

## MBC Equipping Hour 2019

### Church History Introduction

**Purpose:** The purpose of this class is to explore the history of the church and how it has influenced and been influenced by the world around her. Furthermore, we will be looking at how doctrine and missions has influenced the church and some of the key figures who were catalysts throughout church history. These six classes are simply an introduction to some of the key times in church history, not an exhaustive study of each time period.

**Perspective:** A study of church history reveals that there really is nothing new under the sun. The same battles that face the church today have been raging against her on and off for the past two thousand years. We gain much perspective from studying the past and learning the consequences of following these “new ways” which appear from time to time.

**Church History:** *The history of Christianity would always involve at least two related actions: a movement outward to reach places where Christ’s name was hitherto not known and a movement inward to train hearts in learning more of Christ.*<sup>1</sup> By understanding this simple point we come to the realization that we are not alone but standing on the shoulders of many men and women who have gone before us. Our church today does not exist in a vacuum but is the result of many years of struggle and countless lives given for the name of Christ.

#### **Layout for the six weeks:**

##### **Week 1: Introduction and the Early Church**

- This section will cover a brief introduction to the series and discuss the Apostolic era, the early church fathers and some of the main apologists, the heresies they fought and church persecution.

##### **Week 2: New Era for the Church**

- This section starts around 300 AD and we will discuss the major turning points in the church regarding theology, church leadership, how the church interacts with society and the culture around her and how this era has impacted even us today.

##### **Week 3: The Rise of the Roman Catholic Church and Islam**

- This era is generally known as the Medieval Church era and spans from 600 AD – 1517 AD. We will see the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of the pope, monasticism, Islam rapidly spreading, the Crusades, the Great Schism (which still exists today) and much more.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Knoll *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* p. 1

#### **Week 4: Reformation Time and the Catholic Response**

- Many events throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the necessity of church reform. Men like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and many more stepped in to literally change the face of Christianity.
- The Roman Catholic Church would respond unfavorably. *If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone ... let him be anathema.* Council of Trent, 1563

#### **Week 5: 16-18<sup>th</sup> Century: Arminianism, John Wesley, William Carey, The Great Awakening**

- This century was pivotal for the making of our modern church, both good and bad. Calvinism is challenged, Puritans are established, missions around the world becomes popular and one of the greatest revivals in history takes place.

#### **Week 6: Charles Finney and the rise of modern church heresy**

- After The Great Awakening, many wanted to see the excitement continue, even though God was done. Charles Finney decided to bring emotionalism, excitement and altar calls into the church and attempt to “drum up” people to become Christians.
- The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement takes root in mainstream Christianity.

#### **Introduction:**

Church history is one of the most overlooked disciplines in the corporate church today. Most Christians today simply think history is either boring or simply does not matter and willfully neglect learning their roots. Because the vast majority of professing Christians have no idea where their beliefs took root they simply believe they have a new work of the Spirit or have found something new in the Bible. For example, we will see that the modern-day Pentecostal movement finds its roots firmly ungodly and unsaved men. Charles Fox Parham was not only a staunch racist and kicked out of his denomination, he personally started the false doctrine that one must speak in tongues for “proof” of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. This, and many more examples will come to light as we travel through the history of the church and her various doctrines.

A proper understanding of church history not only opens the history of false and good doctrines, but also an appreciation for the abundance of luxuries we have the privilege of having access to. From knowing the thousands that died for the Bible to be in English to the many more that died to separate from the Roman Catholic Church. When we know the price that was paid for what we have today it should cause us to appreciate their sacrifices and not take for granted all we have now.

When we discuss the history of missions we will see that the original missions’ efforts to take the gospel from America to Africa were considered suicide missions. Those who signed up to go overseas had a life expectancy of less than three years and many did not even survive

their first year. The first wave of missionaries established coastal stations and then the next wave went into the interior and changed the face of missions forever.

With all that being said, if we do not know from where we have come and why we do what we do, there is danger in slipping too far to the right of left. Our goal is to be a Biblical church first and foremost and find our practices in the roots of the men and women who went before us.

## The Early Church

The first mention of the church is found in Matthew 16:18 “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” This is Jesus talking about the foundation and the builder of the church. There was nothing up to this point in the previous 4000 years that spoke of a church. The church officially began in Acts 2 at the day of Pentecost. From that day, Christ has been building His church. The book of Acts records the history of the first few decades of the church including its persecution and spreading throughout the known world.

- A few key facts about the church in the book of Acts:
  - The first church was started in Jerusalem and because of the persecution from Saul (later the Apostle Paul), it scattered throughout the region (**Acts 8:1**).
    - This first persecution caused the church to take the gospel outside of its comfort zone to Samaria and other parts of their world (**Acts 11:19**).
  - Presumably the first Gentile church was in Antioch (**Acts 11:26**) and this is the church where they were first called Christians.
  - We see that multiple churches are being established through missionary efforts as believers were spread throughout the known world and spreading the gospel. *The natural outworking of missions’ work should be the planting of churches. This is the Biblical model found in Acts.*
    - We also see the church becoming organized by means of elders, missionaries and deacons and a priority of planting churches.
  - Persecution and proliferation mark the church throughout the book of Acts.
    - Acts ends with Paul in Rome preaching and teaching from a house which he rented. History goes on to tell us that Paul lived a few years after the completion of Acts, was imprisoned one final time in Rome and martyred around 65-67 AD.
  - One of the key truths we must understand in our day and age regarding the book of Acts is the role of government and the advancement of the gospel.
    - If anyone thinks the government can either help or hinder the advancement of the gospel, they do not understand the gospel.
    - We saw in Acts (and throughout history) the gospel spread, and churches planted despite direct objections from the government.

- Our understanding of the gospel's power should never rest on the provision or removal of support from our government.
        - In fact, as we will see in coming weeks, when the church has the government's support it has always become weaker, watered down and less effective in the world.
- The book of Acts is a transitional book for us to read today which explains the history of the church's move from Judaism to Christianity in a Roman world. Many of the ideas and things which took place are not normative for the church today but were necessary for the church then.
  - Things like meeting in houses, there were not church buildings and it was illegal at some points.
  - Speaking in tongues, signs and wonders:
    - **Acts 2:4** when Peter and the others were delivering their first sermon so all around would hear and know it was from God.
    - **Acts 8** when Philip was preaching in Samaria, many signs and wonders were being done but the Holy Spirit was withheld until Peter came. This was done to show the Jews the Samaritans were part of the church.
    - **Acts 10:44-46** when Peter was preaching to Cornelius' house and they spoke in tongues shows that God now saved the Gentiles.
    - **Acts 19:6** when Paul laid hands on the Ephesian men and they spoke in tongues to show there was one unified church and to show these men the Holy Spirit had come.
      - Subsequently, this was the last time this type of event happened.

## After Acts

A key date all Christians should know is 70 AD. In April of that year, Rome invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The way the temple is today in Jerusalem is the way it was left in 70 AD. The reason this is a monumental event in the life of the church is that now Judaism and Christianity were finally severed. Before this, Christianity was looked at as an appendage of Judaism, now it would have stand on its own.

- "In the lands outside Palestine, the decade which ended with the year 70 marked the close of the period when Christianity could be regarded as simply a variety of Judaism.... From AD 70 onward the divergence of the paths of Jewish Christianity and orthodox Judaism was decisive.... Henceforth the main stream of Christianity must make its independent way in the Gentile world." F.F. Bruce (*The Spreading Flame*)
  - Because the church was going forth from Judaism, it had to legitimize itself beyond what the Jews taught/believed.
    - Christianity had to ask *what is truth?*

- Just like Judaism, Christianity relies on divine revelations from God, but unlike Judaism, Christianity finds the ultimate revelation in the person and work of Christ.
- *How do we know truth?*
  - Once again, like Judaism, Christianity relies on the written word to know truth, but unlike Judaism, Christianity sees the New Testament as God's written revelation to the church.
- *How do we put this truth into action?*
  - Israel was never sent to the nations to proclaim the good news, they were to be an example for the surrounding nations. The church is called and commissioned to leave their comforts for the sake of the gospel.
- While Christianity finds its roots in Judaism, it is distinct from it. Over the next 2000 years, the church would continually fight to answer these three questions.

### Early Church Fathers

“By the end of the first century, the death of the apostles produced a leadership vacuum in the church. Who had the authority to lead the believers? Who would guide and guard this flourishing new Christian faith? A group generally called the Church Fathers filled the gap.”<sup>2</sup>

- The early church fathers cover a wide range of time and have varying importance.
  - The Apostolic Fathers were around from 95-150 AD.
    - The apostolic fathers were not known for writing anything theologically profound but were more devotional and encouraging.
    - **Clement of Rome (30-100 AD)** is known for his writing to the Corinthian church 40 years after Paul wrote his letter. He encouraged him in similar ways as Paul did and he quoted the Old Testament extensively as well as several of Paul's other letters.
      - He also was instrumental in forming and establishing church leadership. He focused on the church submitting to the eldership because he believed they received their authority from the apostles who received their authority from Christ.
        - Though he did not intend, this idea of apostolic succession would be abused by the Roman Catholic Church centuries later.
    - **Ignatius (50-?)** was the bishop of Antioch but was martyred in Rome for sharing his testimony of faith. His date of death is uncertain, but most accept 117ish. He was a direct disciple of the apostle John.

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<sup>2</sup> James Eckman *Exploring Church History* p. 17

- He was the first to call for the church to submit to the bishops of an area over the elders of the church. He did this because he thought it would help unity and keep heresy out of the church.
  - **Polycarp (died 155 AD)** was also a disciple of the apostle John and a bishop of the church in Smyrna. He is best known for his letter to the Philippian church where he (just as Clement of Rome) quotes extensively the writings of Paul and calls the church to holy living.
    - This is of vital importance for us today when people call the authority of the New Testament into question. These letters have been authoritative since their writing, even if they were not officially said to be until the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- The Apologists were around from 150-300 AD.
  - The apologists writing was to defend the faith and also to counter any errors that were rising up.
  - Some of the popular writers were **Justin Martyr (100-165)** who was beheaded in Rome with six other men who refused to recant their faith.
  - **Irenaeus (135-202)** who was the first writer after the New Testament to write in-depth on Scriptural authority. He uses Scripture to exhort believers to defend the faith using Scripture. He references all but 4 New Testament books and also shows Jesus as the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies.<sup>3</sup>
  - Some of the heresy's which faced the church externally were **Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Neoplatonism.**
    - **Gnosticism** believed that all matter was evil and the material and immaterial world were completely separate. This means they believed that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body because the material was all evil.
      - They also held to only an elite few have special knowledge for salvation, which was totally spiritual.
      - This was the worst heresy to face the church in the beginning and much is written about it. This heresy is also why apostolic succession was a needed teaching so people could verify what they taught.
    - **Manichaeism** taught that there was an ultimate battle between dark and light and the only way to salvation was a life of complete self-denial and celibacy.
    - **Neoplatonism** did not believe in Jesus, the cross nor the atonement. It taught that the mankind had to absorb the divine

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Irenaeus' teachings also were the seedbed for transubstantiation, baptism for forgiveness of sin and Mary as a second Eve and that her obedience led to restoration...leading to the future veneration of Mary.

essence by meditation, contemplative prayer and other mystical experiences and disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

- **The early church also faced heresy from within her walls.**
  - The first person to cause a church split was **Marcion** (2<sup>nd</sup> century). He taught that there were two gods, one of the Old Testament and one in the New. He called the church to *unhitch itself from the Old Testament*.<sup>5</sup>
    - He was expelled from the church around 144 AD and subsequently started his own churches, which resembled Orthodox churches in practice.
    - Though a heretic, Marcion's writings showed that the *real* church held to the Bible we have today as authoritative. Furthermore, because he was calling all the books he did not like as fake, it forced the *real* church to start the process of canonization.
  - The second major heresy to come out of the church was called **Montanism**, from Montanus around 170 AD.
    - "In his lust for leadership, he became obsessed and would suddenly fall into frenzy and convulsions. He began to be ecstatic and speak and talk strangely, and prophesied contrary to that which was the custom from the beginning of the church. Those who heard him were convinced that he was possessed. They rebuked him and forbade him to speak, remembering the warning of the Lord Jesus to be watchful because false prophets would come"<sup>6</sup>
    - Montanus was joined by two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, who also claimed to have the gift of prophecy and also prophesied in an ecstatic state.
    - He was a pagan priest who was supposedly born again and brought his pagan rituals into the church. From the end of Acts up until this time, there were no occurrences of tongues and prophecies.

### The Spread of Christianity

- During this time period, there were no organized crusades, outreach events or anything of the sort...yet the faith spread like wildfire.
- It was because the believers were living such a radically different life than the world, they stuck out.

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<sup>4</sup> The modern-day mystical practices of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and NAR churches are heavily influenced by Neoplatonism.

<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what Andy Stanley recently taught.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*

- The world wanted what the church had because the world was not in the church.
- In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Julian wrote regarding Christianity it *"has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them."*
- Persecution only fueled the spread of the church; it keeps the goats in the church to a minimum and the sheep live like today is their last day.

### Persecution in the Early Church

- As we end this section, it is important to note that for the first 250 years of Christianity, persecution was sporadic around the Roman Empire. It was never really illegal to be a Christian, but they did not "fit in" to the social atmosphere of the empire.
  - Notably, **Emperor Nero** in 64 AD tried to expel and kill all Christians around the empire by blaming the fire in Rome on them.
  - **Emperor Domitian** (89-96) also is known to have persecuted Christians locally in Rome.
  - **Emperor Trajan** (98-117) sent **Pliny the Younger** (a Roman lawyer and worked directly for emperors and wrote hundreds of letters which lend to a robust understanding of history) around the empire investigating Christians.
    - He made every attempt to persecute Christians, even those who were just accused of being one.
    - He would force them to recant by cursing Christ and giving an offering to pagan gods. If they did not, he would have them tortured (many recorded cases) until they died or recanted.
  - *But the first empire-wide persecutions did not occur until the reign of **Decius** in 250, who attempted to enforce sacrifices to the Roman gods.*
  - *The most merciless persecutions occurred under **Emperor Diocletian** in the early 300s. He ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of the Scriptures, the closing of church meetings, and the imprisonment of Christians. Later he made the refusal to sacrifice to the gods a capital crime.*
    - *Increased persecution forced the church to determine what was really important. For what were church members willing to die? For what holy writings were members willing to die?*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> James Eckman *Exploring Church History* pp. 23-24