
LESSON 2: HISTORICALLY PRESERVED

Introductory Overview

Because God has eternally purposed to redeem a people for Himself and faithfully preserve them in Christ, we can see the evidence of His faithfulness throughout history. As we survey the history of the Church, we will witness Christ continually preserving His people and reforming them according to His Word. Though false teaching, corruption, and error have often arisen, God has never abandoned His Church. Rather, throughout the centuries He has faithfully raised up men, movements, and confessions that called His people back to the truth of His Word and the beauty of His gospel.

I. Reformation in the First Century

We do not have to go past the biblical history of the Church to see the need for reformation. Many of the New Testament epistles are purposed, to a degree, in the need to address false teaching & correcting immorality.

A. Corinth

The Corinthian Church dealt with pride & division, & Paul had to write several stern letters to them, threatening to visit them personally to straighten them out.

B. Galatia

This Church almost fell away from the faith altogether; falling for the Judaizers who sought to burden the people of God with the Law, claiming Jesus + circumcision saves you. Paul's rebuked was grounded in the accomplished work of Christ, saving us in the Spirit and not in the works of the flesh. The Doctrine of Justification was already under attack.

C. 2, 3, 4 Ephesians

The Ephesian Church seemed to have an especially hard time balancing sound doctrine with love for God. They are the only Church in the Bible to have four letters written to them. Paul loved them, & stayed with them for 3 years, wrote them a letter, and exhorted them to discernment & sound doctrine in a final visit before his imprisonment.

Acts 20:28-31

- 28 *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*
- 29 *“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;*
- 30 *and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.*
- 31 *“Therefore be watchful, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.*

Later, Paul wrote two letters to them via Timothy regarding sound doctrine & exposing false teachers. It seems they were able to root out the false teachers, but at the cost of their love for Christ.

Revelation 2:1-7

- 1 *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: This is what the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says:*
- 2 *‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot bear with those who are evil, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;*
- 3 *and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, you also have not grown weary.*
- 4 *‘But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*
- 5 *‘Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first. But if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.*
- 6 *‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*
- 7 *‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’*

Question #1: How should we respond to seeing such errors invading the Church so early?

When we see such staggering issues that pertain to the Gospel & salvation in the time of the Apostles, we are not discouraged. Rather, we are encouraged, knowing that there is a biblical precedent for sin & error to invade the Church; we must expect it, & thus we must stay vigilant. Error in the Church continued on throughout the centuries, but so did faithful preaching of the pure Gospel. We are encouraged, not because the Church fights off error, but because God is faithful to purify His people in His Truth.

II. Reformation in the Early Church

Question #2: What is a heresy?

Question #3: What is Arianism? Have you ever heard of it?

A. Irenaeus & Gnosticism (Circa A.D. 140-202)

Irenaeus wrote a five-volume work titled *Against Heresies*. In it, he goes to great length to explain the various forms of Gnosticism, and refuting them by means of reason, logic, & biblical revelation. Irenaeus’ classic work was later cited by men such as Augustine & John Calvin. Gnosticism seemed to already start creeping into the Church during the first century, teaching that matter is bad, spirit is good, & that you must have some secret, mystical knowledge in order to transcend to the divine realm. Other Christian apologists who wrote against Gnosticism include Justin Martyr & Tertullian.

B. Athanasius & Arianism (Circa A.D. 318-373)

1. **ARIANISM.** Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus was only a created being, not God. They deny the divinity of Christ, demoting Him to simply the highest exalted creature. This teaching is not new, & finds its roots in the historical heresy of Arianism.

A presbyter named Arius was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 for teaching against the divine nature of Jesus. Out of the 300 bishops in attendance, only Arius & two others refused to sign, who were then subsequently exiled.

However, many signers soon after softened against Arius’ teachings, & they were rekindled throughout the eastern Roman Empire. When the Emperor Constantine died, his sons split the empire between east & west. Constantius, an Arian, took the East, & was a

fierce persecutor of Nicene Christians. He even horrifically tortured his father's old counselor (100 years old) into signing an Arian confession of faith. A group of Nicene virgins were publicly stripped and had their faces beaten beyond recognition for their faith. These were some of the persecutions Christians faithful to worshiping Christ faced.

2. **ATHANASIUS.** Athanasius was a church father who was the fiercest opponent of Arianism. A bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, he poured all his strength into combating this false teaching about Christ. While being a member at the Council of Nicaea, he also published many great works & letters combating Arianism, himself facing persecution & exile 5 times throughout his life. Out of the 45 years he served as bishop in Alexandria, he was exiled for 17 of them.

During those exiles, the people were so devoted to Athanasius that they did not truly recognize any other bishops given them. However, outside of Alexandria, it seemed that the entire eastern empire was Arian, and Athanasius was seen as a factious man who took things too seriously. Quite a few of the Nicene signers did not like calling others heretics; Athanasius devoted his life to combat Arianism. It seemed Athanasius was truly fighting against the world.

Gregory of Nazianzus, a contemporary church father of his, said in a memorial service for Athanasius 7 years after his death:

- 1 *amid such delight of the people of the city and of almost all Egypt, that they ran together from every side, from the furthest limits of the country, simply to hear the voice of Athanasius, or feast their eyes upon the sight of him.*
- 2 *Let one praise him in his fastings and prayers ... another his unweariedness and zeal for vigils and psalmody, another his patronage of the needy, another his dauntlessness towards the powerful, or his condescension to the lowly.... [He was to] the unfortunate their consolation, the hoary-headed their staff, youths their instructor, the poor their resource, the wealthy their steward. Even the widows will ... praise their protector, even the orphans their father, even the poor their benefactor, strangers their entertainer, brethren the man of brotherly love, the sick their physician.*

Athanasius was not just a defender of the faith, he was a lover of it & its people. He had such a relationship with isolated desert monks that they took him in for 6 years during one of his exiles. He was beloved by his people because of his great service & care for them. He was a man of passion & conviction; he took everything seriously.

Question #4: What examples of God's preservation are displayed in this account?

C. John Chrysostom (*Circa A.D. 347-407*)

John Chrysostom (*The Golden-Mouthed*) was a powerful preacher & bishop in the churches of Antioch & Constantinople. After preaching moving expository sermons in light of riots in Antioch, he *was made Patr. [or Father] of Constantinople in 398, and immediately set about the work of reforming the city, where the corruption of court, clergy, and people alike had been encouraged by the complaisance and self-indulgence of his predecessor* (Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*; p. 345). Once in this capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, he preached against corruptions, and even denied certain benefits of his station as bishop that would have contributed to the corruptions. He preached against the sins in high places, both in the government & in the Church. Making enemies on both sides, he was eventually exiled, dying years later.

III. Reformation in the Middle Ages

Claudius of Turin (*Early 9th Century*)

A bishop of Turin, Italy, he was a fierce aggressor to evil, both physical and spiritual. He joined armed forces against Muslim pirates that plagued his area. He also decried much of the spiritual abuses and heresies of the Church, going so far as to wage physical war against icons and idols that sprang up in the Church, destroying them by hammer and by pen. He wrote rejections against icons, the intercession of the saints and the doctrine of their excessive merits, the re-sacrificing of Christ in the Mass, and papal supremacy; all summed up as *the extravagant perversity of evil men*. Below are a few excerpts from his *Apology*, a polemical treatise against these things.

- 1 *It is not I who teach a sect, I who really hold the unity and preach the truth. On the contrary, as much as I have been able, I have suppressed, crushed, fought, and assaulted sects, schisms, superstitions, and heresies, and, as much as I am still able, I do not cease to do battle against them, relying wholeheartedly on the help of God. For which reason, of course, it came to pass that as soon as I was constrained to assume the burden of pastoral duty and to come to Italy to the city of Turin, sent thither by our pious Prince Louis, the son of the Lord's holy catholic church, I found all the churches filled, in defiance of the precept of Truth, with those sluttish abominations—images. Since everyone was worshiping them, I undertook single handed to destroy them. Everyone thereupon opened his mouth to curse me, and had not God come to my aid, they would no doubt have swallowed me alive.*
- 2 *"Return to judgment, you liars," who have departed from the truth, who love vanity, and who have become vain; you who crucify the Son of God anew and hold him up for display and thereby cause the souls of wretched ones in disordered masses to become partners of demons. Estranging them through the impious sacrilege of idols, you cause them to be cast away by their own Creator and thrown into eternal damnation.*
- 3 *Why is it necessary to say, "O that Noah, Daniel, and Job were present here." Even if there were so much holiness, so much righteousness, so much merit, they, as great as they were, will not absolve son or daughter. He therefore says these things that no one may rely on the merit or intercession of the saints, for one cannot be saved unless he possesses the same faith, righteousness, and truth which they possessed and by which they were pleasing to God.*

Question #5: Do you think Claudius was too harsh in his criticisms & calls of reform?

IV. The Protestant Reformation (*Circa 1500s*)

A. Proto-Reform

The first few centuries of the second millennium leading up to the 1500s, there were several leaders or movements that became precursors to foreshadow the Protestant Reformation. Peter Waldo & the Waldensians advocated for Scripture in the common tongue, taught against unscriptural doctrines like the papacy & purgatory, & were persecuted for their faith. Jan Huss preached openly against the corruptions & excesses of the Church, most notably against simony, or the purchasing of Church offices. He ended up being burned at the stake. While we do not have the time to take up their zeal for Christ through reform, it is important to know the Protestant Reformation did not occur in a vacuum.

B. Martin Luther

In the 1500's, there was a grief-stricken monk by the name of Martin Luther, who struggled with the guilt of his sin and was unable to see God as his loving Father because of it. The Holy Spirit eventually illuminated him to the truths of the gospel through Galatians & Romans, understanding that we are justified by faith, not by any merit of ours. This went against the doctrines of the Catholic Church, many of which existed apart from such biblical revelation.

C. 95 Theses

In 1517, Luther wrote his 95 Theses, or arguments, against the spiritual abuses of the Church, mainly in regard to indulgences, the sale of time away from purgatory for loved ones. This sparked the Reformation, which led to an intensified relationship between Martin & the Church, until he was excommunicated. This process of gospel reform separated many faithful Christians from a church institution that had become deeply corrupted in doctrine and practice.

D. The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

Other men beside Luther, such as **John Calvin, Philip Melancthon, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, William Tyndale**, & many others, contributed to this great movement of the Spirit. They did not all agree on the doctrines they were reforming, such as the Lord's Supper, church government, or liturgy, but they all affirmed justification by grace through faith alone. They lived in Germany, France, Switzerland, England, & Scotland, yet all held the same Gospel of Christ.

Justification by faith alone & the sufficiency & authority of the Scriptures were the landmark issues that fueled a reformation away from the apostate church into a rediscovery of the gospel. This further fueled other Reformers & the Puritans of the 1600's & early 1700's to expand the doctrinal clarity & proclamation of the Gospel, right up to present day.

V. Conclusion

A. Reminders

1. The Gospel was never lost; each of these accounts displays God's providential preservation of His truth & His people throughout the centuries.
2. We cannot think of these historical church fathers & figures in the same way we hold to Protestant tradition today. They were all Christians in their own time, and they did not articulate, or in certain cases believe, exactly what Reformed Christians today do.

B. Historic Faith

Every generation is filled with opposition to the simple truths set down for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. But, because of God's covenant faithfulness to His people, the Church will always stand on His promises in Christ. Sometimes we need to defend the natures of Christ, or call out the abuses & corruptions that run in so-called churches. Sometimes we will need to defend salvation in Christ alone, even if it means being burned at the stake or exiled. But we are never alone in our desire to reform ourselves & the Church into the image of Christ. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, & we faithfully proclaim the same truths that have been handed down to us from the Apostles. As Luther said, ***I have taught and held all the teachings of Jan Hus, but thus far did I not know it . . . In short, we are all Hussites and did not know it.*** As the wise Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun. What is taught has been taught before, whether that be orthodoxy or heresy. Our desire as the church is to always reform ourselves according to the holy Word of God, reject the unsound heresies that have always risen against Christ, & embrace the historic faith that has always come from the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Timothy 6:3**).