

Church History

The practical aim of the Church History course is to acquaint the student with a wide panorama of the main events of Church history from the time of our Lord to the present day.

We seek to convey the fact that for the Christian, history is rich in meaning and significance. The deists of the 18th century taught that although God made the world, He was not interested in it afterwards. The Christian view is, however, that God through His providence is intimately concerned with the world and actively involved in its history, guiding all events to fulfil His ultimate purpose.

Church history is the account of those who have gone before us in the faith. To know about these people affords us many challenging lessons and provides, at the same time, numerous inspiring accounts of faith and courage. A knowledge of Church history also highlights warnings and examples of the dangers and errors we can so easily fall into.

The course covers eight main sections including, the Early Church period, the Church of the so-called Dark Ages, the Church of the Middle Ages (its strengths and weaknesses), the Reformation of the 16th century, the Puritan era, the 18th century (its highs and lows), the Victorian Church, the Church in the 20th century and some remarks on our own times.

Within this framework we seek to trace out some of the measures which brought about the consolidation of the faith in the early centuries – the development of Christian thought and the establishment of the great doctrines. Some of the leading individuals and their contribution are looked at, noting some of the great upheavals and challenges the Church has faced down the centuries. An emphasis also is put on the massive contribution Christianity has made to the well-being of mankind.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said in his *'The Puritans – their Origins and Successors'*:

My argument is that it is always essential for us to supplement the reading of theology with the reading of Church history. Or, if you prefer it, that we should at any rate take our theology in an historical manner. If we do not, we shall be in danger of becoming abstract, theoretical, and academic in our view of truth; and failing to relate it to the practicalities of life and daily living, we shall soon be in trouble.

Church history is important because in it we see the outworking of God's truth in man's life, an understanding of theology that cannot be separated or divorced from the events that shape our thinking and everyday living.

Topics taught in the three years

2018

Introduction to Church History
The Spiritual and Moral State of the World Before the Coming of Christ:
The Jewish, Greek and Roman Background
The Early Church and the Apostolic Fathers: Who They Were and What They Achieved
Notable Teachers and Influences: Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, Early Missionary Movements, Influence of Charlemagne and Alfred the Great
Tensions between church and state:
Charlemagne to Hildebrand,

Thomas à Becket,
The Crusades, the Influence of Anselm
Pierre Viret
Open Study Weekend:
The Felt Presence of God
The Life of John Calvin
The Reformed Faith in the Public Domain
A survey of British Church History
The History of Revivals in Wales
The First Chapter in Revival Accounts (Prerequisites)

2019

The History of English Bible
Bernard of Clairvaux

The Mendicant Friars
Scholasticism and the rise of the Universities
Thomas Aquinas and his influence
The Cathari, Albigensians and Waldensians
Early forerunners of the Reformation in Britain: Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Bradwardine, Richard Fitzralph, and the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland
The rival Popes, Avignon and Rome.
The Great western Schism 1378-1423.
John Wycliffe and his influence. & John Huss of Bohemia

The Reformation: its Roots and Antecedents (6 lectures)	The Reformation	18th Century Great Awakening
The Black Death	The Rise of the Puritans	19th Century British Church incl.
The sacking of Constantinople In 1453	2020	a) One of 19th Century Social Reformers – Lord Shaftesbury,
The Work of Erasmus	<i>Summarised as:</i>	b) Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy
The Invention of Printing	17th Century Nonconformists	20th Century Church
Martin Luther	The Great Ejection and Glorious Revolution	
William Tyndale	18th Century Conditions	

Content of Some Lectures:

The Influence of Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great + Missionary Movements towards the conversion of Northern Europe + the Influence of Charlemagne and Alfred the Great (3 lectures):

This session completed the life and influence of Augustine of Hippo. He was significant as one of the most prominent leaders of the church of his day, whose influence extends down to present times. His influence can be summarised as follows:

1. His greatest significance lay in his influence on the Church's understanding of the Doctrines of Grace. In opposing the Pelagians, he brought the Church back to the great Pauline teaching that the entire human race was represented by and mysteriously present in Adam. When Adam fell, human nature sinned and fell in him. This is the doctrine of original sin, and because of our slavery to sin, Augustine then argued that people could not become Christians by their own wills, but only by the almighty transforming power of God, that is, by God's grace.
2. Secondly, he contributed greatly to the Church's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. It might be said that through his work the doctrine of the Trinity was for the first time clarified.
3. Augustine emphasised the truth that there is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.
4. Augustine's thought was profoundly Biblical, he wrote commentaries and preached many sermons on the books of the Bible, believing that the Scriptures constitute a special revelation which carries us far beyond the powers and the reasoning of the philosophers. Faith is the one thing which enables men to understand the world and themselves within it, on a rational and secure basis: "Understanding is the reward of faith."
5. Augustine also opposed the dualistic doctrines of the Manicheans. These sought to solve the problem of evil by teaching the existence of an evil agency eternally opposed to God.
6. Augustine also had a profound impact on our understanding of history. He is credited with ridding Europe of the ancient superstition that history simply went round and round in ever repeated cycles.
7. Augustine also taught that the validity of the ordinances depending on Christ and what he had done, and not upon the moral standing of those who administered them.
8. He taught that the civil power was part of God's providence but held that it was good only in so far as it was founded on justice.
9. Augustine was a prolific writer, producing in the region of 232 books, the chief being his 'Confessions' and 'The City of God'.
10. Augustine was not perfect and there would be aspects of his understanding with which we would disagree.

The session included a glance at the work of Gregory the Great, sometimes called *the last of the good Popes and the first of the bad*. Some of the missionary movements taking place at this time, in regard to the conversion of Northern Europe, were touched on. In addition, the influence of the Emperor Charlemagne, and the good and bad legacy of the Holy Roman Empire were considered.

Two famous Englishmen at this time were also considered, that is, the influence of Alfred the Great, and that of Alciun the court chaplain, confidant and adviser of the Emperor Charlemagne.

Early Forerunners of the Reformation:

The general theme of the lectures on this occasion was concerned with individuals who were precursors of the Reformation.

First looked at the life of **Robert Grosseteste** who was born in Stradbroke, about the year 1175. He studied at Oxford and afterwards in Paris. After this he was much given to the study of Scripture in its original languages, rare in those days, and eventually in 1235, he was appointed to be Bishop of Lincoln. He began to be concerned about the powers and honours at that time Innocent IV was claiming for himself.

He said: *"To follow a Pope who rebels against the will of Christ, is to separate from Christ and his body; and if ever a time should come when all men follow an erring pontiff, then will be the Great Apostasy. Then all true Christians will refuse to obey, and Rome will be the cause of the unprecedented schism."*

He visited Rome to demand reform but was not listened to.

As a result of this, the Pope afterwards commanded him to offer the position of Canon in Lincoln Cathedral to his nephew, some say his infant nephew and others his youthful nephew. Clearly this individual did not have the capacity to fulfil this role and Grosseteste refused to implement the order. His refusal was based on biblical grounds. He was clearly asserting the authority of Scripture over the authority of the church.

Grosseteste's defiance on Scriptural principles was well-known, and became the inspiration of popular songs, and the theme of many popular sermons of the friars. He would certainly have lost his position as Archbishop of Lincoln but died before any action was taken.

We looked at some examples of his writings illustrating that he had a fair appreciation of the doctrines of grace. We also noted that he did not hold these truths with an invariable consistency. He was a child of his age and like Apollos it could be agreed that, he needed one to *"expound to him the way of God more perfectly."* This being said, some of the extracts from his writings are very moving and reveal that he was truly a child of grace and a worthy name to be ranked among the precursors of the Reformation.

We next turned to the life of **Thomas Bradwardine** (1290 – 1349), most likely born in Chichester. He studied and taught in Oxford at Merton and Balliol Colleges. In 1337 he was appointed chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, a post he held for 11 years. He is particularly remembered for his opposition to what was known then as the New Pelagianism which was being particularly advocated by William of Ockham. We digressed slightly to consider the positive and negative influence of William of Ockham with regard to the Reformation.

Bradwardine clearly had grasped the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. He was truly an Augustinian though, with regard to the doctrine of predestination, he went further than Augustine and some have accused him of getting dangerously close to a form of determinism.

This apart, Bradwardine was certainly a humble and godly man. He became chaplain to King Edward III and accompanied the king and his army to France where, before the battle of Crecy in 1346, he is said to have preached to the English army, salvation by grace alone. Edward III is said to have attributed his victories on the battlefield to the prayers of Bradwardine. We commented that this would have made splendid subject for an artist to depict. John Wycliffe considered himself a disciple of Bradwardine, though the extent of his influence is debatable.

During the time of Bradwardine's influence Edward III, desirous of guaranteeing the religious liberties of England, passed with the Consent of Parliament in 1350, the Statute of Provisors. This act made void every ecclesiastical appointment contrary to the right of the King, the chapters, or the patrons. The purpose of this was to prevent the Pope from appointing Italian bishops to English benefices. In 1349 Bradwardine was made Archbishop of Canterbury but held his position for a mere 38 days, after which he died of the Black Death.

We next considered the influence of **Richard FitzRalph** (1295 – 1360). Richard FitzRalph was consecrated Archbishop of Armagh on 31 July 1346. He lived about a hundred years after Robert Grosseteste. By this time the Mendicant Friars who in the days of Grosseteste had served the Church well, by this time had become corrupt. Though portraying themselves as a Mendicant order, they had amassed great riches and lands. They had certainly lost any concern for the Gospel and its proclamation.

FitzRalph challenged this, but was appalled to further discover, that to ensure the continuation of their body, the Mendicants were actually kidnapping children, and confining them, with the intention of their becoming future members of their order. FitzRalph made an open denunciation of these activities at St Paul's Cross, London. This was reported to the Pope Innocent VI and FitzRalph was persecuted and at last banished from his position until

his death some 8 years later. Again, as in the case of Bradwardine, the teaching and actions of FitzRalph influenced the life and thinking of John Wycliffe.

John Wycliffe (c 1320 – 1384). John Wycliffe known as the Morning Star of the Reformation. He was born near to the village of Wycliffe, in the hamlet of Sperswell, close to the River Tees, in the north-east of England. He said to have been the scion of a proud but poor family – the manor of Wycliffe was about 720 acres.

Little is known of his early life until the time that he went up to Oxford University, first attaching himself to Balliol College. Though later in life nominated to the rectorship of Fillingham in Lincolnshire, he never really left Oxford. It is true, however, that in later life retired to his ministry in Lutterworth.

We described and discussed the massive upheavals in England and the rest of Europe taking place at this time. There was great emphasis on academic qualifications and the Church was ruled by an aristocracy of University graduates, men who were also considered useful to the State. Many bishops were no more than civil servants, and often loyal civil servants were rewarded by being made bishops.

Wycliffe also grew up in a period when the power and influence of the Papacy was at its height. Though all were compelled to attend church services, the services being held in Latin were incomprehensible to the common peasant. There was little preaching. Many ordinary individuals would never have seen a Bible, and certainly not in English. The common people were in bondage to the Church and its sacraments. This was also the time of the Black Death and it is said that the terror of this dreadful plague was a factor in John Wycliffe seeking Christ.

The Church was in many respects corrupt, this was widely known and surreptitiously attacked and criticised in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer as in William Longlands, Piers Plowman. The Pope was making extraordinary claims in relation to himself, declaring that he should be appropriately addressed as, "Our Lord God the Pope.". This was also the time of the rival popes in Avignon and Rome.

The Church was also extracting large sums of money from the country. Demand was made for the payment of Peter's Pence, which had not been paid since the time of King John; it amounted to a considerable sum of money. This was not to mention the monies that left the country from the large sums raised by the payment of requiem masses etc. Walter Gray had to pay the papal authorities £10,000 for his pallium, giving him the right to take up the position of Archbishop of York. At this time, Parliament refused to pay Peter's Pence.

We considered Wycliffe's doctrine of "Dominion". In this he discusses the qualities needed for an individual to have the right to rule. Lordship is that which is given by God, and therefore those who rule over others, should be in a state of grace. This led onto the questioning of the right of those who were, at that time, ruling the Church, as also those who held power within the state. We went on to consider the 12 points of Wycliffe's doctrine, showing him to be almost entirely anticipating the great doctrines of the Reformation. Only in the fact that he continued, in some respects, to venerate the Virgin Mary, did he not conform to them.

We discussed the voluminous writings of John Wycliffe. It is said that many of these are lying in some of the great university libraries of the Continent and have never been fully investigated or read to this day. We described his work in translating the Bible, from the Latin Vulgate, and the tremendous cost and danger it involved for himself and those who assisted him. Wycliffe was condemned by the Council of Constance but died before any action could be taken against him. He died in his rectorship at Lutterworth on December 28th 1384.

Thirteen years afterwards, the papal authorities disinterred his body and burnt his remains and had them cast into the River Swift. This event has been immortalised in poetic form by Thomas Fuller, the Church historian, and also by William Wordsworth.