

## CHURCH HISTORY CHALLENGES

- A. Student disengagement and relevance – Who cares about ancient history? Why does it matter?
- B. Scope and Selection of Content – 2000 years coverage in 11 hours to a Diverse classroom
- C. Based on Uninspired historical records and imperfect historians [CH sources are “messier”]

How do I know the theological views of myself and others are godly, spiritual, and right, since all sincere religious adherents believe they are Spirit-led?

Church History heroes believed they were walking in the spirit, but were they?

“God impressed on me to pray for you today” (Experience vs. Scripture)

“I believe it is God’s Will to give you this gift (or God’s Will for you to give me one!”)

Charismatic Misuse of Spirit and Experience

For the most part, Holy Spirit confirmation of actions can only be recognized in RETROSPECT

*Does it line up with Scripture?*

*Is it the universal belief of the Christian majority throughout history?*

*Does it have documentation and confirmation from more than one trusted source?*

- D. The Challenge of sorting through Orthodox vs. Heretical Traditions

Definitions:

Roman Catholic Tradition: 2<sup>nd</sup> Source of Divine Revelation

*“Sacred theology rests on the written word of God together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation.”*

Protestant Tradition: ***Sola Scriptura*** [Scripture alone] – Tradition is only a helpful guide

Church Fathers [Acts -> 500 A.D.] – *Best of men were men at best, preconceived ideas*

Often less than discerning; known to repeat tall tales; need of multitude of counselors

Orthodoxy vs. Heresy – Challenging to Discern

Liberal vs. Conservative – “He’s gone Liberal!” -- ***What is a Liberal?***

Truth vs. Legend - Hagiography – writings about holy people, Apostles Legends published by

Voragine: *Golden Legend* – Middle Ages Best Seller – Majority believed to be true

- E. The Challenge of separating Truth from Legend because of the preconceived ideas of diverse religious systems. **Key: Early attestation from multiple reliable sources**

2 Peter 3:16b – “they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

No bones for Mary [Immediate *Assumption* (ascension)] or other “saints”

Rejected bone box of James [Mary perpetual virginity]

Unknown locations of the Apostles because all claim as each church’s founder [cf. 1 Cor. 1:11-12]

F. Emotional and Sensitive Issues – Diverse and occasionally *heretical* views spring up

*Irenaeus argued that Jesus was nearly 50 years old at His death.*

*Origen taught that human souls preexist their bodies.*

*Clement of Alexandria argued that the first sin was lust.*

*Tertullian believed that those who are unmarried should postpone their baptism until they are married*

*Hilary of Poitiers, in his Psalms commentary, argued that Jesus's physical body was incapable of experiencing pain because He was God.*

***Therefore, be careful of “the early church fathers believed ...” [Who and where?]***

G. God's use of unusual vessels [testimonials] throughout Church History [Balaam's donkey, Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:1-18 – Inspired?), etc.]

**ALL Truth is God's Truth**

**Augustine** [Not exact words]: “Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Lord.” & “Wherever I found truth, there found I my God, who is the truth itself.”

**Thomas Aquinas:** Emphasized that truth discovered by reason or by Scripture cannot contradict, since both come from God.

**John Calvin:** Any truth, whether from pagan philosophers or others, ultimately came from God.

**Protestant theologians and educators:** In defense of studying “secular” knowledge (math, science, literature) they presented these as God's gifts to mankind.

**Arthur Holmes** (1915-2011, Wheaton College): ***All Truth is God's Truth*** [1977]

Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10 – Nebuchadnezzar, my servant

Exodus 9:16; Rom. 9:17 – Pharaoh raised up for God's purpose

Isaiah 10:5-7 - Assyria, the rod of God's anger

Isaiah 44:28; 45:1 – Cyrus, God's shepherd

John 17:12; Acts 2:23 – Judas, that the Scripture might be fulfilled

Acts 4:27-38 – Herod, Pontius Pilate

Job 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:20 – Satan himself

H. Theological and spiritual balance – Historical but not Faith-destroying

I. Viewing Church History from the Context, Culture, and Challenges of each period

Church Discipline of Recanters [What would you do?]

Early church required 1-3 years to confirm a Baptismal candidate's worthiness

*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* [Jonathan Edwards: Unregenerate church membership]

J. Assuming that historically, Christians think exactly as we do today.

**Luke 9:49-50** – “And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, forbid him not; for he that is not against us is for us.”

K. Desperate need for Continuity when none may exist. [Apostolic or Papal Succession, Baptist Bride or Landmark Baptists, etc.]

1. Apostolic Succession [Church founder pride]
2. Papal Succession
3. Baptist Bride (The Book, The Blood, & the Blessed Hope)
  - a. Exclusive legitimacy – unbroken continuity since apostolic period
  - b. Local church exclusivity – only true church
  - c. Closed communion and ordinances
  - d. Bride of Christ distinction and Marriage Supper of the Lamb – limited to its churches with other believers either guests or servants
  - e. Church autonomy

L. Cohesion and challenges of chronological vs. thematic approach

M. Realization that, while believers are impatient for truth and accuracy, God is very patient.

N. The Challenge of accepting God's method of using man's free will as instruments in His hands.

O. Throughout Church History God is secure in giving broad latitude to man's methods of confirming His Truth, a latitude man perceives as disturbing insecurity.

Psalm 101:2 – “**I will behave myself wisely** in a perfect way... I will walk within my house with a perfect heart.”

1 Cor. 11:19 – “**For there must be also heresies** [divisions, factions] among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest [recognized] among you.”

Acts 15:28 – “**For it seemed good ...**” [Greek word δοκέω - to suppose, to think, to decide]

*Not perfect certainty but trusted direction. After the first major controversy, the Jerusalem council made a decision that changed the world – not paralyzed by fear nor waiting for 100% clarity but moving forward when the Spirit made it seem good. The kingdom is not built because people are sure, but because they are faithful. History was changed on “it seemed good”, perhaps yours will too.*

**1 Cor. 11:19** – “For there must be also heresies [divisions] among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.”

Inspiration

Canonicity

Who wrote Jeremiah? [Jeremiah 36:4-10 – Baruch]

Did Mark use Peter's eyewitness account? Is Luke Paul's Gospel? [Discuss Apostolic Authority]

Churches, Parachurch organizations – God's Variety

P. The Challenge of connecting church history to Scripture and its application.

Q. Danger of Eisegesis vs. Exegesis [Reading into Scripture rather than interpreting based on Scripture]

***Is Revelation 2-3 an outline of Church History from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century to today?***

It is extremely popular as believers desire to maintain the same inerrancy of Scripture throughout all of Church History [Frustrating: CH is based on fallible historians and documents]

***PROBLEMS WITH THE THEORY***

1. Ethnocentrism and Generationism [Only 15-20% of the world can read the English Bible] – Viewing history from a current American mindset but eras differed by time and country
2. No Scriptural confirmation since we have no third Gospel
3. Assumes each church age has a beginning and ending concurrently, with no overlapping.
4. Since we can only interpret concepts with which we are familiar, Revelation 2-3 could not have been accurately interpreted until 1900 AD, contrary to 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

***We can only interpret familiar concepts [Peruvian Anita and the Baseball game]***

5. When the Bible does address concurrent periods of time, they are always symmetrical.

*“So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.” [Matthew 1:17]*

*“And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week; and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblations to cease.” [Daniel 9:27a]*

*“One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” [2 Peter 3:8]*

6. If true, then the Rapture [Rev. 4:1] could not have been imminent until Revelation 2-3 were fulfilled in Church History and, very possibly, not imminent today if the last verse of Revelation 3 has yet to be fulfilled.
7. Based on the cleverness of the interpreter and *Apophenia* [perception of connection between random items]
8. Not even a hint of any Scriptural confirmation that Revelation 2-3 are periods of church history; therefore, it is an argument from silence.
9. This interpretation would detract from Revelation’s Theme, its outline, and its primary hermeneutical principle.

- a. Theme: Jesus Christ

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty” [Rev. 4:8]

“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” [Rev. 4:11]

“Who is worthy to open the book? ... “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. [Rev. 5:2, 12]

“Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.” [Rev. 5:13]

- b. Outline: Rev. 1:19 (AD 95) [“has seen”, “are”, and “shall be hereafter”] – No “are”
- c. Revelation’s Key Hermeneutic: Revelation often interprets itself. [cf. Old Testament]

10. This interpretation would have been of no value until the *Laodicean* age, allegedly today.

11. Timothy and others would have been unable to rightly divide the word of truth until our time  
[2 Tim. 2:15, 3:16-17]

12. The concept lends itself to much twisting and craftiness

**2 Cor. 4:1-2** – “not walking in *craftiness*, nor handling the word of God deceitfully”

**2 Timothy 2:15, 23** – “rightly dividing the word of truth”

**Titus 3:9** – “But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, ... for they are unprofitable and vain.”

**2 Peter 3:16, 18** – “they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures unto their own destruction ... But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

**1 Timothy 1:4** – “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith; so do.”

1 Tim. 6:4-5 – “He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness; from such withdraw thyself.”

13. The Hermeneutical Synthetic Principle encourages us to Compare Scripture with Scripture, never to compare Scripture with our cleverness in hindsight.

14. Scripture alone reveals the accuracy of fulfilled prophecy

**Luke 4:21** – “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”

**Acts 13:33** – “God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.”

**New Testament “fulfilled” – 57 times** [Matt. 1:22; 2:15-17, 23; 4:14; 5:18; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35, etc.]

***All Alleged Modern Prophets can only be accurate in hindsight***

15. It would be very strange to send epistles to church ages. [Rev. 1:11]

16. The Better interpretation is to start with the Known history of the 7 cities and their churches [20/20 hindsight] and apply them to our churches today.

**Sardis [Rev. 3:1-3]**

Historically, Sardis was a mountain fortress difficult to capture except through carelessness. At the approach of Alexander the Great in 334 BC, the Sardinians surrendered without resistance. Similarly, the city was captured by Antiochus III in 214 BC through the negligence of its defenders. Sardis was lost twice because its people were too complacent to watch and defend properly. According to historian Herodotus in *Histories 1.84*, the city was thought to be impregnable due to a sheer escarpment [steep slope], so the defenders did not guard it properly. However, a soldier on duty, attempting to retrieve a dropped helmet climbed down the escarpment, which revealed a vulnerable path to the enemy. A Persian named *Hyroiades* followed this route and was joined by other Persian soldiers during the night, allowing them to scale the cliffs and capture Sardis. This incident exemplifies how Sardis fell due to complacency and the city’s vulnerable point being exposed by the soldier’s carelessness with his extremely heavy helmet. [Modern archaeological excavations of Sardis unearthed skeletons of soldiers, one showing neck vertebrae compression attributed to wearing a heavy helmet for long periods]

17. Using the very same methodology [*eisegesis*] today’s Bible scholar could as easily *prove* we are living in the *Smyrna* age [*Voice of the Martyrs*] or the *Philadelphia* age [technological worldwide spread of the gospel, AI translations, etc.]

*The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the most Christians martyred in history, with credible estimates indicating that over half – roughly 45 million – of all Christian martyrs across two millennia died during this period, primarily under fascist and communist regimes. Some sources estimate that 65% of recorded Christian martyrdoms occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone. This dramatic increase was driven by totalitarian ideologies, genocidal violence, and civil conflicts in the Soviet Union, China, Nazi-occupied territories, Rwanda, Sudan, India, Bangladesh, and other areas marked by religious and political upheaval.*

*“The Fuhrer (Hitler) is deeply religious, though completely anti-Christian, He views Christianity as a symptom of decay. Rightly so. It is a brand of the Jewish race...Both (Judaism and Christianity) ... in the end, they will be destroyed.”* [Joseph Goebbels (Nazi Minister of Propaganda), *The Goebbels Diaries*, Entry on December 29, 1939]

R. The Challenge of Differing Definitions of Similar Terms throughout Church History

***“Martyr”***

“While definitions and methods for counting martyrs vary, there is clear consensus among major researchers and organizations that no previous century came even close to the scale of Christian martyrdom seen in the 1900s.” [Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary]

***Can there be such a thing as Unbelieving Martyrs?  
[For what they think is the Truth, not for what they know to be a lie]***

Definition of Catholic Martyrdom:

- a. Violent death at the hands of a persecutor, acting in *odium fidei* [hatred of the faith]
- b. The victim must freely accept death as a witness to faith. [cf. Herod’s slaughter of Innocents]

S. The Challenge of maintaining a never-ending balance in our study of God’s Working in human history and, particularly, the History of His Church.

T. The Temptation to Compromise the truth in a noble effort to proclaim Christ’s Gospel  
[The End never justifies the means]

U. The Challenge of the *Big Ditch View* of Church History: God’s story came to a screeching halt after the apostolic period creating a vast spiritual wasteland until the Protestant Reformation.

***Truth: God never abandoned His church in the 2nd, nor 4<sup>th</sup>, nor even the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.  
All of Church History belongs to the believer today – the good, the bad, and the ugly.***

V. The Failure of Believers to learn from Church History, assuming correct Biblical interpretation and the Gospel’s spread were severely suppressed until we of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries arrived on the scene.

Why Study Church History then? Are we the sole repository of Truth?

***Winston Churchill: “If you fail to learn (church) history, you are doomed to repeat it.”  
[So what have I learned, what can I learn?]***