

2000 Years in 40 Minutes

A Study in Church History

Introduction

Interest & Need: Why should we study the history of the Church? Why is it important for us to understand what has happened from the birth of the Church in Acts 2 until our present day? Will an understanding of Church history really shape how we live as the Church in our world today? That's my hope... by looking at a snapshot of 2000 years of Church history and by drawing some implications about what has happened over those past 2000 years, we will be renewed in our vision of what we're supposed to be and do as the Church in our world today. And at the end of the day, here's my big idea for this morning:

Big Idea: *If we truly want to be the Church for the world, then we must keep Jesus Christ and His gospel central to all we do because He is the Lord of the Church.*

Introduce Message: In the *Story of God*, we need to understand not only the larger story that is revealed to us in the pages of Scripture, but we need to understand our place in that story as the Church as we continue to march further and further toward the end of the story in re-creation.

Honestly, I think this is one of the hardest messages that I've ever prepared. How do I share 2000 years of history in 40 minutes? What do I include, and what do I exclude? Unfortunately, I am not going to be able to go into great depth into the Church's history, but what we will do this morning is look at two things:
(1) *The History*. I'll give you the highlights of what happened during six distinct eras of Church history, and then we'll talk about (2) *The Heart*... the implications of two millennia of Church history and what we should learn from the past to keep Jesus Christ and His gospel central in our present and future as we are called to build His kingdom and "invite the people of our world into His life-transforming community."

⇒ *So let's begin with...*

The History

A. Explanation: As we study the history of the Church, there are many different lenses that we could view this history through. I'm choosing to focus on the history of the Church and its impact upon Western civilization. I've chosen 6 distinct periods or eras.

1. ***The Ancient Church (33-313)***. We talked briefly about the Ancient Church when we discussed the controversies about the person and work of Jesus Christ at Nicaea and Chalcedon. During this period, the Church is trying to clarify and affirm what they believe about the person and work of Jesus Christ, and how they are going to live on mission in their world.

a. *Apostles (AD 33-100)*. The apostles are the first sent ones of Jesus who preach the gospel and plant churches to fulfill the Great Commission.

b. *Church Fathers (AD 100-150)*. By 100 AD, all of the apostles have died (John is likely the last one to die in the late 90s AD). And the Church

Fathers are the ones who take the apostles teaching and begin to help the early church focus on what it truly means to be a Christ-follower.

c. *Apologists (AD 150-300)*. After 150 AD, the Christian faith and church is spreading and beginning to have influence in many lives. And the Roman Empire starts to get nervous. So there are some major persecutions of Christians during this period. So the “apologists” are writing and preaching to explain and defend the Christian faith.

2. ***Christian Empire (313-500)***. It’s very difficult to overemphasize the change that occurred in AD 312 when the Roman Emperor Constantine “converted” to Christianity. Before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine had a vision in which he was told to paint Chi Rho (the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ) on the shields of his soldiers. And allegedly, a voice in the vision announced, “by this sign you shall conquer.” He obeyed the vision and won the battle. So Constantine and his administration decided to dedicate themselves to the Christian God. In 313, Constantine legalized the Christian religion with the Edict of Milan. Constantine had the dream of restoring the ancient glory of the Roman Empire, and he now believed that this could be achieved on the basis of Christianity. Even though Constantine sincerely believed in the “divine power” of Jesus, this does not mean that he personally chose to follow Jesus with his own personal life. He never placed himself in any kind of discipleship role, and he was not baptized until very close to his death.

a. During this era of the Holy Roman Empire the Church begins to enjoy more power and prestige. The make-up of the church had primarily been from the poor and limited middle class, but now the Church began to attract the aristocracy.

b. There are several responses of Christ-followers during this period, and these responses are very instructive for all of the periods of Church history:

(1) The first group of followers is grateful for the coming together of the Church and Empire, so they accommodate the union. They are grateful that the violent persecutions have stopped, but they also believe that the church can further her mission through the power of the Roman Empire.

(2) The next group flees and retreats. This is the beginning of the monastic movement. This group believes that the Church has become compromised and corrupted by the union of Church and Empire.

(3) The last group takes a middle position (and I tend to be drawn to this response). This group takes part in life and society of the Roman Empire, but they do so with a “critical” stance. By critical, I don’t mean “negative.” They are constantly evaluating and assessing the calling and mission of the Church and its role to speak into the society, culture, and politics of the Roman Empire. They don’t retreat to get away from the Empire, but they don’t fully accept the union of the Church and Empire either.

3. ***Middle Ages (500-1500)***. In this period of 1000 years, there is a lot going on in world history and in the Church.

a. *Early Middle Ages*. By the late 400s AD the Roman Empire is declining “Barbarians from the North” (or so they are called) invade the Roman Empire. In 476 AD Romulus Augustus, the last official Roman Emperor is defeated,

and the Holy Roman Empire is officially “no more.” In the 600-700s Islam arises from the east and begins to take over much of North Africa and the eastern part of the former Roman Empire. Trade and the economy in the West is now severely impacted. In 800 AD, there seems to be a resurgence of the dream of the Roman Empire when Charlemagne is crowned Emperor by the pope. With all of the turmoil in the political landscape during era, the popes of the Church in the West consolidate more and more power to themselves.

b. *“Middle” Middle Ages.* As we approach 1000 AD, there’s a lot of conflict between the Church and the State. At one point, Pope Gregory VII excommunicated Emperor Henry IV, and then Henry marched on Rome with an army... it’s a geo-political tit for tat. And also, the Church in the West and the Church in the East officially split... in 1054, the pope of the Western Church officially calls the leader of the Eastern Church a heretic. That’s usually not good for relationships. In 1095, the Crusades began and lasted for several centuries in an attempt to recover the Holy Lands and Jerusalem from the Muslims.

c. *The Late Middle Ages.* As we get into the 1300s, nation states in Europe have begun to form, and the Church began to lose its power and influence. In 1347 the Great Bubonic Plague called the Black Death sweeps through Europe kills upwards of 60% of the population. During the last part of the middle ages as Spain rises in international power, they begin to send out colonial expeditions to the Americas, and conversion to Christianity becomes an official part of the strategy of the colonial powers.

d. I know I’m painting a bleak picture of the Church during this era, and at times, this is the Church at her worst. However, some great things do happen during this period. Thomas Aquinas wrote his masterpiece *Summa Theologica*, which was a major treatise on the character and nature of God. John Wycliffe, an English preacher, translated the Bible into the common language of the people.

4. **Reformation (1500-1800).** By this point, the Church’s leadership in the west is corrupt and is in need of major reform. So in 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther nails 95 Theses of protest against the church to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The Reformation is born. Luther protested the Church’s sale of indulgences in which you could buy forgiveness of sin. In his study of the Scriptures, he was overcome by grace through faith alone... not of works and definitely not of cash. Luther sought to make God’s Word the starting point and final authority for theology over and above the Church’s tradition and the various pope’s edicts. Twenty years later in Switzerland, a young lawyer and theologian named John Calvin joins the Reformation movement and begins to systematize this new theology of the Reformation.

a. The “Five Solas” of the Reformation are still held today as part of our belief and doctrine: *Sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”), *Sola fide* (“by faith alone”), *Sola gratia* (“by grace alone”), *Solus Christus* (“Christ alone” or “through Christ alone”), *Soli Deo gloria* (“glory to God alone”).

b. As the Protestant faith sweeps through Europe, this leads to bloody conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. And even between Protestants there are violent persecutions. Within Protestantism, there arises a group called the “Anabaptist” who don’t practice infant baptism... they believe that baptism is for those who have given their life to Jesus Christ... baptism after conversion. They are persecuted, so many of them get on ships and sail across the Atlantic to what will one day be called the United States.

c. In the United States, pilgrims fleeing religious persecution have established colonies... and the influence of faith of upon these new colonies ebbs and flows. In the 1730s, at a spiritual low point in the United States, there is a great revival that takes place called the “First Great Awakening” led by the likes of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. These great preachers taught that conversion is not only the pardon of sin but also the transformation of the heart. In the early 1800s, there is also a great missionary movement from North America and Europe to unreached people groups throughout the world. This is a great season of the history of the church... not without warts, but it is truly the Reformation that the church needed.

5. **Modernity (1800-1970).** During the time period of the Reformation, there were many new philosophical developments, especially in Europe. We call it the Enlightenment. Rene Descartes, a French philosopher and mathematician developed the famous phrase, “I think therefore I am.” Notice that the phrase was not, “God is, therefore I am.” God had now been dethroned as the center of all existence, and humanity now placed itself on the throne. Even though this is nothing new spiritually (we’ve been doing it since Genesis 3), it’s revolutionary philosophically and culturally. Everything is now called into question, and this period called “Modernity” is the cultural expression of the philosophy that develops during the Enlightenment. Reason becomes king. If you can’t explain it “naturally,” it’s not worthy of intellectual discussion. “Supernatural” (without “natural” explanation) is no longer a viable explanation. During this period, many theologians believe that the Bible cannot be a supernatural document because “supernatural” is officially out. This becomes the central struggle in the battles between theological liberalism and conservatism. The mainline denominations in American Christianity depart from the inspiration of Scripture. And when you depart from the inspiration of the Bible, you depart from the power of the story... the story of the God has revealed Himself through the Word... the God who creates and re-creates for His glory and for our good. The last overarching theme of modernity was humanity’s faith in itself and its ability to solve all human problems and societal ills by its own intellect. A century of the world’s most violent wars and genocides have proved that arrogance wrong. During the Modern period, the West increasingly became a post-Christian culture.

6. **Post-Modernity (1970-Present).** The last period we’re going to look at this morning is our own. I’ve dated the beginning of the post-modern period as 1970... much of the 60s paved the way for full blown post-modernity as we saw the full outworking of a disdain and distrust for authority on a cultural scale like we’ve never seen it before. Much like modernity, God is still dethroned, but now there is no authority (reason is no longer authoritative), and therefore, there is no

absolute truth. Everything depends upon your perspective... truth is relative. One thing we can agree with the postmodern perspective about is that humanity is flawed and unable to see things correctly. Postmoderns would say that we are flawed in our perspective because there is no absolute Truth... just perspectives. As evangelical Christians who believe in a capital "T" truth, we would say that we are flawed because we are sinful... because we have rebelled against the God of Truth who created us and we have dethroned Him and made ourselves God. We do have our work cut out for us as we proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic, postmodern culture... and we dare not shirk back from the mission. There is a hopelessness that is spawned when there is no God and no longer a larger story, and we have the hope that comes from the God of The Story.

⇒ *So that's a big picture view of 2000 years of the Church's history. How can we learn from the past to be the church for the world today and into the future... what is...*

The Heart

A. Explanation: What do we learn from these 2000 years of Church history? What are some of the themes that should surface as we live out our calling and mission of being the church, the life-transforming community of Jesus, for the world? You might draw other conclusions and implications, but these are three implications that I believe must be at the heart of being the church for the world.

1. *We must keep Jesus and His gospel central in all we do because He is the Lord of the Church.* What strikes me most about the history of the Church is that when anything other than Jesus Christ and His gospel was made central, the Church lost her way. The Church is a group of people who are called by Jesus to follow Him, who cling to His good news that they have been restored to Him through His cross and the resurrection, and they are now part of His kingdom on mission to take His life-transforming grace and power to the world. When anything other than Jesus is central to who we are and what we do, we have lost our "first love." **READ Revelation 2:2-5.** Jesus and His gospel must be the centerpiece of all we think, say, and do as the Church... we must never leave our first love.

2. *We must carefully evaluate the Church's role in society, culture, and politics.* In my interpretation of Church history, whenever the church cozies up too closely with the reigning societal, cultural, and political powers, we lose our ability to clearly and powerfully see and speak Jesus into that societal, cultural, and political landscape. The Church must always choose influence over institution. And let's just be honest, we like power. As fallen humans who like to build our own kingdoms, and in doing so, we are drawn to power and prestige. We see it with Constantine and the Holy Roman Empire in the 300 and 400s... people in the Roman Empire are drawn to a false gospel... the gospel of power and might of Rome. We see it in the papacy of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages... the Church's leadership spent more time controlling nation states than preaching the gospel and calling people to live transformed, holy lives as the Church for the world. We see it in the Reformation when John Calvin takes over Geneva, Switzerland and tries to force Christian theology and Law upon citizens, even when many of them were not Christians. And some of those who resisted were

tortured and executed. And in our own American history, we see it in the Puritans who tied conversion to the gospel with the right to vote. As 2nd and 3rd generations of Puritan children and grandchildren chose not to follow Jesus, the Puritan governments realized they couldn't legislate conversion, and they had to backtrack on their expectation that all citizens would be Christ-followers. I'm not saying that these examples did not begin with the best of intentions, but in the end, the gospel of Jesus and the witness of the Church was compromised and corrupted. We must critically evaluate the Church's role in society, culture, and politics. As we talked about last fall during the Presidential elections, as Americans who are Christians, we should be the best of citizens and exercise our right to vote, but as the Church we must always keep ourselves free of anything that compromises our ability to clearly and powerfully speak Jesus Christ and His life-transforming gospel into all areas of society, culture, and politics.

3. *We must never lose the mission of changing lives for God's glory.* And one final thing that we must remember is that our primary mission as the Church is to preach Christ crucified and risen so that lives are transformed for God's glory. That is our focus. We are to be on a mission to broken world, calling people to repent of building their own kingdoms and come to the God who changes lives through the power of His kingdom. We must always be aware that our mission easily shifts to making our own name great... and we must continually repent of this and renew our commitment to God's mission of inviting the people of our world into the life-transforming community of Jesus. And as this happens, He looks great... He gets the glory.

Conclusion

2000 years of the Church's history in 40 minutes. I know it's been overwhelming and very possibly confusing. I encourage you to study the history of the Church... not so much so you can fill your hard drive with historical data, but so that we can be ever reminded of who we are to be and what we are to be about as Jesus' followers in our world. As you study these past 2000 years of the Church's history, you might draw some of your own conclusions. But I think that you'll discover what we have affirmed this morning. We must always keep Jesus and His gospel central to all that we are and all that we do because He is the Lord of the church. We must always carefully evaluate how we engage in society, culture, and politics. And we must always be about His mission of transforming lives for the sake of His kingdom... because He is the God who creates and re-creates for His glory and for our good.