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that that gives tradition such a bad name.

Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*

**Christianity as a Historical Faith**

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 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.

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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. We also 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.

As a church, we rightly take biblical history seriously. We should also take church history seriously, since the same God who was at work in Scripture has continued to be at work down through the ages.

### **The Christian Worldview and Historical Interpretation**

According to Philip Graham Ryken, a worldview “is the structure of understanding that we use to make sense of our world. Our worldview is what we presuppose. It is our way of looking at life, our interpretation of the universe, our orientation to reality.”

The Christian worldview is shaped by the grand biblical narrative of the Scripture. The storyline of Scripture develops over the course of five movements: creation, fall, promise, redemption, and consummation. This grand biblical narrative records for us everything that God is doing through Jesus Christ to reconcile lost sinners to himself and ultimately redeem the entire created order. Everything in this class occurs at a particular point in grand biblical narrative: the time “between the times,” the period between redemption and consummation.

The Christian worldview should affect how we interpret the past in several ways. We’ll remember that the Triune God is holy, perfect, infinite, and he sovereignly exercises his wise and loving providential control over all of history. We’ll recognize that creation is good and is pleasing to God, and we will remember that all human beings are created in the image of God and possess inherent dignity. We’ll remember that God’s good creation is fallen because of human sin. We’ll remember the promise of redemption: people, institutions, even entire nations really can change for the better by the power of God.

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We want to show neighbor-love to every individual we discuss, trying to understand them on their own terms and see things through their eyes. We want to practice “interpretive humility,” remembering that, unlike God, we don’t know all things: we see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12) and the hidden things belong to God alone (Deut. 29:29).

### **Key Terms for Studying Church History**

History is the discipline of reconstructing and interpreting the past.

Church history is the study of the beliefs and practices of professing Christians from the New Testament era to the present day.

A Christian is any individual who claims that title for himself or herself and does not hold to beliefs that would be widely considered to be incompatible with the Christian faith.

A heretic is someone who is a professing Christian but who rejects or redefines what would widely be considered core beliefs of the Christian faith.

### **Approaches to Church History**

The chronological approach is the most common because it seems the most natural. It starts at the beginning and moves sequentially to the present.

The denominational approach, focuses on the distinct histories of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, and various Protestant sub-traditions.

The sociological approach focuses upon the various social and cultural factors that contributed to the growth, expansion, and diversification of Christianity.

The geographical approach looks at how Christianity has developed in various regions of the world. The “Global Christianity” movement has dramatically influenced the entire field of church history.

The biographical approach focuses on the most influential figures in each century and/or region.

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### Why Study Church History?

Mark Noll gives four reasons for why it is helpful to study Christian history.

1. Studying Christian history "provides repeated, concrete demonstrations concerning the irreducibly historical character of the Christian faith."
2. "To provide perspective on the interpretation of Scripture."
3. Studying Christian history "is also useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture."
4. "God sustains the church despite the church's own frequent efforts to betray its Savior and its own high calling.... Study of the past can be useful, that is, in shaping proper Christian attitudes."

### Sanctification and the Communion of Saints

Sanctification is a community project. While each of us will one day stand before Christ as individuals and give an account of our lives, our growth in godliness depends upon being surrounded by a community of disciples who "spur each other on to love and good works" (Heb. 10:24). You should love God more, love his people more, and be more burdened for the lost and the needy because of your relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ, especially in your church.

Sanctification is a community project across the centuries as we learn from the communion of saints. Baptists and other evangelicals don't often talk about the communion of saints, but this phrase simply refers to the spiritual union of all the members of the church universal, both living and the dead, on earth and in heaven. Each of us is a part of the communion of saints, but part of what it means to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us is to learn how to better walk with Christ from the examples and teachings of dead saints.

The word "saints" doesn't mean Catholic saints in particular, but following the Apostles Paul and John, it means all followers of Jesus Christ. We are all saints because we have all be set apart to be holy and will one day be fully perfected when we are glorified in the next life. Along the way to that final destination of perfect holiness, our spiritual growth can be aided by learning

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from those members of the communion of saints who have gone on to their eternal reward.

This is why it is spiritually helpful to read Augustine's *Confessions* and Jonathan Edwards's *Charity and Its Fruit*; this is why it is spiritually helpful to read sermons by John Chrysostom and Charles Spurgeon; this is why it is spiritually helpful to sing hymns by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley; this is why it is spiritually helpful to read the personal correspondence of Samuel Rutherford and John Newton; this is why is spiritually helpful to read an edifying biography of John Wesley or Hannah More or Elisabeth Elliot or Billy Graham.

**Recommended Resources**

*ESV Church History Study Bible*

Timothy Paul Jones, *Christian History Made Easy* (Rose Publishing, 2009).

Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Zondervan, 2021).

Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Zondervan, 2013).

John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History, Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Zondervan, 2013).

Ruth Tucker, *Parade of Faith: A Biographical History of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, 2011).

Stephen J. Nichols and Ned Bustard, *The Church History ABCs: Augustine and 25 Other Heroes of the Faith* (Crossway, 2010).

Linda Finlayson, *God's Timeline: The Big Book of Church History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (CF4Kids, 2018).

Simonetta Carr, *Church History* (Reformation Heritage, 2022).

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