

Pages from Church History (A Guided Tour of Christian Classics) by Dr. Stephen J. Nichols, P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ: 2006. (36 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. The Holy Spirit Uses the Knowledge of Past Generations

And it was Spurgeon who said, “I find it odd that one who thinks so highly of what the Holy Spirit teaches him, thinks so little of what the Holy Spirit teaches others.” In context, Spurgeon was arguing for the use of commentaries. Yet his point has broader application. If the Holy Spirit works in us, then (paraphrasing Spurgeon) how much more work has he been doing in the lives of countless others who have gone before us over the past two millennia? Another voice from the past, Martin Luther, declares in his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”: “The Spirit and the gifts are ours.” Consequently, because of the gift of the Spirit, we are equipped for all things pertaining to life and godliness. But the Spirit is not our unique, solitary gift. The Spirit is a corporate gift, given to a long train of past generations and, Lord willing, given to many generations to come. (p. 14)

2. Studying the Past

Studying the past offers meaningful connections with our legacy. We are enriched through our study of the past, simultaneously humbled by testimonies of courage and emboldened by reflections of God’s grace and faithfulness. (p. 14)

3. Salvation Through the Work of Christ Alone

Yet, while there are alternatives, to be sure, at the heart of these various Protestant groups who remain faithful to the gospel there is a common core: a theological center that consists of the authority of Scripture alone and insists that salvation comes by faith alone through God’s grace alone – and that this salvation comes through the work of Christ alone. This is the lasting legacy of the Reformation – not the discovery of the truths, but their recovery and their return to the heart and center of the church. (p. 35).

4. Martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

It has been said that there have been more martyrs in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. One such martyr, a Lutheran minister, theologian, and author of the classic text *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, offers a moving example of courage in the face of the Nazi regime. (p. 39)

5. House Churches in the First Century

Polycarp’s letter also reveals the role of the bishop in the early church. Significant differences exist today regarding church government and polity. There are also those who hold to a hierarchy of bishops, those who hold to a Presbyterian form, those who argue for congregational rule, and so on. What we learn from Polycarp’s letter, though this does not serve to settle the question based on the biblical teaching, is the practice that emerged early on in the church. Cities and towns tended to have house churches.

Actual church buildings were not built until the second and third centuries, although, as we learn from Paul's missionary endeavors in Acts, some Christian communities sprang from Jewish communities where the synagogue then served as church. These various house churches were served by elders and deacons, each of those offices with distinct functions. Over these local officers were bishops, largely responsible for all the various house churches under their care. Hence, Polycarp is Bishop of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, Anicetus of Rome, and so on. (p. 55-56)

6. The Burning of Polycarp

"Eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

The proconsul persisted, showing his reluctance to persecute such an innocent person. To all of his attempts, Polycarp replied, "Listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing". The proconsul was not about to offer Polycarp a debate, so he threatened him with the wild beasts, to which Polycarp replied, "Call for them." The crowd took over at this point, demanding the lions be set on this teacher of the Christians, "the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship." Philip told them that he couldn't since he had already ended the animal hunts, so they demanded that Polycarp be put on the pyre.

Polycarp refused to be nailed to the stake, telling his executioners that God would enable him to endure. Polycarp then offered a prayer, one last testimony to God. He blessed God, who had "considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the numbers of martyrs in the cup of your Christ." When he said "Amen," the fire was set. (p. 59)

7. Martyrs Were Victorious

As *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* summarizes the whole affair: "[Polycarp] was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was high priest during the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus, but while Jesus Christ was reigning as King forever." The it adds, "To Him be glory, honor, majesty, and the eternal throne, from generation to generation." The reference to Christ and the true King was intended to remind other Christians who might very well find themselves standing before a Roman soldier or a proconsul or even the emperor himself that they should not fear the one before them. It also reminded them there was a reality that was true and firm and real, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. The martyrdoms were victory, not defeat. (p. 61)

8. Hostile Environments, Facing Persecution

It has been said that there are more martyrs from the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries than from all of the previous centuries of the church's existence combined. In fact, many Christians in various parts of the contemporary world find

themselves in exactly the same spot as Polycarp and the early church: in a hostile environment, facing persecution. For them, the words of Christ in John 15:18 ring all too true. “If the world hates you,” Christ tells the Twelve, “keep in mind that it hated me first.” Christ proceeds, however, to inform the disciples that this is precisely the world that he is sending them into. (p. 61-62)

9. Christ is the Eternal Emperor

Perhaps the most telling lesson we learn from Polycarp concerns the way he experienced being a disciple in the world. Polycarp’s world required of him the sacrifice of his life. And so he went boldly to his death, remaining faithful to the end. Consequently, his martyrdom had a great impact on his contemporaries and on Christians in the ensuing centuries. The account of his martyrdom became well known to the early church and bolstered those who would face their own persecution and, in some cases, martyrdom. Eventually, the tide changed and Christians enjoyed the favor of the Roman Empire for many centuries. Today the church lives in both worlds as some Christians enjoy the favor of government while others are persecuted for their faith, both groups can learn from Polycarp that regardless of who sits on the various thrones and seats of power in governments, Christ is the eternal Emperor, and in that Emperor’s steps are to follow. (p. 62)

10. Death of Augustine’s Mother

Augustine was converted in 386 and baptized the following year in Milan. His mother was there for it all, and as if her life’s mission were now complete, she died that same year. In her last words she told her son that she had longed to remain alive to see him become a Christian. Now that God had granted her wish, as well as “more besides,” she was quite content. Her mission accomplished, she asked rhetorically, “What is left for me to do in this world?” Grief-stricken, Augustine wept, realizing that this precious handmaid of God was now lost to him. He was overwhelmed with memories of her devoted love and patience and tenderness. And so he recalls, “The tears which I had been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making them a pillow for my heart.”(p. 77)

11. Friendship

Augustine liked to quote the Roman poet Cicero on friendship: “Friendship is agreement, with kindness and affection, on things human and divine.” (p. 81)

12. Theology Is Necessary, But Challenging Work

Why the God-Man is not easy reading. The tightly reasoned dialogue and logical development may have been par for the course in the medieval era, but such writing is not commonplace in the present day. Ours is not a world where we typically speak of reasonable things as delightful and delightful *because* they are reasonable. This does not detract, however, from the ongoing value and impact of the work. Anselm

demonstrates that theology is sometimes challenging work, but necessary and fruitful—and, at the end of the day, a great cause for rejoicing in what God has done. (p. 105)

13. Aquinas's Summa Theologica

Isaac Newton is said to have read everything. That is, he read every single book that was available at that time. That might very well have been the case. As for Aquinas, he didn't have to say that he read everything; all you have to do is read his *Summa Theologica*, and you very quickly come to see that he had. Clearly, any reader of the *Summa* is struck by the magnitude and scope of the work. Encyclopedic. Monumental. Unprecedented. In the case of the *Summa*, these all do not go far enough. No stone is left unturned as Aquinas makes his pilgrimage through the theology of the early church, the philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome, and the pages of Holy Writ in his quest for truth, not just on one subject, but on them all. Of course, as a medievalist, he begins his pilgrimage with God. By the time he finishes his course, though he left the work unfinished, he has touched on just about all things related to God and creation and other beings and the self. The *Summa* entails ethics and law, philosophy and theology, and hermeneutics and commentary on the biblical text. (p. 118)

14. à Kempis' Monastic Life

It is in imitating Christ that one achieves the spiritual life. Yet it becomes obvious that à Kempis offers little help as to how that is accomplished outside the monastery walls. Here we see the great medieval divide between this world and the one to come or between the spiritual labors of those in the monastery or the church and those merely temporal and material labors of everyone else. (p. 140)

15. Subjective Experiences Loses Checks & Balances of the Bible

The mystics enjoyed wide readership during the Middle Ages, and they (as well as more contemporary mystics) continue finding a mass market now, which is certainly true of "The Imitation of Christ." The contemplative life has always had its appeal. As our own age becomes increasingly technological, fast-paced, and materialistic, the appeal grows all the more strong. The challenge presented by the medieval mystics and mysticism, however, is the relationship of faith to reason and especially to the Bible and its propositions. By lodging everything in subjective experience, one loses the checks and balances offered in a faith firmly anchored in the Bible. The contemporary mystic Thomas Merton (1915-1968) illustrates the problem well. He finds as much insight into spirituality in Buddhism as he does in Christianity, especially in his later writings. He might speak well, even to the point of persuasion, of the soul's devotion to God, but he undercuts his own advice by his inability to ground it in sound doctrine.

We should be careful, however, not to paint to medieval mystics with a broad brush. There was much diversity among the movement. Bernard of Clairvaux was not quite the same as Thomas a Kempis, who was not quite the same as the anonymous author of "The Cloud of Unknowing," and so on. They shared similarities, to be sure, but there

were also differences. In its finest hour, mysticism reminds us of the importance of devotion to God, that He is indeed the living word. It reminds us that at most times we are rather full of ourselves and fixated on this world and that we would be far better off to take the eternal perspective. Mysticism wasn't always, however, at its finest. More often than not, the mystics grounded their devotion in personal experience rather than on Scripture. Further, they tended not to offer much help for living out one's Christianity in the world. They commended escapism instead, fostering a withdrawal from the world in order to get in touch with the true reality. Consequently, one might experience God in the moment of the vision or in times of spiritual ecstasy, but translating that experience into the daily grind did not always come easily, if it came at all. (p. 143-144)

16. Misguided Theology of Catholicism

The Brothers of the Common Life had won many adherents and sympathetic followers at a distance, and à Kempis had found many eager readers of his classic text. But he and his book were unable to bring about the significant, substantive, and lasting reform that would come only in the next century. Perhaps it was because his attempted reform of the church's spirituality lacked a theological foundation. In other words, the problem with Roman Catholicism in the later Middle Ages was more than a problem of a lackluster spirituality; it was at base a misguided theology that had sent the church astray. Thomas à Kempis had correctly diagnosed the problem by only half, and his prescription followed accordingly. (p. 145)

17. The Cross Puts Our Focus on Christ

The cross, Luther said, was God's NO to our *incurvitas*, God's NO to our attempt to merit salvation, to earn grace. The theology of the cross takes our attention off of ourselves and puts our attention, and our hope, squarely on Christ and his work on the cross. Luther's theology of the cross points us away from any feeble attempts to merit God's favor, attempts that ran rampant in Luther's day. Instead, his theology of the cross teaches us o rest in Christ. (p. 157)

18. Luther's Catechism

Further, Luther's catechism merits our attention for its ability to challenge readers of all ages. Luther himself once remarked, "I haven't yet progressed beyond the instruction of the children in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer"—the three texts that form the hub of his catechism. (p. 159)

19. Training People in Doctrine, especially the Young

We cannot perpetuate [doctrine]," Luther once remarked in a sermon, "unless we train the people who come after us and succeed us in our office and work, so that they in turn may bring up their children successfully." He saw firsthand the disaster that waited down the road for generations that were pointed in the wrong direction. He belonged to a church that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was reaping an unfortunate

harvest sown over the previous centuries. When he formed the new church, he was determined to see it pointed in the right direction. So he continued in his sermon, “Therefore let every head of a household remember that it is his duty, by God’s injunction and command, to teach or have taught to his children the things they ought to know.” “The youth,” he said on another occasion, “is the church’s nursery and fountainhead.” He knew that if the Reformation were to have any lasting impact, then the church must programmatically, purposefully, and explicitly teach the next generation. (p. 160)

20. Prayer a Discipline with Promise

Luther next turns to address the spiritual discipline of prayer by looking to the model words of Christ. He viewed prayer as an essential part of the Christian life in part simply because it was commanded by God. But also, he recognized it as a necessary means to living the Christian life. In *The Large Catechism*, he explains why this is so: “Nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and obedience.” Prayer further causes us to reflect on our needs. “Each of us,” Luther exhorts, “should form the habit from his youth up to pray daily for all his needs.” We do this not because God needs to be made aware of our needs, but to impress upon us our dependence upon him.

Luther also recognized prayer as a discipline with a promise. As Luther expresses at the end of the section on the Lord’s Prayer in *The Small Catechism*, God “himself commanded us to pray like this and promised to hear us.” Luther derives the basis for this statement from the first petition, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” When asked what this means, the answer given is: “Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father.” Consequently, we pray because God commanded us to, because we need to, and because we can be confident that our prayers are heard. As Luther works through each of the phrases of his prayer, he sometimes asks an additional question (“How is this done?”) after the familiar “What does this mean?” In the process, Luther finds the Lord’s Prayer to be a perfect model of prayer, as its various petitions provide an ample reminder of “all the needs that continually beset us, each one so great that it should impel us to keep praying for it all our lives.” (p. 164)

21. Erasmus’ Greek New Testament

The quintessential humanist scholar, Desiderius Erasmus (1469 – 1536), exemplified this approach when he produced his Greek New Testament in 1516—it should not go without notice that in the following year, Luther sparked the Reformation with the publication of the Ninety-Five Theses. (Curiously enough, 1516 was also the year that coffee was introduced to Europe from the Arab world, leading one to argue that coffee and the Greek New Testament combined brought about the Reformation.) Rather than

advocating the reading of the Latin translation of the New Testament, or Latin commentaries on the New Testament, the cry of *ad fontes* led to the reading of the New Testament in the original Greek. (p. 178)

22. Preaching Is Central

Calvin saw nothing more necessary for Christian growth and nothing more central to the life of the church than preaching. (p. 189)

23. Getting the Meaning of the Text

Calvin started us on the path of what today is called the grammatico-historical literary approach. This approach looks at the historical and cultural context, the mechanics of grammatical structures and meanings of words, and the genre of the text. Because of Calvin's attention to these legitimate textual questions that we should be asking as we read the Bible, his commentaries are amazingly helpful in getting the meaning of the text, even nearly five hundred years later. (p. 189)

24. Calvin's Works Pacesetters for Contemporary Evangelicals

Like the medievalists, Calvin, too, quotes Augustine often; he even approvingly quotes some of the medieval authors – Bernard of Clairvaux for one. Unlike them, however, Calvin tends to root his theology deep not only in biblical texts, but also in the arguments and themes of Scripture. As his commentaries serve as pacesetters for contemporary evangelical biblical scholars, so his theology sets the standard and provides the model for theologians.” (p. 191)

25. True Wisdom Originates in God

Rather than emphasize reason and philosophy and the classical arguments for God's existence, Calvin starts with and focuses on the revelation that God gives to humanity. Calvin takes a top-down approach, not a bottom-up. In other words, true wisdom originates in God as he discloses himself to humanity, not as humanity reasons up to arrive at God. (p. 192)

26. Members of a New Community

It was John Donne who put it so well: “No man is an island.” Calvin agrees. For him, it is not so much the issue of redeemed individuals as it is the new redeemed community of the church or, in Calvin's terms, the new society. We do not become, at conversion, unconnected islands. Rather, we become members of the new community, of the body of Christ; Christianity is social, not individual. (p. 193)

27. Christianity Extends Beyond Church Walls

His influence can also be seen on the practical level of Christian living. One of the things Calvin insisted upon at Geneva was locking the church doors in between worship services. For one thing, he was weaning church members off of certain medieval superstitions that only prayers uttered in churches would be heard. But locking the

doors meant far more. Calvin was challenging the medieval view that spirituality was a matter for the church and that practicing Christianity belonged only within its walls. He didn't want his parishioners in the church building in between church services; he wanted them in the world and in the marketplace and in their homes. The locked church signified that Christianity extends beyond the walls of the church and that Christian living extends beyond hearing sermons. As Calvin said in his farewell letter to William Farel, all aspects of living are for Christ. (p. 194)

28. The Sense of the Divine

Calvin identified the longings of the human soul for fulfillment and wholeness when he spoke of the *sensus divinitatis*, the sense of the divine. And he eloquently expressed how redemption and Christ's work on the cross and grace abundantly meet that need when he spoke of the *sensus suavitatis*, the sense of sweetness, and also of the beauty of Christ. These ideas applied in sixteenth-century Geneva, and they also apply in such twenty-first-century places as the Las Vegas airport. (p. 196)

29. The Puritans

This group often spoke of a pure church, over and against a national church. They argued that church membership should be contingent upon the sincere profession of faith and not simply on one's national identity and baptism as an infant. Their quest for a pure church eventually earned them the title of "Puritan," originally a term of derision.

The Puritans were also called "Nonconformists" due to their violation of the Act of Uniformity and "Dissenters" due to their dissenting from the state church of Anglicanism. It might be best to view both of these terms, *Puritan* and *Nonconformist*, as umbrella terms encompassing a diverse group with some beliefs and practices in common and some in distinction. These different groups consisted of the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Independents or Congregationalists. They were in agreement against Anglicanism and tended away from high-church tendencies. They also took church membership and church discipline quite seriously, holding to the church as the significant component of life. They believed that the Bible was central to all of life and especially to the church service. In other words, Sunday was the apex of the week, the church service the focus of the day, and the Bible and sermon the center of everyone's attention. (p. 203)

30. John Bunyan Not Promising to Stop Preaching

In November 1660, Bunyan became one of the first Puritans to be arrested for holding an illegal religious service, the old legislation was reenacted, and Bunyan was sentenced to a three-month jail term beginning in January 1661. He was to be released at the end of the three months on the condition that he promise not to preach. Bunyan could not meet the condition, so the three months turned into twelve long years. He

feared most for his family as they would be without support, and he absolutely dreaded what might await his beloved blind daughter, Mary.

The church in Bedford rose to the occasion and supported the family throughout his imprisonment. Bunyan also contributed to his family's support by making shoelaces. So his fears for his family were never realized. In fact, Mary eventually memorized the route from her home to the prison, and the highlight of Bunyan's day came every evening as Mary arrived with a bowl of soup for her father. (p. 208)

31. Dependent on Grace

The Puritan's understood grace, and they understood that those with grateful hearts, entirely due to and dependent on that grace, should desire to live a holy life of service. (p. 219)

32. Providence of God

Edwards asserted that contrary to modernity's belief in the autonomy of human reason, God's revelation is absolutely necessary for us to know anything at all. Further, he added that it requires the work of God to have certainty and assurance for that knowledge. Further still, God is intimately engaged and intertwined in the workings of the world. There is no other word for *providence*. There is no other base from which one can make sense of the world or find meaning in life. (p. 231)

33. Perfected the Art of Preaching

The Puritans took sermons gravely seriously, and they nearly perfected the art of preaching. They produced manuals, the classic being William Perkin's *The Art of Prophesying* (1592), a text that Edwards not only read but also from which he memorized large portions. *Prophesying*, the Puritan for "preaching," was in fact an art and also a science. They developed the plain style and the sermon form, which started with a text, then stated a doctrine, initially in one proposition that would be systematically developed, and then concluded with an application, which they termed "Use" or "Improvement." (p. 239)

34. W. Carey Knew the Weight of the World.

Someone once wrote of Carey that he knew the weight of the word *world*. (p. 290)

35. Missionary Work Should be Practical

Let missionaries simply "engage in the work," he concludes with his usual grit and determination, "and we shall see that it is not impracticable." (p. 290)

36. God Forgives the World Its Sin

Bonhoeffer was profoundly influenced by Martin Luther. He writes of Luther as if they were friends; he reads his books as if they were in conversation. Perhaps the idea of Luther's that Bonhoeffer cherished most was the theology of the cross. Luther once

remarked that when we come to God, we come to him in the person of Christ on the cross. And, he added, this is not where we should expect to find God. Here is God in the person of Jesus Christ on the cross, suffering and shamed and brought low by sin. The cross, thundered Luther, is God's "no" to all vain attempts of humanity to merit God's favor. It is, he countered, God's "yes" to our sinfulness, to our frailty, to our inability. For Bonhoeffer, like Luther, the cross is at the center of everything. "The figure of the reconciler," Bonhoeffer wrote in 1940, "of the divine human Jesus Christ, steps into the middle between God and the world, into the center of all that happens." At the cross, God at once declares the guilt of the world for sin and extinguishes that very guilt. From another perspective, Bonhoeffer continues, "The world takes out its rage on the body of Jesus Christ. But he, tormented, forgives the world its sin." At the cross, God answers the hatred with love. (p. 306)