This is lecture number 1—Reformation Patterns. Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is Garth Rosell, professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston, and it’s my privilege to be your instructor as we explore the development of the Christian church from the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century right down to the present time. This is an exciting story, and I hope that many of you will become as fascinated and captivated by these intriguing events and remarkable people as I am. I teach church history because I love it and because I am convinced that it can help us not only grow in our own faith but also to become more competent in our ministries on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ. So welcome to our class, and may God bless each of you as you study.

And now, as I will do in each class, I want you to join me as we begin in a moment of prayer. Let us pray. Good and gracious God, we come to you at the beginning of this course asking for your guidance through the Holy Spirit. Help us to be open to what you have to teach us. For we pray this in Christ’s name. Amen.

Some two thousand years have passed since the birth of Christianity and the establishment of the church of Jesus Christ. During that period the progress of the church has had its bright moments of glory and its dark valleys of shame, its periods of rapid growth and its times of decline, its eras of compassionate and Christ-like ministry, and its exhibition of petty and dishonest and unjust maneuverings of treacherous men and women. All of this is part of the history of the church, however we might personally feel about it. There are those, of course, who choose to see only part of church history, focusing either on its high points or its shady valleys. I’m often reminded of Professor John Wisdom’s parable of the plot of ground upon which two men came one day. Noting what he perceived as signs of order and design, the first man commented that the original plantings must have been made by a gardener. The other, noting the weeds and disordered,
disagreed. There could not have been a gardener here. No self-respecting green thumb would have produced such chaos. The evidence for both was the same; only the perspectives of the two men were different.

Although the parable was first written with regard for the arguments of the existence of God, I think it has an interesting parallel in the study of church history as well. For some have looked at the church’s past and seen only the good, the right, and the fit. For them the church has always stood the test of ethics, truth, and appropriateness. For these folk, church history provides the ultimate vindication for the truth of the Christian faith. For them, many of them, the progress of the Christian community has been from strength to strength, from triumph to triumph.

Others on the contrary have concentrated on the church’s darker side, tending rather to see its corruptions, its failures, and its defeats. From this perspective, church history becomes the ultimate weapon against the faith, the apologetic for anti-church, and we see this in the interesting writing of Bertram Russell, Why I Am Not a Christian.

Still others, unwilling to ignore the reality of both strength and weakness in the church’s past, have fallen upon an ingenious mediating device, distinguishing between our history or our tradition or denomination or church, which is good, and their tradition or church or denomination, which is bad. Thus when weaknesses, apostasy, or corruption are found in the church, they are almost always seen as the products of the other traditions, of other denominations, of other people, of other congregations, of the thems. This has made it possible, for example, for Protestants on occasion to relate with a kind of joyful glee the tales of corrupt popes or of convent hanky-panky since such practices were done by the thems. On the other hand, self-righteous Catholics have often pointed with relish to the deaths of a Michael Servetus or a Mary Dyre at the hands of Protestants, as if that blood was not also on their hands.

I suspect that many of us who listen today fall into one or other of these categories; that is, either we have uncritically tended to see the church’s history as an unmixed apologetic either for faith or against faith, or perhaps even more likely we have tended to place the goods in our history and the bads in their history. If my assumption is correct, then our task is before us. It’s a task of reexamining history in an effort to more adequately handle the
adversity of goods, bads, and in betweens which we find there.

In short what I would like to suggest to you today, as you probably already guessed, is that none of these options is really adequate to handle the diversity of the Christian church through its nearly two thousand years of history. A fourth option, I think, is necessary. We must learn to embrace the whole of Christian history as our own, learning from its mistakes, celebrating and glorying in its victories. And I suggest that this is important for us, particularly as evangelical Christians, for three major reasons—the nature of truth, the nature of the evidence that we use, and the nature the church itself. Let me talk with you just briefly about these three areas.

First the nature of truth. While all scholarship should ideally be linked to the pursuit of truth, wherever that truth might lead us, the Christian scholar has a particularly strong stake in doing so. If God is author of all truth, as I firmly believe Him to be, and I hope you do too, then our pursuit of truth ought to lead us toward God rather than away from God, yet strangely it has been the church which has so often stood in the way of scholarly pursuit. Haven’t some of you heard over the years the critique of education is dangerous for the Christian faith, or the university as the destroyer of faith, or scholarship as undermining of true religious fervor? This is a statement which all too often is spoken from Christians to Christians as if it were more honoring to God for us to abandon our pursuit of truth rather than to vigorously pursue it.

Well, let me suggest two affirmations in light of those kinds of critiques. First of all, that truth is one. It is absolute, not as is so often claimed today relative, growing simply out of one’s context, one’s own person. Christ Himself is truth, and if truth is found in God, as one, as united in God’s created order, then we move to the second affirmation and that is, that any interference with the wholehearted pursuit of truth is fundamentally against what God has intended for us. A Christian with faith has nothing, in fact, to fear from the facts. A Christian historian who draws the line limiting the field of inquiry at any point whatsoever is admitting the limits of his or her own faith. A Christian, in fact, need not be inhibited in the least degree from following the line of truth. Indeed, he or she is bound by integrity to pursue truth. It should be, in fact, part of our spiritual worship. Christians, I’ve always felt, are freer than any others who are limited by their own limitations of understanding of God’s power in the world. We ought to be
the most free of all to study and think, to use the minds God has
given to us. The implications of these affirmations that truth is
one and that we should pursue it with enthusiasm and vigor, the
implication of these affirmations are legion. Let me mention a
few.

The gospel frees us to pursue our studies without the fear that
such efforts will damage our faith. Indeed, such efforts ought
to strengthen faith. Our studies can indeed become an act of
obedience and of spiritual worship. The reality of weakness and
failure in ourselves and in the history of the church need not force
us to despair or cut us off from huge chunks of our heritage. We
can, in fact, with joy embrace the whole history of God’s people—
goods and bads alike—as part of our own spiritual rootage.

In addition to this stress upon the nature of truth, I would add
a second factor, and that is the nature of our evidence; namely,
the sources upon which we rely for our study of the past. Our
basic source, of course, is the Bible. We are people of the Book. A
recurring theme again and again in my teaching, and you’ll hear
this over and over, is the need to test all of our thinking, of all of
our behavior, of all of our understandings of the past and present
alike, against the teachings of the Bible. The Scriptures, you see,
are our final and sufficient rule of faith and life, the very Word of
God.

History, therefore, becomes a helpful interpretive tool in
understanding the way Scripture applies to our lives and our
work. Biblical studies in seminary curricula are focused upon
understanding of the Scripture, rightly dividing the Word of
truth, and the focus there is basically upon those centuries in
which the scriptural materials were written. Ministry areas, the
practical department, is often focused upon the present context,
our understanding of the world today, of the cultures in which
we live and move. History and systematic theology, along with
some related disciplines, are those elements which bring the link
between the first century and our own, and it can be a helpful
interpretive tool not in supplanting Scripture, because nothing
must do that, but in helping us to rightly understand the meanings
of God’s Word for His people in the world today as has been true
in the past. Our basic source, then, is always the Scripture, and
we need to go back again and again as we look at the practice
of the church, whatever century and whatever group; we need to
test that reality against the Scripture and its teachings and its
affirmations.
Along with that, we need to reaffirm the importance of humility. We don't ever understand everything perfectly. You see, we're creatures, not the Creator. History is always reconstructed from evidence. Some people in the past have created their own histories for their own purposes, but in this course, we will try to tell the story as accurately as we know how, because we feel that is honoring to God. History is reconstructed from evidence, and some of that evidence points in directions of things that we don’t particularly like or practices or developments that we wish were different, but we need to understand the story correctly so that we can test it once again against Scripture and either reject or accept it as appropriate for our lives today. Our telling of the story, however, is never final or perfect. I like the little phrase, “The larger the island of knowledge, the greater the shoreline of ignorance.” And on occasion, this shoreline of ignorance is all too apparent, and that will emerge for us again and again throughout our course.

The nature of truth, the nature of evidence, and finally the nature of the church itself point us in the direction of embracing the whole of church history as our own. The church’s nature is that of human and divine mix. Human in that it is a community of sinners like ourselves who have been saved by God’s grace. Divine in that it was founded by God. It’s empowered by God’s Spirit, and it’s ruled by the living Word. This is why we find such disparity so often between what we call the ideal and the real in the church: what the church is meant to be and what it actually is.

The Christian church has been described in many ways across its history—as the body of Christ, one of my favorite themes, as a fellowship of faith, as a new creation, as the people of God, or as the salt of the earth or the boat or the ark or unleavened bread or the bride of Christ or exiles or ambassadors, and you can name many others in that famous list. None has captured the interest of the historian more, however, than the characterization which was given to the church at Nicea in AD 325, that first of the great councils of the church.

During that pivotal event, the church was described in the now famous outline which we call “the four marks of the church.” The church is an institution which is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. I’m sure that many of you have heard that characterization. The church is one. It is united. How could there possibly be more than one such body founded by Christ with Christ as its single head and the authority of the Word to guide it? The church is to be holy.
Being of divine origin, the church must reflect the righteousness of God. Its members are to hunger and thirst after righteousness. The church is to be catholic; that is, universal. God intended for His church to be worldwide, to include all classes and conditions of people, to touch every nation, every part of the globe, every race. All of the divisions that we know are divisions for which Christ has engaged his church—apostolic, the church continues to teach the true doctrine of the apostles, which have been taught since the very founding of the church.

Now these four marks of the church give us a picture briefly of what the church ideally is to be, yet through its nearly two thousand years of history, the church has seemed to be anything but one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In many ways, the church's history is a commentary upon the bickering discord and division which is so much a part of its past. We don't need to look very far to discover the great schisms and divisions of the church life, particularly in recent history. The church which is to be one, that is, it is to be united in the way that Christ Himself prayed that the church might be united in that great high priestly prayer of John 17, actually appears in our day to be very badly divided around the world.

I hold in my hand an edition of Frank S. Mead's *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. This is put out periodically by Abingdon Press to describe briefly the various denominational groupings which we have just in this country alone, and I look at the table of contents and I see literally hundreds of different denominational groups. You can start with the As and the Adventists. There are the Seventh Day Adventists and the Advent Christian Church, the Primitive Advent Christian Church, the Church of God Abrahamic Faith, the Life and Advent Union, and you go right through the As to the Bs and you come to the Baptists—the American Baptist Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Association, the General Baptist Conference of America, the Bethel Baptist Assembly, the Christianity Unity Baptist Association, the Conservative Baptist Association of America, the Duck River and Kindred Association of Baptists, Baptist Church of Christ, Freewill Baptist, General Baptist, General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, General Conference of the Evangelical Baptist Church, Inc., General Six Principle Baptist, Independent Baptist Church of America, Landmark Baptist, National Baptist Evangelical Life and Soul-Saving Assembly of the USA, National Primitive Baptist Convention of the USA, North American Baptist Association,
North American Baptist General Conference, Primitive Baptist, Regular Baptist, Separate Baptists in Christ, Seventh Day Baptist, Seventh Day Baptist German, Two Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Baptist, United Baptist, United Free Will Baptist, and so on. It’s incredible when you look down through the list at how divided denominationally we are just here in America, and then when you see that worldwide, you can’t help but be struck by the enormous diversity within Christianity, not only of three major groupings, of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant bodies, but now all of the subgroups within each of those bodies. The church is to be one, but the church today seems badly divided.

Some, of course, have enjoyed exploring ways in which you can illustrate that division. Back some years, *Christian Century* put out a series of penultimate articles, studying the denominational handbooks to find unusual name combinations for churches and pastors. Some of these are kind of fun, and they illustrate some of the diversity that we have in our names, as well as in our denominational groupings in our church communities. Let me give you a few examples. They found that there was a Gunpowder Friends Meeting that was located in Sparks, Maryland. So you have gunpowder and sparks together. You have Orange Church on the Green in Orange, Connecticut, and Brown’s Wonder Church in Lebanon, Indiana, and Cannonball Church in Cannonball, North Dakota, but the interesting thing that they had in these articles is that they put together certain pastors from these denominational handbooks with certain churches. Let me give you a few examples. They had a joint ministry of Pastors Boots and Wade who went to Sinking Springs Lutheran Church. Or Pastor Vigil went to Lookout Lutheran Church. And they had Pastor Kermit Clickner of Canoe Camp and Covington Christian Churches. My favorite is in Virginia: the Rev. George Shivers served for a time at the Naked Creek Baptist Church. Well, enough of that, but you can see where this diversity, which is part of the reality of our church life today, can lead one. The church is to be one, and yet in our day the church seems to be very badly divided and sometimes angrily divided, one part from the other.

The church is also to be holy, yet the church does not seem very holy during much of its history—greed, wrath, immorality, and brutality have raised their ugly heads more often than we like to admit. Indeed in the very place one might expect to see the most freedom from sin, we often find the least righteousness. We have all too many examples of how church leaders have used their position for personal gain. The church is to be holy, and yet there
is so much failure, so much sin, so much that must bring sorrow to the heart of God.

The church is to be catholic; that is, it is to be found universally among all classes and conditions, and yet today as we look at the world, we see enormous disproportionate division of the church around the globe. Here in America it's not unusual in some of our major cities on one main corner to find two, three, sometimes even four churches with different names, sometimes with different ethnic backgrounds, and the like, but four of them all on the same corner, oftentimes putting ads in the paper or sending people door to door or having a mail campaign or something in order to compete with the others for members. Some areas are even overchurched. In fact, some smaller communities that I know have far more churches than can be supported by the sheer number of people who live there, even if everybody goes to church.

And yet if you look in many parts of the world, you'll find that there are areas in which there are thousands, indeed tens of thousands of people without one Christian church or without one Christian witness. What must God think of this as He looks down upon this world which He made, loving people of every race and group, and yet finding in so many places competition among churches because there are too few people to keep them running? In other places there is not one witness for the gospel. Shouldn’t that at least raise in our minds the question of the need for Christian missions worldwide? Shouldn’t we be addressing that reality and insuring through missionary outreach that the church is genuinely universal? I’m going to come back to that theme, as you probably guessed, when we talk more about the missionary outreach of the church, but the church which is called to be catholic or universal is badly distributed now in the world, disproportionately distributed, and we need to be aware of that not only overseas, but as some of you are aware, right here in our own country where we have churches that are clustered in the suburbs and oftentimes downtown in the very heart of our urban centers, the churches have fled, the buildings are now used as social service agencies or put to some athletic purpose and the Christian witness has evaporated from huge population centers. And we need to take a look at that reality as well.

The church is to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We are to be insurers of the truth of the gospel within the church. We are to stand against heresy. We are to proclaim the faith once delivered to the saints, that faith which Christ Himself taught and which
His apostles communicated to the early Christian communities in the first and second centuries.

How do we preserve apostolicity? How do we guard against heresy in our day? I think there are a couple of ways in which we ought to be thinking about this. First, we need to distinguish truth from error. That’s always important in the life of the church. And how do we do that? By testing what is thought and what is practiced against the Scriptures, and I come back again to that theme that I sounded a little earlier. Second, we need to do this, that is, distinguishing truth from error, without pride and with genuine Christian love. What is needed today are men and women who believe deeply, who believe passionately, and who love just as passionately as Christ loved. A joyous, winsome, enthusiastic band of believers who are available to God for His good purposes and who are faithful to Christ and His Word. What marvelous things could happen if this were true in our churches today. The church needs to seek to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. All of these elements are critically important for us as we look at the history of the church and try to discover there what God has for us in our world today.

We need to recognize also that Christ Himself is the one who established the church, and the great text which I point you back to as we start this course together is Matthew 16:13–20. Let me read it for you and make a few comments. “Now when Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, ‘Who do men say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ And He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ And Jesus answered, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven, and I tell you, you are Peter [Petras] and on this rock [Petra], I will build my church [the ecclesian] and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.’ Then He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.”

There are those scholars who have argued that Christ intended to establish the kingdom, but what emerged, unhappily from their perspective, was the church. Matthew 16, I think, makes it absolutely clear that Jesus Himself intended to establish the church
to carry on that great ministry which He Himself had launched, the ministry of proclaiming the Good News, of healing the sick, of caring for those who needed care, that marvelous ministry which we have described for us in the Gospels. Jesus, knowing that He would be taken up into heaven, left us empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on precisely that ministry which He had Himself launched while He was here on earth. Matthew 16, you see, is always tied to Acts 2, the intention of the establishment of the church and the Gospels, the actual establishment and empowering of that church in that great Pentecost event in Acts 2.

One of the interesting features of this text is that Christ Himself intended that frail, weak, clay-like human beings would be the ones who would take up His task and do His work as His church. This little phrase, “I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock you will build my church,” has been discussed in many corners of the church over the centuries, and it’s been a matter of no little debate. Some have suggested that Peter is symbolized here as the rock on which Christ will build the church, but the rock is not so much Peter as it is the faith of Peter or the faith of the apostles or, as some interpret it, Christ Himself. All of these interpretations have merit, and I think all can be incorporated into this text, but we dare not overlook the most obvious meaning of all, and that is, that Christ is saying, “Peter, it’s upon you and all of those Peters that are going to come after you—all of my disciples—that I am building my church and, in fact, as strange as it might seem to you, I’m entrusting you with the ministry that is so precious, this treasure bound up in very human form.”

I like to think that this text also means, “You are Peter, and on you, Peter, and on all of those who come after you as my disciples, I am building my church and the very powers of death, the gates of hell, shall not prevail against it.” What a marvelous privilege we have to be entrusted, commissioned by our Lord, to be the church and to carry on that ministry which He’s given us.

Protestants all too often overlook Peter because of the embarrassment of what they think is the interpretation that has been given by the Roman Catholic Church. Catholics often overlook the kind of emphases which the Protestants give. We need to learn from one another and discover once again that though the church is founded upon Christ supremely and though the church is built upon the faith of those who were to come after, it is also in very human terms built by the people who make up the church, the faithful. Folk like Peter who swung from one end
of the pendulum to the other, weren’t always reliable, who were sometimes prone to deny, but in the end were empowered by the Spirit to do God’s work in the world today.

What a privilege it is, and I take great comfort from this text, that despite all of my weaknesses, God has entrusted me with His great work, and I thank Him for that and rejoice in it. And in doing it, in looking back over all of the centuries of those who helped to prepare the way for me and my work in the church, and you in the work that you’re doing in the church, we learn from their failures, we rejoice in the great triumphs and success, the exhibitions of faith which are in the past, but we embrace the whole of the history of the church as our own, because it is our own. The church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and though we value those separate traditions which nourish us, and I hope that at the end of this course you will love your own denomination, you’ll love your own church more deeply than you do now, because we treasure those particular forms in which we have been nourished that have taught us the faith and that have allowed us to serve Christ. We don’t diminish any of those, but they are always subject to that larger reality which is Christ’s great church as a whole, and we embrace it all, with all of its difficulties, as well as its strengths, and we learn from it. We seek for truth. We use the minds God has given us without fear of destruction of our faith, but knowing that our very search for truth is a search which is honoring to God.

We use the evidence well so that we do not create history or try to develop it for our own purposes, but we try to tell the story accurately so that we can learn from it, its weaknesses, as well as its strengths. And we come back again and again to the very core, the foundation upon which we build all church history, namely, the great Scriptures, the revelation of God, which are our rule of faith and practice.

This is the task which then is before us, and we're fortunate to have wonderful help, wonderful resources available as we move from lecture to lecture. I’ll be mentioning many of these as we go through the various sections of modern church history. But let me also mention that we will be using Kenneth Scott Latourette’s excellent History of Christianity, and that text will be of great help to us as we work our way through now with his second volume, which takes the story from the Reformation to the present time, and I’ll be referring to that from time to time.
There are many other excellent general texts which are available to us also for the study of church history. Let me mention a few of these in case you should like to pull out from the library some alternatives for some additional reading. You have Bruce Shelley’s fine little survey of church history, *Church History in Plain Language*, which was put out by Word Press in 1982. And one of the old classics, Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church*, eight volumes, which you can find in many good libraries, published by William Eerdmans over several years. And the second volume of Jusio Gonzalez’s *The Story of Christianity*, and Paul Johnson’s *History of Christianity*, published in New York by Athenaeum Press in 1976. And maybe one of the great classics of all time, Williston Walker’s *A History of the Christian Church*, fourth edition, Charles Scribner’s Sons, revised in 1985. And there are many others that are available to you as well, and I would commend those general studies to you if you need further background within the general flow of church history, and then we’ll be looking at specific tasks as we move on from one topic to another throughout the course.

So as we in this term explore the history of the church, its bright moments of glory, its dark valleys of shame, its times of compassionate ministry, and its periods of corruption, we can do so in the confidence that it is all part of our heritage—glorying in its successes, learning from its failures, loving its participants, bowing before the authority of its Lord, listening to what the Spirit has to teach us through it. May God bless you as you study the history of the church and as work through these materials together.