



CHURCH HISTORY

Great Commission Bible College
Church History 101 Textbook

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Lesson 1 Church History 101

Preview

This course will give you the broad outline of the history of the Christian church from the time of the Apostles to the Twenty-first Century. With such a large subject, we will not get into much detail. Also, we will concentrate on the western church (primarily European and American).

Halley's Bible Handbook will be used as a reference book. The church history section is at the back of the book (pp. 972-1019 in the twenty-fifth edition). All questions can be answered from the lesson pages alone but reading Halley's Bible Handbook will be quite helpful in your understanding of the material.

The Early Church and "Church Fathers" -- Suggested reading: pp. 972-981 in Halley's Bible Handbook

The church started with the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ in approximately 30 AD. The book of Acts in the Bible describes what happened in the following thirty years, or so. We will mention here only a very few highlights from Acts.

(1) Pentecost (Acts, chapter 2), when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus' followers gave power to the infant church.

(2) There were many “witnesses” and missionaries during that time, most notably Peter and Paul. Paul was the “Apostle to the Gentiles” who carried the gospel to the eastern Mediterranean region and into Europe at least as far as Rome.

(3) The first true “Church Council” was held in Jerusalem in about 49 or 50 AD (see Acts, chapter 15). An important result of that council was the decision that Gentile Christians do not have to follow the ceremonial Jewish law.

By late in the 1st Century, all those who had known Jesus during his earthly ministry had died. Most of the original Apostles were martyred. Other men took their places in the leadership of the early church. Many of those became known as “Church Fathers” or “Apostolic Fathers.” Among those were: Polycarp (AD 69-156) pupil of the Apostle John, bishop of Smyrna, Ignatius (AD 67-110) pupil of John, bishop of Antioch, Papias (about AD 70-155) pupil of John, bishop of Hierapolis, wrote “Explanation of the Lord’s Discourses”, Justin Martyr (AD 100-167) died as a martyr at Rome, Irenaeus (AD 130-200) pupil of Polycarp and Papias, Origen (AD 185-254) lived in Alexandria, Egypt (an early Christian center), Eusebius (AD 264-340) “Father of Church History”, wrote a history of the church which covered the period from the time of Jesus’ ministry to the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD (we will discuss the Council of Nicaea in Lesson #2).

The early church suffered persecution. This came from several groups and was sporadic but sometimes intense. In the early years, Jews persecuted the Christians (Stephen was stoned as the first Christian martyr, see chapter 7 of Acts). Later, it was primarily the Roman government or local governmental bodies that persecuted Christians. In the 60s AD, Roman Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for burning the city of Rome. During the persecution that followed, Peter and Paul were martyred.

False teachings (called heresies) cropped up from time to time in the early church. One of those that gained a wide following was called Gnosticism (from the Greek word for “knowledge”). Gnostics taught that matter is evil and, therefore, Jesus was only a spiritual being.

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Lesson 2 Church History 101

Constantine and the Roman Church--Suggested reading: pp. 981-987 in Halley's Bible Handbook

Roman emperors in the late 200s and early 300s AD (Decius and Diocletian) severely persecuted Christians. Then came a dramatic and especially important shift as Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 AD. We can debate whether his conversion was sincere. It may have been more practical and political than genuine, but the results were certainly real. These included: 1) an end to organized persecution of Christians, 2) freedom of worship for all, 3) Sunday as a day of rest and, 4) the building of fancy church structures. Nowadays, many countries have freedom of religion. Sunday is still the day that most Christians worship. We owe these practices, at least in part, to the precedent set by Constantine in the early fourth Century.

The Edict of Milan (313 AD) was the formal acknowledgment of freedom of religion and, as such, was the first in world history.

In 325 AD, an important church council was held at Nicaea (in what is now northwestern Turkey). Emperor Constantine called the council to deal with

Arianism, a belief that Jesus was a created being. The council decided that Jesus was not created but begotten of God the Father. To quote from the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, ... begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.” The Nicene Council set the date of Easter as the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. Other councils in the 300s and 400s determined the orthodox beliefs of original sin, the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the dual nature of Christ (human and divine).

Church councils have been held at intervals through the centuries. The most recent “ecumenical council” was held by the Roman Catholic Church in 1962-65 (Vatican II).

The Roman Empire split, east and west, in 395 AD. The eastern capital was Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey), named for Constantine and established earlier by him. The Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD but the eastern Roman Empire (or Byzantine Empire) lasted for almost 1,000 years longer (until Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 AD). Meanwhile, the Christian church continued to exist throughout the old Roman Empire with the western center at Rome (now held by the barbarians, many of whom accepted Christianity) and the eastern center at Constantinople. The bishop of Rome eventually became known as the “Pope” (for “Papa” or “Father”) and exerted more and more political power during the centuries that followed the fall of Rome in 476. The word “catholic” means “universal,” so the western church became known as the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Church eventually became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Both churches exist today. The final split between the eastern and western churches didn’t take place until long after the Roman Empire divided in 395, however.

Church and state became closely aligned during the centuries following Constantine. In modern times, however, most governments have separated themselves from active involvement in religious matters. Nevertheless, even today, in the early twenty-first Century, the United States and many other countries face questions dealing with the issue of “separation of church and state.”

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Lesson 3 Church History 101

The East-West Split in Christianity and the Crusades Suggested reading--pp. 987-990 in Halley's Bible Handbook

After the fall of Rome in 476 AD, Christianity remained as the dominant religion in all the old Roman Empire. Most of the barbarians that controlled western Europe adopted Christianity and followed the lead of the bishop of Rome (the pope). In eastern Europe and western Asia (the Byzantine Empire) the patriarch of Constantinople was the dominant figure. Gradually two churches developed. A formal split occurred in 1054 AD. The western church was the Roman Catholic Church and the eastern church was the Eastern Orthodox Church. Both exist today.

In the meantime, a “new” Roman Empire was formed under the leadership of Charlemagne who was crowned emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire” by the pope in 800 AD. The Holy Roman Empire continued to exist, in some form, until 1806. During that period “church and state” were closely aligned, with the church devoted to ecclesiastical matters and the state devoted to civil matters.

During the period 1094 to 1291 AD, a series of military operations, known as “crusades”, was launched by the western European powers with the blessing of the popes. Their goal was to take the Holy Land away from the Moslems. They

achieved limited success. Jerusalem and other portions of the Holy Land were held for a time before the Moslems regained complete control of the region.

During this time, specifically from 1198 to 1216, Pope Innocent III was the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Many historians consider him to have been the most powerful pope ever. The Inquisition was established at that time and used for several centuries thereafter. The purpose of the Inquisition was to find and punish heretics (those who taught or believed “false teachings”). Later, in the 1500s and beyond, the Inquisition was used against Protestant reformers. We will discuss the Protestant Reformation in lessons four and five.

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Lesson 4 Church History 101

Martin Luther and John Calvin--Suggested reading: pp. 990-995 in Halley's Bible Handbook

For 1 ½ millennia, Christianity was more-or-less unified. The one major split came in 1054 when the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church went their separate ways.

Starting in the 1500s, however, the church began a splintering process that continues to this time. Many denominations and movements have been formed during the past 500 years. The early years of this process were called the "Reformation." It turned out to be separation from the Roman Catholic Church rather than reform, however. Those who left the Roman Catholic Church (or were forced out) became known as "Protestants" since they protested certain practices of the Roman Catholic Church. There are many varied Protestant groups to this day.

The major leaders of the Protestant Reformation were Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German monk, and John Calvin (1509-1564), a Frenchman.

The event that triggered the start of the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther's posting of "95 theses" on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany.

This event occurred on October 31, 1517. The 95 theses mostly dealt with the sale of “indulgences”. Indulgences were sold by the pope to raise money for construction projects at Rome and for other church uses. The idea behind an indulgence was to remit the punishment for the sins of living or dead people. Martin Luther found the idea of buying your way out of punishment to be an offensive idea and he offered to debate the issue at Wittenberg. In Romans 1:17 he had read “the just shall live by faith.”

Martin Luther was later excommunicated. He did not want to leave the Roman Catholic Church, but he was forced out. The Protestant church that developed in northern Germany is called the Lutheran Church.

John Calvin did most of his teaching and preaching in Switzerland but “Calvinism” spread to other countries including the Netherlands and Scotland. “Calvinism” is most noted for an emphasis on predestination.

Calvinists were persecuted, as were most Protestants. Those in France were especially persecuted. Many of these French “Huguenots” fled to America.

Religious wars were fought between diverse groups in Europe for more than 100 years after the start of the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

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Lesson 5 Church History 101

Reformation and Counter-Reformation--Suggested reading: pp. 995-998 in Halley's Bible Handbook

In lesson #4, we learned about the two most prominent leaders of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. In this lesson, we will discuss other people and movements of that time.

Huldreich Zwingli was known as a “Radical Reformer.” He was from Switzerland.

The Anglican (Episcopal) Church developed in England when King Henry VIII broke off with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534.

In 1560, John Knox brought the teachings of John Calvin to Scotland where the Reformed (Presbyterian) Church developed.

Ireland remained Roman Catholic (except for Northern Ireland where Scottish immigrants settled).

France and Spain remained Catholic countries but there were wars in much of Europe during the 1500s and early 1600s to settle issues of religion and politics. Italy, the home of Rome and the Roman Catholic Church, continued as a Catholic country. Southern Germany and Austria continued to be Roman Catholic, but northern Germany and Scandinavia became Lutheran.

Many people lost their lives in religious wars and massacres. The most infamous massacre of these was the St. Bartholomew Massacre in France in 1572 when thousands of Huguenots (French Protestants) were killed.

The Roman Catholic response to the Reformation was a series of measures that brought some changes and counter-measures. The Inquisition was active in trying and punishing “heretics.” All Protestants were considered to be heretics. The Jesuits (Society of Jesus) was formed at that time. They were zealous in the work of the Roman Catholic leaders. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was active in these developments. Taken together, the actions of the Roman Catholic Church during this period are called the “Counter-Reformation.”

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Lesson 6 Church History 101

The Puritans and Other Groups--Suggested reading: pp. 996-999 in Halley's Bible Handbook (partially a re-read)

During the late 1500s and 1600s, several Protestant groups developed in England and elsewhere in Europe. The Puritans of England were influential there as well as in America. They even overthrew the British monarchy for a time during the mid-1600s (under Oliver Cromwell and Parliament).

Starting in 1620 with the Pilgrims (separatists of extreme Puritan views), many of these people fled England to come to America for religious freedom. The New England colonies were settled mostly by Puritans.

The Puritans wanted to “purify” the Church of England. That is how they got their name. They taught modesty in dress and a strong awareness of sin.

Another English group that had a major influence in America was the Quakers (Society of Friends). These people were modest in habits and pacifist in nature. The colony of Pennsylvania was initially settled by Quakers under the guidance of William Penn.

Anabaptists (particularly the Amish and Mennonites) believed that infant baptism as not enough. Thus, they believed in “rebaptism.” That is how they got the name of “Anabaptists.” Many Amish and Mennonites settled in the American colonies. The Mennonites got their name from Menno Simons of the Netherlands.

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Lesson 7 Church History 101

**John Wesley and Methodism, The “Great Awakening” -- Suggested reading:
pp. 999-1001 in Halley’s Bible Handbook**

John Wesley (1703-1791) was a clergyman of the Anglican faith (Church of England) who was the founder of Methodism. He was born the fifteenth child in a family of 19 children. His younger brother, Charles Wesley, participated in the development of Methodism and wrote many hymns, including “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”

During the 1700s, revival spread in both England and America. This spiritual revival is called the “Great Awakening” and it was part of the development of “evangelicalism.” Evangelicals emphasize the experience of personal salvation. Other leaders of the Great Awakening included Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Jonathan Edwards is best known for his sermon “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God.”

John Wesley made brief visits to America but most of his preaching was in outdoor meetings in England. He traveled many miles and preached perhaps 40,000 sermons during a lengthy career. He never left the Anglican Church, but his followers separated to form the Methodist Church. The name “Methodist” came from the application of methodical techniques of accountability in spiritual life. The Methodist Church is a big denomination in America to this day.

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Lesson 8 Church History 101

**The Challenge of Darwinism--Suggested reading: pp. 1001-1007 in
Halley's Bible Handbook**

Like it or not, all Christians since the late 1800s have had to contend with scientific ideas and theories that challenge their faith. In some ways, it was easier to be a believer during the prior centuries. Modern science has brought many benefits to mankind, but it certainly hasn't made the world a more moral place or made the church any stronger.

The man behind this revolution was Charles Darwin (1809-1882). He was an Englishman who studied medicine and theology before specializing in biology (he was called a naturalist). His observations of the natural world eventually, in 1859, led him to publish his theory of biological evolution in a book entitled The Origin of Species. The date of 1859 is important in scientific history but also in church history.

Biological evolution or "survival of the fittest" doesn't leave much room for a caring Creator God. It also represents mankind as just another animal, even if an intelligent and innovative animal.

Since 1859, there have been many contests between proponents of “creation” and proponents of “evolution”. The most noteworthy of these was the “Scopes trial” of 1925 (in Tennessee, U. S.). “Creation” won that trial (technically) but in effect, the creationists lost the public relations contest and evolution has been taught in most public schools since then. The issue of what to teach in school remains a “hot” topic until this day.

Churches have taken widely diverging views on evolution. Many (including Roman Catholics, in many ways the most orthodox group of all) have accepted evolution in some form but have maintained that God had a hand in it. Others, especially “fundamentalists” and many “evangelicals” have rejected the idea of evolution as un-Biblical. The debate continues.

One of the most harmful aspects of “survival of the fittest” is the idea of “Social Darwinism.” If the natural world rewards the most ruthless, why wouldn’t the political and social world do the same? Tyrants such as Adolf Hitler have, in part, justified their actions by using ideas of “Social Darwinism.”

In the twentieth and twenty-first Centuries, everything has been open to scrutiny and questioning. Some good can come out of the process, but faith can also be lost. The Bible is open to criticism. Miracles are denied. The virgin birth of Jesus is questioned. Even the bodily resurrection of Jesus is often denied. Sadly, many of these teachings have crept into the seminaries that teach young ministers.

The Twentieth Century brought several uplifting trends as well. Christian missionaries traveled to far parts of the world to spread the gospel. Groups such as the Salvation Army brought help to those in need. Spiritual revivals occurred from time to time in the United States and elsewhere. Fundamentalism developed to counter the teachings of modernism and evolution. The term “fundamentalist” was coined in 1920 and has been used in both a positive and negative way. Fundamentalists believe in the Bible as God’s inspired word. They believe in the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus as well as his healing ministry and miracles.

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Lesson 9 Church History 101

The Holiness Movement--Suggested reading: pp. 1007-1013 in Halley's Bible Handbook

This lesson will cover developments in the United States during the late 1800s to middle 1900s. The Holiness Movement was just one of those developments. We will discuss others as well.

“Holiness” refers to clean and pure living before God and man. It involves thoughts and actions as well as outward appearances. Things such as clothing (modesty) and hairstyle are involved. Smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol are certainly not considered to be activities that a “holy” person would do. Also, card-playing, dancing, and movie-going are condemned. The stance of holiness people has softened over the years, but many of these ideas are still held by those in the holiness tradition.

Most holiness people came from a Methodist background. John Wesley had preached “sanctification” and the Holiness Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s emphasized it as a second definite experience (after salvation) that Christians should seek. Upon being “sanctified,” a person was expected to live a pure and clean (“holy”) life.

There are several churches that exist today that trace their origin to the Holiness Movement. Among these are the Church of the Nazarene and the Church of God (headquartered at Anderson, Indiana). Much “gospel music” has sprung forth from these groups. For example, the prolific songwriters, Bill, and Gloria Gaither came from the holiness tradition.

Holiness people are sometimes condemned for being legalistic and emphasizing the “do’s” and “don’ts” of Christianity. Overall, most people would agree, however, that they make quite good citizens. They are law-abiding, honest, and trustworthy people.

In a broader sense, the Twentieth Century saw the development of “fundamentalism” and the advancement of “evangelicalism.” These movements were discussed in earlier lessons. Older denominations saw lesser growth. These older denominations became known as “mainline” churches.

Two other developments need to be mentioned here. They are “premillennialism” and “dispensationalism.” Please read pp. 1010-1011 of Halley’s Bible Handbook for more details. Premillennialism is the belief that the world will get worse and worse until Jesus Christ bodily returns and sets up a 1,000-year reign of peace on earth called the millennium. Dispensationalism was developed by John Darby in England in the 1800s. It is included in the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. It says that history is divided into periods or “dispensations” that lead up to the return of Jesus Christ.

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Lesson 10 Church History 101

Pentecostalism--Suggested reading: pp. 1014-1019 in Halley's Bible Handbook

Please read (or re-read) chapter 2 of Acts in the Bible.

The word “Pentecost” means fifty. It is a Jewish celebration (also called “Feast of Weeks” or Shababout) that comes on the fiftieth day after Passover. This is usually in late May or early June around the time of grain harvest (barley and wheat). Pentecost is, therefore, a feast of the “first fruits” of harvest.

In the modern Christian Church, “Pentecost” and “Pentecostalism” refer to the return of the experience of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” with signs like those in the book of Acts. Speaking in other languages, “tongues,” is a modern sign of the infilling with the Holy Spirit, just as was in the first Century.

The history of modern “Pentecost” goes back to Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas (U. S.) at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Charles F. Parham, a former Methodist minister, conducted the school in late 1900 and early 1901. It was

there at the beginning of 1901 that the baptism of the Holy Spirit re-occurred complete with “tongues”.

Later, in 1905-1906, Parham conducted a Bible School in Houston, Texas. One of his students was William J. Seymour who traveled to Los Angeles, California and helped conduct the huge “Azusa Street” revival. Many Pentecostal groups trace their origins to Azusa Street. Others go back to revivals in Texas and the Midwest U.S. But all, directly or indirectly, go back to Topeka and Charles Parham.

Parham called his work the “Apostolic Faith Movement” since he considered this to be a return to the faith of the original Apostles. Also, he spoke of the “latter rain” outpouring of the Holy Spirit since the first Pentecost was needed to start the church (the “former” or “early” rain) but the “latter rain” was needed to bring the church to the time of harvest.

Charles Parham died in 1929. By that time, Pentecostalism had grown and diversified. The movement has grown and diversified much more since then. The original “Apostolic Faith” group has remained small. They are the people who conduct a Bible College in Baxter Springs, Kansas where Charles Parham lived during the final years of his life.

The Assembly of God Church is now the largest Pentecostal group but there are many others. Also, there are now people in other churches that have experienced the infilling of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues. These people are often called “charismatic.”

Early in the Twenty-first Century, the Christian Church continues to grow and change. Splintering continues but also there are efforts at reunification. Even the old split between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox has shown some signs of mending.

Two current trends deserve comment. They are “non-denominationalism” and “megachurches.” Both groups (and they overlap, many megachurches are non-denominational) downplay doctrine and doctrinal differences among believers.

Megachurches are exceptionally large churches. They thrive in larger cities where people are attracted to the amenities that large groups can provide.

This concludes our study of Church History. As stated in lesson #1, this could only be a broad outline. It is impossible to provide much detail on such a huge subject. I hope that you will study other aspects of Church History in more detail on your own.

As for my background and perspective, my parents were Quakers (Society of Friends). They met at Friends Bible College in Kansas. I grew up in the Apostolic Faith Movement (the movement started by Charles Parham). For forty years, I have had an association with the Apostolic Faith Bible College at Baxter Springs, Kansas.

May God richly bless you for your efforts in this course!