



Church History

Why It's Important

By

Mark McGee

1 **What is Church History?**

Webster's Dictionary defines "church" as -

"a building for public and especially Christian worship"

The second dictionary definition is -

"the clergy or officialdom of a religious body"

The third dictionary definition is -

"a body or organization of religious believers: such as the whole body of Christians"

The third definition is closer to the actual meaning of the word "church"

The Greek word is *ecclesia* and means "a called out, summoned assembly." In ancient Greece, the *ecclesia* was the assembly of male citizens over the age of 18 in a city-state who voted on public policy and the election of leaders. The writers of the New Testament used the word *ecclesia* to describe people God had called out from the world to be His people.

Church “history” is the chronological record of significant events in the life of the “church” along with the people involved, their sayings, writings, etc.

2 Why is Church History Important To Know?

Church history is important to know because of Who is building the Church.

Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, said - “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18).

3 Why is Church History Important For Us To Know?

If we are spiritually connected to Jesus Christ, we are spiritually connected to the “Church,” which means we are spiritually connected to each other - meaning brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12 that Christians “are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” He wrote the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12.

That means each one of us as Christians is part of the same body as every Christian who has ever lived, is living now, and will ever live. That makes Church History more than just names and dates and places in

the past .. Church History is the story of the Body of Christ and every member in it.

Lots of people today are fascinated with their family history. They love to see old photos, read old letters, learn more about their family who lived decades even centuries ago.

The same is true with Church History .. whether it's the history of a local church from the past hundred years or the history of the Church from two thousand years ago. It's all about the amazing body of saved people Jesus is building as His Church.

4 How do We Learn Church History?

Learning any kind of history is based on how a person learns. Some people like to see the big picture before they dig into the details. Some people want to spend time in the details before they look at the big picture.

History is usually presented and studied in a chronological, geographical and anthropological method — when, where and who. People make history during a period of time in particular places.

The Church is two-thousand years old, so that's a lot of history to absorb. Here's one way of learning history that helped me.

Start with the excellent Church history we have in the New Testament.

Read the Gospels, the Book of Acts and the Apostle's letters, especially the Apostle Paul's since more than half of Acts is about Paul's life and ministry travels.

Next, read the letters of the post-apostolic leaders .. Church leaders who studied with the apostles - people like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Papias of Hierapolis.

Then, read the letters of the 2nd century Christian apologists - people like Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian of Carthage.

Their writings include a lot of information about early Church history.

You'll find another good history of the early Church written by Eusebius of Caesarea. He was born in the latter part of the 3rd century and was a Bishop of Caesarea during the early part of the 4th century. Eusebius had access to many early Church writings and put together a comprehensive chronological account of the history of the early Church from the 1st - 4th centuries.

You can also find some good Church history materials online, at your local library, and at local church libraries. You can also ask pastors and Bible students to point you to some good histories of the Church. Many Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias and study Bibles include

Church history information. The challenge is to find histories of the Church that are accurate, so be sure to compare histories on different time periods to be sure what you're finding is correct.

5 How do We Share Church History with Other Christians?

Once you have a good handle on Church history, you can share it with Christians during private conversations and group studies. Be ready to answer questions Christians have about Church history and to point them toward good references for learning more.

6 How do We Defend Church History with non-Christians?

Non-Christians are often confused or mis-informed about Church history, so it's important that we have a good handle on the subject before trying to help them. Some non-Christians are just curious, but some are antagonistic and may want to argue about Church history. Determine which it is and how best to handle it.

7 Are We Making Church History Today?

Absolutely! We are members of the Body of Christ, so everything we do and say and write becomes part of the larger history of the Church. Christians in the early Church may not have thought about how they were writing history at the time, but we see how they were. Christians in the future will look back at the 21st century Church and consider that part of Church history.

8 How Do We Make Church History Better?

Jesus and the Apostles tell us how to live our lives to the glory of God. We make Church history better as we obey God's Word. We may not think that what we do on earth matters much in the life of the Church, but it does. Every member of the Body of Christ is part of what Jesus is doing today. He is building His Church and we are part of that Church.

Church History Reference Materials

Books

Church History in Plain Language, Bruce L. Shelley, Thomas Nelson

Introduction to the History of Christianity: First Century to the Present Day,
Tim Dowley (Editor), Fortress Press

Eusebius: The Church History, Edited by Paul L. Maier, Kregel Publications

The History of the Church, Eusebius, Penguin Classics

Foxe's Book of Martyrs, John Foxe, Various publishers

The Reformation: A History, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Penguin Books

The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation,
Michael Reeves, B&H Academic

The Protestant Reformation, Hans J. Hillerbrand, HarperCollins

Websites

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/>

<https://www.ccel.org/fathers.html>

<http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/>