

# The Challenge of Church History

“One of the most remarkable aspects of Christianity today is how few . . . Professed believers have ever seriously studied the history of their religion.”

Bruce L. Shelley

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ We need to acknowledge at the outset that every church history on the market has a point of view: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, ect. While this is probably not shocking it must be kept in mind when studying the subject.
- ▶ “What these histories have written about is largely *ANTI-church history*; they have taken for granted that the ecclesiastical monster which controlled Europe during the Dark Ages was “the church,” and therefore, a history about Roman Catholicism would be a church history.” (Ruckman, ix)

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ Examples
- ▶ Our goal will be to show the Bible believer that there has existed from early times to the present time a continuous chain of Christians who believed the Book they had was the word of God and were actively engaged in trying to convert people to the truths found in that Book, and more exactly, to the very author of that book. These Christians throughout church history often vary in some of their doctrinal beliefs, and they also have no one name by which they can be identified. (Ruckman, xxiv)

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ Andrew Miller, author of *Miller's Church History*, makes a distinction between the church represented in history and the one mentioned in Scripture. Miller writes,
  - "We must always bear in mind, when reading what is called a history of the church, that, from the days of the apostles until now, there have been two distinct and widely different classes of persons in the professing church; the merely nominal and the real—the true and the false." (Miller, 1)
- ▶ Acts 20:28-30
- ▶ I Timothy 4:1, II Timothy 1:15
- ▶ I Timothy 3:15, II Timothy 2:20

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ According to Miller, “we should Endeavour to trace, all down through the long dark pages of history, the silver line of God’s grace in true Christianity; thought at times the alloy so predominates that the pure ore is scarcely perceptible.” (Miller, 2)
- ▶ Romans 11:4—God has never left himself without witness. He has had His loved and cherished though hidden ones in all ages and in all places.
- ▶ E.H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, recognizes that church history as recorded in the book of Acts provides a permanent pattern. According to Broadbent, “departure from this pattern has had disastrous consequences, and all revival and restoration have been due to some return to the patten and principals in the Scripture.” (Broadbent, 26)

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ “. . . there has been a continuous succession of churches composed of believers who have made it their aim to act on the teaching of the New Testament. This succession is not necessarily to be found in any one place; often such churches have been dispersed or have degenerated, but similar ones have appeared in other places. This pattern is so clearly delineated in the Scriptures as to have made it possible for churches of this character to spring up in fresh places and among believers who did not know that disciples before them had taken the same path, or that there were some in their own time in other parts of the world.” (Broadbent, 26-27)

# Difficult Nature of Church History

- ▶ The means adopted to counter the so-called heresies had a greater affect on the church than the false teachings themselves when it comes to the development of Episcopal power and distinction between laity and clergy. (Broadbent, 30)
- ▶ Broadbent summarizes our main point. History is written by the winners.
  - “The fact that the Catholic Church system later became the dominate one puts us in possession of a great body of its literature, while the literature of those who differed from it has been suppressed, and they are chiefly know to us by what may be gleaned from the writings directed against them. It is thus easy to gain the erroneous impression that in the first three centuries there was one united Catholic Church and a variety of comparatively unimportant heretical bodies. On the contrary, however, there were then, as now, a number of divergent lines of testimony, each marked by some special characteristic, and different groups of mutually-excluding churches.” (Broadbent, 34-35)



# Creeds and Confessions

- ▶ Much of so-called church history is dominated by discussion about creeds and confessions. “Councils and creeds may settle the matter of outward profession of faith in regard to what the group of Christians is supposed to believe; as to how many of them believe it or as to how much of it they should have believed to start with is something else.” (Ruckman, 3)
- ▶ Consider the popular Apostle’s Creed
  - I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN.



# Creeds and Confessions

- Creeds are convenient props to be produced when necessary. Creeds and councils are usually politically motivated and rarely settle anything having to do with Bible-believing Christianity in practice. (Ruckman, 4)



# The Question of Final Authority

- ▶ True church history must begin with the premise that there is one absolute, final, and infallible authority that God has given, the Bible. Then we must judge all data, facts, findings, theories, opinions, and ideas by that standard. (Ruckman, xxiv)
- ▶ “No real Bible believer is going to lay his Bible down when writing church history; as a matter of fact he will need the Bible more in this field than in any field of research outside of Biblical theology and textual criticism.” (Ruckman, xxiv)
- ▶ Not only is the Bible our final authority but it must also be rightly divided when evaluating the veracity of any belief or practice within Christian History.

# The Question of Final Authority

- “Church history shows that whenever and wherever the Book is abandoned or disregarded or questioned or doubted or perverted, social, political, economic, and religious disasters follow. Any authority accepted as an authority higher than the Book will inevitably lead to imprisonment, starvation, torture, demonism, and death. Church history is a demonstration of this truth: the truth that even where a church professes to believe the Book and professes to be “going by the Book,” that it means absolutely nothing at all if they don’t really believe the Book.” (Ruckman, xxiii)

# The Question of Final Authority

- “All apostasy begins with questioning what God said (Gen. 3:1), and all men who promote or tolerate (or aid or encourage) apostasy recommend conflicting authorities so that they themselves (or their friends or employers) can become the final authority. . . . Conflicting authorities are set up in church history by Christian scholars for the purpose of splitting and dividing the body of Christ and bringing it under the dominion of either an authoritative body of scholars (a school) or an authoritative ecclesiastical organization (a church).”  
(Ruckman, xx)

# Christianity Verses Christendom

- ▶ R. Dawson Barlow, author of *The Apostasy of the Christian Church*, makes the following important distinction between Christendom and Christianity.
- ▶ “Christendom is the unholy mixture of Judaism, Christianity, philosophy and pagan traditions. It is a conglomerate of organizations which have failed to revere the Word of God, and have refused to rightly divide the Word of God.” (Barlow, 58)
- ▶ “In the wake of the resulting confusion there has been added a multitude of somethings (whatever take your pick) to the Holy Scriptures. It is then no surprise that these theologians no longer recognize the supremacy of the Scriptures as the only source that determines doctrine and manner of life.” (Barlow, 58)

# Christianity Verses Christendom

- ▶ Fundamentally, Christendom denies the glorious mystery truths which were revealed through the Apostle Paul and were faithfully recorded in the Church Epistles. (Barlow, 59)
- ▶ Throughout this class we will use the following working definitions
  - *Christianity*—the faith that shudders to accept any doctrine that is not clearly presented and taught in rightly divided word. (adapted from Barlow, 60)
  - *Christendom*—“any religion (claiming to be Christian) that is based on tradition, human philosophy, and a potpourri blend of most anything else one could think of.” (Barlow, 60)

# Christianity Verses Christendom

- ▶ According to Barlow, “. . . church history is, for the most part, the lamentable tale of Christendom which has apostatized from the divine revelation given to the Apostle Paul that is God’s benchmark for believers of this age. The story of vast numbers of faithful Christians living in the early days of the “Church” is left untold because they were driven underground, hunted, terrorized, and slaughtered. The shame of the “Christendom” of Western culture is that many of those persecutions were led by “Christendom” herself.” (Barlow, 64-65)



# Cycles in Church History

- ▶ *Preaching*—which may be called Evangelism
- ▶ *Teaching*—which may stand for Education
- ▶ *Culture*—which means the introduction of science, philosophy, and tradition (Col. 2:8) into the teaching
- ▶ *Apostasy*—includes ecumenical overtures (compromise) with pagan religious systems or unsaved people.
- ▶ *Paganism*—which means the original condition the populace was in before they were “evangelized.”
- ▶ *A Man*—this involves the preaching and evangelization
- ▶ *A Movement*—this involves the setting up of teaching facilities and institutions
- ▶ *A Machine*—this involves regimentation and patterning the system after the world’s system of education (colleges and universities)
- ▶ *A Monument*—this means the Holy Spirit has departed, abandoning the institution to paganism; discipline and academic standards are substituted for the liberty and power of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ *A Morgue*—there is no shred of the movement left (Ruckman, 6)

# Basic Unit of Study

- ▶ A church historian who begins his history with a false or distorted view of the nature of the local church will shortly find himself in deep water. The local church called out of the world system is the essential unit to be studied in church history.
- ▶ “Church history, by virtue of Biblical definition must deal with the history of local congregations first and with organized denominations secondly.” (Ruckman, 19)

# Basic Unit of Study

- ▶ Also used in reference to the living organism of Christ's spiritual body (Eph. 1:22, Col. 1:18) the word church refers to a local group of believers on this earth more than 87 times in the New Testament.
- ▶ Not once does the reader of the New Testament get the slightest whisper or shadow of the reality of political hierarchy run by archbishops, Cardinals or popes. The New Testament church is completely divorced from any church that is connected directly or indirectly with any of these people or their activities. (adapted from Ruckman, 19-20)
- ▶ "Where a church historian ignores the basic, primitive, Bible definition of what a New Testament church is, there will be no end of confusion, misrepresentation, and "dead ends" in the historian's research work." (Ruckman, 20)

# Works Cited

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