

Why Study Church History?

Richard C. Gamble, ThD

*Experience: Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*



Most of you are here to be pastors or church workers. The question that we need to ask in this first lecture is the role church history plays in the life of a pastor or full-time Christian worker. Church history helps us to understand four very important things. First of all, the Bible and its interpretation; second, the history of doctrine; third, the roots of today's church; fourth, it also helps us to guard against error. Let's look at these four points individually.

Number 1, the Bible and its interpretation. The department of church history in the theological curriculum is of course not alone in performing the function of helping us to understand the Bible and its interpretation. Hermeneutics is taught by the biblical departments at seminaries. They teach us how we are to understand and exegete the Scriptures today. But today's hermeneutics should not be understood in a historical vacuum. Our course on the ancient church will provide various alternatives in understanding and interpreting the Bible. Certain principles of exegesis can be traced through from the ancient church to the Reformation. Some schools of biblical interpretation will be found wanting and will be dropped from the Protestant movement. In the later courses in the Reformation and in the modern age, you'll be given a guided tour through the maze of the changes of biblical hermeneutics and interpretations through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

It's also important to see how certain passages have been historically exegeted. Here again there will be some overlap with the biblical departments or the biblical lectures, but in church history we look at the history of exegesis as well.

How about the second point—the history of doctrine? Understanding the history of doctrine helps us to understand systematic theology. The theologians don't usually have time on the MDiv level to trace the doctrine they are dealing with historically. Between the biblical material and modern

interpretation lies centuries of complicated unfolding. A good example is the doctrine of the Trinity. In the ancient church we will find a tremendous amount of fighting and discussion concerning the doctrine of Christ. Gradually, the church will be more and more able to deal with the biblical material. Yet after spending so much time on Christology, the church will rather suddenly realize that it had in a sense forgotten the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The heated arguments as to the nature of the Holy Spirit will gradually contribute to a split between the Eastern and the Western churches in the Middle Ages. Speculation concerning the nature of God will absorb the Middle Ages, and perhaps only be resolved in the theology of the Reformation. It is my contention that only after you have completed your historical studies, that doctrine in the beauty of its complex unfolding can be understood.

The third point is helping us to understand the roots of today's church. We can see this, first of all, in worship. History will explain why some churches have icons and burn incense, while others believe that church buildings are unnecessary. History will teach us why one church has a pope and others believe that there should be no ordained clergy. Or in the sacraments, why are there two sacraments or three or seven? What happens during the Lord's Supper? Should infants be baptized? Who has the right to administer these sacraments? Also the confessions that make up our churches. Should we have confessions? Why do we have so many or so few? Closer to home, why are we called Presbyterians or Methodists or Baptists? What makes the differences between the churches?

And last, the study of church history is helpful to guard against error. The German theologian Hans Küng is charged with being an Arian. Who was Arius anyway? What did he teach? If you haven't had much theological training before coming to this lecture or coming to teach in the church and a colleague perhaps dubs you with the title of being Arminian and you were a Methodist, for example, what does being an Arminian mean? Is that perhaps a social disease? If we understand the theological complexities of the past, if we understand the directions in which the church has gone, it will help us to understand ourselves, to understand our friends and colleagues, and will help us to not make mistakes which have been made in the past.

This course deals with the ancient church and not with the complete theological, historical curriculum. And in this course, we'll be looking at some of the very important doctrinal controversies,

we'll be examining the lives of certain Christians in the past, we'll see what would be required for us to fully understand the ancient church, and especially we'll see that at the end of this course as we begin our study of the medieval and Reformation period how God has kept His Spirit alive in the church and has continued to bless the church through the centuries.

The last part of our introduction concerns the importance of studying the ancient church. Sometimes this period is called patristics, the study of the Fathers. The Latin word for "father" is *pater*, and so we sometimes call this period the period of the Fathers, or patristics. Why do we study patristics or the ancient church? There are some very important reasons. Concerning the history of doctrine, we know that at this time the church was particularly pure, especially in the time period of the early church, as the Christian church is emerging from the times of the Acts of the Apostles. And we can't understand the Reformation heritage without first understanding patristics. It's also important for us to know the various theological heresies that came up during this time.

Of a practical nature, it helps us to understand the roots of Roman Catholicism. This is begun in the ancient church time period and continues through the period of the Middle Ages. Also we understand the nature of church government. How was the church run in the ancient church period? Did we have bishops? Were there ordained clergy, and how were their clergy different perhaps from clergymen of today?

We'll learn of the history of preaching. We'll focus on such important people as John Chrysostom or sometimes pronounced Chrysostom, who was known as the golden-mouthed one or the golden-tongued preacher. We'll learn about hermeneutics, that is, how the Bible was understood and how it was interpreted. We'll learn of the method called the allegorical method, and we'll analyze that method and see whether or not we would want to implement that method in our preaching today.

We'll learn of the missionary endeavor of the church. The twentieth century is known as the greatest century for missionary endeavor, but we'll see the background of the ancient church period and see why it was much more difficult to send missionaries during the first centuries of the church. We'll also understand the Eastern church. Perhaps in the United States we don't have many opportunities to meet people from the Greek Orthodox Church or

the other Eastern churches. But by our understanding this time period, we'll be able to understand the millions of Christians who also belong to that great tradition.

We'll learn of the creeds of the church. Many churches, for example, still hold to the Apostles' Creed, and we'll see how that creed was developed. And of a very practical nature, we'll learn about the time of persecution, the time before the emperor Constantine when Christianity was an illegal religion and that those who confessed Jesus Christ could oftentimes be met with death and swift martyrdom. Our goals for this church would be twofold. First of all, the student should be aware of the various doctrines and creeds that are developed during this time. Second, the student should understand the historical events that surrounded the creation of these creeds and the development of the doctrines of the church so that we see the continuity between cultural activity and theological reflection.

There are different ways of approaching the ancient church. Three different ways would be a theological perspective, a historical perspective, and a patristic perspective. As I mentioned very briefly already, the theological perspective is outlining the history of doctrine. The historical perspective would be looking at this time period as historians, and from the patristic standpoint, we could look at this in a sense as a matter of biographical investigation. In our course today, we will be talking a look at all three of these perspectives and weaving them together so that a collage is created for the student, that he or she can understand this beautiful, historical time period.

But for our purposes, theology will perhaps be the most important standpoint. The purpose of this course is to train Christians for church service. We're not giving this course for graduate students of history. And so history and patristics are important too, but they will be seen from an ancillary perspective. The goal of all three areas is to help us to understand what is happening today in all the other areas. Church history can provide a bridge for the student that spans over the other theological disciplines. The history of exegesis is quite important. The history of church government and the church standards and all of these different disciplines can be seen as connecting with the history of the church. Oftentimes in my discussion with students before they begin this course or another course in church history, they are oftentimes confused and in a sense afraid of church history. The practical relevance is not always clearly apparent, but I'm confident that as you come

with me in this course, we'll see the importance of studying the ancient church for very practical Christianity.

That ends our introduction to the lecture. We begin now with a discussion and examination in point number 2 of our lecture outline of Philo Judaeus. Philo was born somewhere between 30 and 25 BC and died somewhere between AD 45 and 50. Our course in the ancient church will begin with him, a Jew, and we'll see how important his theologizing and his life were for the early Christian church.

Philo was what we call a Hellenized Jew; that is, he is a Jew that understood and lived in the world of the Greek language and culture. He maintained that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called by us today the Septuagint, was divinely inspired in its translation and contained the infallibly revealed will of God in the Mosaic law. As he attempted to understand that Bible, he employed the allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures. This had been used before his time by Greek philosophers. His theological work is a synthesis, a putting together, of the Old Testament with Greek philosophy and Greek culture. That's why we call him a Hellenized Jew. He used in his understanding of Moses and the law ideas that express the spirit and life of Greek philosophy and culture. He believed that the teaching of Moses, of course not as a Greek, was in complete accordance with the best that Greek culture had to offer. So in fact Greek theology and Hebrew theology were in his mind completely meshed.

Concerning his doctrine of God and his doctrine of human beings, Philo maintained that God is completely unchangeable, and that our place in the universe is at least in part to serve God. Our minds, the human mind, is made in the image of what he called the divine reason or logos, and that that human mind can therefore contemplate reality beyond space and time. The studies of general education that students had in the Greek schools could prepare the minds of human beings for the study of philosophy, which also was very helpful for understanding religion. However, Philo, as a Jew, knew that without divine revelation, God could not be fully understood, and he was convinced that that divine revelation is found in the Scriptures.

Who is God? God for Philo is the God of his father Abraham, a personal God who loves His creatures, even though they make mistakes, a God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and upon whose creative will the world and every creature are in

continued dependence. Yet, unfortunately, Philo fused his doctrine of God with the theology of Plato. Plato was a Greek philosopher. In fact, he did his best to show that what Greek philosophy had taught about God and human beings was virtually the same thing that the Old Testament taught about them. Philo virtually makes the Old Testament teach that which Greek philosophy, based upon human experience and not divine revelation, had taught. Wherever the Old Testament obviously conflicts with the teaching based on experience, Philo resorts to that biblical understanding which we've called allegory, and so the Mosaic account of the origin of the world, the creation of the world, and of the days of creation must not be taken as historical but as allegorical.

Matter and change for Philo are eternal. Therefore creation is not the bringing of the universe into existence out of nothing, but it is the molding of preexistent material. Original matter had no qualities, and God has no qualities that man can absolutely know. These are virtually taken as limiting concepts of one another; they are correlatives. Philo asserts belief in the idea of creation out of nothing, but to do this he uses allegory as a means of removing the historical character of the biblical doctrine of creation in general and of the creation of human beings in particular.

What is true with respect to the idea of creation is also true with respect to the fall of man. Philo says that the lower parts of the soul naturally turn to the things of sense and evil. It is the mind, the intellect, that must act as governor. It naturally does not always succeed. Thus, Philo virtually denies that originally the human beings were perfect in all aspects of their personality and that because of the fall, man and woman became sinful in all the aspects of their personality. For Philo, it is not possible that Scripture should identify one point in history at which time human beings are clearly confronted with the expressed will of God. The temporal world is made up of matter that has no quality. This matter makes it impossible for any fact of history to be the medium of the revelation of God to human beings. Certainly then it is impossible that there should be one particular point in history which is of all determinative significance; that is, one point where the world is created. The implications of his teachings are very important for the study of later theology.

Under Philo, then, our second point would be the problem of history. If there can be no one point in history when God created the earth, the implication for later Christian theologians would be that the decisive event of Christ breaking into our own time

would virtually be impossible. This problem, although not faced by Philo as a Jew, was especially a problem in modern theology. And I mention this especially as a precursor to the course in the modern age where you'll see that the problem of God breaking into time is not just a modern problem. It's one the church has struggled with from the very beginnings.

The third point concerning Philo concerns the problem of language. The problem of Philo's theology is not just the problem of history, but there is a problem in language as well. For Philo, no creaturely language is adequate to express the being of the transcendent Creator. That word *transcendent* means beyond all human comprehension and beyond human reality. Since the material world is not eternal, and is therefore dependent, so language is also incapable of expressing the eternalness of the transcendent Creator. This is a grave problem in the history of theology, and once again, this problem will rear its ugly head in the modern age.

As we look also at Philo's doctrine of the Logos, we see our fourth problem. Certain conclusions can be made concerning his doctrine. This Logos which I've mentioned comes from the Greek word meaning "word" or sometimes translated "reason," and the Logos of God in Philo's thought performs two functions. It helps God, so to speak, in creation and helps our minds to apprehend God. Philo as a Jew had to assert that it was God who created the heavens and the earth, but also he believed that this Logos helped God in creation. As Philo read his Bible, he saw that God created the world by His word and that He spoke to the prophets by His word. As we continue our study, we shall observe Philo's influence on Christian theologians, and Philo's thoughts will become more and more clear as we go ahead.

There is another aspect of Philo's thought that we should mention, and that's the possibility of the doctrine of the Trinity. As we have been looking at Philo, we must remember that Philo was a Jew and remained a Jew throughout all of his life. He was never converted to Christianity, and therefore it would be presuming too much to assert definitively that his theory was extremely important in the formation of early Christian theology. As I've thought about the influence of Philo in the ancient church, the question that I ask myself concerning him was, How could a Jew, even though an important Jew, be so influential in the early Christian community? And Philo was extremely important. There was an animosity in many sections of Christendom to the Jews, especially in the Greek

world. So what made Philo so different? Part of the answer is seen in his Jewish doctrine of a sovereign God, a doctrine embraced in within Christianity. His doctrine of the Logos could also be and was adapted to be applicable to Jesus of Nazareth by the Christians.

But there's a third element as well, and that is that there is also a triad in the thought of Philo, a triad that could perhaps be interpreted as a Trinity. In many of his writings, Philo says that to the contemplative soul, God appears like a triad consisting of Himself with His two chief powers, creative goodness and kingly power, which are symbolized by the cherubim. This thought may seem far away from the mature doctrine of the Trinity, and it is, but as we follow the pathways of early Christian Trinitarian thought, you will see that Philo's theory could as well be adapted to the Christian theologians.

This ends our brief look at Philo, and we move ahead now to the third point of today's lecture, and that concerns the philosophical schools and exegetical methodology of the apostolic age. Let's look first of all at exegetical methodology. We've mentioned in this first lecture various words such as allegorical method. We need to understand the sources of that method and other methods of interpreting the Scriptures which were employed by the early church. We're going to move ahead chronologically from the time period of Philo, but we should investigate his theory and see how it is applicable and will be used by the later church.

As I just mentioned, Philo implemented this allegorical method. During his period of time, during the earliest part of Christian history, there were other schools of interpretation besides the allegorical. There were the literalists, and Philo found them to be despicable. There were the rationalists, and those were the ones who had apostatized from Judaism and had become basically Greek philosophers. And then there were, according to Philo, the best interpreters, the allegorists. If it is not clear yet as to what an allegorist is, here are some examples of what Philo did with a text of Scripture. These examples are taken from the work that he wrote entitled *On the Allegories of the Sacred Laws*.

Concerning the creation of the world in six days, Philo says that the number six is only mentioned because it is a perfect number. God didn't actually rest on the seventh day, but since He stopped making mortal creatures, He worked on divine beings. To think that God actually planted a garden in paradise, Philo thinks is

impious. He says, “Let not such fabulous nonsense even enter our minds.” The meaning is that God implants terrestrial virtue in the human race. The Tree of Life is that most general virtue which some people call “goodness.” The river that goes forth out of Eden is also generic goodness. Its four heads are the four cardinal virtues.

In another place in the Old Testament when Jacob arrives at a certain place when the sun sets, this according to Philo doesn't mean that Jacob comes to a certain place when the sun sets, but it means that wisdom is acquired by training. And so Jacob comes to the divine word when the perceptive faculty is found to be useless. In other words, the meaning of the passage is not found in its historical content, but it means much more. When he says, “that I crossed over the Jordan with my staff,” the word *Jordan*, the river, doesn't mean river for Philo, it means baseness. The staff means discipline, and Jacob intends to say by discipline he had risen above baseness. This type of exegesis requires the abandonment of simple and instructive human history.

Point two. How was this type of method defensible? First, we must remember that it was the current literary methodology implemented in contemporary interpretations, but Philo also attempted to support his theory from Scripture. He says that in the book of Numbers 23:19 we find God is not a man and Deuteronomy 1:31 we find “the Lord Thy God bear thee as a man doth bear his son.” Philo sees in these two passages indications of the two methods of divine interpretation—the literal and the allegorical.

Third, finally we should see that Philo gives certain rules for proper allegorical interpretation. Some of the rules totally exclude the possibility of a literal sense. In others, the two senses live side by side. Some of the rules are as follows:

1. The literal sense is excluded when there is a contradiction or a statement unworthy of God. For example, in the Garden of Eden as Adam hid himself from God, that can't be literally understood as hiding because no one can hide from God.
2. The two senses are side by side when an expression is repeated. For example, oftentimes we have in the Hebrew Bible, “Abraham, Abra-

ham,” and so that means that this should be understood in two senses—the literal and the allegorical. Or when there is a superfluous word, for example, in the Hebrew Bible we’ll read, “In eating you shall eat.” That second “eat” isn’t necessary, and that’s our key to understand that there should be a twofold sense to that passage. This means, for example, that according to Philo, eating in a proper spirit and conscious knowledge.

Philo also says the third rule for allegory is that particles, adverbs, and prepositions may be forced into the service of allegory, and he says that each word, fourthly, may have all its possible meanings apart from all context. For example, the lip of the Nile means to beware of Pharaoh’s speech. It certainly doesn’t mean the bank of a river.

Looking also now at the next part of our first lecture, we come to the philosophical schools of the apostolic age. In the first century AD, the older schools of philosophy, the Platonic coming from Plato or the Aristotelian from Aristotle, were not very popular, but rather the most popular school was the Stoic school, which was founded in about 300 BC by a person named Zeno of Citium. The other important school was the Epicurean school, also found in the fourth century BC. Both of these schools were quite in vogue. As you may know, the Stoics could have nothing to do with the gods of the Greeks. They regarded the stories about them as allegories that at best could affirm the belief in a supreme reality that is imminent in the universe. At this time lived the famous Stoic Seneca, who died in AD 65, at the orders of Nero. Seneca wrote a book on *De Clementia* (*On Clemency*), and later the Reformer Calvin will write a commentary precisely on this book.

Seneca’s ideals were basically good. He advocated the brotherhood of human beings and stressed ethical and moral behavior. The Epicureans didn’t have the Stoic contempt for the Greek gods but thought that while the gods existed, they nevertheless had no concern for the lives of mortals here on earth. There’s a thread that connects these two philosophies. They both were searching after inner peace, and they both studied moral problems. If we might simply evaluate the philosophical culture in which we find the earliest Christianity, we observe a general inner unrest and searching for answers to questions which afflict the soul.

Perhaps our own culture is in many ways similar to that of the earliest Christianity.

The generation of the last two decades has searched for inner security in various different non-Christian answers—in materialism, in drugs—and in some way, the Jesus movement of later half of the 1960s and early 1970s, and perhaps also that reversion to materialism in our own time period can be seen as expressions of this same inner unrest that afflicted the souls of the Greeks so many centuries ago.

As we progress chronologically (point B), leaving the time of the writing of the New Testament and enter the period of the apostolic fathers and apologists, we observe Platonism again coming into favor. What is the period of the apostolic fathers and apologists? That would be the time period immediately after the writing of the New Testament. The apostolic fathers are those Christian leaders who at least tradition says were taught by the apostles themselves, those who were too young to have any direct encounter with our Lord but who could have been taught, and it was believed that they were taught, by the writers of the Bible.

After the apostolic fathers comes the time period of the apologists. And we all know what it is to apologize, but the apologists did more than apologize for being Christians. They were the Christians who stood face to face with an unbelieving world and made their defense for their belief in Christianity, and they tried to show that Christianity should not be persecuted just because people confessed belief in this Jesus of Nazareth. During their time period, the time period of the apostolic fathers and apologists, Platonism, the philosophy of Plato, comes back into vogue. This Platonism, however, has modified itself and has accepted certain parts of the systems of other philosophical schools, and this is represented primarily in the philosopher Plutarch, who lived around AD 100 and who was a Platonist except at the Stoic emphasis upon moral behavior. The Stoic philosopher [and emperor], Marcus Aurelius, who lived from 121 to 180, accepted some of the ideas concerning reality that were Plato's.

The next school that was important was the school of Gnosticism. As perhaps you know from readings in one of our textbooks, especially the book by J. N. D. Kelly (see the lecture outline for information on that book), there are many different schools of Gnosticism, and certain themes ran throughout all the systems of Gnosticism. Gnosticism, coming from the Greek word *gnosis*,

maintains that there is a knowledge that is to be had by those who are philosophically aware and that knowledge brings salvation. Gnosticism then was a philosophical school that attempted to give knowledge that brings salvation. Gnosticism in general affirmed an antithesis; that is, a contraction between Spirit and matter. Here there is much diversity of detail in the various systems. In some systems, the ones that approach more nearly the Judeo-Christian heritage, they envision some type of an original man, a human being that fell from heaven. In the Ptolemaic variety of Gnosticism, however, there is no original man. But the main point to remember is that these all affirm this antithesis between Spirit and matter. The supreme deity always remains in the sphere of the Spirit, and this deity then sends some type of Savior who helps to obtain release for those who are captive in the sphere of matter. This knowledge that brings salvation is the knowledge that deliverance to the realm of the Spirit is through the Savior.

This ends our look at the important philosophical schools of the apostolic age. We've looked at the Stoics; we've looked at the Epicureans; Seneca; we've seen how important Gnosticism is. We've looked at the exegetical methodology of the ancient church period. We have taken a look at the life and times of Philo Judaeus, and we've seen why we need to study church history. In the following lectures, we'll begin to look in more detail at some of these apostolic fathers and apologists and see what they taught, why they taught what they taught, and how important it is for us today.