

Newsletter April 2016

In last month's March 2016 newsletter we put forth a model depicting an ideal temporal church. While this model may have seemed highly subjective to some, it was based upon sound biblical principles as well as attained from hard-won doctrinal principles and practices gleaned from centuries of church history. In this newsletter we shall provide a brief introduction to that rich history. The history of the living Church is a fascinating story. To see God at work through the leading of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals and nations is awe-inspiring. As in most stories, there is a villain as well — as we shall see Satan diligently working behind the scenes to thwart the efforts of God and his elect through instigating persecution and by orchestrating the injection of theological error into the church. We shall also discover ungodly men who willingly propagate Satan's lies. Conversely, we uncover the heroic efforts of godly men to attain to the high calling in Christ Jesus in the face of severe persecution and death as a witness to the power of the faith and the truth of the Gospel.

While the study of church history is not on a par with the Gospel and the vast expanse of biblical doctrine, it is very important that we consider the historic background as well as the essential teachings of any local church to which we may choose to become affiliated to be sure that we are as closely allied with the true faith as possible. To accomplish that important goal, we must understand how a church is related to other churches both today and in the past. On the Reference page of this website we have provided a *Church History Outline*, the main headings of which are as follows:

Apostolic Age (AD 30-100) – age when Jesus' apostles were still living to direct the temporal church

Sub-Apostolic Age (AD 100-150) – first generation of men trained by the apostles ruling the temporal church

Post Sub-Apostolic Period (AD 150-313) – subsequent generations of men ruling the church through times of great turmoil and persecution by the Roman Empire

Roman Imperial Period (AD 313-440) – Roman Empire's political takeover and rule of the temporal church

Papal Church Period (AD 440-1200) – age of Roman popes that ruled supreme over the temporal church

Age of Reform (AD 1200-1648) – age of biblical church reform through the *Protestant Reformation Movement*

Age of Revival (AD 1648-1861) – revival of the temporal church out of stagnant national churches

Age of Decline (AD 1861-Present) – the slow but persistent moral and doctrinal decay of the temporal church

While a simple chronological listing of past events, such as we have in this outline is useful in summary, it does not attempt to explore the substance of those events as they relate to important specific doctrinal truths. The church in every age must be studied with regard to its relationship to sound Scriptural doctrine. To do otherwise, would subject the study of the church to a mundane recording of related events, places, and dates that totally ignores its vast spiritual dimension. Only by studying the history of the church in some detail against the backdrop of biblical Truth can the invisible Universal Church be seen as an essential spiritual entity working in and through its subordinate temporal churches. The topics listed in this simple outline are explored and explained in some depth in *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity* Book III, the unabridged text of which is available free of charge in the Portable Document Format (pdf) on this website. This simple history is especially recommended for the novice who has little or no knowledge of Church History, and finds scholarly multiple volumes filled with exhaustive detail quite overwhelming. While it is not feasible to completely discuss every possible thread in the great tapestry of church history within the strict confines of Book III, the first three sections of this book (Sections 17 through 19) are intended to provide a basic overall understanding of this important subject. In Section 17, we begin with the infant church on the day of Pentecost and then trace the church's trials, tribulations, and joys chronologically through the medieval period, into the reformed period in Section 18, and finally into the near present age in Section 19.

In this brief history, we reveal how persecutions and outside pressures often had an adverse effect upon the struggle for establishing sound doctrine in the early church. At times, the future of the church as a viable institution was actually feared to be at risk due to persecution and infiltration – thus causing the institutionalized church to react by compromising sound doctrinal positions or by establishing erroneous reactionary doctrines. These actions were often seen by the church leaders of that day as being expedient in order to maintain order through the exercise of their hypothetical superior intellect and authority. The effort to maintain a tight reign and control over church congregants, both spiritually and temporally, adversely modified sound doctrine and practice over time finally leading to the extreme doctrinal and moral corruption of the Roman church of the medieval period. This worsening corruption eventually necessitated a volatile effort toward serious biblical reform in the

fourteenth and fifteenth century. Out of this *Protestant Reformation Movement* came the restoration of many important biblical truths, but it also resulted in political division and great doctrinal wrangling over specific biblical interpretations as well as lingering Roman traditions. Schisms soon stagnated the movement and splintered it into many sub-movements or sects. The outcome of all this turmoil was the formation of Christian denominations (See *Major Denominations Chart* on the Reference page of this website), which now number in the thousands. We shall undertake the important study of Christian denominations in next month's newsletter.

It would be all too easy to take an extreme Protestant view that nothing of theological value was accomplished by the Roman church that dominated Christendom before the *Protestant Reformation Movement*, but that is hardly true. Due to many spurious writings of the time being given the same weight as the writings of the New-Testament authors, it early on became absolutely necessary to establish a list (i.e. canon) of all the documents that would eventually make up the Holy Scriptures. By failing to do so, the formulation of major doctrines could be undermined through considering erroneous texts or by excluding reliable documents. The church eventually established a full list of Scriptural texts in AD 398, which carefully excluded erroneous works as being heretical or even blasphemous since they often tried to pass themselves off as God's Word. From that diligent effort came today's Bible, which we now have in our possession through its many language translations.

To have the Scriptures available was one thing, but what they meant when taken together as a whole was still another matter. As we examine the history of the church, we shall see the development of major Christian doctrines slowly taking form as believers struggled with the total context of canonical Scripture in an effort to establish sound biblical teaching. The Greek Gnostics, who falsely claimed supernatural extra-biblical personal knowledge, came up with fantastic interpretations to satisfy their own occult fantasies. Therefore, it became a question of not only how Scripture was to be interpreted, but who had the authority to interpret them. The question of interpretative authority ultimately gave rise to the fictitious doctrine of apostolic succession within the Roman church, which ultimately led to the non-biblical office of the Roman Catholic Pope as the perpetual successor of the apostle Peter and the alleged vicar of Christ on earth.

One of the first theological issues that had to be dealt with was the doctrine of the person of Christ. In the four Gospels, Jesus is emphatically presented as deity living within human flesh, which appeared to be in conflict with well-established monotheism inherited from Old-Covenant Judaism. It was not until the fourth century that the doctrine of Christ, as being fully God and fully man, was authoritatively articulated by the church in the *Nicene Creed* of AD 325 (text of this creed is available on the Reference page of this website). With the doctrine of Christ firmly established, it then had to be determined how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit existed as three distinct deities without dividing up the Godhead into three separate "Gods." This question was finally resolved by establishing the doctrine of the Trinity (cf. *CRC Book I*, Chapter 6.3). These two major doctrines, the person of Christ and the Trinity, are universally accepted today as sound biblical teaching – so much so that they provide a primary basis for separating true Christian churches from cults and other false religions.

Soteriology is the study of salvation, and the means by which that salvation is attained. Examining this topic involves us in the age-old conflict of grace versus works as well as the absolute sovereignty of God in determining how the redemption of the lost human race comes about. As important as the establishment of the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were, these additional doctrinal conflicts have eclipsed all others as the church continued on in her attempt to establish sound doctrinal standards from the full context of Scripture.

The first of these is the Pauline doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, which is absolutely central to the Gospel message. This doctrine was and is in conflict with fallen man's aspiration to shape an institutionalized church into his own vision for it through his own works. The Pauline doctrine of grace weakens the view of the church as a powerful sociopolitical institution and undermines its temporal as well as its supposed spiritual authority by placing an emphasis on a direct personal relationship with Christ through faith – rather than a corporate relationship with a church that must be maintained by strict obedience to church ordinances. If salvation that is obtained through simple faith in Christ alone is correctly understood, the church as a temporal institution loses its absolute authority over the hearts and minds of believers.

As a means to gain and sustain absolute control over salvation, the temporal church quite early on turned the simple profound Christian practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper into sacred church vows (i.e. sacraments) that only the institutionalized church and its appointed agents could administer. Therefore, redemption from sin

was seen as impossible apart from a supposed spiritual regeneration through church-administered ritual baptism, and a believer's continued standing within Christ was impossible to maintain apart from partaking of the Lord's Table that was also within the exclusive control of the church. Faith was no longer seen as a serious issue in gaining assurance of salvation, since salvation allegedly came about through continued obedience to the ordinances of the temporal church. Even rank unbelievers were at times baptized and declared to be Christians without requiring any valid profession of faith. Furthermore, since both sacraments must be administered by the institutionalized temporal church alone in order to be valid, an individual's salvation apart from membership in the temporal church was declared to be null and void. The power that this false teaching afforded misguided and evil men cannot be overestimated. We shall see how that power was so often exercised and abused to foster the growth of a tyrannical temporal church throughout our study of church history.

The second major conflict that we shall find throughout this historic study is over the Pauline doctrine of the sovereignty of God in redeeming his own in Christ through an act of divine election. Since salvation is received by God's grace alone, it follows that only He can administer it as He chooses to do so. The highly institutionalized temporal church has continually refuted that important doctrine over its entire history inasmuch as it leaves God fully in control of the destiny of men, and it leaves Christ in full authority over his Church. Man prefers to decide the matter of salvation through the exercise of his own supposed "free will," and to also build and control the church himself. It is as though some still think that man can by human effort save himself and through like means save others by constructing the Church – which Jesus said that He alone would construct upon the basis of simple faith in Him as his Father revealed Him to chosen men (cf. Mt.16:18). After the death of the Apostle Paul, the doctrine of the saving grace of our sovereign God was almost immediately submerged under church-directed sacramentalism. However, it was never completely extinct and was occasionally reiterated by such men as Augustine in the fourth century and then openly expounded a thousand years later by men like Martin Luther and John Calvin during the *Protestant Reformation Movement*.

As we begin a study of the early church, it would seem that a careful study of Luke's excellent writing in the book of Acts quite easily accomplishes that for us. While the book of Acts does provide an historical background, it does not go deeply into many doctrinal matters. We must then look to the four Gospels as well as the many epistles that were written to the early churches by the apostles to discern important matters of doctrine and practice. We can rest assured while studying the history of biblical times that the information we have at hand has been authenticated by God Himself through Holy Scripture. Unfortunately, we cannot expect to find all of church history up to the present date recorded in the Bible since all of the books of the New Testament were completed before the end of the first century. Therefore, we must resort to the study of secular or "profane" history from the second century forward to determine how the Visible Church and the temporal church that represented it has fared through the ages to bring us up to the present day. We find that we must walk on the soft ground of problematic historic records in doing so rather than the bedrock of Scripture. To be sure, we must exercise extreme caution each step of the way, but we must proceed nevertheless while still holding firm to the essential doctrinal principles and precepts expressed in Scripture and interpreting church history in that light.

As someone has said, "[As] faith is the evidence of things not seen, history is the evidence of things half known." In studying "extra-biblical" church history, we find that we must rely on information recorded by many fallible men over the centuries. Many of those men were within the temporal church and some were no doubt members of the true Visible Church as well. Even so, all of their writings lack the apostolic stamp of spiritual authority held by the biblical authors. Moreover, many of those men were trapped within a rigid paradigm of thinking that reflected the superstitious paganism of their times, as well as retaining various dogmas and errors that had deeply infiltrated the Roman church quite early on and continued through the Middle Ages. Much of our knowledge of church history comes from the writings of those men who were not of the reformed biblical faith and did not – indeed could not – interpret facts with that necessary insight.

Furthermore, general information surrounding the church was recorded by rank unbelievers who may or may not have inserted anti-Christian bias into their reporting. Their historic information pertaining to secular events is not necessarily inaccurate and for that reason may be found useful, but we must realize that some of their renderings of those events may be tainted through impious misinterpretation. Unfortunately, historians always interject their own opinions and suppositions into their recording of facts even if they do not intend to do so. That

is not always a result of intentional bias, but merely a matter of personal perspective since witnesses of the same event will often come up with somewhat different descriptions of what has taken place.

If we do not accept extra-biblical information as having some degree of validity, we must admit that we can know nothing of the nearly two thousand years that have transpired since the birth of the early first century church. We therefore have no choice but to weigh the evidence and accept the greater part of it as true in order to determine how the many denominations and individual churches of today are related to the early churches founded in the New Testament by the apostles. We must also ascertain how today's varied doctrines compare with those great doctrines that are set forth in Scripture. We must then attempt to determine the true basis of each temporal church's beliefs and practices, and determine how the many contemporary churches and denominations have come into being from what was once a singular first-century Church with Christ truly at its head.

Because of the necessarily critical study of the institutionalized temporal church taken in this work, it at times may appear that Christianity was having little or no positive effect upon civilization at large. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Even as the Holy Spirit living in the hearts of chosen individuals was changing them one by one, regions around the world were being positively affected from within everywhere that Christianity took root. Governments, institutions, and civil laws were slowly being altered by the Christian ethic that Jesus taught regarding how men and women were to properly associate with one another.

Even in its most corrupt state, the institutionalized Roman church itself was producing positive change as it continued to intrude into the lives of degenerate pagan peoples – subjugating them to Christ in name if not in fact. Much of the positive work of the Roman church was accomplished through the teaching of monastic orders that were established in the far reaches of the Roman church estate. Those orders took an interest in improving farming methods and in developing various other enterprises that were passed on to the populace. In accord with Jesus' healing ministries, hospitals sprang up that valued patients as children of God. The nursing profession in particular was positively affected as nuns of various woman's orders took that profession on as their religious mandate. In the wake, civilizations were blessed with increased wealth and an increased state of well-being.

As positive as all of this activity was, the *Protestant Reformation Movement* produced an even greater advance in civilization, as the Word of God was finally being printed and dispersed among the laity. No longer was the indwelling Holy Spirit being inhibited by fallible church dictates and mysterious traditions that often veiled the Truth. God's very Word was imprinted upon the hearts and minds of men that God called out of the medieval darkness. So effectual was the text of the Bible upon those who could read and study it, there was a great desire to teach many others to read in order that they too could have God's Word in their minds to guide them. To accomplish this, public schools were organized to teach reading to young children who would grow up to take their place in a fully reformed Christian society. As a direct outgrowth of the *Protestant Reformation Movement*, nations began to emerge whose governments were increasingly seen to be servants of the people. That movement reached its pinnacle in the creation of a unique nation that was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" in the eyes of God (cf. *CRC Book III*, Chapter 18.5).

It is hoped that this brief introduction to church history has been informative, and that it will encourage the reader to undertake a more thorough study of this important subject. We must not study church history with the illogical hope of returning to the past – which after all was not that superior in many respects – but in order to discern as much as we can the proper manner in which the temporal church should conduct its assemblies today in the light of Holy Scripture and the church's vast history. It is imperative that we apply the prevailing substance and spirit of the apostles' teaching that motivated proper practices of the early church to our assemblies today. No fundamental truth of doctrine must ever be sacrificed to the expediency of a modern world of thought. We must be very sure that any innovation of practice in our church gatherings is brought about solely by benign differences of the times and culture in which we live, and that it is not brought about by fundamental doctrinal neglect or a falling away from the core biblical doctrines of the faith. The study of church history is particularly important for the newborn in Christ that he may come to better understand the temporal aspect of the Universal Church into which he was spiritually born when he accepted Christ as his savior. It is further hoped that he will be more able to cope with the extreme array of temporal churches of which he is faced, and may come to a sound decision about taking his proper place in the corporate worship and ministry of a biblically-sound local church to the glory of God. © Arthur J. Smith April 2016