

Why bother with church history?

1 Christianity is historical

The centre of the Christian faith is not a set of principles but an historical event – the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

As we study history using our bible glasses, we see the same God of the Bible working in amazing ways to fulfil the things he has promised to do in the Bible

2 Church history helps us understand the Bible better

"We are like dwarfs standing upon the shoulders of giants, and so able to see more and see farther than the ancients."

Those who are ignorant of the past are likely to make the same mistakes as the past.

3 Church history shows us how to engage with culture

4 Church history stirs the heart and refreshes the souls

Church history is about Gods people, which makes it interesting.

5 Church history teaches us that God is in charge

God is the God of all history, not just the history of Bible times. As we study church history we will be reminded time and again that God is in charge.

Mark Noll puts it brilliantly:

"The heroes of the faith usually have feet of clay – sometimes thighs, hearts and heads as well. The golden ages of the past usually turn out to be tarnished if they are examined closely enough. Crowding round the heroes of the faith are a lot of villains, and some of them look an awful lot like the heroes."

AD 30 – 70 The history of the fledgling church

Church in the New Testament period

Matthew 28v19-20; Acts 1v8

The early missionaries preached first to Jews and Greek God-fearers (e.g. Cornelius - Acts 10v2) and then to pagans (e.g. Paul in Athens Acts 17v16-34).

Acts 15

Persecution from the Jews

e.g. Acts 17v5, 13; 18v12-17; 2 Corinthians 11v24

Persecution by the Roman Empire

cf. 1 Corinthians 10v14-30

Christians sought to ensure that they were not perceived as rebels (e.g. Romans 13v1-7; cf. Mark 12v13-17)

religio licita This status continued for Christianity even after the destruction of the temple.

In 64 AD Nero (55-68) blamed Christians for the fire of Rome.

'To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats - and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called)...First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large

numbers of others were condemned - not so much for their incendiaryism as for their anti-social tendencies.' (Tacitus)

AD 70 The destruction of the temple

Sulpicius Severus writing later (around 200AD) said that the temple was destroyed:

"in order that the Jewish and Christian religions might more completely be abolished; for although those religions were mutually hostile, they had nevertheless sprung from the same founders; the Christians were an offshoot of the Jews, and if the root were taken away the stock would easily perish."

There was no longer any temple of Jewish structure whose coattails it could cling to. Church leaders could no longer operate like synagogue leaders. The Christian church had to find its own ways or doing things – or die.

AD 70 -300 Christianity spreads under attack.

The demographic of the Early church

Why did Christianity grow?

- corruption and depravity of paganism
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- obvious love of Christians for each other - 'See how these Christians love one another' (Tertullian)

- willingness of Christians to die rather than deny Jesus

How was the early church viewed?

'They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for criminal purposes, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.' (Pliny, Letters 106-114 AD)

Features of the early Church

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- no national structure/denominations - churches were organised locally
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- practical care - e.g. by 251 AD the church in Rome was supporting 1500 Christian widows and other needy people

The Emperors

Titus Flavius Vespasianus, commonly known as Vespasian. He was succeeded by his sons Titus (79–81) and Domitian (81–96)

Marcus Aurelius (161-180)

A final severe period of persecution under Diocletian (284-305). On April 30th 311 Galerius issued an edict granting Christians tolerance:
'After the promulgation of our edict ordering all to return to the ancient customs, many obeyed for fear of danger, and we were forced to punish others. But there are still many who persist on their opinions, and we are aware that they neither worship nor serve the gods, nor even their own god. Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them our pardon, and

allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order.'

Early heresies

Gnosticism (1st Century)

Marcionism (144 AD)

Montanism (circa. 155 AD)

Some important figures

Tertullian

He who lives only to benefit himself confers on the world a benefit when he dies.

We are equally forbidden to wish ill, to do ill, to speak ill, to think ill of all men. The thing we must not do to an emperor, we must not do to any one else.

Reason without goodness is not reason, and goodness without reason is not goodness

Nothing that is unjust can be good, and everything that is just is bound to be good.

I shall at once go on, then, to exhibit the peculiarities of the Christian society, that, as I have refuted the evil charged against it, I may point out its positive good. We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This violence God delights in. We pray, too, for the

emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation. We assemble to read our sacred writings, if any peculiarity of the times makes either forewarning or reminiscence needful. However it be in that respect, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more stedfast; and no less by inculcations of God's precepts we confirm good habits.

In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered. For with a great gravity is the work of judging carried on among us, as befits those who feel assured that they are in the sight of God; and you have the most notable example of judgment to come when any one has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation and in all sacred intercourse. The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase, but by established character. There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God.

Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love one another*, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death. And they are wroth with us, too, because we call each other brethren; for no other reason, as I think, than because among themselves names of consanguinity are assumed in mere pretence of affection. But we are your brethren as well, by the law of I our common mother nature, though you are hardly men, because brothers so unkind.

At the same time, how much more fittingly they are called and counted brothers who have been led to the knowledge of God as their common Father, who have drunk in one spirit of holiness, who from the same womb of a common ignorance have agonized into the same light of truth!