

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (14)

The Awakened Church (1648-1789) – The Light Goes Out

A. Introduction

1. What is church history?

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

The command of making disciples, which Jesus gave to His followers, involved them taking the good news of His death and resurrection to places where it was not known and teaching His followers to obey Him.

Church history is the story of how this has happened.

2. Why bother with church history?

Three great reasons for studying church history.

Instruction – the difficulties and circumstances we face today are not new and we can look to the past to learn from where believers have acted wisely in these situations and where believers have acted foolishly.

Worship – when we see all God has done through His church it should lead us to praise Him for His faithfulness.

Confidence – Jesus is keeping His promise to build His church.

3. Recapping the first four periods of church history.

The Early Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

This period was marked by rapid *growth* as Christians spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. But two dangers threatened to halt its growth, *persecution* and *false teaching*. In response to persecution came the rise of the apologist who defined and defended the faith strengthening the confidence believers had in the truth they professed. In response to false teaching was the formation of the canon of Scripture and creeds that summarised what Christians must believe. Responsibility for protecting the apostle’s teaching also transferred from the church to the bishop.

The Imperial Church was the period of church history between the Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Fall of Rome in AD476.

This period was marked by three big changes: *Formalism* (the church became shaped by the world around them and the services began to reflect the pomp of the civil ceremonies); *Nominalism* (everyone in the Empire was now a Christian and the church became a mixed community of believers and unbelievers); and *Hierarchicalism* (the structure of the church emulated Roman organisation and the church was under state control with the Emperor as the head of the church). But this did not stop a number of positive developments to take place in the areas of training church leaders, Bible translation, preaching, the education of children, as well as a right understanding of the Bible’s teaching about Jesus and His saving work in response to Arianism and Pelagianism.

The Medieval Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Rome in AD476 and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

Perhaps the best way of summarising what took place during a thousand years of church history is to look at three ways this period can be described.

It was a time of *deterioration*. The deterioration was really a continuation of a trajectory set by the Imperial Church. There was deterioration in the *leadership* of the church (abuse and corruption); the

beliefs of the church (a number of serious errors became core beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church); the *mission* of the church (the opportunity to take the gospel beyond the borders of the Roman Empire was missed); and the *worship* of the church (a shift took place from the centrality of the pulpit and preaching to the table and the mass).

It was also time of *development*. Some of the positive developments that took place included the opening of universities, the rise of scholasticism, the rediscovery of the Greek New Testament, the rise of Nationalism, the discrediting of the Pope and the invention of the printing press.

And it was a time of *dissent*. Concerns about the corrupt practices and mistaken beliefs within the church became increasingly common and gradually people like Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and Jan Huss began to speak out against them. The Roman Catholic Church wasn't too thrilled with these men and their followers and sought to silence them. The Waldensians were excommunicated by the church and persecuted. Wycliffe, though never excommunicated, did have his corpse dug up, burned and his ashes thrown into the River Swift, and Huss was burnt at the stake after refusing to recant his beliefs.

Thankfully the Medieval Church became the Reformation Church, when Martin Luther nailed on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral his 95 Theses in 1517.

In this period, the gospel was rediscovered and recovered as God raised up leaders, like Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin who unleashed His Word and their teaching spread throughout Europe.

These men were committed to the preaching and teaching of God's Word, but also to the 5 great reformation truths that salvation according to Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*), is by grace alone (*Sola Gratia*) through faith alone (*Sola Fide*) in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*) to the glory of God alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*).

In 1648 the Reformation Church period of church history would end in Europe with the Peace of Westphalia which gave people the freedom to belong to the form of worship of their choosing, whether that be Calvinism, Lutheranism or Roman Catholicism.

The reformation of the church in England was different to the rest of Europe. Whereas the reformation in Europe was driven by the church as preachers unleashed God's Word upon the people, in England was driven, to start with anyway, by the Crown and King Henry VIII, and resulted in a compromised church that was neither Reformed nor Roman.

This was something which many in the church were not happy about and so the Presbyterian Church, the Independents or Congregationalists, and the Baptists came into being.

With the Act of Uniformity in 1662, these groups outside the Church of England were persecuted. The situation would change in 1689 with the Act of Toleration, which granted these groups a new freedom to worship God in the way they believed was faithful to His Word.

There was now no longer one single church in Europe, and neither was their one in England to enforce a sole interpretation of the Bible.

Denominationalism was well and truly alive.

4. The Awakened Church was the period of church history between the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the start of the French Revolution in 1789.

After the high point of the Reformation – the light of the gospel went out.

The church needed to be awakened and in parts of the UK and the USA it would be.

B. What caused the light to go out?

1. War.

Europe was tired of people being killed in wars that were perceived as being religious in nature.

The English Civil War, the persecution of the French Huguenots, the Thirty Year's War in Germany had given to them a negative perception of the Christian faith.

This led to a new-found tolerance and thirst for truths that everyone could agree on.

2. Freedom.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 in Europe, and the Act of Toleration in 1689 in England granted the freedom to different kinds of churches to worship God freely.

This freedom would eventually be expanded to give people the right to not worship God or follow a particular religion.

3. A dead state church

After the Reformation, faith in the state church became mere confessionalism and no longer a vibrant trust in the Lord Jesus.

This resulted in churches packed full of non-Christians.

The church lost its credibility in society and no longer shined like stars.

4. Advances in science.

During the age of the Reformation, a number of scientific discoveries were made.

Copernicus (1473-1543) saw that the sun, rather than the earth, was the centre of the universe.

Kepler (1571-1630) recognised that the sun emitted a magnetic force which was responsible for moving the planets on the course they followed.

Galileo (1564-1642) proved that the speed of acceleration of falling bodies was constant.

These findings along with Sir Isaac Newton's observation of gravity, changed the way people thought about the world.

The natural laws that people had now noticed that the universe followed, caused them to view it as more like a machine.

Suddenly God's involvement in sustaining the cosmos did not seem necessary.

5. The enlightenment.

This was a new way of looking at life marked by a change in the place of human reason.

Before reason was used in submission to Scripture or the traditions of the church.

With these new scientific discoveries it begun to be elevated above these things.

"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!" (Kant, What is Enlightenment?)

People now looked to themselves to decide how to live and make sense of the world.

C. What happened as the light went out?

1. There was revision.

A reduction of Christianity to what was seen to be rational.

Practically this meant placing a greater emphasis on moral conduct.

Behaviour not doctrine was what was most important.

2. There was rejection.

While some were revising the Christian faith, others were rejecting it, especially in Europe, with the spread of Deism.

Deism is the belief that there is a God who created the world with natural laws, but then left it alone and did not interfere with it.

It is a view of God where He is like a watchmaker who winds up the world and lets it go, or the absentee landlord who has no active involvement in what belongs to Him.

Deists, like Voltaire, rejected any intervention by God in this world, like miracles or special revelation.

The lasting influence of deism was to move religious belief out of the public realm.

3. A response was needed.

Where would it come from?

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. There is nothing new under the sun.

The reasons for the decline in Christianity post-Reformation continue to be reasons used by people to dismiss Christianity today – war, science and reason, a dead state church's lack of credibility.

The pressure to keep Christianity out of the public sphere continues to be seen today.

The undermining of doctrine continues to be present in many churches.

2. You can't take the progress made by the gospel in a community, city, or country for granted.

It didn't take long for the Reformation light that was burning brightly to go out.

This is a warning for us today about the importance of investing in the generations to come.