

Introduction Outline

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The Structure of History: The Views from the Academy

A Structure of History: A View from the Church

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Ancient Church

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Introduction Objectives

- That the reader will describe why the study of church history is useful for the present and the future
- That the reader will distinguish between circular, linear, and progressive views of history
- That the reader will identify major figures in the study of history
- That the reader will describe the structure and meaning of history from the perspective of the church
- That the reader will identify the four main periods of church history by name and time period
- That the reader will identify the three major expressions of the Christian faith

An illustration of an unrolled scroll with a parchment-like texture. A faint world map is visible in the background. The word "INTRODUCTION" is written in a bold, dark blue, serif font across the center of the scroll.

INTRODUCTION

THE APOSTLE JOHN ENDED his account of the claims of the Lord Jesus by stating that, if all that Jesus did had been recorded, the libraries of the world would not have the shelf space to house them (John 21:25). That is an amazing assertion.

Centuries have passed since that remarkable person entered the world that he had created; in fact, though he lived among us briefly, he spawned a movement that is truly unexplainable from natural perspectives. It has always appeared a frail movement. Hostile political states have severely persecuted it; armies have relentlessly endeavored to crush it; zealous visionaries from within have proven disastrous pied-pipers; heretics have attempted to redefine and control it; and friends have shown themselves, at times, to be as dangerous as its enemies. Yet, from a small band of fearfully distraught followers, the story of the Christ has been told with remarkable courage and sacrifice over and over through the centuries. Christianity has spread

to the nations of the world with tremendous vitality. The Christian faith quickly became a global movement that has ebbed and flowed through the pages of the centuries. It has conquered nations, been conquered by them, and yet has sustained an undeniably enduring quality.

It is that story, or shall we say “his story,” that is the focus of this study. As a discipline, history is the study of the recorded past, with the goal of presenting it to contemporaries; it is learning through historical inquiry, the gathering of records with a view to telling a story. Ultimately, it is an attempt, through the search of the past, to explain the meaning and function of the present while providing hope and direction for the future. Church history, the

focus of this inquiry, is the story of the “body of Jesus Christ,” the people of God fashioned through the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God, infused with the Spirit of God, overwhelmed with a sense of divine forgiveness, and motivated to live life in such a way as to represent him in society at large, the home, the visible church, and to neighbors near and distant from no other motive than to respond intellectually, physically, and emotionally to such great fortune. This is a love story; it is a narrative of a people who have sought and seek to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind and their neighbors as they do themselves (Matt. 22:37, 39). It is a movement that is blind to ethnicity, nationalism, economic status, and educational accomplishments. It is found in the poorest of cultures and in the economic wealth of the advanced western nations. It is red, yellow, black, white, and brown. It transcends all these things because they are not the most important issues in life. There is emptiness in the human soul, restlessness in the spirit of mankind, and only satisfaction and delight in the Lord Jesus will transcend the deepest human needs and social differences.

The Benefits of the Study of the Christian Church

Though it may be impossible to cross “the ugly broad ditch,” to know the past accurately, because it cannot be duplicated, the sources are biased, and the human mind cursed with prejudice, is there no benefit in the attempt? Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), a prominent figure in the development of the **Enlightenment**, a movement whose principal assumptions were that the rational facilities are a more sure guide to truth than any ancient, external authorities, believed new insights would offer

hope for peace, harmony, and the perfectibility of mankind through rational reflection, progress in the sciences, and the inevitability of social progress. Lessing argued that history is not a sufficient guide for contemporaries because it cannot be accurately re-represented. This is evident in the emergence of the Hobbesian despair of certainty. Lessing contended that the past is an uncertain guide to truth because most of it has been inaccurately recorded and transmitted.

This, he and others argued, is clearly applicable to Christian truth claims, which are based upon fallible eyewitnesses (since all people are error prone). For example, the Christian assertion of miracles, he stated, is the product of more mistruth than truth because people commonly exaggerate. It is more reasonable to believe that people lied about miracles happening than that they actually happened.¹

The assumption that reason alone can discover what is true has been turned upside down by postmodernist scholars; it is an absolutist claim that cannot be absolutely proven. Further, the rationalist denial of the possibility of the supernatural has led western civilization to the twilight of despair. It has produced failed materialistic-political approaches to life, huge governmental attempts to organize social cohesiveness, and the loss of personal and corporate meaning. By despairing of past solutions to complex human problems, the Enlightenment enterprise put its hopes for the betterment of mankind in restructuring social and cultural structures through the sciences. Man became mind, progress became quantifiable **materialism**, aesthetics was lost, and the spiritual was crushed.

The ground for this study, this retelling of a story, is that the past is valuable for the present and it has something to offer to lead us into

1. This is based on the assertion that all truth is empirically verifiable through observation and repetition. Christian faith is rooted in the reality of one-time occurrences, such as the incarnation and the resurrection, and the truth of the possibility of divine intervention.

the future with hope. Time is a seamless garment; it can only be compartmentalized with great loss. Most particularly, knowledge of the history of Christianity, for those who cherish it, must be constantly retold because the lessons garnered from the past are invaluable. Let me list a few of those lessons before we proceed. Here are a few.

First, the story of Christianity is a powerful argument for the validity of Christian truth claims. The place to begin, it seems, is to broach the question of the nature of knowing or certainty. When it is said that something is true, it means that it is *more reasonable* that it is true than false. That is, arguments can be amassed that hopefully entitle an affirmation as valid. It does not mean that arguments cannot be presented against a truth-claim; it is that the claim is reasonable. The criterion of reasonableness is not concerned that a belief system begins with several unprovable—assumptions; it is that the worldview developed from those assumptions explains the world as it is, broken and dysfunctional, and offers hope. Christianity, which assumes the existence of God and his communication to humankind, most poignantly in the Bible, claims to do just that; it explains the problems in society and offers peace and hope. This is where the story of Christianity becomes important. Though the history of Christianity has regrettable episodes and derelictions have abounded at times, the centuries of its existence bear proof that it is true. It has brought hope to the hopeless, peace to the forsaken, strength to the weakened, and purpose to the downtrodden. Christian faith *is* not true because of this; these things suggest that it is true.

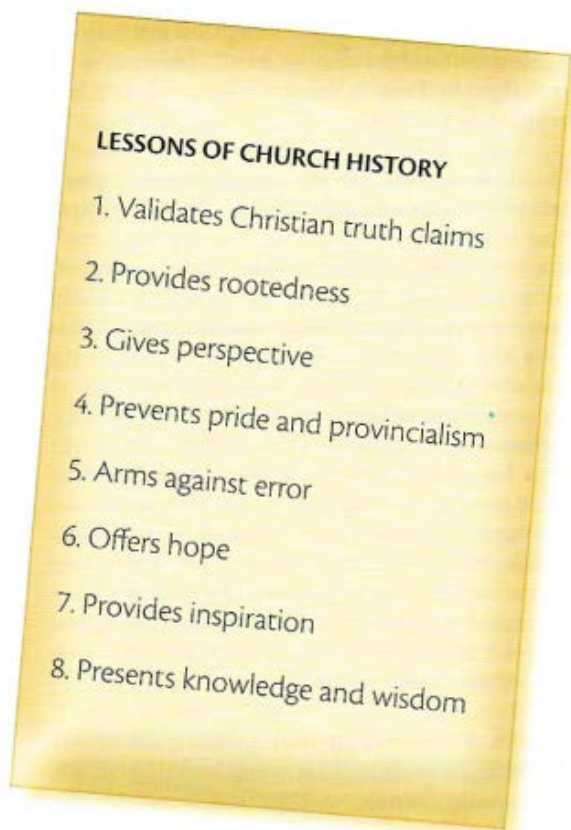
Second, a knowledge of the history of the church not only provides a potent argument, it allows us to understand why the church today thinks the way it does, why it uses the language it does, why it worships as it does. Prejudices

and insights have historic roots that are helpful to plumb in order to understand current issues and, thereby, help us to have a sense of stability in changing times.

Third, a knowledge of church history gives perspective to our own times. These are neither the worst of times nor the best of times! The knowledge of church history suggests that some things are timeless, but much is not. It preserves the church from fads and novelty. We have the tendency to perceive new programs and methods as having messianic promises of success, thus falling into the trap of thinking that novelty, accompanied with zeal, is *the* catalyst for church growth. History teaches that there are few great events or life-changing moments; on the contrary, change is very gradual. It is the little things that bring about significant alteration in culture. In short, knowledge of the past can be a preventative; it can help us separate the merely exciting, but temporary, from the enduring and eternal.

Fourth, it reminds us that we are part of the body of Christ that is far more extensive than our private beliefs or denominational affiliations. It should deliver us from provincialism, pride and arrogance borne of the idea that any one church or ecclesiastical tradition stands in the exclusive heritage of first-century orthodoxy. It should help all to realize that the church of Jesus Christ is a global community that easily transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, economic status, or intellectual progress

Fifth, knowledge of the history of the church will preserve the church from error; it provides apologetic weapons against deception. The accumulated wisdom of the church can provide an arsenal of arguments as we struggle to preserve the church today from opponents within and without. History exhibits patterns in the work of God that may be applicable today.



Sixth, an understanding of the past can give us a sense of calm in turbulent times and assurance that the Lord's church will ultimately triumph. The devil has employed every strategy to destroy the church, armies have marched against it, faithless scholarship has relentlessly assaulted it, internal bickering has rent it, and martyrdom has depleted its ranks from time to time. Yet the church marches forward

— in triumphal anticipation of the day when the kingdoms of this world will be put under Christ's feet, and the bride, without spot or wrinkle, will be given to the king. Such knowledge can dispel the sense of loneliness and isolation that is characteristic of the present times with its stress on the temporal, peripheral, and sensational.

Seventh, throughout the history of the church, women and men have provided a rich literary depository with regard to the spiritual life. The lives of many, recorded in their writings or biographies, have inspired and directed subsequent generations of saints. Numerous books on Christian spirituality in the annals of the church offer counsel, solace, and insight.

Finally, history can be a sourcebook of knowledge. To guide our path the Lord has given his people a rich heritage. The sources of helpful information are several: the *Bible*, which is the supreme authority for life and the corrective for the errors perpetuated by other sources; *reason*, though it is subject to misperception and bias; *natural history*; *experience*; and the *collective memory of the past*, which historians of the church call tradition. Knowledge of the past provides stability in the uncertain present and hope for the future. How the church has gone about its work in the past, how it faced its challenges, how it has understood the Bible are all aids as we seek to serve our generation.

The Structure of History: The Views from the Academy

The study of history is as old as Herodotus, the fifth-century BC² Greek who described the

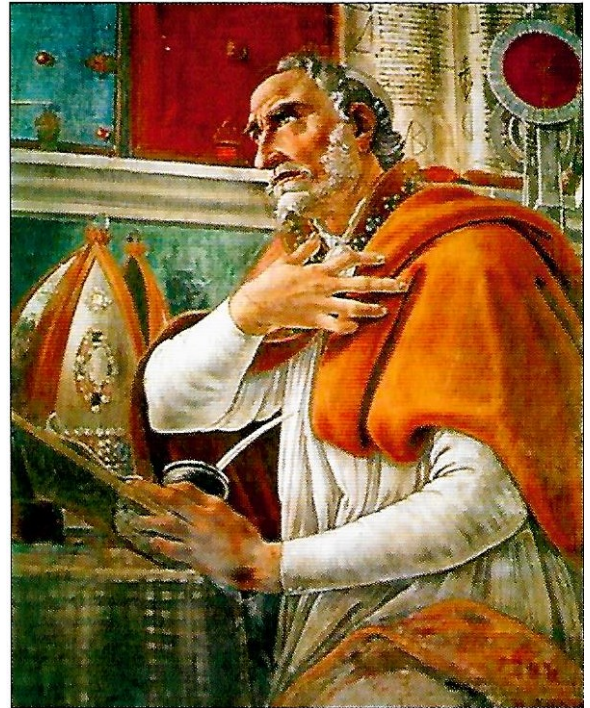
2. A recent trend in the scholarly designation of the past has been to refer to the era before Christ as "Before the Common Era [BCE]" and the period after Christ as the "Common Era [CE]," a not-so-subtle attempt, at least it may be argued, to express the point that Christ is not the centerpiece of human history. Such a movement is consistent with the secularizing trends in literary arts that became obvious in the previous century within academic circles. I have chosen to use the traditional designations for the division of history based on the assumption that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the central focus of redemptive history, that the story of time is that of the promise, advent, and return of Jesus.

Persian Wars, and Thucydides, an Athenian who later described the Peloponnesian Wars. The earliest view of history, whether from China, India, Persia, or the Greeks, was to see it as cyclical or circular. Nations, dynasties, cultures have a rise, maturity, and decline (though often the cycle was seen as retrogression from a “golden era” or the harbinger of rebirth from a dull one [the **Renaissance** view]). Perhaps the most famous, recent exponents of such a view were Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), *The Decline of the West*, and Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), *A Study of History*. The latter, however, combined a cyclical view with a linear view of progress in time. Though Toynbee did not see Christianity as the final truth, he adopted the Christian notion of history as the embodiment of progress toward a goal; he embraced the idea of cycles, but not endless cycles. The cyclical/linear combination view is, perhaps, best illustrated in the work of the American Christian historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette (1884–1968), whose massive histories of the Christian church and Christian missions, combined the ideas of successive waves of declension, followed by ever-longer waves of progress, culminating in an endless wave of the dominance of Christian faith, a **postmillennial**, progressive **idealism**.

As Christianity emerged into the Roman world with its message of profound hope, the naturalistic or spirited, often fatalistic, circular theory of history was displaced. For Christians, history is one of linear progress toward a goal orchestrated by the Lord, who directs the events of this world by providential care and intervention. History is inexorably on a path that will end in the triumph of God over his enemies and reign over his own people forever. At times of perceived Christian triumph, such as during the reign of Constantine in the fourth century and several Frankish and Carolingian kings of the medieval era, the sixteenth century Reformations (particularly in England), and among the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century liberal progressivists, the kingdom of

the king and that of earthly kings seemed to have blurred. In times of political uncertainty, hostility, and persecution, the two kingdoms were separated. Both views appear to be overstated expressions of contemporary myopia.

In articulating a theory of history from a Christian perspective, Augustine (354–430) has had an immense influence. Writing to explain how an empire that embraced the Christian faith could be in the death throes of pagan invasion (Alaric’s pillage of Rome in 410), the bishop of Hippo articulated a general theory of the flow of history, a history of nations, and a theodicy. To explain why the empire was crumbling, he argued for a divinely orchestrated and providentially secured notion of the rise and fall of nations. In brief, he argued that God rises up nations for a divine purpose (such as the emergence of the Christian faith) and preserves



A portrait (c. 7480) of Augustine by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510). At Church of Ognissanti, Florence. Courtesy of the Yorck Project.

them according to his purposes by curbing their lawlessness and granting them success. When his purpose for a nation ends, he withholds his preserving mercies, allowing them to voluntarily devolve into exploitation and selfishness, and then justly condemns and destroys them.

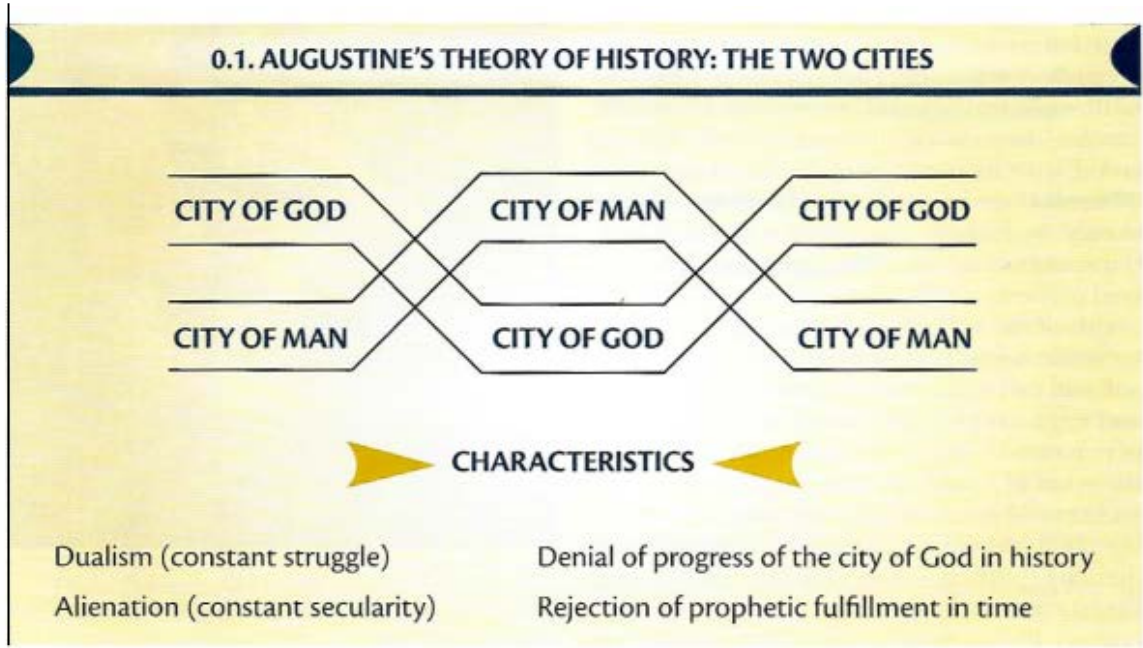
Augustine also postulated a providential theory of cosmic history, a theory that is more linear than progressive (though it had components of both), interventionist, and eschatological. Since the fall of humankind,

the world, argued Augustine, is composed of two entities, each characterized by love, but having vastly different objects of love. The City of Man, the Earthly City, is characterized by self-love, false gods, envy, strife, and brute strength. The City of God, the Heavenly City, is the creation of the true God and partakes of his character. These two cities, intertwined in existences, share the same joys and afflictions in this life though they have different faith-objects, expectations, loves, and ends (*The City of God*, 14.28, 18.54). The inhabitants of the

“heavenly city” use the good of the world to enjoy God; citizens of the “earthly city” use God that they might enjoy the world (15.7). At the end of time (though there is no end to existence), the two kingdoms will be dissolved in a divine judgment: the righteous will be received into a spiritual kingdom that Christ purchased, and the wicked will be received into an existence devoid of divine blessing and comfort forever (20.6).

The general theory of history delineated by

Augustine was embraced with variations through the Christian era (400–1750) until the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment emerged in the eighteenth century. The empirical and materialist approaches taken by many eighteenth-century scholars and churchmen precluded the possibility of the supernatural, interventionist assumptions of historic Christianity. Instead, the forces for change were increasingly deposited in natural causes and God was relegated to “the-watch-presupposes-a-watch-maker” theory of a distant god who operates the universe by the law he imposed on it at



creation, never to intervene again. Natural processes replaced miracles, mere earthly progress replaced the *eschaton*, and the hope of a better human existence preempted the promise of heaven.

Integral to the rejection of divine interventionism was the emergence of a more optimistic assessment of human moral and spiritual abilities and, its corollary, the embrace of the notion of the perfectibility of man. Historic Christian faith has strenuously argued that the human species is irreparably blighted by sin. The hope of retrieval is only partial in this life through the Savior of the world, but complete when time will be no more. Enlightenment advocates announced a new, more favorable assessment of the human condition and turned a future heaven into the not-yet of scientific and moral advance.

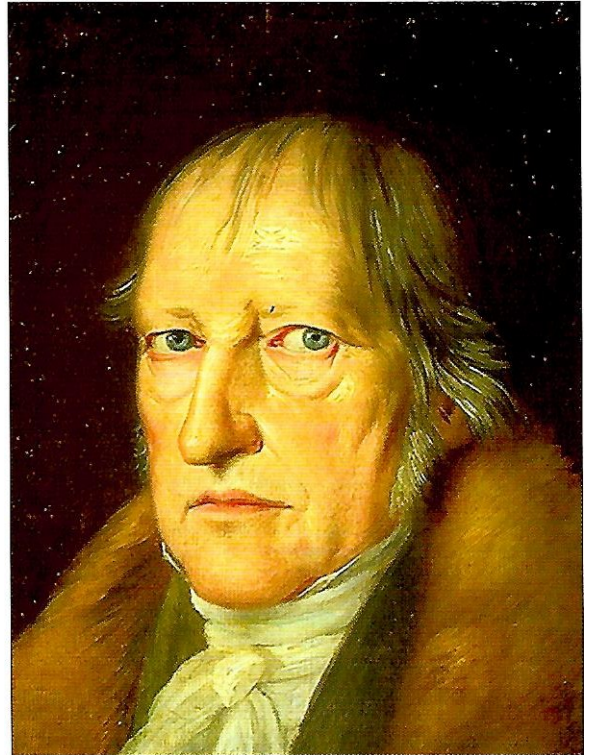
While Christians have asserted moral and spiritual responsibilities to improve the plight of the neighbor, they have tempered their enthusiasm for progress, not the endeavor itself, with the realization that perfection awaits another realm of existence. The worst demonstrations of human behavior can be ameliorated by social, economic, and political action, but they cannot be eradicated. Simply stated, human nature is educatable, but the evil of it is not eradicable.

In the history of philosophy, no one is more central than Georg Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel argued that time and human nature is not static, but is subject to advance through the convergence of conflicting opposites, creating new syntheses that push humankind in a forward, ascending spiral of degrees of perfectibility. Spiritual forces, the impersonal Geist, propel the quest of humankind for freedom or self-consciousness. Christianity is reduced to a primitive, now archaic, steppingstone of humankind on the way to perfectibility.

The elasticity of Hegel's historical and philosophical theory was applied to sociology by August Comte (1798–1857). Comte, the father

of modern sociology, argued that humankind has progressed through three stages on the road to perfectibility: the religious stage, the philosophical stage, and the sociological stage. For Comte, sociology was the key to progress with the philosophical and theological stages inferior steppingstones. Hegel also influenced Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Adolph Hitler, and others. Truth became relative, temporary perceptions in the upward march of time.

A reaction to the philosophical school of historical development can be seen in the rise of nineteenth-century **historicism**. Advocates of historicism rejected the notion of human perfectibility and progress through rationalism, moving historical change even further from



Oil painting of Georg Hegel by Jakob Schlesinger in 1831. Courtesy of FreeArt 1.

Christian assumptions. Historicists, such as R. G. Collingwood, argued that each age is an age unto itself, created and advancing through its own unique intuitive powers. The approach is rooted in nineteenth century **Romanticism** that infused nationalistic pride with a spiritual pietism. In brief, historicism, emergent in Germany, took the form of radical nationalism. The state was elevated to the status of redeemer, not the individual or, in the case of Christianity, the Christ. Historicism offered immediate gratification by arduous application of its principles. The Christian's hope is in a temporally shadowed, but ultimately deferred, fulfillment of expectations. Both made significant impact upon our world, but the promises of enlightened progress and nationalistic pride have failed; they have proven empty and destructive. Christianity argues that hope deferred is real hope that awaits realization; that this world, being only a shadow of reality, an imperfect one at that, at its best moments only prefigures a better world to come.

While historicists found the clue to progress in national character, Marxists offered a more extreme explanation of the progress of history, its nature, and cause. Often denominated as **Marxist materialism**, it is, perhaps, more accurately described as economic materialism. Indebted to Hegel for the thought that man participates in the historical process as an active, causative agent of change, Marx rejected Hegel's **idealism**, viewing man as only material. He, therefore, saw man's highest potential blunted by the lack of material equality or the disproportionate control of it by an elite. Marx and Engel saw economic disparity as the origin of humanity's failure to reach its potential. They believed this could be reversed by social and economic equalitarianism (unfortunately imposed by force should the need arises to do so). Like historicism, Marx's economic materialism, as an explanation of the human dilemma and a source of hope, has proven disastrous for those who have been forced to embrace it.



The cenotaph of Karl Marx, East Highgate Cemetery, London. Courtesy of Paasikivi.

Postmodern historiography has rejected the possibility of a cosmic pattern in history and has found comfort in individualized hopes and private aspirations. Sadly, postmoderns can detect no plan or purpose in the universe. Time is not circular, linear, or progressive. It is erratic and unpredictable. It makes no sense! They correctly see that the brilliant rhetoric of the historians and philosophers of the Enlightenment whose "messianic" promises of the improvement of the human race has proven empty in the heartrending devastations brought to our world by the most advanced nations. The idea of the improvement of human nature through economic and social progress has become a delusion. Postmoderns have seen the folly of technological redeemers, but they have turned inward to find meaning. Perhaps, it is wiser to argue that redemption is not in this world, that intellectual redeemers can only give us vaporous illusions of hope that time

and experience dash into tiny pieces. It could be that the assertion of the Christian faith that hope came to us in the person of the Christ is worthy of renewed consideration. Because the enormous advances of the applied sciences cannot grasp “heaven,” it may be time to reconsider the Augustinian maxim that “heaven” will always be elsewhere!

A Structure of History: A View from the Church

From a Christian perspective, physical existence is a created phenomenon. We believe that God created the universe by speaking it effortlessly into existence (Ps. 33) and constantly sustains it by his moment-by-moment power. It had a beginning and will have an end (2 Pet. 3). Viewing the centuries from that perspective, from the pages of the Bible, it is appropriate to ask the question, what is the purpose of the creation? Having raised the issue, it might prove helpful to situate church history into the larger panorama of the history of the world. In essence, the Christian perspective on history, at least in part, is a divine stage on which the wonder of redemption is enacted. The Bible explains the redemptive drama from the beginning of time to its end, though there are significant gaps in the story (i.e., the Bible does not provide a history of the centuries, though some have viewed the book of Revelation as a divine time line of the centuries between the advents of the Christ). The history of humankind involves a huge plot that exists as a “golden thread” through the story of nations and families. As Augustine argued, God is calling out of the “City of Man” the “City of God.” Though the two cities share many of the same vicissitudes of life, they are distinct cities because of separate goals, motives, and ultimate objects. The Bible describes this grand metanarrative. It explains how a pristine creation became corrupted and how it is being, and will be, restored.

The Christ is the focal point of all history (Heb. 1:1). He created the world and sustains it

(John 1:3; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:3, 2:10). He is also the end of history. There will come a day when Christ will bring time to a conclusion. At that moment, he will be the centerpiece for eternity. He is the “alpha and omega,” the beginning and the end. However, there is something more. He is the center of history. Jesus, who is called the Lord and the Christ, is the most important figure of all times; he alone is central. Before secularism divided history into two “common” eras, it was normal to segment history before Christ (BC) and after Christ (AD); Christians embrace a third era to follow the second called “fulfillment” in which all of God’s promises will find fruition. The Old Testament Scriptures anticipated his incarnation; the New Testament Gospels describe it; the Epistles of the New Testament delineate the proclamation of his message in the first century; and Revelation describes its culmination in the “new heavens and new earth.” The Hebrew Scriptures, rightly interpreted, have a christocentric focus. Luke tells us that Jesus on the Emmaus road “beginning with Moses and with all the Prophets...explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures” (24:27). Jesus said on another occasion, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). Christians today look back upon what the prophets of old longed for, the coming of the Christ (1 Pet. 1:10–12). We look back to the first century and also anxiously anticipate the return of the king the prophets anticipated. When he comes a second time, time will end and a new world will begin that will last forever.

Though the Christian Bible is composed of two unequal parts, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Scriptures, the Old Testament and the New Testament, it is unified by one, single promise, the promise that God made to Abraham to bless all the nations of the earth through his greater progeny, Jesus Christ (Gen. 12, 15, 17). The promise to Abraham was threefold: a land, a seed, and a blessing. The ulti-

mate fulfillment of the land promise is spiritual in nature though the shadowed fulfillments are physical. This is evident in that the “seed” promised to him is interpreted by the Apostle Paul (Gal. 3:16) as a reference to Christ. The blessing itself in its final fulfillment, will be the redemption of the nations through the Christ in the eternal state.

The Bible’s central theme is redemption. Redemption was anticipated in the Old Testament writings, procured in the New Testament Gospel accounts through Christ, and applied in the other books of the New Testament down to the end of time through the preaching of the gospel. It reached its penultimate fulfillment at the conclusion of the book of the Revelation, the description of a world with remarkable parallels to the original creation in Gen. 1–2.

The Old Testament contains what is described as the Old Covenant, the promises to the ancient people of God; the New Testament gives us the New Covenant, the promises to the new people of God. The Old Covenant is

presented to us in Exodus 19 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5. The New Covenant is promised in Jeremiah 31 and instituted in Christ’s death (Matt. 26, Heb. 8). The differences between the two great covenants are made clear in Hebrews, a book whose central concern is to explain the superior qualities of the New Covenant over the old one. In essence, the New Covenant is superior because it is based on better promises through a superior priest, Christ, and his superior once-for-all-times sacrifice. The Passover lamb is a figure of Christ, the true Lamb that takes away sin forever.

The Old Testament is a book of shadows (Heb. 10:1) that anticipates the promised seed of Abraham, Christ. In figure and ceremony, the Old Testament taught the believer to expect a greater One to come who would bring a greater deliverance. It is the great era of anticipation! The Old Testament progressively reveals two things to the inquiring reader. First, it reveals the person who would bring redemption to his people.

0.2. CHRIST AS THE CENTER OF HISTORY



- Genesis 3:15: a male child born of a woman
- Genesis 9:26: a male Semite (a son of Shem)
- Genesis 12:3: a son born of the Semite Abraham
- Genesis 49:10: a son born of Isaac's son Jacob, and of Jacob's son Judah
- 2 Samuel 7:14: a son of David of Judah's descendants, a king
- Isaiah 7:14: a son born of a virgin in Israel
- Micah 5:2: a son born in Bethlehem whose days are from eternity.

Second, the Old Testament progressively reveals what this person would do to accomplish the redemption of his people. In this capacity the roles of priest and king were combined; he has the character and station to represent his people being a divine mediator and royal prince!

- Genesis 3:15: the redemption involved violence
- Exodus 12:1-28: the redeemer is a "lamb" whose blood will protect from death
- Leviticus 16:1-34: the redeemer is a slain "goat" that covers sin, making expiation
- Isaiah 52:13-53:12: the redeemer is an astonishing (52:13-15), misunderstood (53:1-3), vicarious (53:4-6), submissive (53:7-9), and a righteously bruised-exalted deliverer (53:10-13).

The New Testament gospel writers identify that the One promised in the Old Testament

who came to suffer and die for his people is Jesus. He is the long-anticipated One. First, it tells us who this one would be, Jesus Christ the Lord (Matt. 1:21, 23). Second, the New Testament tells us he did what was foretold of him. He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prediction. For example, Jesus commented that the prophets anticipated his arrest ("How would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way" [Matt. 26:54]). The Christ is the fulfillment of the sacrificial lamb-figure of the Hebrew Scriptures.

- John 1:29: "the Lamb of God"
- 1 Corinthians 5:7: "For even Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us."
- 1 Peter 1:18-19: "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb"
- 1 John 1:7: "the blood of Jesus, his Son purifies us from all sin"

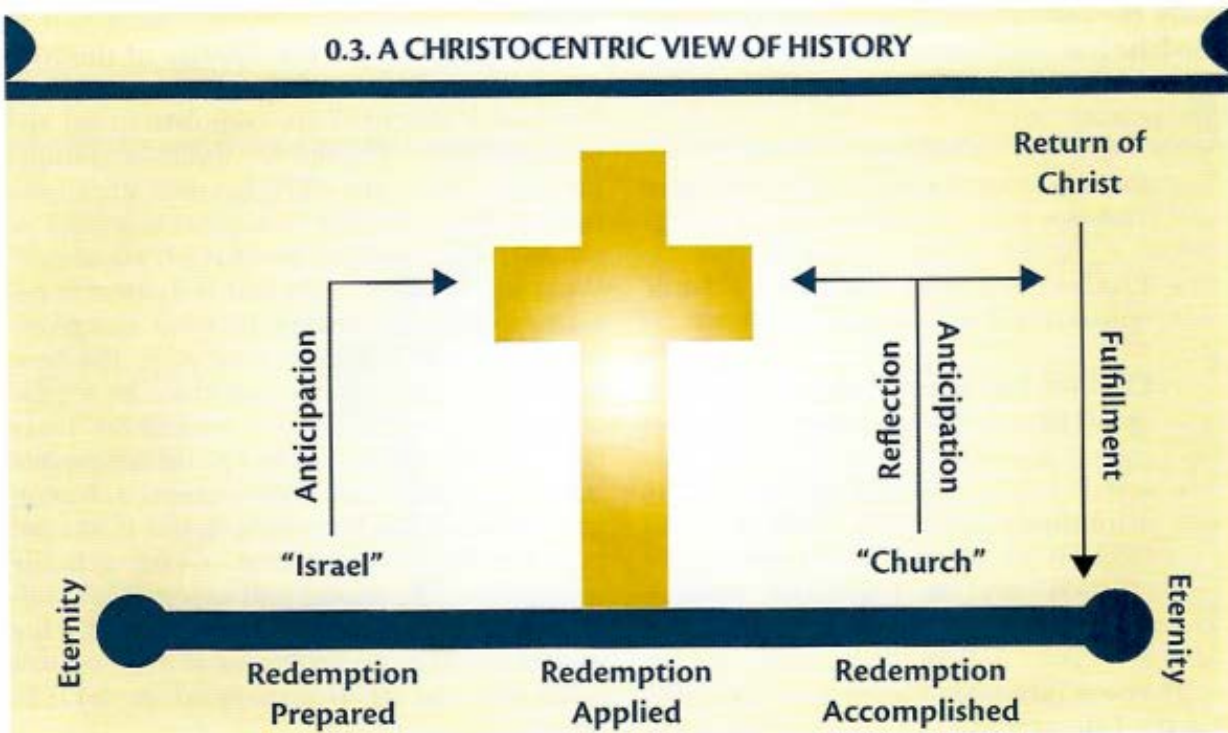
The Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament tell us what Jesus accomplished; Revelation describes its completion. All the nations will be blessed in Abraham through his greater Son, who will reign over all peoples forever. Thus, the Old Testament is a book of *shadows*; the New Testament is a book of *light*. What was *enfolded* in the Old Testament is *unfolded* in the New Testament; what was *promised* in the Old has been *realized* in the New. However, to this day we "see through a glass darkly," but in a future day we will see more clearly. The Gospels and the Epistles are replete with fulfillment and anticipation. Salvation has come; sin has been judged, but it has not been removed. When Christ comes again, he will destroy his enemies and welcome his children into a final, forever rest. That period is the time of the ultimate fulfillment of the promises given after the fall of mankind (Gen. 3:15) to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).

The Bible envisions three eras of history. Biblical scholars commonly speak of the Old Testament era, the New Testament era, and the Kingdom; or, a period that was, a period that is, and a period that will be. Hebrews 1:1–2 speaks of a time long ago when God spoke “to the fathers...by the prophets” (“past ... ignorance,” Acts 17:30) and in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” In this Hebrews passage, the writer is indicating that the Jews thought of only two ages—former times and latter times. They thought they were living in the former times, because they did not think the “latter times” had come in the spiritualized kingdom inaugurated by Christ. The latter times are divided into two parts: the time between Christ’s two advents and a period of his full reign as the triumphant king after his second coming. Hebrews refers to the time between the two advents of Christ as the “last days” (1:2) and the “time of the new order” (9:10) that will end when Christ appears a

second time (this time in judgment) at the “consummation of the ages” (9:26). Peter, in his sermon recorded by Luke (Acts 3:19–24), says that the prophets from Samuel announced “these days,” the latter days, and that Jesus will not return to earth “until the time comes for God to restore everything” (v. 21), or the latter part of the latter days. The Jews envisioned only two eras in all of history, the former days and the latter days, the promise of Messiah and the advent of Messiah. They saw Messiah as reigning politically and religiously, not crucified and resurrected. They did not see the latter days in two parts, thereby segmenting history into only two eras, with Messiah reigning most fully at its end and forever.

The study of church history focuses on the “new people of God”; it concerns itself with the events between the two advents of Christ. It is the story of the redemptive purposes of God in the second great period of all time, the period when God’s people look back to

0.3. A CHRISTOCENTRIC VIEW OF HISTORY



celebrate the coming of the One the Old Testament prophets promised and who live in anticipation of his return when the redemption of humankind will be complete, the earth restored to its pristine beauty, and a people will have been gathered from the nations through the centuries to worship and adore the “Lamb” forever and ever. The history of the church is the story of the proclamation of the gospel: its defense, clarification, and extension for over twenty centuries since our Lord commanded us to make disciples of all the nations through going and baptizing, accompanied with the comforting promise that the endeavor will not fail because he, through his Spirit, will be with us until the task is complete (Matt. 28:19–20).

There have been times of great external success in going, telling, and receiving; the Christian faith has made significant strides among the nations. At other times, the fortunes of the church have been crushed under the persecuting blows of its enemies, even supposed friends. Sometimes in the name of the church, its leadership has persecuted the church. The Christian movement is so varied and different than others. When it is numerically strong, it has proven to be spiritually weak and culturally ineffective; when it has suffered alienation, it has risen with great impact. The story of the Christian church is not an easy story to tell because it is not the same as institutions, movements, and denominations. It is an invisible movement, the most “real” entity in this world of the surreal and shadows. This is a real world, and ought not be minimized, yet there is a coming world more “real” than this one, a city whose builder and maker is God!

The Meaning of History: The Glory of God

To gain an even deeper perspective of the meaning of history from a Christian perspective, it is important to grasp that though a

redemptive metanarrative threads through the Bible, it is not, in itself, the final or ultimate purpose in God’s creative and recreative activity. Redemption is a wonderfully profound, but secondary reason for the creation, the sustaining of it, and the restoration of humankind and the universe. What, then, is the deepest reason God created the universe, placed humans on a sphere called the earth, witnesses the violence and inhumanity of his creatures, and some day will return it all to uprightness?

In short, the answer is that God’s fundamental interest is his own glory (Rom. 11:36). God delights in himself alone, for who is the measure of his worth and beauty but he himself alone! For God to take delight in less than himself is to delight in inferiorities. Further, God not only shares mutual love and delight in his Trinitarian existence, he delights in exuding that delight so as to delight even more, in beholding his beauty. God made the world so as to behold his own beauty and humans to reflect that beauty. God delights in himself and in the extension of himself. He delights in the praise emanating from his own creation. Praise does not make God better, nor does its refusal cause deletion. He alone is the all-sufficient, self-sufficient God, needing nothing. He simply delights in praise!

Why, then, did God make the world and inhabit it with animals and humans? He did it so that he could behold himself in his workmanship. He made a realm of symmetry and beauty because he is symmetry and beauty. The biblical fall has marred that world so that the capacity to accomplish its divine purpose has become severely encumbered. Peace and harmony have been replaced by avarice and war. The animal kingdom is in rebellion; creation groans for a day when thistles and weeds will no longer limit flowers from blooming at full strength and trees from foliating in abundance. Humanity is a wrecked vestige of his created potential. God is now glorified to a lesser

Invitation to Church History: World

degree by a twisted, rebellious world, but that will not be the case forever.

What then is God doing in the world that has lost so much of its potential to reflect his beauty? He is creating it anew day-by-day, year-by-year, and century-by-century. God is redeeming a people; he is reversing the effects of the great retrogression (Gen. 3). Some day creation will be liberated and that day draws closer with every passing one. History is not aimless; it is progressing toward a goal, though that progress seems to flux, sometimes being more apparent than at other times, though that is a merely human perception. The goal will be realized when creation rejoices and the people of God worship him in a new heaven and earth.

God is seeking his own glory, and he is doing it by shaping the destiny of nations and people. The study of church history can tell part of that story, the story of a redeemed people living in a blighted world with their eyes and hearts set on non-earthly values and motives. It is the narrative of a people who have been caused to see the world in a different way from many around them, yet with a love for the world that has not been diminished, only refocused, with an other-worldly perspective. So church history, like universal history, is the story of how it is that God is glorifying himself now and will do so until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of God's Son, Jesus Christ. To God be the glory!

The Structure for the Study of Church History

As scholars approach ways to convey the history of the period between the advents of Christ, the age of the church, the task is not at all easy. The records available from the past are incomplete, the sources blighted by prejudice and jaundice, as well as that of the interpreter, and the context of statements cannot be fully reconstructed. An added dilemma for the historian is that Christianity is not always to be identified with institutional structures,

whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant. A movement is not necessarily Christian because it professes attachment to pious ideals, makes prominent display of religious symbols, claims historic connections to a fertile past, possesses a large and obedient following, or has a record of religious sacrifice and zeal for the cause. Christianity is more than institutional identity; it is a matter of an invisible heart-attachment that may or not be expressed in quantifiable ways. The center of Christianity is a devotion to a person whose claims and accomplishments are revealed in the Christian Bible.

With that caveat, the scholar studies the outward manifestations of Christian faith to uncover an inner meaning and dynamic. Organizational structure, though somewhat arbitrary at times, is important in making complex material more readily understandable. Accordingly, scholars divide the centuries of Christian history into large units of time and subdivide them into a variety of subjects integral to each period. Generally, church history is divided into four periods: the ancient church, the medieval church, the modern church, and the postmodern church.

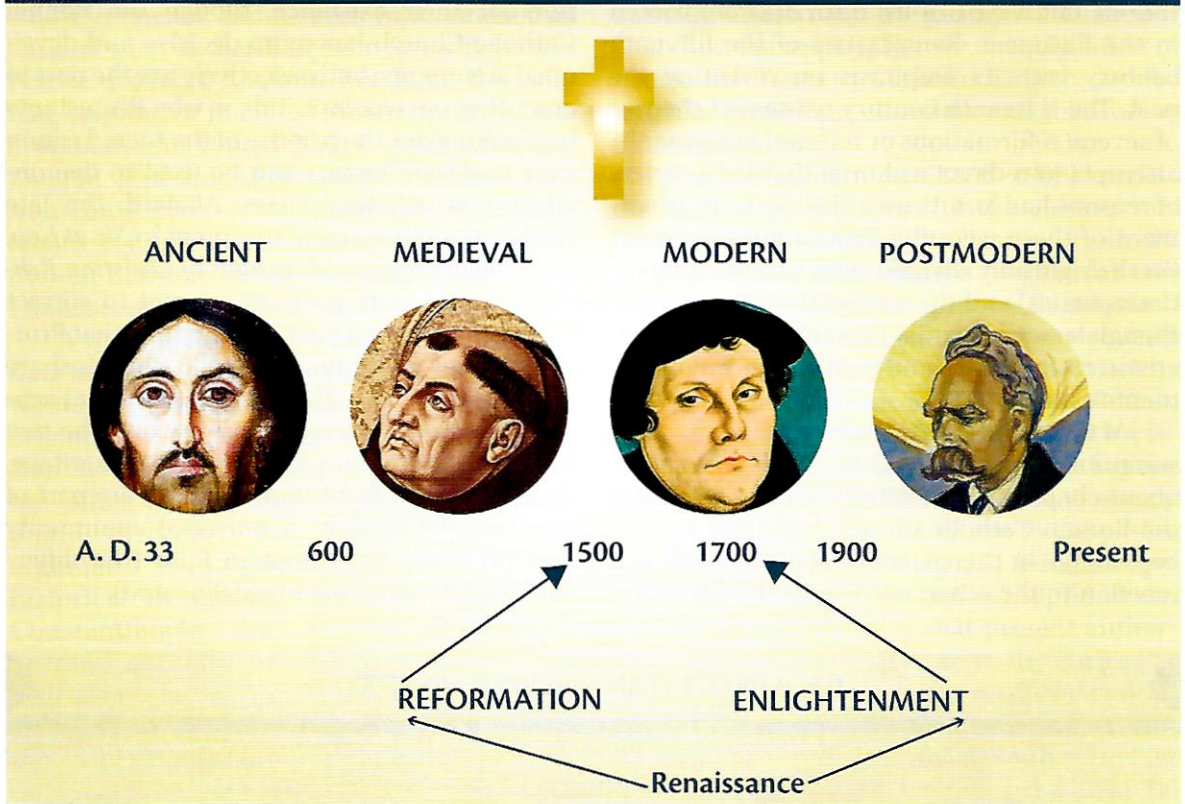
Ancient Church

The early church, often called the ancient church or the patristic period, stretches from the beginning of the life and ministry of Christ, and the birth of the church, to the decline of the Roman Empire in the West (33–600), revealing a western perspective on the story. It is the story of the expansion of the Christian faith, the hostilities of the pagan state seeking to crush it, attempts at explaining the faith and the writing of creeds, and the unexpected triumph of the church in the fourth century through the benevolence of Constantine.

Medieval Church

The medieval period (600–1500) begins with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West

0.4. THE DIVISIONS OF HISTORY



and ends with the demise of the same empire in the East, the time of the great Western Renaissance. It was a remarkable era, an unprecedented millennia of the dominance of Christianity. In the West, the pagan tribes were progressively christianized from Ireland to the steppes of Russia, though the rise of Islam presented a powerful reminder that the true kingdom of God is “not and not yet,” the “garden” has weeds and thistles in it. Perhaps the greatest stories of the period is that of the rise of the papacy, the unresolved clashes between church and state for temporal supremacy, and the corruption of the church, morally and spiritually, that became the background for the sixteenth-century reformations. The outward unity of the church was shattered

in the eleventh century as the churches in the West and the East divided into separate entities, each claiming to be the more ancient and original (the Orthodox churches in the East and the Catholic church in the West).

Modern Church

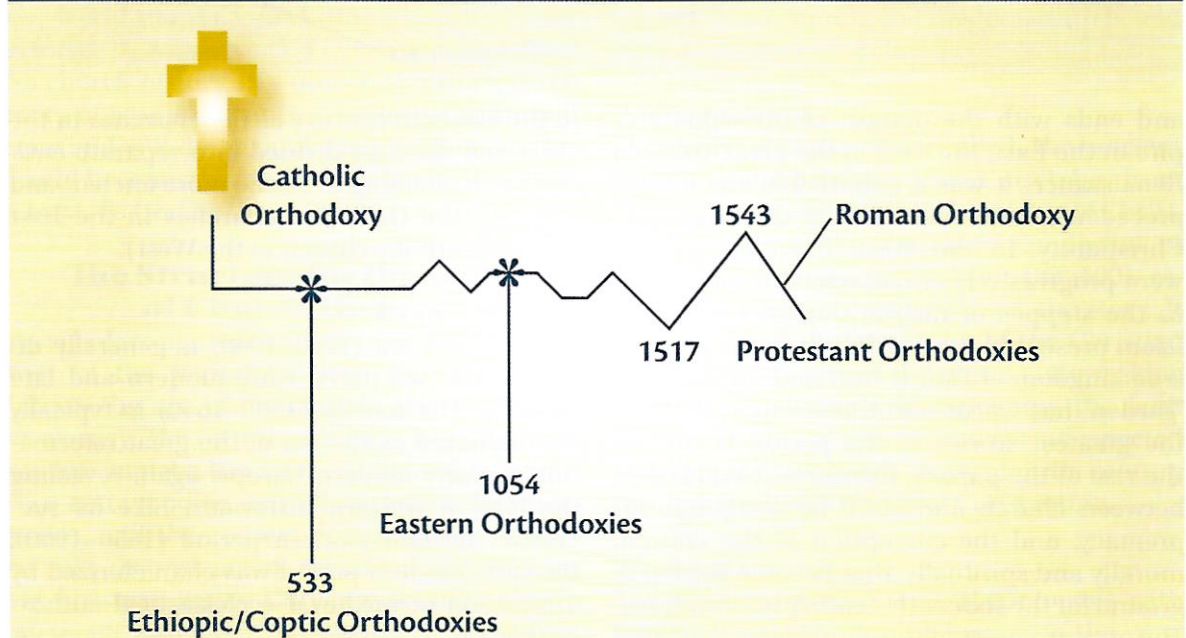
The modern era (1500–1900) is generally divided into two parts: early modern and late modern. The former (1500–1650) is typically denominated as the era of the great reformation or early modern Europe, again revealing the bias of western historians. Like its successor, the late modern period (1650–1900), the early modern period was characterized by a rejection of medieval ecclesiastical authoritarianism as expressed in church councils,

papal decrees, and the Bible if inappropriately used (it was not a rejection of external authority, but a type of it). Both eras are rooted in the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century with its emphasis on revisiting the past. The sixteenth century witnessed the rise of several reformations or renewal movements, attempts to redirect a church that for a variety of reasons had lost its way. The two most prominent of these were the Protestant movement (itself frightfully divided into various contentious parties) and the Roman Catholic Church, though lesser reformist movements such as pietistic, rationalistic, and political reform movements also appeared.

At this point it is instructive to state an assumption, though it will be argued in subsequent chapters. The Protestant movement and the Roman Catholic Church had their creedal beginnings in the sixteenth century. Each is a reaction to the other; each is an attempt to re-

form late medieval Catholicism. Both movements have sought to use the past as justification for their existence, though the Roman Catholic Church has more decisive and developed arguments; both selectively use the past to erect their viewpoints. This is why Protestants have argued for the priority of the sacred canon over tradition; history can be used to demonstrate contradictory views. Abelard, the late medieval scholar, made this point in *Sic et Non*, and Calvin's massive *Institutes of Christian Religion* is, at least in part, an attempt to correct misuses of a shared past. I am arguing that Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church share fourteen centuries. Though the issues that separate the two movements are serious, the two movements embrace together a rich heritage, doctrinally and institutionally. Both are part of the "catholic church," a universal community that professes the Christian faith (the differences will be subsequently delineated).

0.5. A PROTESTANT VIEW OF HISTORY



The Protestant reformations created a movement, a renewal of the Christian faith, whose influence can be seen in its impact on nations such as Germany, the Swiss Republic, France, Holland, England, Scotland, the colonial empires of many of these countries, and eventually the United States of America and Canada. It produced the great Protestant missions movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a countermovement to the Roman Catholic global missions thrust of the Franciscans from the sixteenth century.

A third major expression of the Christian faith, the Orthodox churches, would see themselves as the original first-century expression of Christianity and the other two as schematic divisions. The argument is largely historical in nature. Constantinople did become a center of Christian faith in the fourth century; the Christian faith did emerge in the East and the sites of our earliest Christian communities are there. I will argue that none of the three major branches of the confessing Christian church has a singular grip upon the initial centuries and that such a claim based on history is weak (particularly if it is not warranted by the Scriptures that all three traditions share). The initial centuries of the church were simply "catholic." The precarious unity of the "catholic church" was evident as early as the fourth century with Constantine's administrative division of the church between Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East. Significant cultural and social differences between the West and East, as well as historical experiences, created a wedge of separa-

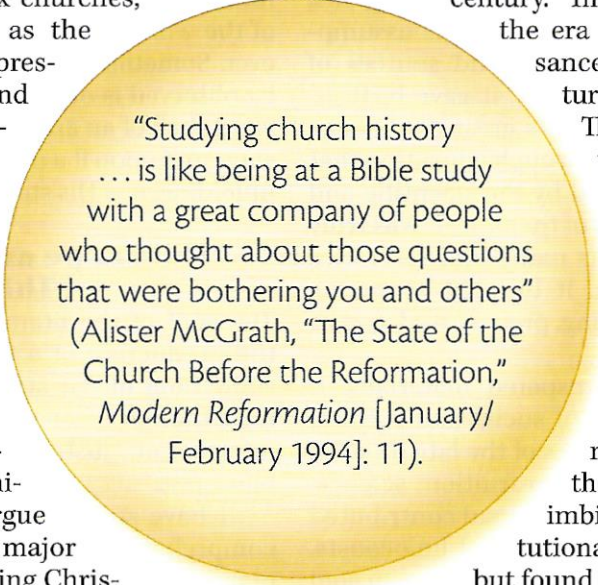
tion that has been seen generally as occurring in the eleventh century, creating a Western Catholic Church and the Eastern or Orthodox churches. Subsequently, over entirely different issues, the Western Catholic Church divided into the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

The late modern era (1650–1900) marked the beginning of the end of the cultural and intellectual dominance of Christianity in the Mediterranean and western worlds, an era that stretched from the time of Theodosius I in the late fourth century to the twentieth

century. The intellectual root of the era was the great Renaissance of the fifteenth century in Western Europe.

The movement sought to return to the past as a guide to the present, the assumption being that present authoritarian structures (i.e., the medieval church) were no longer beneficial, as they had become corrupted. The reformers, children of the Renaissance spirit, imbibed the critical institutional ethos of the times, but found refuge in the sources of

first-century Christianity and sought to reduplicate them. The emergent Roman Catholic Church endeavored to curb the moral and religious excesses of the late medieval church. As a renewal movement, Protestants claimed that their Roman Catholic opponents did not address the weightier issues of the means of redemption and the nature and cause of divine grace. Others, however, found in a more distant past than the first century, sources for the renewal of Western culture that had, in their judgment, become bedraggled by an oppressive and perverse authoritarianism, an im-



"Studying church history
... is like being at a Bible study
with a great company of people
who thought about those questions
that were bothering you and others"
(Alister McGrath, "The State of the
Church Before the Reformation,"
Modern Reformation [January/
February 1994]: 11).

posed authority, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, over the minds and consciences of men and women. The evil was not religion per se, but an external authority (the church, the Bible, or both). The inspiration for the movement, the Enlightenment, was drawn from pre-Christian sources, Greco-Roman culture, with its focus on human potential, on mankind as the measure of all things.

The emphasis upon the rational competencies of mankind to create a world safe from oppression emerged as a philosophical movement, suggesting its secular-source orientation, but rapidly brought about vast religious, political, and cultural changes as its assumptions concerning the nature and sources of truth were adopted. In short, it gave birth to the late modern era with its great confidence in human perfectibility through education that appeared to be validated by the scientific and technological advances of the time. It was truly a remarkable era, but its many success stories were its own undoing. It brought economic prosperity, yet, in so doing, precipitated a crisis in Western culture.

While the West prospered materially, it suffered a denouement of social and cultural cohesiveness. The promises of the late modern era simply did not come to fruition; science, the new savior of the race, instead contributed its knowledge to world wars and holocausts. The atom could be divided, but the human soul could not be united; it was restless with new venues for its tragic expression.

Postmodern Church

The postmodern era (1900–present)³ is difficult to describe, but it stands in sharp antithesis to the optimism, a supposed societal corporate

ethic, and faith in progress that characterized the previous era. Postmoderns have lost faith that reason and science have redemptive potential; instead, the quest for meaning has turned inward toward self, individualness, and the private viewpoint. Absolutes are unimaginable in this “new world” except in a frail, often vague, utilitarianism.

However, Christians, live in another “city” with distinctly different values and goals, as Augustine so wonderfully stated centuries ago. In all the eras of the history of the church, and however more there may be, God is building a community that someday from out of all the peoples of the world will assemble to worship him forever. Something far more “real” than what can be observed is occurring. This world is the outward shell of an amazingly invisible story. It is a stage and upon it a divinely orchestrated story is unfolding. It is His story!

The Scope and Limitations of This Study

The goal of the literary effort that follows is the production of a tool that accurately tells something of the story of the Christian heritage, though this writer is limited by impartial information, distortive ignorance, and biased blindness.

I have structured the volume to enhance comprehension. First, I have chosen not to place in the text an abundance of footnotes with a view that the text be as uncluttered as possible. Source verification can be obtained in some cases by citations within the text, particularly if direct quotations are used. In other cases, substantiation has been provided by the addition of a list of “Further Readings” at the end of each section. The readings will provide

3. The beginning of the postmodern era appears to have been about 1900 in Western Europe, but not so in the United States. Until the post World War II era, Americans embraced the assumptions and promises of the Enlightenment. The disillusionment with rationalism became observable in the 1960s with the status-quo rebellion expressed in the hippie movement, the shock of the assassination of a president, and the social disruptions caused by American military intervention in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War.

a great depth of knowledge. They are selective, being either recognized, time-certified sources or more recent works reflecting the contemporary state of scholarship, interpretation, and bibliographical sources.

Second, to facilitate learning, the text is interspersed with illuminating sidebar comments and quotations, each documented, as well as descriptive diagrams and pictures. Pur-

posed to be a learning tool, as well as a descriptive story of a movement, hopefully this work will prove beneficial for learning.

Third, in regard to learning, a glossary of terms can be found at the end of each chapter and a complete glossary of terms at the end of the volume. Terms are highlighted when they first occur in the text.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Enlightenment (Age of Reason): a movement begun in eighteenth-century Europe that emphasized the inner capacities of man (rational reflection, intuition) as opposed to external authority sources such as the church or the Bible to improve social and society performance. Strenuously opposed by the religious community as well as secular materialists, the Enlightenment spawned the modern era, a three-century experiment in the redemptive values of science and technology. Though highly successful in the technical realms, the venture collapsed under the weight of holocausts and wars, suggesting that the blight of human discord could not be remedied by social advances alone. The movement filled life with opportunities but emptied it of meaning, creating postmodernism.

Historicism: a view of history that emphasizes the role of context, largely cultural forces, in the understanding of events. Prominently proposed by Hegel and later borrowed by Karl Marx, who used the theory in a materialistic direction, the theory argues, opposed to rationalist theories of progress, that cultural forces shape and determine the direction of the history of nations and peoples.

Idealism (see German Idealism): a philosophical approach to the nature of knowledge arguing that the structure of reality is immaterial or mentally constructed.

Marxism (Marxist Materialism): a philosophy developed by Karl Marx that centers around a materialist interpretation of history and the Hegelian dialectic model of social change. Marx and Lenin argued that the blight of the human condition is attributable to social

and economic disparity, clearly the antithesis of the capitalistic, free enterprise approach to societal organization.

Materialism (Philosophical): a term that suggests that all existence is subject to the categories of volume, shape, and proportion; that is, only matter exists and only the observable is real. This view of existence can easily be invoked to deny the existence of God and the spiritual since such cannot be observed. The view, however, does not take into account such recognized realities as gravity, an invisible force.

Postmillennialism: a view of "end times" that understands that the church through Christ is progressively triumphing, that the reign of Christ is in the church, not in a geopolitical rule in space-time history. This rule, rather than a literal reign, will be brought to consummation in Christ's literal return to judge the nations, triumph over all his enemies, and share in the eternal state. In this view Christ's return to judge and redeem will take place after the millennium, the reign of Christ through the church.

Renaissance (Renaissance Humanism): a cultural and educational reform emphasis that emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in reaction to medieval scholasticism, emphasizing personal affirmation of truth through a study of the sources of belief-structures, as well as the engagement in civic life through speaking and writing with eloquence and clarity. Its focus was on the study of the humanities with the new curriculum of university education, a shift from the scholastic preoccupation with rational explanation

of the medieval faith to the readoption and prominence of the Aristotelian method.

Romanticism (Romantic Movement, Romantic Philosophy): a movement in the latter half of the eighteenth century in reaction to the dangers of Enlightenment rationalism and the Scientific Revolution with their quest for

truth primarily in the cognitive faculties at the denigration or diminution of the affective and emotional faculties of the human makeup. Like its counterparts, the Romantic movement, expressed religiously in transcendentalism and mysticism, finds the quest for meaning in humankind in the emotive, intuitional, and the balance or harmony with nature.