

Introduction to Women in the Church

Lecture 1

1. Why study Church History?

Covering 2000 years in four hours - so it's going to be like a 10 day Cook's tour of Europe - come away with an impression and the major landmarks and hopefully go back one day and do it all slowly!

As Christians we are used to studying history - **Salvation history** - history of God's dealings with His people and it comes to us as divine self revelation - it is binding on our lives and the ultimate authority in matters of faith, truth and life.

Church History is not like this but it is a **clear demonstration of Jesus' promise**, that He will build His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt 16:18).

Church History tells us of how those before us **understood their faith**. The Bible is not a textbook of doctrinal definitions, these have been forged over the centuries, in the face of false teaching and confusion. False teaching, often, over-emphasised one aspect of the truth whilst obscuring another. By studying Church History, we can scrutinize our own understanding of the truth, and that of the churches to which we belong. Hopefully, we will be prevented from repeating past errors.

Church History teaches us how Christians have **lived their faith**. Each culture and context brought new temptations, challenges and advantages. We can learn from their experience. Centuries and cultures may change, but people don't. Church History can instruct us as to how to live and be faithful in our own age.

Studying the lives of earlier Christians can **strengthen our lives of faith**. We are learning about Christian brothers and sisters, with whom, despite the centuries and obvious differences, we share the truth and love of Christ. It is tremendously encouraging to see the faith of these men and women. We also see their failings, in both doctrine and lifestyle, and realise that future generations may thus look at us. We are forced to have humility, knowing that God forgave them their weaknesses, as He forgives us.

2. Dangers of studying Church History

Even the general study of Church History is likely to give us a biased view of history. Firstly, historical sources tend to concentrate on the big events rather than the everyday. Secondly, the original observers and recorders of these historical sources each had their own biases and interpretations of the arguments and events that they relate. Thirdly, we ourselves are influenced by our Christian backgrounds, culture, and so on, and more particularly, by our convictions about truth.

But the danger of bias is even more pronounced in studying the role of women in the church. Historically it has not been the women who have recorded history or who have been part of the big events that history records. And in addition to this there has been actual prejudice against the abilities and advancement of women that was likely to overlook what women did anyway!

Having said that, this doesn't mean what is recorded is not true, or the church

was necessarily oppressive for women. And of course, it also means that where women are lauded and remembered their contribution is all the more significant.

Today we can find ourselves in the opposite situation, where the contributions of men are devalued (sometimes simply by taking them for granted or setting higher standards) and those of women are amplified, and that *reverse bias* grates even more against the already existing bias in the historical sources.

Absolute objectivity is therefore a myth in the study of history and demonstrates another departure with the nature of the Scriptures, which *are* able to give us absolute truths about God and how He is towards us, and which by the power of the Spirit God reveals himself to us perfectly.

3. The Big Picture

For the purposes of Church History there are three main foci of interest. Firstly, the period of the Early Church, largely on the stage of the Roman Empire, which reaches to the end of the sixth century. Secondly, in the 16th century, with the Protestant Reformation that occurred in Western Europe and the British Isles, when Biblical faith was reasserted against Roman Catholicism. Finishing with the Modern era of European and American movements and scholars whose thought stems from the 17th Century Enlightenment and brings us to the present day.

Given the brevity of this course, one obvious bias is expressed in the selection of the material to be studied. Having said that, this selection represents the major theological movements of Church History, the spread of the Gospel throughout the world, and particular events and issues that speak to us today.

4. Lecture Outline

Lectures One and Two

1. Introduction to Church History
2. Women in the New Testament
3. Women in the Early Church

Lectures Three and Four

4. Women in the Reformation
5. Women in the Modern Era
5. Women in the 20th–21st Centuries

5. References

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Renwick, A. M. and Harman, A. M. *The Story of the Church*. Leicester: IVP, 19902.

Severance, Diana Lynn, *Feminine Threads: Women in the Tapestry of Christian History*. Glasgow: Christian Focus. 2011.

Tucker, R. and W. Liefeld. *Daughters of the Church: Women from New Testament Times to the Present*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

Weinrich, W. 'Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors'. Pages 263–79 in J. Piper and W. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton: Crossways, 1991.

6. Primary and source documents

The raw data of the study of history is the archeological material and documents that arise from the particular period of study, they include monuments, buildings, artifacts etc and letters, official statements, inscriptions, and histories written by near contemporaries. Primary documents are those written by eye-witnesses, such as the “we” passages in Acts, where Luke includes himself in the narrative e.g., Acts 20:6ff. Source documents are early histories or reports.

Now, obviously, in a course of this depth, you'll not be required to be familiar with original documents, but we are going to have a little dabble in them. As Christians we often forget the New Testament is a credible first century source document, and so some appreciation of primary and source documents can give us confidence in the historicity of the NT for a start, and more of a feel for the periods and people that went before us.

But here just for your interest are some snippets from early observers of the Christian faith.

i) following the great fire of Rome in AD 64 which, it was rumoured, the Emperor Nero had instigated himself, **Tacitus** (Roman Historian AD c. 55 - 120) wrote:

'Consequently to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christ from whom the name had its origin, suffered their extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of the procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the source of the evil, but also in the City, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed'. Tacitus, *Annales*, 15:44

ii) In AD 112, the governor in Bithynia, called **Pliny**, wrote to the Emperor Trajan about how to try Christians of their crime.

'They (the Christians) maintained however, that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words* to Christ as a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food; and even this (they said) they had given up doing after the issue of my edict, by which in accordance with your commands I had forbidden the existence of clubs. On this I considered it the more necessary to find out from two maid-servants who were called deaconesses, and that by torments, how far this was true: but I discovered nothing else than a perverse and extravagant superstition. I therefore adjourned the case and hastened to consult you. The matter seemed to me worth deliberation, especially on account of the number of

those in danger; for many of all ages and every rank, and also of both sexes are brought into present or future danger. The contagion of that superstition has penetrated not the cities only, but the villages and country; yet it seems possible to stop it and set it right.' Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96

*possibly sing a hymn

iii) **The Reply of Trajan to Pliny**

'You have adopted the proper course, my dear Secundus, in your examination of the case of those who were accused to you as Christians, for indeed nothing can be laid down as a general ruling involving something like a set form of procedure. They are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished – yet on this condition, that whoso denies himself to be a Christian, and makes the fact plain by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance, however suspicious his past conduct may be. Papers, however, which are presented unsigned ought not to be admitted in any charge, for they are a very bad example and unworthy of our time.' Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97.

Excerpts taken from *The New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, J. Stevenson (ed.). Revised edition. (London: SPCK, 1987).

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