



PART

1

**Why We Study Church  
History—Purpose**



**M**any church history books I have studied begin their stories with the assumption that their readers know why they are reading the book. This one does not. Although I consider the topic of church history to be interesting, useful, and important, others do not recognize the immediate and inherent value of this academic discipline. This is understandable, especially given that a portion of the public regards history as boring and the church as irrelevant.

So why should you study church history? In this part, I root my response to this daunting question in the history of the church—a rather brazen if not circular approach, to be sure. We study the history of Christianity, in part, so that we may embody the four characteristics of the church as suggested in the New Testament and codified at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Nicene Creed, which the council reformulated at this council and circulated to the global church, has been in constant use in churches in all pockets of the globe since that time. In the creed, after the prior sections on God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it delineates the “four marks” of the church: its oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

In each the four chapters in this part, I offer a response to why you should study church history. Although I use the original language given in the creed, I also fully recognize that the church has not perfectly lived out its vocation to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Nevertheless, I suggest that we study church history for four reasons: because the church is our family, because church history allows us to learn from our mistakes, because Christians from different time periods and time zones give us needed perspective, and because the study of the church’s rootedness in Christ goads us on to faithfulness in the midst of changing cultures. I look forward to your company as we explore church history together!



## Chapter 1

# The Church Strives to Be *One* Family



Several years ago, I attended a family reunion. Although held in Texas, where my father's side of the family has called home for six generations, relatives from other states and even foreign countries attended. During the two-day event, I spent most of my time with those I had known since childhood: my two brothers (of course), my first cousins, their parents, and my grandparents. However, I also socialized with second and third cousins, distant granduncles and grandaunts, and many other relatives reportedly once or twice removed from family members I scarcely knew existed.

At the reunion, I watched videos of great-grandparents who had died before I was born but who obviously played a pivotal role in my family's life. I heard heartwarming tales about my ancestors who immigrated to the United States in pursuit of their dreams. I listened to tragic stories about family members who had divorced, died prematurely, or otherwise experienced some calamity that left emotional scars on those closest to me. I held in my hands silver cutlery, porcelain dishes, and other articles my forebearers used. I glanced at photographs of people who looked eerily like me despite differences in hairstyle and wardrobe.

### **Welcome to Your Story: The Story of the Church**

Studying church history is like attending a family reunion, but on a grander and even cosmic scale (Heb. 12:22-23). There are individuals from all nationalities, all walks of life, and all spheres of influence. There are those, like siblings

and first cousins, whom we have known our entire lives, just as there are those, like third cousins and more distant relatives, with whom we are much less familiar. There are people we love to be around and others who are gossipers and rabble-rousers whom we hasten to avoid. There are stories too incredible to believe, too heartbreaking to ponder, and too sacrosanct to repeat.

The study of church history teems with stories of extraordinary courage and profound love, of shameful characters falling into disgrace and disrepute, of tragic events, innovative theories, world-defining movements and institutions, ancient rivalries, and family splits. It consists of ancient relics, faded pictures, half-standing buildings, theological apologies, autobiogra-



What's your definition of "the church"? Depending on how you define it, it may include or exclude the holy departed who are now "in Christ" (1 Thess. 4:16) in the heavenly places. What role do the holy departed in Christ play in the church?

phies, Bibles, journals, letters, poetry and fiction, tomes, decrees, weapons, sacred vessels, frescoes, statues, sculptures, murals, graffiti, icons, cemeteries, castles and palaces, court records, wills, and remarkably enough, living relics like you and me.

Although it is sometimes dismissed as irrelevant or impersonal, church history is arguably the most relevant and personal subject in all of theology. It's a mega-story reverberating through the centuries and encompassing both you and me—and many others we will never know. It explains the most important and intimate features of our lives. It has given shape to our beliefs, worship practices, lifestyle choices, hopes and fears, and decisions concerning a whole cluster of issues related to our education, employment, friendships, marriage, and childrearing. In short, church history is a family affair. It's not simply a story that happened to someone in the past. It's *your* story, for it is intimately concerned with your other family—the church.

## The One Family of Christ Jesus: The Church

In addition to our earthly families, whether biological or adoptive, the Bible speaks of a spiritual family united in Christ. This spiritual family is called

“the church”—from the Greek *ekklesia*, more literally translated “the ones called out [of the world].” The apostle Paul, in one of his most poignant letters, proclaims to “all the members of God’s family who are with me, to the *ekklesiads* of Galatia” that “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal. 1:2; 3:26). This dramatic declaration, particularly the second portion, serves as the crescendo of his argument in this brief letter—



Did you know that, in Christ, you are related to some of the most interesting and inspiring individuals to ever walk the earth? How does their faithfulness affect how you live the Christian life?

and arguably of all of his letters in the New Testament. Despite economic, ethnic, linguistic, vocational, and gender distinctions among those living in Galatia, as elsewhere in the world, the Galatian Christians are “all one [family] in Christ Jesus” (3:28).

According to the Nicene Creed, the oneness of the family of Christ is the “first mark” of the church. The Christian church, the fourth-century document explains, is “one.” The idea of the oneness of the church comes directly from the pages of the New Testament. In a celebrated passage that later Christians incorporated into the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, the book of Ephesians underscores both the unity and the oneness of the family of God: “[Make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-6).

Over time, individuals and church communities from all parts of the world have affirmed belief in the oneness of Christ’s family. In one of the earliest regional church disputes, a bishop in North Africa developed a theory of the church that still commands credence in many churches. The bishop’s name was Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258). He lived in what is now Tunisia at the height of Christian persecution in the Roman Empire. In 251, he wrote a book titled *The Unity of the Church* to emphasize the oneness and indivisibility of the church. In the book, Bishop Cyprian famously asserted, “You cannot have God as Father without the Church as Mother.”<sup>1</sup> Later in the book, he went on to write:



Although there is a small percentage of Christians today living in North African countries like Tunisia, Christianity was widely practiced throughout North Africa for centuries before the global expansion of Islam beginning in the seventh century CE.

God is one, and Christ is one, and his Church is one, and the faith is one, and the people are joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord. Unity cannot be severed; nor can one body be separated by a division of its structure, nor torn into pieces, with its entrails wrenched asunder by laceration. Whatever has proceeded from the womb cannot live and breathe in its detached condition, but loses the substance of health.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is easy to get lost in the details, Bishop Cyprian was addressing an issue that directly affects Christians today, particularly in North America. This issue relates to the nature of the church—what is called ecclesiology. In effect, this North African bishop argued for the existence of only one family of Christ on earth—again, one church.

## Many Members of the One Family

Most of us will not agree with all of Bishop Cyprian's conclusions, but the history of Christianity has safeguarded the concept of the oneness of the family of Christ despite the obvious fact that each century has witnessed church divisions, factions, splits, and reformations. At its most basic level, the oneness and the unity of the family of Christ refers, so to speak, not to the branches of the tree but to the root. Even though we come from the same rootedness in Jesus the Messiah, the spiritual family of which you and I are a part has sprouted many branches over its two thousand years of existence. Over time, some of these branches scarcely resemble one another. Finding commonalities between the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Mennonite Church, for instance, proves challenging. That's because a casual glance at their distinct expressions of theology and practice suggests more differences than similarities. However, as we look beyond the leaves, move aside some of the soil, and investigate the seeds that distinguish these two



Christian branches, we should begin to recognize their common rootedness in Christ.

Truth be told, the issue we are discussing is an ancient one that predates Christianity. We can address it in the form of a perennial philosophical question: What is the relationship between the one and the many—the universal and the particular? Once again, we may turn to the apostle Paul for a response to this question. In addition to the unity of the one church, Paul also wrote frequently about the diversity of that one family. “We who are many,” he addressed to the conflict-ridden Christians in Corinth, “are one body” (1 Cor. 10:17). Later, in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, he developed this notion of diversity within unity: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another” (Rom. 12:4-5).

Although Paul recognized the unity that believers share in Christ, he also oversaw and corresponded with churches from all around the Mediterranean. Due to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences existing among them across the Roman Empire, these churches no doubt differed on any number of issues. Paul, in fact, as a culturally intelligent global missionary, responded to issues that arose in his churches differently depending on the context—whether it was demanding that his disciple Timothy undergo circumcision out of consideration for the Jewish population or, contrariwise, prohibiting his disciple Titus from being circumcised in order to prove that Gentiles do not have to become Jews before becoming Christians (Gal. 2:1-3; 5:2-4; Acts 16:1-3).

Returning to the passage in Romans, Paul meant to underscore that Christians—particularly those living in fellowship together in the large and multicultural city of Rome—did not live or die unto themselves. Rather, they existed as one spiritual family whose different members served various functions and roles for the betterment of the whole community: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:6-8).

Although Paul was not speaking to the issue of church denominations, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the one family of Christ expresses itself faithfully through its distinct denominational members. According to

this interpretation, the different theological “members” of the one body of Christ resemble different “gifts” that each church tradition or denomination displays. Put simplistically, each denominational member contributes a different gift to the one Christian body for its collective edification. It was under the oversight of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, for instance, that monasticism was born and spread across the global church—eventually leading to the preservation of countless Christian artifacts, documents, and Bibles. And it has been the Pentecostal churches in the past century that have transformed communities all over the known world, leading to the growth of Christianity in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.

Over time, individual churches and church traditions have gotten into the unfortunate habit of taking their one or two gifts away from the global Christian community in order to use them for themselves. This is understandable to an extent, but the result is that individual churches and traditions not only harbor suspicion toward other Christian traditions but also produce a form of theological greed in which we hoard gifts given for the whole church for ourselves. John Donne (1571–1631), an English author who became an Anglican priest, famously wrote in one of his poems, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”<sup>3</sup> Told from one perspective, church history is the study of various ecclesial islands floating in a sea of theological division and distrust. Rather than building bridges between the islands and sharing our individual gifts with our distant relatives, we have often gone the way of ignoring the actual existence of these islands or of maligning the way they operate as well as the distant relatives who govern them.

## **Practicing Hospitality toward Distant Relatives**

One of the benefits of studying church history is the opportunity it affords us to practice hospitality toward distant theological relatives. It is easy and natural for us to think only about ourselves and those closest to us, but it does not seem to exhibit the kind of love that the New Testament enjoins. As 1 Peter exhorts us, “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (4:8-10).



If it is true that “love covers a multitude of sins,” one might make the argument that we could yield our “correct doctrine” for the sake of love. Is there ever a time when it is better to intentionally sacrifice doctrine for the sake of love, specifically when it comes to non-essential doctrine?

The “constant love” about which this letter speaks to early Christians is linked closely with the demonstration of hospitality toward other Christians, likely believers who came from other churches.<sup>4</sup> The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) once wrote, “Strange as it may seem, it is still true, that those who fail to understand other churches than their own are not the people who care intensely about theology, but [are] theological dilettantes.”<sup>5</sup> The study of churches from other Christian traditions disabuses us of the notion that we can have a family without grandparents and great-grandparents—and granduncles and third cousins. It is not without reason that the Orthodox tradition has historically seen little difference between Catholics and Protestants, given that the latter came from the former and necessarily imprinted its DNA onto the Protestant churches.<sup>6</sup> As much as we may attempt to live out our theology on our own, we cannot deny the work of our ancestors in the past or the existence of our second and third cousins in the present.

## Conclusion: Family First

To bring this chapter to a conclusion, I have attempted to answer in part the lingering question as to why we study church history. In short, we do so because the study of church history is the study of our family. The study of church history enables us to identify and connect with our spiritual family in a way that we would never do otherwise. It allows us to understand where we come from, who we are, and what we want our legacy to be. Like all family histories, of course, church history is full of factions, strife, and splits. These unsightly divisions mar the church’s witness to the world and sever the members of our own body.

However, the study of church history forces us to investigate what we have in common with distant brothers and sisters in Christ and to celebrate those differences in the context of a former unity. It encourages us to repent of family discord, seek peace with Christian cousins from different family

trees, and reflect on Jesus' prayer for the church to be one just as the Father and Son are one (John 17). And it encourages us to agree with the words of a fourth-century bishop of Barcelona named Pacian: "'Christian' is my name, but 'Catholic' is my surname. The former gives me an identity, but the latter distinguishes me. By the one I am approved; by the other I am marked."<sup>7</sup>

Before we are Baptists or Catholics, Lutherans or Methodists, we are "Christians." That is, we come from the same Christian family that is rooted in Christ the Messiah. It is only afterward that we are to be "marked" by different denominations. By focusing unduly on the latter, we become estranged from our cousins and grandparents in Christ and sever a part of our selves, but by emphasizing our prior identity as Christians, we can begin to achieve the unity for which Jesus, Paul, and the earliest Christians endeavored and prayed.



### Questions for Personal Exploration

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1. How would you think and act differently toward others who identify as Christians if you thought of yourself and others primarily as Christians and only secondarily as Lutherans or Presbyterians or Pentecostals?
2. Go back and read through each of the longer quotes from primary literature in this chapter. What is the sense you get as you read through them?
3. How important is "unity" in church history in general and your own church body in particular?
4. How could you and your church practice theological hospitality in a concrete and practical way?



### Resources for Deeper Exploration

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- Buschart, W. David. *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.
- McGrath, Alistair. *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999.
- Noll, Mark. *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- O'Collins, Gerald. *Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Ware, Kallistos. *The Orthodox Way*. 2nd ed. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995.
- Zizioulas, John. *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001.



## Notes

1. Cyprian, *The Unity of the Church* 6.
2. Ibid., 23.
3. John Donne, "No Man Is an Island," *Meditation* 17.
4. John Elliot, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 37, part 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 753.
5. Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 57.
6. The Russian Orthodox layman Alexi Khomiakov (1804–1860) once wrote that Protestants "are no more than developers of the Roman teaching. The only difference is that they have adapted it to suit themselves." Khomiakov, "On the Western Confessions of Faith," in *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Religious Thought*, ed. Aleksandr Shmeman (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1965), 50.
7. Pacian of Barcelona, *Letter to Sympronius* 1.4. Because other denominations had not developed at this early stage to the extent they exist today, Pacian also intends his statement to identify him as orthodox rather than heterodox.