

A MANUAL FOR TEACHING CHURCH HISTORY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Introduction

This manual is created with the intention of supplying a format for teaching church history at the local level to those unacquainted with the situations, developments and major players in church history up to the Reformation. This work is far from comprehensive since covering every historical point of that time would be beyond the scope and purpose of this writing. Important events, issues, and people that made significant positive or negative contributions to ancient, medieval, and modern Christianity are examined to discover their relation to current and future church health.

In order to facilitate our understanding of such a large segment of history, the ancient, medieval, and modern eras are segmented further into six specific periods of time. These segments sometimes divide with natural breaks; at other times the divisions seem somewhat forced. These human divisions are only to assist in handling the vast material. The periods we will be working with are: Period I (The Birth of the Church: 100 BC to 100 AD), Period II (Apologists and Polemicists Strengthen the Persecuted Church: 100 to 313), Period III (The Development of the Old Catholic Imperial Church: 313 to 590), Period IV (Church and State and the Balance of Power: 590 to 1054), Period V (Schism and Crusades: 1054 to 1200), Period VI (Internal and External Reformation: 1200 – 1600).

Period I (The Birth of the Church: 100 BC to 100 AD)

It is important to first discover the factors that produced the political, cultural, and religious climate into which the church of Jesus Christ was born. These elements provided the context that the church started and were evident before the coming of Christ. Foremost, the political environment created an era of peace known as the *Pax Romana*. This 200 years of peace had been established initially by the Roman Caesar Augustus and employed the use of heavy force to ensure submission of conquered peoples. The unification of the Empire and the extension of Roman citizenship, the building of roads with provided protection of travel routes from bandits and pirates, and the abundance of Roman government and law expertise all contributed to an environment conducive to an infant church.¹

Culturally, Alexander the Great had established a common language, koine Greek, which became the language of trade over the entire Mediterranean basin. Hellenization provided a common cultural highway that the church could travel as it grew. If the broad Greco-Roman culture was the home of the early church, Hellenized Judaism was her crib. Judaism created the synagogue and translated the Septuagint (the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek), both of which were crucial to Christianity's start and spread.

Understanding some of these underlying political, cultural, and religious factors are important in the study of church history because they continued to play significant roles as the church developed. Even today, these influences affect the vitality of the universal and local church much more than many people realize. The elements of

culture, politics, and religion are the soil in which Christianity was planted and still grows. There are many similarities with the cultures that confronted the early church and those that we find ourselves entrenched today. Impersonal civil tactics, disappointing religious systems, and unsatisfying lifestyles of materialism left people of ancient days hungering for spiritual reality. So, too, our culture of the 21st century is ripe for the good news.

However, there are many, both inside and outside the church, who propose Christians separate themselves from political, cultural, and religious structures around them. To hole up with a fortress mentality is to overlook historical precedent and to cut the church from the very environment she is meant to grow in and influence. In application to the local church – it is vital that each individual becomes aware of the cultural conditions in which he is located. One's location is not by accident but by Providence in order that the church receives necessary resources for ministry and then influences the culture with the gospel.

Another important issue of the earliest period of the church is the personal and corporate spiritual disciplines that were followed. We find in Acts 2 that the people were prioritizing their lives in order to have time for fellowship, communion, prayer, and teaching. Through these disciplines it seemed they received from God the power and faith to affect their culture, despite its antagonism and persecution. The historical lesson is clear – to have maximum impact in the lives around us we must regularly tend to our own spiritual lives with the disciplines necessary for vital Christian experience. The local church is only as strong and influential as its individual people are. As the people are built up through these basic priorities the church will become the expression of Christ in

its community. Following these same principles, the modern church of today may expect to experience the same renewal and evangelistic results that the early church enjoyed within the cultures of her day.

Period II (Apologists and Polemicists Strengthen the Persecuted Church: 100-313)

The fledgling church during her second period found herself embroiled in external and internal battles in her struggle for survival. Much can be learned from how the church handled these crises of persecution and heresy. Persecution against the church began in Jerusalem with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem during this initial persecution and also later when the Roman legions sacked the city in 70 AD. Some 30,000 Jews committed suicide according to Josephus the Jewish historian and eyewitness.ⁱⁱ But many of the Christians escaped having given heed to Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Setting up establishments in such cities as Antioch and Rome, Christians were barely distinguishable from Jewish settlements until sporadic persecution under Nero and other emperors began to define them. Apparently, during this initial state persecution of Nero, Peter and Paul lost their lives. Persecution intensified under subsequent rulers and little record is found of the apostles' lives after the *Diaspora*. However, the writings of the ante-Nicene Fathers (those who wrote before the Nicene Council in 325) have become our vital link to this early period of the church.

Writers such as Tertullian and Justin Martyr were apologists writing to civil authorities to convince them of the unreasonableness of their persecutions. Writers such as Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen were polemicists who wrote to combat philosophical, theological, and ecclesiastical heresies within the church. The years 100 to 313 were a period of intense external pressure against Christians as well as severe infiltration of heretical teachings. The “renewal” movement of the day was the apologetic and polemicist writers who lead the fight in this two-front war.

The Romans persecuted Christians for a number of reasons: Christians were considered a threat to the Roman state, there was widespread public misunderstanding of Christian practices of nonconformity in emperor worship and pagan carnality, and Christianity had great appeal for the lower classes.ⁱⁱⁱ Organized persecution began with Nero and increased with Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian. Ignatius lost his life under Trajan, and Origen died from tortures suffered under Decius. These brave men and others like them were used of God to articulate truths of the Christian faith in the very jaws of the Roman political machinery. Apologists argued that although they refused to worship the emperor, they were very good citizens.^{iv} And it was their witness that, at least in part, helped to melt the Roman conscience and provide favorable future relations for the church and the Empire.

Persecution squeezed other good things out of the church as well. Diocletian’s diabolical destruction of Scripture triggered a purposeful effort to canonize New Testament books. The work of heretic Marcion, who made a list of what he insisted were inspired writings, also necessitated an official canon. The marks of apostolicity and

inspiration of nearly all of our New Testament books were generally agreed upon in the church. The councils then simply confirmed this consensus.

As the church reacted to state persecution, she attempted to persuade the secular authorities, she drove out heresy which sought to contaminate her teachings, and she formed the New Testament canon to give unifying documents for faith. The church also reacted to persecution and heresy by initiating a centralized form of government.

Although not yet official, this hierarchical system is evidenced in the writing of Clement as early as the year 95. Apostolic succession, according to Clement, is seen in that the apostles selected elders and deacons, Christ selected the apostles, and Christ was sent from the Father God.^v Another Father, Ignatius, also emphasized subordination. He wanted elders subordinate to the bishop and church members subordinate to both.

Ignatius was the first to use the word *catholic* in reference to the church.^{vi}

This period serves as a classic example of the “good, the bad, and the ugly” that came from the church as it developed. Plenty of good obviously happened as the creeds, canon, and writings of the early Fathers strengthened the church during awful persecution. However, the centralization of church government – although probably a necessity during this period – quickly turned bad and in later years became downright ugly in the supremacy of papal power. On the other hand, this writer can see no other way such serious secular and heretical affronts could have been dealt with effectively.

It seems clear the church Fathers sensed correctly the need for a strong centralized system to pull them through the tough time they had to endure. What is not clear is whether they thought this type of organization should only be temporary until the persecutions and atrocities were finished. Theoretically, the church could have reverted

back to New Testament decentralized organization of an individual priesthood of believers. Whatever the Fathers were thinking, the church ran with centralized government even after persecution ended. Similar to God allowing Israel to have her king like other nations, the church was allowed centralized government to replicate her counterpart Roman secular culture.

One of the travesties repeated in Christian history is that of hanging on to something God only meant to be temporary. The early Fathers did some marvelous work in appealing to civil authorities on behalf of the Christian population. They were fabulous in their confrontation of damaging heretical teachings and doctrine. They were terrific in their ability to unify the church under pressure by beginning the use of centralized ecclesiastical authority. But, *after strong hierarchical centralized organization had served its purpose, it should have been disbanded.* This would have placed responsibility back on individual believers to develop their own spiritual disciplines (as they did in Acts) instead of developing an unhealthy reliance on spiritual authorities, bishops, popes, etc. for direction in temporal and spiritual matters.

This is not to say that the local church shouldn't provide for the proper function and respect for ministries of the pastor, elder, bishop, and deacon. Yet, each of these can operate in an empowering, inverted pyramid-type structure where the greatest is the servant, not the lord. Had the church dropped the centralized system, she would have experienced nearly 1,200 years of development in the individual priesthood of believers and the Reformation would not have been necessary.

The writings of the Fathers as a whole contain valuable insight into the conditions and thinking of the ancient church. But a grave error is made when too much is taken

from their ideas. To their credit, the Fathers are crucial connectors to the apostles and, in some cases, able commentators on scripture. Their works, however, are not inspired. To say the monstrous Roman ecclesiastical system of papal supremacy is supported in the Fathers' few words about apostolic succession is unjust and does not consider the context of the times.

Overall, this period teaches the value of standing up for truth in the face of external persecution and internal heresy. It also shows the danger of over compensating for weaknesses found in the church. As the church continued to stress centralized control, new opportunities presented themselves in the next period for the development of an imperial church that would have voice in both spiritual concerns of the church and in temporal affairs of the state.

Period III (The Development of the Old Catholic Imperial Church: 313 to 590)

Between 313 and 590 the church drifted further away from its roots and became an official religious system without much semblance to her foundation. Three hundred thirteen was the watershed year as Constantine granted freedom of worship throughout the Empire in the *Edict of Milan*. In a scramble to save classical culture, Constantine enacted reforms including the establishment of favorable relations with the Christian church and moving the capital to Constantinople. Both of these decisions would have monumental implications for the church.

The Edict of Milan must have been a tremendous relief to the persecuted church. The excitement was probably overwhelming as secular oppression relaxed and worship was practiced openly, publicly, and fearlessly. However, as history is replete with examples, after a great victory comes great testing. The test for the church switched from pressure to prosperity, from oppression to opportunity. By 381, Christianity was the official religion of the state. But this elevated status became a Trojan Horse to the church because now the state had the right to involve itself in the affairs of the church.

As secularization rushed into the church, profound changes developed in worship – especially during the latter stages of this period. Hordes of pagan people were baptized without true conviction. Semi-pagan practices were adopted to accommodate them, such as the veneration of relics, pictures, saints, Mary, and statues. The sacrament was gradually becoming a literal sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus.^{vii} Church buildings were erected and clergy donned special clothes.

When Constantine moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople, he left a vacuum of power in Rome – the traditional seat of authority. In short order, the church began to fill this void and operate as an authority from Rome in both spiritual and temporal arenas. When the Roman populace desired protection from Barbarian migrations, the Roman bishop assumed the responsibility. Whereas the Eastern wing of the church was dominated by the state (and eventually fell from prominence), the Western wing grew to absorb secular duties of the state. The seeds of centralized authority, found in the Fathers' comments concerning apostolic succession, grew in this period to give rise to a dominant religious system that embraced both spiritual and secular powers.

These trends are most disturbing in that the compromise of Christian worship and the rise of autocratic authority severely blurred the avenue of God's grace. No longer was God's love and grace simple and direct to the believer through Jesus Christ. Now Christians had to work through a maze of pagan worship practices and ecclesiastical hierarchy for forgiveness and peace. Even communion was seen as sacrifice and had the effect of mystifying the bishop's position. All these alarming developments helped to accelerate the distinction between clergy and laity.

Some ramifications from this period of history are obvious. Today, the church still struggles with her expression of true worship from the heart. Do we need tangible worship paraphernalia to glorify God? Do we need a building to feel like we have really been in church? Do we need some spiritual authority to give us approval in order to feel we have received God's grace or blessings? Can we treat our ministers with all due respect (according to Hebrews we are to respect them for their service – not some artificial or mystical authority in their position) and still call them by their real first name? Or do we *have* to call them reverend, or father, or pastor? I am afraid the effects of our history have stained our spiritual conscience to the degree that we think what we are “wearing” is the original color.

As in all periods of church history, however, there were definite bright spots from 313 to 590. Missionary work spread to the Goths, Lombards, Vandals, Anglo-Saxons, Huns, Celts, and Franks. Clovis, king of the Franks, converted to Christianity in 496 and his kingdom followed suit. Patrick brought the gospel to Ireland in 432. And with the moral decline caused by paganism in the church came the development of monasticism. Although there were some extremely ascetic expressions, monasticism played an

important role in the preservation of moral standards, scholarship, and scripture. Monks were also effective missionaries, caregivers, and agriculturists.^{viii} A fresh look at monasticism would prove valuable to today's church – not to gloat in spiritual and social isolationism, but to recapture our moral standards, priorities, and simplicity of faith.

Another bright spot was the answer to the theological controversies resulting in the first major wave of church council and creed development between 325 and 451. A creed developed from the council at Nicaea in 325 addressed the relationship of the persons of the Trinity and condemned the views of Arius who attacked the deity of Christ. Athanasius voiced the orthodox view that Christ is coequal, coeternal and consubstantial with the Father. The Council of Constantinople sought to correct the denial of the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Chalcedon (451) attempted to put to rest the controversy about the nature of Christ by stating, in essence, Christ is 100 per cent God and 100 per cent man. The Council of Ephesus, in 431, condemned Pelagius's views that held that man's will has a role in his salvation.

Today, the church benefits by considering the work of these councils. Many of the same issues, such as Arian Jehovah Witnesses, confront Christians now. We don't have to swallow all the councils' conclusions, but they do serve as excellent reference points for theological debate. Later councils, however, tended to drift further and further from reality and seem to function to validate ecclesiastical policy rather than represent an earnest search for scriptural truth.

During this great era of council and creedal development is when John (Chrysostom), Jerome (who translated the Septuagint into Latin), Eusebius (the historian), Ambrose, and Augustine did their work. Augustine was a pivotal figure due to

his emphasis on grace and his insistence on using the whole of Scripture when interpreting single passages. He was a proponent of the sovereignty of God and also emphasized that God created man with a free will.^{ix} Both Protestantism and Catholicism claim the Augustinian mantle, but seeing the abuses in each camp one wonders if either is worthy. Since that time, both groups have at times expediently interpreted parts of the Bible toward selfish ends, and both have complicated the grace of God.

Augustine's work continues to cry out to the modern church to return to her emphasis on the grace of God, to interpret Scripture contextually, and to work toward the redemption and regeneration of society. Our "City of God" is the community and state we live in, and it is our responsibility – God-given duty – to let our works shine in them. By correctly interpreting the word of God and practically applying it to the conditions surrounding us, we bring a tangible message of hope to a godless society.

Augustine wrote during the crumbling of classical society around him and felt that the church could offer a new civilization of strength and stability. Although these optimistic views have brought inspiration to many, especially to those who hold to postmillennial eschatological hopes, his views seem somewhat idealistic in their full import.

This period was certainly pivotal in the development of the church into an official religious system with far-reaching authority in spiritual and temporal matters. As we consider the next period of history, it is evident that the church is faced with the ever-increasing and complicated problems between church and state.

Period IV (Church and State and the Balance of Power: 590 – 1054)

The period between 590 and 1054 is difficult to track due to the complicated issues that arose as both the organized church and the state powers jockeyed for control. Yet, this period is important to understand because this is when Western European civilization, as it is known today, began to emerge from Christian and classical foundations.^x The last classical Roman emperor lost his job in 476. From 500 to 1000 is considered by many Catholics as the “good ol’ days” since Roman church monopoly over the affairs of men reached new heights. But, to people of the Renaissance and the Reformation, this period is considered “the dark ages.” In either case, the medieval era saw the church spread her influence past the Mediterranean to include the Baltic and negotiate the rise of the Holy Roman Empire.

Gregory the Great serves as a starting point for this period. Gregory was a noble monk known for his charity, humility, intellectual acumen, and administrative ability. In 590 he was chosen pope and did more than any other Roman bishop before him to solidify Roman supremacy and expand the power of his position. Gregory was devoted to theology and deeply involved in the state and ecclesiastical politics of Spain, Italy, Britain, and Africa. His strong bishopric set precedent for future popes to follow.

However, the bold assertions of papal authorities did not go unanswered. Although temporal authority in Rome was vested in the church, state authority was still alive in the East. Eastern state and church powers were not happy with the Western church’s claims. And, with the fall of the empire came great mass migrations including Teutons, Goths, Huns, and later, the Vikings. These plundering barbarians, along with

Arian Lombards, threatened to destroy the Western church. Barbarians swarming from the north, growing Muslim threats to the south, and increasing tension with the church in the east encouraged the pope to look even further west and make a powerful alliance with rulers of the Franks. This is where the strong Catholic influence originated that is seen in France today.

After Clovis, king of the Franks, came the Carolingian dynasty, most notably of that line being seven-foot-tall Charlemagne (son of Pepin *the Short!*). The pope crowned Charlemagne “Emperor of the Romans” in 800. As the East, fortunately, held back the Muslims, Charlemagne quickly capitalized and brought most of the modern areas of France, Italy, and Germany under one roof.^{xi} It was a kind of “manifest destiny” as Charlemagne, a fan of Augustine’s *City of God*, spread the good news by force. Side by side, church and state were to rule together into the new era of the Holy Roman Empire.

Following the death of Charlemagne, the Frankish-papal bond softened, the new empire fragmented, and European culture drifted into decentralized feudalism. The Holy Roman Empire continued, at least in name, with the Germans, but there was constant disagreement between German rulers and papal authorities. The church eventually won out over the state authorities in Europe, but in doing so disrupted the balance of power and again found herself in a precarious position.

How does one comment on this period of history, relate it to today, and still do justice to the complexity of the times? The period is full of irony as Charlemagne, for example, spread the gospel – but he did it by the sword. One appreciates his motive and message, but it is hard to condone his method. And then, every body seems to be crowning somebody else in order to stay one up on the other.

In all the confusion there seems to be at least a couple points of interest to the church today. First, God works through the power of the state *and* through the influence of the church. Charlemagne saw that. It is evident he wanted more of a dichotomy than the church had in mind. He proposed the state rule the physical affairs and the church rule the spiritual affairs. The church said that would be fine as long as he was subject to the church. So around and around we go! In either case, the two were able to work together amazingly well and brought measurable stability to their domain.

As difficult as it is to put a finger on what God was doing during these dark years, this one aspect – stability – seems to stand out above others. Paul had encouraged Timothy to pray for kings and all those in authority in order that believers could carry on the work of evangelism and lead quite and peaceful lives (1 Tim. 2). In the mass chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire, apparently God moved through the church and the secular state under Charlemagne to bring much needed stability to the area.

This principle is quite pertinent to the modern church today. We are in the midst of a critical imbalance of power with the fall of the USSR. It is nice to think that the United States will continue to do what is right, but that is presumptuous considering human nature and some of our past mistakes as a nation. The crucial impact of prayer concerning world affairs must find its place in the church. The world is still a very dangerous place, and the church's greatest contribution is to pray for those in leadership in order that policies leading to peace and stability are enacted. Prayer will ensure that God accomplishes His will through both the church and the state.

Second, the effects of manipulating world events by the Roman church should serve as a warning to church leaders of the modern era. The church today has looked at

politics from the outside in. There are many believers who influence national and world events from within, but for the most part, the church has attempted to make an impact on state policy and structure from without. In the Middle Ages it was different. One step behind the curtain brings the discovery that it was the church that was the “wizard of Oz” pulling all the levers. And pull them they did. In the next period, the church set up the French state, subdued competing nation-states, and in the process destroyed the balance of power in Europe.

It is important not to overlook or diminish the consequence of appropriate church involvement in political issues of the state. However, the warning that reverberates from this period is that power is a tricky two-edged sword that can quickly have unexpected repercussions. Again, as Paul stated to the Romans (of all people), there is no power in existence unless God established it (Rom. 13). Therefore, how that power, authority, or influence is used makes all the difference.

Although the day of the church dominating secular heads of state is probably over, the church’s influence in political events is increasing through many other avenues, especially at the grassroots level. The local church is a major player in this arena and must choose carefully which issues to hold civil authority accountable to. In this way, the church and state function together, hold evil at bay, and allow for maximum opportunity for the spread of the gospel. Until the government is on His shoulders, society will always have the opportunity to balance the issues of church and state.

In the next period, tensions between the church in the East and the church in the West come to a head. Subsequently, the organized church in the West achieves unprecedented power and turns that power to confront Muslim advances in Palestine.

Period V (Schism and Crusades: 1054-1200)

The first major split in the church's history occurred in 1054, but the causes of the schism were rooted in events as far back as 330. Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople; from that time the relationship between state and church of the East (Constantinople) and West (Rome) differed. The Eastern Church, because it was controlled by the state, had little to offer as far as political influence. She focussed her attention on theological controversies. The Western church, on the other hand, controlled and influenced both secular and ecclesiastical structure. The West used Latin in worship but the East used Greek.

Added to these cultural differences came contention around the specific policies concerning celibacy, when to celebrate Easter, and Western interference with Eastern concerns. Great strife also arose around whether to kneel before pictures or images. Muslims accused the East of idolatry because of the practice, but the West preferred it as a tangible aid to new pagan worshippers who were not used to worshipping something invisible.

The final straw to break the camel's back came in 1054 over using unleavened bread in the Eucharist. East didn't want to, but West did. So after they excommunicated each other, East and West churches didn't like each other for over 900 years until 1965 when the curse was lifted. Apart from some successful mission work in Russia, the church in the East became isolated, out-of-touch from the Renaissance and the Reformation, and has held limited influence in the world.^{xii}

The church has never mastered the art of disagreeing without being disagreeable. Unity in the church up to 1054 was not a unity of vision, but a unity of necessity. The centralized system was crucial to survival initially, but challenge to its validity was inevitable when world conditions changed. The religious, political, and cultural differences were too much and overwhelmed the superficial unity. One lesson from this first great schism is that the two churches could have recognized that division was inevitable and sought to help the other through it. Instead, they chose the road of bitterness, strife, and envy. Working through problems at this level may sound idealistic, but that is exactly what Jesus and Paul taught concerning love.

On the local church level today, with Baptists and Charismatics leading the fray in church splits, it is important to keep perspective. Certainly, there is room in God's plan for division. It could be argued that Paul had a ministry of synagogue splitting! There are legitimate reasons for separation – corruption, doctrinal variance, and differences of purpose or vision – but we don't have to be nasty about it. The pain of rejection and the feelings of insecurity are great in many types of separations. The only profitable way to cope with them is to develop sincere attitudes of helpfulness and love toward the other person or group. Most of the issues local churches fight over disappear with time anyhow, but people are *eternal*. What matters is obedience to God and treating people in fairness and with dignity.

The power of the papacy after the schism went off the charts. Hildebrand worked tirelessly behind the scenes to increase the power of the pope and was then chosen Pope Gregory VII in 1073. Gregory set up a system of cardinal deacons and bishops, took the selection of the pope out of the hands of the populace and put it into the control of the

college of cardinals. To further remove the laity from the picture and gain the upper hand in temporal matters, Gregory attempted to eliminate lay investiture and bring Emperor Henry under his thumb.

Gregory and his ideas served as forerunner to Innocent III who became pope in 1198. Innocent believed God had given him supreme authority over the entire world *and* over all the church. And, he proved it by subjecting the major rising nation-states through French power.

The mentalities of these two popes underscore the crusading events that took place during their tenure. Aggressive Muslim Seljuk Turks had begun organized pressure on both East and West in the 8th century. The church in the East was constantly threatened with their presence, and the church in the West had instigated efforts to remove Muslims from Europe before the official crusades ever commenced. Although economic plunder and political control factor into reasons for the crusades, religious conflict with Muslim ideology was the most important motivation.

The East had managed to hold the Muslims at bay after the fall of the empire until Europe rebounded with the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1095, French peasants launched a massive campaign against Palestine to free the Holy Land. This ended in disaster but was followed the next year by another wave led by European noblemen. They captured Jerusalem in 1099. The Second Crusade (1146) failed and Saladin recaptured Jerusalem. The Third Crusade (1189) ended with a negotiation with Saladin to allow Christian pilgrims access to the Holy Land. The Fourth Crusade (1204), to set up a base in Egypt, was misdirected to Constantinople (which further irritated the East). The Fifth Crusade (1209) wiped out the heretical sect of Cathari in southern

France. The Sixth Crusade gained control of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth but was eventually lost in subsequent efforts. Finally, the horrific Children's Crusade took place in 1212 in which 100,000 children (average age 12) and led by a 12-year-old, set out for Palestine. Most died along the way by war or hunger and the rest were sold as slaves.^{xiii}

The church rightly should have had no interest in capitulating to the brutal Turks. However, there is no excuse for the barbaric acts perpetrated during the crusades. Christians today can learn from the era of the crusades. Leaders may be powerful and powerfully persuasive, such as the force of Innocent III and the preaching of Bernard. Yet, believers have to ask what will be the ramifications of a proposed action, regardless of who is offering it? Can it be accomplished ethically? Who will benefit, and who will pay? Most of all, is God pleased by what we propose?

The crusades fail the test of all three of these questions. It was not a good plan. "Not by power, not by might, but by My Spirit says the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6). Each crusade was a human effort using human power of the European state combined with the human might of the pope. Intentions may have been right, but, because the plans were carried out through fleshly means, they failed. As Christians become disturbed about the influence of evil, it is crucial to find God's mind on how to confront it. The same principle found operating during the crusades is found today when, for example, some misdirected radical blows up an abortion clinic or slays one of its doctors. This is not God's way. He has a better plan.

When God sets out to change something, if there is any judgment He will take care of that Himself. On the other hand, Christians *must* take their place in the change process.

To the degree the crusaders expended efforts toward misdirected causes, the reformers of the next period invested themselves in worthy aims to improve the church. Next, cataclysmic events erupt in the church when true champions of faith face frightening and overwhelming power structures in their quest for truth and reformation.

Period VI (Internal and External Reformation: 1200-1600)

Reformation took place inside and outside the traditional western church between 1200 and 1600. Peter Waldo formed the “poor men” in the late 12th century. These men gave up their worldly possessions and took the Bible as the final authority for their lives. The pope commanded them to stop teaching but they continued – and still continue in Italy today!^{xiv} In 1229, the church clergy decided lay people would not be allowed to read the Bible in their own language. The church also responded with the Inquisition that used torture and executions as well as property confiscation through secret church trials to intimidate heretics and reformers.

After 1300 corruption was widespread in the hierarchy of the church. Sexual immorality and luxurious living were only two of many reasons laity lost respect for clergy in medieval times. Animosity also built up due to taxes from the pope. Mystics

attempted to return to a more personalized religious experience, but effected only nominal results.

One early reformer who had a powerful effect was John Wycliffe. Rising nation-states resented sending money to the pope, and in 1379 Wycliffe took advantage of the situation to attack the pope's authority. Similar to Waldo, Wycliffe pushed for reform along New Testament lines and translated the Bible into the language of his fellow Englishman. When the church demanded he stop teaching, Wycliffe formed the Lollards who continued to spread his ideas under penalty of death.

Bohemian students in England at the time caught hold of Wycliffe's teachings and brought them to their home country where pastor and professor John Huss studied and embraced them. Huss was trapped, condemned, and burned at the stake at the Council of Constance. His last words were prayers for mercy to be shown to his enemies^{xv}. Huss's teachings spread and eventually propagated Christian groups who later influenced John Wesley.^{xvi}

A series of councils followed Huss's disturbance to deal with, among other things, reformation issues and decide which of three popes was the real pope. At best, the councils produced weak results, and by 1500 the economic, social, and intellectual changes set the stage for phenomenal religious reformation. This reformation, although begun inside the church, could not be contained within the church.

Without diminishing the economic, intellectual, moral, technological, and social factors as contributing causes to the Protestant Reformation, by far the most significant cause was the emerging consciousness of God's grace. The grace of God had become a buried and dormant theme since Augustine. Clouded by pressing state and ecclesiastical

concerns, and crowded out by church traditions, the grace of God had not held preeminence in the minds of people for centuries. Early reformers were used of God to return attention to the Bible and especially to the New Testament. Yet, even their opposition didn't carry the full implications of God's grace and faith that we know today. Even when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Wittenberg door for discussion in 1517, it doesn't seem he comprehended the full import of grace and personalized faith that he did later in his life and ministry.

The point of contention that sparked the Protestant Reformation was the selling of indulgences for forgiveness in order to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Luther tired of Johann Tetzel's fund-raising tactics, posted his theses, debated John Eck, and printed his message for distribution. By 1520, Luther's message centered on teaching three truths: 1) Scripture alone is the believer's authority, 2) faith alone is the means by which man is saved through God's grace, and 3) each believer is a priest before God. Luther was promptly excommunicated after refusing to recant.

Luther's spunk and courage particularly impress this writer. But his grasp on the three planks of Scripture, faith, and priesthood is nothing less than staggering, especially considering the times in which he lived. The local church must stay focussed on faith in the grace of God. This may sound simplistic, however, with all the local church is expected to accomplish, it is the pastor's responsibility to keep the body ever conscience of God's grace. The law of God is just and good. The works of the flesh need to be addressed. But it is faith in the grace of God that enables us to fulfil God's law and overcome the flesh. Luther found this faith; we must never lose it.

The Bible is the Word of the living God. The move to reach unchurched people by communicating “in their language” is long overdue. Pastors trying to remove specialized vocabulary that only the Christian culture understands is an important step in bridging the gospel to the unbelieving world. However, a warning is in order here. It is fine, for example, to substitute different words, phrases, and explanations for theological words such as “propitiation.” Yet, church leaders have to protect the integrity of the Bible and see that no compromise is made in the name of communication with the world. No truth should be hidden or obscured from people because it is from “Scripture alone,” as Luther put it, that our rule for faith and practice is derived.

Luther restored the priesthood of the believer. The importance of personal faith sometimes is lost in this day of tremendous ministries in media. Flawless preaching and multitudes of people on television sometimes give a sense that one has to attain some high stature or emotional state to access God and His love, power, and forgiveness. We have to be careful not to set up a kind of “new hierarchy” people have to go through to get to God. Luther and the Protestant Reformation were invaluable in opening for the church again the throne of grace where we can receive mercy and help. The church today would benefit from a reminder of the emphases of the Reformation.

This period saw the church take a giant step in returning to the New Testament ethos. Looking in review at the church since her inception through persecutions, imperialism, schisms, and reformations, one is amazed as she continues to evolve into the church that Jesus Christ has purposed her to be. Hell itself can not withstand the church’s progress, and one day Jesus Christ will present His church before Himself without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Considering our history, that is quite a miracle!

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- ⁱ Charles Holman, Beginnings of the New Testament Church: A Study Guide (Va. Beach: Regent University, 1999), 9.
- ⁱⁱ Peter Prosser, noted in lecture during modular week, Nov. 28, 1999.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Earle E. Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 89.
- ^{iv} Justo L. Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 57.
- ^v Cairns, 75.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 76.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 153.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 148.
- ^{ix} Gonzalez, 213.
- ^x Cairns, (this thought is from Cairns, but I was not able to locate it).
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 180.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 198.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 216.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 222.
- ^{xv} Gonzalez, 351.
- ^{xvi} Cairnes, 247.