

Church History 101: The Highlights of Twenty Centuries by Joel Beeke, Sinclair Ferguson, and Michael Haykin, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016. (47 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Preface

1. The Importance of Church History

Church history is important for Christians. **First**, it continues the history of God’s faithful dealings with His people found in Holy Scripture and records the ongoing life and work of Christ in our world. **Second**, we are commanded to “remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee” (Deut. 8:2) and make it known to our children (Ps. 78:5-6). **Third**, church history helps illuminate and clarify what we believe, providing a context for evaluating our beliefs and practices, according to the teaching of the church of all ages. **Fourth**, it is a safeguard against error; there are no new heresies, it seems, only old ones masquerading as new. **Finally**, it gives us mentors and heroes, guides to follow as they followed Christ. In doing so, it promotes spiritual maturation and heartfelt supplication to God to reform and revive His church. [page vii-viii]

First Century -- Apostolic Foundations

2. The Apostle Thomas in India

Thomas is remembered as the apostle to Persia and India. There is a famous denomination in India called Mar Toma Church, the St. Thomas Church, which traces its origins back to the preaching of Thomas in the Indian state of Kerala. [page 3]

3. The World Opposed to the Church

As the church of Jesus Christ is built on earth, it faces opposition and often violent persecution. [page 3]

4. Martyrdom – the Seed of the Church

An early Christian historian named Tertullian wrote in his *Apology*, his defense of the Christian faith, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” that is, a blessed means whereby Christ plants and grows His church. [page 4]

Second Century-- The Church of Martyrs and Confessors

5. Christ Builds His Church in the Face of Opposition

Matthew 16:18 is an important text in the New Testament. The words of Jesus indicate in no uncertain terms that wherever Christ builds His church, there will be powerful opposition to what He is doing, but “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Joseph Alexander explains “the gates of hell” as “a strong figure for death or

destruction ... *Gates* has been variously explained to mean the entrance, the defenses, the military force and the judicial power.” In other words, Christ promised to build His church in defiance of the enmity and destructive power of death itself. [page 6]

6. Polycarp’s Testimony

One of the most famous, an old man named Polycarp, declared to the authorities: “I have served Jesus Christ these eighty and six years. He has done me no harm; why should I deny Him now?” The Romans burnt him.

7. If Christ Is Not for Real, Why Die for Him?

The martyr Ignatius of Antioch tied together the ways in which the church responded to both persecution and false teaching when he said, “If Christ be not fully human and if he did not really die, why am I suffering for the gospel and prepared to die for it?” [page 8-9]

Third Century -- Persecution and Heresy: Origen and Tertullian

8. Defending the Truth

From the second century, apologists such as Justin Martyr defended the truth of the Christian gospel by expounding Scripture and refuting false accusations regarding the Christian faith. [page 10]

9. The Use of the Word “Trinity”

Tertullian vehemently fought against modalism and, as far as we know, was the first person in church history to use the word *Trinity*. [page 12]

Fourth Century -- The Beginnings of the Christian Empire

Fifth Century -- The City of God and the City of Man

10. Two Kingdoms – God’s and Man’s

The life of Augustine encompassed two important events in the fifth century. First, barbarian tribes swept into Italy and sacked the city of Rome in 410 and in 455. Rome’s reign of power over the nations was broken. One response to this tragedy was to blame the Christians. Augustine responded in his famous book *The City of God*. He argued that from the beginning of history, fallen man has been building his “city” or kingdom over against God. Any kingdom not grounded on the kingdom of God is bound to be transient. The only lasting or kingdom is the one God is building in Jesus Christ, which Augustine identified with the church. To those who wished to lay blame for the destruction of the great city of Rome at the feet of Christians, he declared: “This is no surprise to us, to see the kingdoms of men rising and the kingdoms of men falling, because our commitment is to Jesus Christ and exclusively to the kingdom He is

building.” There are two kingdoms, yet only the kingdom of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, will last forever. [pages 20-21]

11. The Lasting Kingdom of Jesus Christ

We learn how important it is to not rely on the kingdom of man. The only lasting kingdom is the kingdom of Jesus Christ. It teaches us that salvation is not by our own accomplishments, but by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. [page 23]

Sixth Century -- Justinian, Benedict, and the Conversion of the Scots

12. Cell Groups Becoming the Church and Transforming Lives

By the witness of Ninian, Columba, and other, lesser known individuals, many of the diverse peoples of Scotland came to know Jesus Christ. Two things stand out about these men. To historians, Ninian is an obscure figure with little to no background or claim to fame. Perhaps the only reason why the name of Ninian endures in Scotland is his ministry to evangelize the Picts. Faithful service is often unnoticed by men but it never remains unnoticed by God. Another lesson we learn from both Ninian and Columba is that the power of the gospel is demonstrated not only through preaching and teaching but through the transformed Christian community. In the pattern of the New Testament, cell groups went out to be the local church in order to demonstrate Christ’s grace to transform lives. Though there are various theological points Ninian and Columba strayed from Scripture, many churches and denominations today can learn from them that grace-filled interaction between Christians will draw unbelievers to see that there is something supernaturally wonderful about Jesus Christ’s kingdom. [pages 28-29]

Seventh Century -- Gregory the Great and the Rise of Islam

13. Nominal Christianity in the 7th Century

Gregory’s vision produced the kind of nominal Christianity with which the church continues to struggle to this today. [page 31]

14. No Grace in Islam

By the turn of the century, within eighty years of Mohammed’s original vision, Islam began to sweep through the Middle East. It saw success in North Africa, often through sheer brutality. But its advance ground to a halt in Spain. In the end, those who claimed to follow Allah and his prophet Mohammad conquered nearly half of the Roman Empire. The historic Christian communities of the Near East and North Africa were either destroyed or reduced to the status of despised and oppressed minorities.

Mohammed denied the deity of Christ and denied that Christ Himself died on the cross. He taught that salvation does not come through someone else’s work on a

person's behalf, but through a self-willed submission to Allah. In Islam, salvation knows nothing of God's grace in Christ or of the substitutionary atonement, of Christ bearing the sins of man and offering them assurance of salvation. Islam was and remains a manmade religion because it can never offer what only God can offer in and through Jesus Christ—that is, mercy, grace, and salvation for fallen, sinful human beings. [pages 32-33]

15. The Great Commission

While there is a time and a season for everything, the church must forget what matters most: it must remain clear and steadfast on the Great Commission, not just claiming land and nations for earthly gain, but proclaiming the gospel to a lost and dying world. [page 34]

Eighth Century -- The Iconoclastic Controversy

16. The Worship of Icons

Many began to think that icons were channels through which Christ was speaking to them and through which God was blessing them. Christians in the East would kneel before them, perhaps would kiss them as holy objects, and on occasion would light candles or burn incense before them as an expression of their desire that through the intercession of the person depicted by the icon, the heavenly Father would hear their prayers. [page 36]

17. Contrary to 2nd Commandment

The making of such images, as well as worshiping or serving them, was forbidden by God in the second commandment. Yet men always attempt to be wiser than God, it seems. [page 37]

18. The Use of Biblical Images

Protestants should remember the biblical “images” or “visual aids” we have been given to help us understand the gospel. The New Testament witness affords the church two—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are encouraged to continually reflect on the significance of these two sacraments, “wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the New Covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 92) [pages 37-38]

Ninth Century -- Struggle for Power in the Church; Ratramnus and Gottschalk

19. Gottschalk with Augustine for a Salvation without Works

Born in Saxony, Gottschalk was given over by his parents to be a servant in the church. Gottschalk became fascinated by Augustine's writings. Augustine had emphasized that

we are not just spiritually sick, but are, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, dead in trespasses and sins. Gottschalk began to reflect on God's grace in electing some to salvation. But he also observed that many leaders in the church were teaching salvation by works righteousness. Gottschalk argued that we need to grasp that salvation, which we receive through faith, is a gift that God planned to bestow upon us before we were born. Like Augustine before him, Gottschalk left no place for any individual contribution in gaining righteousness before God. Our faith and works are merely reflections of the salvation we have received, not a contributing factor to it. [page 42-43]

Tenth Century -- The Dark Ages

20. Power and the Church

The power gains of the church tended to corrupt the church and her leaders. Educational standards fell, and many of those who ministered God's Word were altogether ignorant of it. An ignorant ministry could not arrest the inherent decay in society with the power of the gospel. New political powers from the north (the Vikings or Norsemen) and the south and east (Muslims) swept in, challenging the worldly power of the church. The church responded with little to no spiritual direction for its members. [page 46]

21. Barbarian Invasions

The church also had had no small measure of success in surviving barbarian invasions and converting the invaders. [page 48]

22. The Dark Ages and Today Have the Same Temptations

Today's world is not much different from that of the tenth century. The church continues to be confronted with paganism, as well as with temptations to worldly success. While some denounce the tenth century as "the Dark Ages," we must recognize that our contemporary society demonstrates a moral and spiritual darkness, and the church is challenged to respond with the light of the gospel. Sometimes the church stands by and lets her witness be muted by worldly concerns. Rather, the church should perpetually increase in the knowledge of God's World, be strengthened by the worship of God, and give itself to the simplicities of day-by-day devotion to Jesus Christ. By living for Christ and proclaiming the gospel, we can shine a much-needed light in the darkness. [page 49]

Eleventh Century -- The Great Schism; Anselm of Canterbury

23. A Light Even in the Dark Ages

The eleventh century still found the church in a dark place, though glimmers of light continued to shine through. [page 50]

24. Rome and Constantinople Against Each Other

The pope of Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other, and the bodies of churches under the authority of each were arrayed against each other as hostile camps. The unity of the visible church was broken, and remains broken down to our time. [page 50]

25. Our Need of a Savior throughout the Ages

As sinners, our only hope is to find a mediator and deliverer who is very man and perfectly righteous, and therefore able to satisfy for our sins; but also very God, more powerful than all creatures, and therefore able to sustain the burden of God's wrath and obtain righteousness and eternal life for us. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is "very God and very man," is the Savior God has provided for us. [page 52-53]

26. Worldly-minded Popes

Worldly-minded popes had little concern for the spiritual well-being of the church, and little or no interest in her true calling and mission in the world. [page 54]

Twelfth Century -- The Crusades, Abelard, Lombard, and the Waldenses

27. Show the World Humility and Love

The Crusaders failed to understand that Christ enjoins His people to speak a different language. Our means and ends should be those of Jesus. Ours should be a language of humility and love in the name of Christ, not violence, slaughter, and retribution. [page 56]

28. The World Influencing the Church

Many lessons can be learned from this period. One prime lesson is that when the agenda of the world becomes the agenda of the church, the church's true calling is cast aside. Although the church of the twelfth century fell into this error, its light was not extinguished. God did not forsake His church, even in the darkest of ages. [page 59]

Thirteenth Century -- Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas

29. Relics and Holy Places

The church preached bloodshed as a way of defending relics and sacred places of the Christian faith. To be spiritual was to fight. The transformative teaching of the gospel had fallen into decay. [page 60]

30. Aquinas and Literal Scripture

Aquinas is noteworthy for his defense of the literal sense of Scripture as the primary and authoritative sense. But ultimately Thomas accepted the authority of the church.

He was content to expound and defend the received teachings and practices of the church, whether they accorded with Scripture or not. [page 64]

Fourteenth Century -- The Church's Babylonian Captivity and John Wycliffe

31. The Popes and Politics

Sadly, the church hierarchy continued to pursue worldly power in the fourteenth century. The popes persisted in their bid for dominance in political affairs. While the church must be in the world, working to bring about change and draw people to Christ, we are never to be of the world. The church should not thirst for power or seek to assert its authority through political means. In the fourteenth century, the ambitions of popes and kings embroiled the church in ecclesiastical civil war. [page 65]

32. God's Word Accessible to the People

From Wycliffe's life, we learn the importance of getting the Word of God into the hand of the people. Despite the fact that the church's hierarchy was beset with ambitions for earthly power, some were focused on helping people know God's Word and be transformed by the gospel. Because of this conviction, Wycliffe is often referred to as "the morning star of the Reformation." Today we must see that the church exists to bring light to the world, and we must be willing to separate earthly power and gain from the mission of the church. The church accomplishes her mission by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the might of kings or political leaders. [page 69]

Fifteenth Century – The Renaissance, Huss, Savonarola, and Groote

33. The Renaissance – a Prelude for the Reformation

The Renaissance was a prelude to and preparation for the Reformation. Nothing was more important to the Reformation than the recovery of the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek. The times were ripe for a reexamination of the teachings and practices of the church in the light of Scripture. [page 73]

34. The Beginning of the Reformation

Because many were faithful to what they read in the New Testament, the biblical gospel began to reemerge. Both Huss and Savonarola recognized that after deaths, the church would experience the much-needed renewal that we call the Reformation. Huss famously predicted that if they burned "this goose" (that is, himself), God would send a swan (which proved to be Luther). [page 74]

35. The Reformation

The sixteenth century, the beginning of the modern age, is one of the greatest watershed moments in all history, for it witnessed the unfolding of the Protestant Reformation. Benefiting from the biblical scholarship of the Renaissance, the recovery of classical learning, and the zeal of faithful servants in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Reformation was the greatest revival of the Christian church since Pentecost. [page 75]

36. The Writings of Luther

On October 31, 1517, he [Martin Luther] nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the castle church door in Wittenberg. These theses, written in Latin, were intended for discussion among scholars and monks in the university. Much of what he wrote was an explanation of the truth of the gospel and a condemnation of the church for failing to believe it and to preach it. Though it was never Luther's intention, soon the *Ninety-Five Theses* were translated into almost every language in Europe. Like wildfire, the message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone spread across the continent. Luther was tried, his teaching was condemned, and he was excommunicated. Concerned friends shielded Luther from danger, however, and he set about the task of translating the Bible into German. In the years that followed, the Reformation took hold in many parts of Europe, and almost always it began with the writings of Luther. [page 77-78]

37. The Puritans

While differing on church polity, the Puritans—who included such notables as William Perkins, Matthew Henry, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, John Bunyan, John Flavel, and Thomas Watson—were united by a concern to maintain faithful preaching of the gospel and teach sound doctrine; to promote true conversion, personal faith, and practical godliness; and to bring God's Word to bear on all aspects of life, as individuals, in families, and in the nation at large. [page 81]

38. The Short-lived Triumph of the Puritans

Charles alienated Scottish Presbyterians when he tried to impose a version of the English liturgy on the Church of Scotland. The Presbyterians of Scotland and the Puritans of England united in determination to resist such tyranny. The result was civil war in England and Scotland, pitting forces loyal to the king against the army of Parliament, commanded by Oliver Cromwell, often hailed as the greatest Englishman of his century. Charles lost his throne and life in 1649. For a time, it seemed that the

Puritans had triumphed. The high-water mark of Puritanism was the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which met from 1643 to 1652. [page 83]

Eighteenth Century – The Great Awakening

39. Europe and Bloodshed

By the eighteenth century, Christian Europe had wearied of constant religious strife and bloodshed. [page 85]

40. Deism

This was not the personal God of the Bible; deism was a rejection of revelation in the name of reason. Rationalism prevailed in the eighteenth century and continues to influence theology today. [page 85]

41. The Beginning of Revival

The church became irrelevant to many people, highborn and low. No one would have guessed that a great revival was at hand. [page 86]

42. The Welsh Revival

The revival first appeared in Wales. In the early 1730s, two men who were to lead the revival in Wales—Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland—were converted. By 1750, their preaching and godliness, and that of others, had brought about the creation of 433 religious societies. These societies, whose members called themselves Calvinistic Methodists, set the tone and character of Christianity in Wales for two centuries. All the early Calvinistic Methodist leaders were convinced of the necessity of the Holy Spirit's power and anointing on their ministries. [page 86]

43. The Missionary Legacy from the Great Awakening

What this fallen world needs is not reason, but the saving grace that transforms people for Christ. The guiding light of the Great Awakening demonstrated this fact. The evangelistic fervor of the Great Awakening produced a significant missionary expansion that aimed at reaching the whole world for Christ. It also produced a piety focused on conversion and growth in grace through knowing God's Word. We do well to honor and continue that legacy today. [page 89]

Nineteenth Century – Beginnings of Modern Theology and Kingdom Builders

44. The Second Great Revival

The work of God went forward, however, in two great revivals, the Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the century in the United States and the Revival of 1859 on both sides of the Atlantic, not to mention lesser revivals in various places. [page 92]

45. Church Growth in Asia and Africa

As decadent Western churches retreated from missionary work, under pressure of declining memberships and shrinking revenue, the newly planted churches of Africa and Asia grew apace. Communism waged a long and brutal campaign to destroy Christianity in the name of materialism and atheism, but failed, falling into the dustbin of history. There is a vibrant church in Russia today, and more Christians in China than in any other nation in the world. The church in the West has declined in faith and numbers, poisoned by Modernism, battered by secularism, and emasculated by worldliness. But God has continued to send forth His Word to the ends of the earth, bringing people to Himself through Christ, planting churches everywhere, and building His kingdom in the hearts of His redeemed people. [pages 96-97]

46. Recovering the Reformed Faith

Movements to recover the historic Reformed faith were led by able men such as J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In Britain, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones drew large congregations to London's Westminster Chapel, and through his influence, the Banner of Trust began to republish outstanding but long-forgotten works of Reformed and Puritan theology. [page 98]

47. Holding Fast to Christ throughout the Ages

In the Middle East, historic Christian populations are shrinking under persecution at the hands of militant Islamists. The clash with Islam continues in Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere in the world. But the record of church history teaches us to hold fast to Christ, assured that He is with us always, even to the end of the world. He will build up His church and kingdom to all generations. [page 99]