

## Church History or Christian History?

The Bible has three main purposes: To shew how wretched men can be, to shew how bad the visible church can get, and to shew the way of redemption through a Saviour.

Here we shall look at the second of those. The Old Testament serves as a witness as to how bad the church can become. For example, the Temple in Ezekiel's day:

Ezekiel 8:9-16

*And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, pourtrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth. He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations that they do. Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then said he unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than these. And he brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east.*

The Lord's people are here distinguished, not by how holy they were, but by whether they sighed and cried for all the abominations that were being done in the midst of the Temple, which should have been God's witness on earth:

Ezekiel 9:4

*And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.*

This example, and many more in the Old Testament, are for us to learn from:

*many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even **all her living**.*

Christ commended this poor widow for throwing "**all her living**" into the treasury, yet it was the treasury of those who "**devour widows' houses**." Why did she do it? Maybe she was unaware of all the evils going on in the Temple. To her, it had the name of God attached to it. She loved the Lord, so she gave generously to what she truly thought was His work.

When we first become a Christian, we don't fully comprehend how much wickedness there really is in the church either. Even though we read in Scripture that Christ's worst enemies came from within the visible church of His day. We still instinctively join a church. We believe it is the right thing to do. We don't know any better. After all, we want to meet other Christians and make friends. But we should never end up thinking "My church, right or wrong," the church being given the highest place, above the Scriptures.

Every true believer will eventually and inevitably end up coming into difficulty, and indeed opposition, from inside the church. This is the way the Lord has made it to be.

Those in the church not truly the Lord's people get the hottest place in hell, because they rebel against more light:

Luke 12:47,48

*And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.*

We are not called to blindly follow a church. Neither are we called to come out and set up a new one. Christ never did. We are called to love Jesus Christ with all our heart, and to live like Him. And that will inevitably put us outside the camp:

Hebrews 13:13,14

*Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*

Now, today, in contrast to most of "church history," we are no longer forced to acknowledge any one particular church. We are free to set up, join or leave any kind of religious organisation we like. So most good Christian people, seeing many problems in the large mainstream churches, get out. They join or form other little groupings with others of like mind instead. But that ruins the witness in another way. If I was an unbeliever, knowing nothing about Christianity, why should I come to your tinpot little church? Rather, it would be far more logical for me, not knowing any better, to go to the big edifice that has the name of Christianity firmly attached to it, with history behind it, even though in reality it is far from having the true Christian religion in it. But I wouldn't know that. The tinpot little church, if we don't know any better, just looks like a spin-off, a weird sect. And many of them indeed are. Only after we learn and grow in the faith, would we ever consider attending such smaller churches instead, because we would realise that that's where we would find something more biblical, and we would be able to meet other fellow true believers. But how do we get others to understand this?

The only way it is possible for us to give a true Christian witness to the world, is by our **lives as individuals**. Our **lives** should be different. Not by becoming members of any church, because as soon as we become a member of anything, we are identifying with all the distinctives of that particular church, many of which will still be wrong. No church is ever going to be perfect. Our **lives as individuals** are the only real witness we can possibly have.

Most true Christians, in every generation, will not be in any books on "church history." They are totally unknown to us:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

*But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

In Scripture, Christ spoke of the religious leaders of His day:

Mark 12:38-44

*And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: **Which devour widows' houses,** and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation. And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and*

1 Corinthians 10:11

*Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

The nearer we get to the end of the New Testament, the more warnings there are against false teachers coming into the church. It seems we are being warned that this is what we are going to have to put up with, whatever age we live in.

We cannot rely on any church. Rather, we have the Bible alone as our infallible guide. The canon of Scripture was completed before the first century was out. The church, however, took another 300 years of arguing before deciding on which books should be in the Bible. And when they did, they got the Old Testament wrong because they included the Apocrypha. So, again, we should not rely on any church to tell us what to believe. We, as individual believers, have the Holy Spirit to tell us what is Scripture and what is not:

Luke 24:32

*And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?*

Jeremiah 20:9

*Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.*

Scripture became Scripture as soon as it was written, whether men or church councils recognised it as such or not:

2 Peter 1:21

*...prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*

Immediately after the completion of the canon of Scripture, a man called Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (who arrogantly called himself *Theophorus*, which means “God-Bearer”), was raised up. In AD107 he wrote a series of letters in which he laid emphasis upon two things in particular: the elevation of the bishops (such as himself) and the elevation of the Lord’s supper into some kind of superstitious magic:

**“Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful to baptise or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God. Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid.”** —Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8:1,2

*“Assemble yourselves together in common, every one of you severally, man by man, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who after the flesh was of David’s race, who is Son of Man and Son of God, to the end that ye may obey the bishop and presbytery without distraction of mind; breaking one bread, which is **the medicine of immortality** and the antidote that we should not die but live for ever in Jesus Christ.”* —Letter to the Ephesians 20:2

The huge edifice of the visible church that we see today (in its various forms), all began here with Ignatius, immediately following the completion of the canon of Scripture.

It is always useful to know what has been going on in the name of “Christianity” throughout the ages. But we must always keep in mind that it is so far from the true Christian life, as we find it defined in the Bible. Just a quick whistle-stop tour of “church history” will suffice to shew us this:

Soon after the close of the New Testament came the so-called “Church Fathers.” But if we read any of them, we’ll soon find they had some very strange views. For example, Origen is said to have castrated himself.

Then we had a series of “Ecumenical Councils.” But, if they decided on something, say, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity or finer points on the nature of Christ, everyone had to follow suit or they were branded an heretic, cast out of the church and persecuted. And some of those council decisions were dubious to say the least. Some were even reversed. Yet, every time a decision was made, the majority vote in the Council always became “orthodox” dogma, and the minorities who disagreed were persecuted.

And those cast out never learned either. In turn, they formed new churches based on their own beliefs, only to end up being just as intolerant with anyone who opposed their decisions in their manifestation of the church. What kind of organisations had the churches quickly become? Where is any of this in the simple, true, real Christian faith given to us in the Bible? When we read any book on church history, it’s always, “The bishops said this,” “Holy Synod decided that.” Who do these people think they are? This is madness.

And what about the lives of the church leaders? Many popes in Rome were terribly wicked men. Sometimes there were two or even three popes at the same time competing for the title. Are we really meant to honour these people and follow their every encyclical when they were so openly profligate?

We are told of small, localised movements such as the Waldenses and the Albigenses, who stood up against the

church of their day. But all of these too had some very unbiblical views that we couldn’t possibly accept. They all split from the pope of Rome, so we are told they were proto-Protestants. But they weren’t very much like us at all really.

Thomas A Kempis was different. He had access to the Scriptures in his monastery, and in his most well-known work “*The Imitation of Christ*,” he clearly shows that he was a real, true, biblical Christian, knowing the Lord for himself personally. So, there were such people about. But he still worshipped Mary, believed in transubstantiation, believed in purgatory and lived a monastic life. None of this is in the Bible, so where did he get it all from? It all came from the church. These things were so ingrained into the everyday church life of his day, that he wouldn’t have known any better **at the time**. This begs the question: What is ingrained into our everyday church life that is not right, but we don’t know any better **in our time**? PLENTY of things, I’m sure.

Then came the Protestant Reformation. That was a breath of fresh air, coming, in the Lord’s providence, alongside the invention of the moveable type printing press, it brought ordinary people the Bible to read for themselves in their own languages. Well, that can only be a good thing.

But, even so, in those days, there were still some very unbiblical practices taking place. The established religion was forced on people. If the leader of a land became Protestant, the whole land would automatically follow and Catholics would be persecuted. If he stayed Catholic, the whole land would too and Protestants would be persecuted.

Has the church really got any better since the Reformation? Today, in the Protestant churches, we have child-abusing priests and unbelieving bishops. Where do they rank amongst the terrible things that have gone on in the church of the past? They are certainly one in apostolic succession with all the other past generations of the visible church. One in sin and filth together with the vile activities of past popes and the church in Ezekiel’s day. So, what do we do? All we can do, together with Ezekiel, is to sigh and cry over all these abominations in the visible church, because they ruin the external witness of what outsiders see as Christianity

Yet, despite all this “church history,” the Lord still had His people in every generation. We are comforted to know that, in every age, not one of His little flock will be lost:

Luke 12:32

*Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*