

Nine Lessons from Church History.

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Introduction:

"He Who Fails to Learn History is Destined / Doomed to Repeat it."

Cicero:

"Only he who knows the times in which he lives can act upon the times; and only he who has studied the past can know the present and act wisely for the future."

See 1 Corinthians 10:1-11; 15:1-19; Luke 1:1-4, etc.

Issue. The biblical philosophy of history compels us to draw conclusions and make application of objective lessons of spiritual value from our study of history. This is a process which is considered invalid by many historians today. Again, we see another area where world views are in direct conflict (What is the meaning of history? Does it even have meaning?). Of equal danger (besides those who deny the possibility of objective spiritual lessons) are those who draw false spiritual lessons from history by misreading the Bible or the historical events in view.

In my own experience of learning and teaching church history at our seminary over the past several years, I have found nine themes that repeatedly surface from church history. My desire here is to stoke in you a hunger for studying church history, because it is full of rich spiritual illustrations. The format will be to first briefly define each point from Scripture, and then give you a few instances from church history which illustrate each of these.

1 ***Jesus is the Exalted Head of the Church*** (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18). As such, He is continually building His Church, and no matter what the threat - whether theological or physical; internal or external- the Church of Jesus Christ *will never be destroyed* (this presupposes a biblical definition of "church" - we are not talking about the church *institutional* [which can and often has declined into apostasy] but the church *universal* [which consists of the redeemed of all the ages). The indestructibility of the Body of Christ is crucial to remember in a day when many "experts" in our day claim that the Church (and Christianity) will become extinct within a generation or so unless the church makes vital changes and adjustments to its theology and methodology to reach unbelievers with the gospel. ILLUSTRATIONS:

Christ sustains His church through persecution. Jesus promised His followers that they would suffer persecution for His name's sake (Matt 5:10-12; John 15:19), and Paul (2 Tim 3: 12) and Peter said the same thing (1 Peter, written to suffering believers, is

an inspired commentary on the last beatitude). Throughout the first three centuries of Christian history, the church was horribly persecuted under a string of Roman emperors). Nor did the persecution stop once the Roman empire became "Christian." The persecutors then became the State Church - just ask the independent groups of the Middle Ages, John Hus and other victims of the Inquisition, the Anabaptists, Puritans in England, Huguenots in France, and so on. Yet the more true believers were persecuted, the more the church grew! Tertullian got it right when he testified to one of the persecuting emperors, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church!" (cf. The experience of believers in Communist Russia, China, and other totalitarian states today). The very thing the enemies of Christ seek to use to destroy the church actually purifies it and helps it grow!

Christ sustains His church during times of apostasy. There have been several times during church history when the institutional church has grown so morally corrupt and theologically apostate that one cannot help but asking, "Where have all the Christians gone?" This was especially the case during the Middle Ages. The Roman Catholic Church, which had long since departed from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel, held "Christendom" in an iron grip. At numerous points throughout the middle ages, the papacy, which claimed to be the "vicar of Christ" on earth, was positively degenerate. The Crusades and Inquisitions were directed not only against non-Christians but genuine Christians (especially as one approaches the Reformation period), and many Christian groups were wiped off the face of the earth. Works-salvation was clearly advocated. Was *anyone* saved during this time? The answer is an emphatic YES - remember Matthew 16: 18! There were the isolated John Wycliffe's, John Hus', and other church leaders before the Reformation who were calling the church back to the Gospel - most of whom paid for it with their lives! And those are just the people we know about! Many of the early Reformers (d'Etaples, Luther, Zwingli) came to Reformation convictions *independently* of one another! True, we only know of *afew* genuine believers from this era, but if you pick up a haystack, and five needles fall out, the probability is that the haystack is full of needles.

When I look at the institutional church today, at the beginning of the 21st century, there are plenty of reasons to be discouraged. But I must confess, I'm not discouraged. All over this country I see pockets where God is doing some incredible working and transforming lives through the power of the Gospel and the love of Jesus Christ. North Hills is one of those places that reminds me that Jesus is still Head of His church. I teach at a Seminary where the hand of God is evident not only in our school, but also in the fifty or so schools that are connected in one way or another with it. I've seen it in upstate New York, and it's happening all over the world - South Korea, Africa, China, the former Soviet Union - because Jesus is still on His throne. Church history teaches us that He is still on the throne.

2 The Absolute Authority & Sufficiency of the Bible.

Foundation: Mark 7:7-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21 [see also Canham 350-51].

The church rather quickly departed from *sola Scriptura*. This was seen in a number of different ways:

* * * *Departure from biblical positions on key issues*, such as baptism (believer's baptism ----> infant baptism ----> baptismal regeneration), the Lord's Table (memorial view --> sacramentarianism), and the ministry (plurality of elders/local church autonomy ----> papal authority).

*** *Arguing against heresy using unscriptural arguments* (ILLUS: apostolic succession. Sometimes little aberrations (bishop-elder distinction) have major implications if not held in check by Scripture.

* * * *Integration of philosophy with theology* [see Canham 301-02] [ILLUST: Clement of Alexandria; Origen; allegorical hermeneutics] *Application:* The role of psychology today.

* * * *The impact of allegoricalism on interpretation* - you had to find the deeper meaning. Who determines whose allegorical interpretation is the correct one? Obviously the church. Hence the Bible became a chained book until the Reformation. *** *Early writings of the Fathers* became the norm rather than the Scripture.

All of this created a massive biblical illiteracy, which made possible some of the worst theological and moral aberrations of the Middle Ages (ILLUST: The Crusades! what a disaster! Why did it happen in the name of Christ? Because nobody knew what the Bible said! !). We, too, can be blinded by our culture (cf. arguments for slavery in 19th century America) without seeing the implications of our own positions. How do we protect ourselves from that. By ruthlessl submittin everything we believe, practice.

and teach to the absolute authOrlty of the Word of God (Ezra 7: 1; or:

And so, throughout church history, there have been "Back to the Bible" movements that have called believers back to the absolute authority of the Word of God, which itself provides the only means of salvation and spiritual growth (remember Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 3:15; 1 Peter 1:23; 2:2; James 1:18,21). *Examples* include:

Educational movements throughout the middle ages (e.g. under Charlemagne [Canham 672-73], Scholasticism [Canham 754,815-18], Medieval Independent Groups [Canham 819-32], and the Renaissance [Canham 917]), which, while seriously flawed in other respects, all shared in common the study of ancient texts, including the Bible.

The role of the Word of God in the Reformation (Wycliffe, Tyndale, d'Etaples; Luther and Romans, writing the German language, etc). [see Canham 477-81 and the entries on the above named individuals]

The stress in the 20th century on Expository Preaching.

3 The Transforming Power of the Gospel: The Reformation (Rom 1: 16-17).

This third lesson derives from the second - when God's people return to His word, the result is the freedom that comes from the truth (John 8:32, 36), and specifically, the truth of the Gospel (Gal 5:1). And so Martin Luther was transformed by the power of Romans 1: 16-17 and the truth of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, by grace alone, based on the Word of God alone - the absolute core of the Gospel. Nor was he alone - one could add to the list men like John Wycliffe, John Huss, Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes (all of whom came to evangelical convictions *before* the Reformation), and Reformers like Zwingli, Calvin, Cramner, Sattler, Knox, and multitudes of others - many of them independently of one another.

The Gospel is *still* the power of God unto salvation (note the present tenses in Rom 1: 16-17 and 2 Tim 3: 15). In this day of religious syncretism, we must remember that Jesus alone is the way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4: 12). And when we move away from the theological reality of justification (as the New Perspective on Paul is today), we have backed headlong into what Paul calls "another Gospel" which can only damn a man (Gal 1 :6-9).

4 The Pendulum effect is constantly at work.

Church history is filled with reactions and counter-reactions to particular issues, such as those listed below.

Rationalism (Liberalism)	vs.	Irrationalism (Charismaticism)
Legalism	vs.	Antinomianism
Institutionalism	vs.	Disestablishmentarianism
Authoritarianism	vs.	Anarchy

Such reactions can happen at both the individual and corporate levels. We need to be aware of where our churches and we are on the pendulum swing, and apply the appropriate corrective (red and blue pill syndrome; compare how Paul applied Christian liberty in different situations). Christians must always beware of defining our position and practice largely as a reaction against another position (illust: Fundamentalism).

5 The Seductive Appeal of a False Spirituality. The Bible places a great emphasis on the holiness of a believer (e.g., 1 Peter .14-16), which manifests itself in a number of key areas - a personal, moral, and spiritual purity (Matt 5: 8; 2 Cor 7: 1; 1 Tim 6: 11-14), a proper exercise of church discipline (Matt 18: 15-18), and separation from the world (2 Cor 6:14-7:1). A changed life is one of the key marks of a genuine believer (Eph 2:8-10).

Yet all three of these areas can and have been counterfeited. Throughout church history there have been several pseudo-spiritual movements that have greatly appealed to

Believers (asceticism, Novatianism, Donatism, and monasticism). While many of these have properly diagnosed the problem (the danger of worldliness), they have prescribed a deadly cure. Church history teaches us that false holiness (legalism) can never restrain the flesh. If anything, it only exacerbates the problem by removing the Christian's focus from what the Bible describes as holiness (see Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:14-23).

6 The need for strong, wise Moral leadership on the part of the church.

Contrast the positive example of William Wilberforce in England and the Evangelical church in America when it came to the question of slavery. William Wilberforce devoted all of his energies to getting the slave trade successfully abolished (and later slavery itself) in the British Empire, without the shedding of blood. In America, the three major Protestant denominations in America (Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian) all split along sectional lines a generation before the Civil War, with the North and the South taking opposite sides on the question of slavery. This made the country split inevitable, and 600,000 lives were lost in the American Civil War.

What about other issues? The church in Germany was largely silent about Hitler's atrocities, especially when it came to the Jews. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer provided a tremendous example of moral courage in his opposition to Hitler, which ultimately cost him his life. The American Evangelical/Fundamentalist church lost a tremendous opportunity to provide moral leadership in the Civil Rights movement, and could have paved the way by ending racial segregation in their own midst. How does this apply to abortion? Homosexuality? Same-sex marriage? These are questions the church needs to wrestle through and provide a consistent moral (biblical) voice.

7 The centrality of sound Doctrine. Jude wrote his epistle to urge his readers to "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and Paul warned Timothy that the day would come (indeed, was already present) when people would heap to themselves false teachers, "having itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Church history teaches us that when it comes to sound doctrine, the church will always have to be vigilant.

A twin lesson is that God has often used heresy as a means of pointing his people back to truth. Gnosticism, Arianism, and other heresies forced the church to articulate a theologically orthodox position on the person of Christ. Some of the Christological statements that came out of the early Councils (especially the Chalcedonian) are theological masterpieces. The rise of Marcionism and Montanism forced the church to define the issue of Scripture. The works-salvation that permeated the church of the Middle Ages forced the church back to the Word of God on the matter of salvation (and specifically justification). (The New Perspective on Paul is causing the church of the 21st century to do the same). And the wholesale departure of theological modernism from sound doctrine in the late nineteenth century led to the rise of (Historic) Fundamentalism, with its faithful reaffirmation of the cardinal truths of the Christian faith.

Another lesson from church history is that false teaching comes in different forms. It can be seen in (1) subtraction from the Word of God (Rev 22:18-19; examples include

Docetic denials and the eventual loss of justification by faith); (2) Addition(s) to the Word of God (Deut 4:2; Prov 30:6; 1 Cor 4:6; examples include works, the collecting of relics, martyrdom as a second baptism); and (3) Misrepresentation of the Word of God (2 Cor 2: 17; Examples include the elevation of bishop from regular elders; the elevation of clergy from laity. Cults such as the

Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses fall under all three categories.

Church history teaches us that believers must always maintain and affirm sound doctrine, and that the temptation to compromise, dilute, reject, or set it aside as "irrelevant" will always be there. The ash-heap of churches that were once used by God but are now lifeless hulks teaches us that the church that departs from sound doctrine signs its own spiritual death-warrant. The implications of this in a day when people are telling us that we need to "dumb down" theology in the pulpit should be readily apparent.

8 **The Church and State must be kept separate**, or both will suffer (Of course, the two will be perfectly joined when Jesus comes back to reign on earth, but He's a perfect ruler! I'm not interested in a theocracy before that point!). The merging of church and state under Constantine was one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the church, leading to the corruption of the church almost immediately and constant tensions between the church and state throughout the Middle Ages. The Puritan experiment in New England, while laudable in most respects, sought to implement a church-state model, and in this they were opposed by Roger Williams. We have two lectures devoted to this issue.

9 **Wise and effective Ministry is hindered by Christians' ignorance of history.**

A lot of mistakes were made because we were not aware of past successes and past failures.

ILLUST: Prohibition - also saw the rise of organized crime in America at the same time.

Disengagement from the Civil Rights movement.

Implications for

Operation Rescue?

Politicizing of the church's mission?

Conclusion: Are these the only nine lessons from church history? Of course not! Other church historians would stress different matters as key lessons from church history - grounds for a fruitful debate! However, the above list demonstrates that there is much fruit to be gained through a study of Church History, and that he who fails to learn history is doomed to repeat it!