

# OpenTheo

## Church History Introduction



### Church History - Steve Gregg

In this introduction to church history, Steve Gregg emphasizes the importance of studying the history of Christianity in order to gain a greater perspective on the body of Christ, which extends beyond our own time and place. He acknowledges the shortcomings of institutionalized Christianity throughout the centuries, but also notes the divine origins of the church and the importance of maintaining a personal relationship with God. Rather than conforming to strict patterns of belief or institutionalized leadership, Gregg encourages believers to focus on the core teachings of Jesus and to allow for differences of conviction and interpretation within the community of faith.

### Transcript

I think it is in the nature of a study like this, embarking on a lengthy series of studies on church history, that we begin with an introduction to the general subject. And for that purpose, I've given you a handout so that you can follow the points I'm going to be making. We will, in I'm hoping 12 sessions, we'll see if it works out that way, but probably about 12 sessions we'll be covering the entire history of the church.

Not in great detail, of course, because you can't cover 2,000 years of history in great detail in the time that we have. But we can give it a good thorough survey, I think, and we can do a certain amount of analysis of some of the things that have transpired. And that, I hope, will be instructive to us.

I want to start out tonight talking about reasons for studying church history. I know when I was in high school, when it was obligatory that we study history, I was not in a Christian high school, so we were not studying church history. Though, because it was in a high school where the teachers were often hostile toward Christianity, they often tried to interweave their version of church history and with the rest of world history.

It was usually not very flattering to the church. Of course, many things that happened in history are not very flattering to the institutional church, to be remembered. But I remember that I had no interest in history.

I couldn't see how it had much effect on the way I was living my life. And it wasn't until

long after I was out of school that I really realized that history had such a tremendous value to me. And now I can't get enough of it.

I've been reading a lot of church history in the past several years, and I really can't get enough. In fact, the one thing I am not altogether comfortable about is that there are so many more things to read on the subject that I have not yet read. And I feel like I should read them all before I really begin to talk about it, because I have a shelf this long of books on nothing but church history.

I have several sets. I haven't read all the books. I've read some of them, and I want to read them all.

I probably never will. And if I wait until I've read all those books before I teach, I'm afraid I'll probably never get around to teaching. But I do think it's valuable for us to know something of the subject, and so I'm going to, with the limited knowledge I have, endeavor to give you the broad outlines of what has transpired in the past 2,000 years and what the meaning of many of the turning points have been.

Now, as far as reasons for studying church history, I've given you three points on the outline I've handed out. One is that I believe there's a tremendous value in knowing church history to give us a perspective that's informed by a sense of continuity. There is a great value in realizing that we are not the first generation to come along to try to sort out what Christianity is about.

It is not for us to start in a vacuum and to discover and reinvent the wheel and so forth. Much has gone on before us, and if we don't have a sense of where we stand in relation to former generations of Christians, I think we're greatly impoverished for the lack of that knowledge. There was a scripture many years ago, about 10 or 11 years ago, I remember, a brother was sharing from.

He was making some kind of point from it, and I felt like the Holy Spirit just made a point to me from it that was very insightful to me. I don't know if perhaps everyone else already knows it, but in Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 14 and 15, it says, For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. And I remember many years ago, someone reading that verse, and it just struck me.

I always think of the church as a family. I've always had. I mean, well, I don't know if I always have, but in my adult life I've never had any other thought of it than that.

We're brothers, sisters, we have the same father, and so forth. And therefore, the family image always seemed appropriate, but I always thought of the living church principally as my family. And Paul speaks of the church, the whole family, in heaven and on earth.

And somehow, when this verse was read to me some years ago, it just struck me for the

first time. Most of the family is not on earth right now. Most of the family is in heaven.

I mean, we are living at the, it may be the tail end. Of course, many of us are not sure whether we're at the end or not. But many Christians believe we're at the very end of church history right now.

And whether that is true or not, we have to say that a lot of history has gone on before where we are now. And we are simply part of the same family. It's not like every generation there's a new family.

You know, ever since mandatory public schooling became the norm in this country in the last century, there's been a counterculture or a subculture every 15 years, someone has said. Because when children go off and leave their families and go to school and they associate with their peers, they begin to form among themselves their own culture independently of their parents. Not 100% independently, but because they spend more hours with their schoolmates than they do with their parents.

Many times they develop their own culture among themselves that is contrary to their parents' culture. So it has been observed by somebody that every 15 years there's been a new counterculture, a new subculture, alienate, a generation gap between children and their parents. So that every generation seems to feel like they have to kind of reinvent the wheel.

They need to start from scratch. You know, they're not learning from their parents because their parents were, you know, out of touch. And they feel like they just have to learn everything from scratch.

And I know I did. My generation might have felt that more than most because I was part of the 60s and 70s generation and particularly rebellious against older authority and so forth. And it was really kind of a thrashing around, you know, in the dark.

I mean, that was unnecessary. And I kind of felt like, you know, what was happening in 1970 and the Jesus movement, you know, like that was the greatest thing that ever happened. And it was, you know, it was the whole family as far as I was concerned.

The whole family of God was affected by this movement in the 70s. That was, of course, a very narrow-minded view of mine because I hadn't really been considering that the whole family of God is much larger than the Christians of my generation, much larger than the Christians living at any one time. In fact, there never is a total turnover of generations because you don't have a whole generation of Christians dying at the same time and a new generation being born at that moment and starting from scratch.

There's this overlap continuously. The body of Christ is a living organism just like your body has cells dying all the time and new cells being, you know, produced all the time. It's the same body from the beginning to the end.

It just so happens that with the body of Christ, the cells that have died are still in the body. They happen to be in heaven now. The family has most of its participants in heaven, but they're still alive and they're still part of the family, and we just represent part of the living segment of the church.

And the study of church history gives us a greater awareness of our family. I think most people enjoy reading family trees and family histories of their parents and their grandparents and, you know, what their parents did when they were younger and what their grandparents did when they were younger and great-grandparents because it gives us a sense of belonging. It gives us a sense of continuity with those that have gone before us that we feel attached to, that we feel some identity with.

And in Christ, we have a new identity, and that is that simply we're identified as one in Christ. Prior to becoming a Christian, I might have identified myself as a baby boomer or as a male or as an American or a Caucasian. I mean, there's any number of things I could have identified myself.

At one point in my life, I could have identified myself as a musician or in some other subgroup. But whatever I may have thought myself to be before, when I become a Christian, old things are passed away and all things become new and all things are new in Christ. And our identity is in Christ.

There's no male or female, Jew or Gentile, bond or free. In Christ, all are one. And that being the case, I cannot find my identity in being male or female or being of any particular social status or of any race.

These things may be important to people before they're Christians, but they're not important after you're a Christian. What is important is that I'm in Christ, and all those who are in Christ are my family, my relatives. And knowing what they did before I was here is very interesting to me now because I feel connected to them, and it's important that I should because I am.

And the whole family of which I'm a part is not just the living Christians of my generation. It is the living Christians of all times and those who are living in heaven now as well as on earth. And it gave me a new appreciation for where I stand in this whole thing to realize I'm just part of a big family, some of which is here on earth.

Some of it is not anymore. And another aspect of the perspective that can be gained from studying church history is that it fills a major gap. When we read the Bible, we read of the life of, well, we read the Old Testament stories and we read the life of Jesus in the Gospels and we read the book of Acts.

And then you get to Acts chapter 28, and it ends. There's no more historical information in the New Testament after that. And Paul's not even dead yet when it ends.

It doesn't even take us to the end of his lifetime. It doesn't even record the death of people like Peter or John, important people who are characters. The story kind of ends abruptly without an evident close.

And maybe that is partly because the story hasn't closed yet. You know, we have the history in the Bible and we have our own time, but there's this big gap of almost 2,000 years in between that most of us have very little awareness of what went on to connect those two. In fact, in many cases, I think many Christians don't feel connected at all to it.

You read about Jesus like an ancient person in history. You read about the primitive church as something just that, primitive. Primitive, maybe even prehistoric practically, something that's so far back there that it hardly feels like something we can relate to.

Here we are in the ultra-modern world at the end of the 20th century, and we read these stories about people who lived in a pre-scientific, pre-technological age, in a part of the world we've never been to and can't relate to, with a culture that is so far removed from ours that it's hard to even imagine what they have to do with us. But if you study church history, you can, in your mind, connect it. You can see what happened when the apostles died, and then the next generation, the next generation, and through the centuries.

And here I am as part of an unbroken continuum from that time to this, and it connects me. It makes me feel much more connected, because I am, and I should feel that way, to what was going on in the book of Acts and in the life of Jesus. It's not like a big gap is there.

There was no gap. There never was a gap. It's just been one continuous growing body, growing phenomenon.

It's had its ups and downs in terms of its purity, or in terms of its reputation, or whatever, and power, but it is still one body that's been growing all the time. And to connect the canonical history of Acts with our own time is a tremendous advantage to us, because when we read the book of Acts, then we actually feel like we're reading something that is part of our own history, and it is. Another really important aspect of the perspective that we need to gain from reading and studying church history is that we need to be freed from our own theological and experiential and ecclesiastical provincialism.

And what I mean by that is we all live with a very limited range of Christian experience and education. There's very little that any of us really knows of what can be known about theology or about what's going on in the world in general. Of course, we have an information glut in our day and age, as no previous generation ever had, almost an overload, but we still know and can know only the tiniest fraction of what's going on.

And because of that, we tend to interpret reality in terms of our own culture, the worldview and the zeitgeist of our own time, and the theology of our own denomination

or of our parents and the denomination they raised us in. Let's face it. At different times in history and different places in history, Christians have had very, very different emphases and very different perspectives on things, and sometimes they may have been seeing things more clearly than we do.

And it helps us to break out of this bubble of the narrowness of our own time and place, which has restricted our experience and our knowledge of Christian reality, really, to get in touch with what Christians in all parts of the world and all periods of time have known. In 1 Corinthians 14, 36, the place where Paul gives instructions about women and their silence in the church, a subject that I'm not intending to bring up tonight, but the verse 36 of that chapter, 1 Corinthians 14, 36, Paul said, Or did the word of God come originally from you, or was it to you only that it reached? Now, what he's saying is, because he goes on to say, If any of you think he's a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write are the commands of the Lord. Paul is expecting people in the church to object to some of the things he says.

Paul is making some statements and some decrees that he expects some people will not find agreeable. And he challenges him. He says, What, are you the only people who know the word of God? Are you the only people who have insight into the things of God? Has the word of God only reached you? Are there not others of a different mentality from your own who also hear from God? That is essentially what he's saying.

And it's something we need to hear. We need to be challenged by the same thing. We say, Well, wait a minute.

Some of the things in Christianity seem to go against my personal grain. Some of the things I discover in the Bible are different than what I was taught. But if I block those things out, if I block out the insights from history and from other ages and other denominations and other movements that have been in history, and I refuse to hear them, then I'm stuck in this little this little bubble of late 20th century American evangelicalism or whatever else it is I'm a part of.

And that is not all there is. And it's much safer for me to get a bigger picture of what Christians have gone through, what they've dealt with, what they've sorted out, and what they've considered and what they've eliminated from their consideration and so forth, so that I can just see the picture bigger and not be stuck in my little corner, my dark little corner. And I can escape from my theological and ecclesiastical provincialism, I hope.

I can do so certainly much more by studying church history than by not doing so. Of course, any time you study history, you hope to be inspired by the heritage of your ancestors. There's a tremendous move back in many evangelical circles back toward American patriotism in the study of history.

I've never been too much consumed with American patriotism myself, but I think America has some worthy and commendable things in her past. I think there's some rather shameful things in the past, too. But I have found that among Christians, many times there's been this embellishment of American history to make it seem like, you know, God was honored in almost everything that the founders of our country did in their hearts and in their minds and so forth, some of which I think is not paying attention to all the details and all the facts of their lives.

But that can be done with the church history, too. But the reason that people like to do that with American history is we like to feel like we can be proud of our heritage. We like to feel like, well, this great country of ours, you know, it's a great country and it's always been a great country.

And the people who founded it were all great men. And, you know, it makes us feel confident and proud and other stuff like that, I guess, to feel that our heritage is a mighty wonderful heritage. Well, actually, our heritage as Christians is a mighty wonderful heritage, although not everything that has gone under the name of Christ throughout church history has been commendable.

In fact, much of it's been outright shameful. But I'd like to make a distinction throughout my teaching on the subject between what is typically called the church. When the world talks about the history of the church, they're always thinking about the institutional church.

And there were many centuries where the institutional church was extremely lost and corrupting. It was corrupt and corrupting of the governments and the individuals that it had contact with. And there are many ways in which institutional churches sometimes still do the same things.

But there's a difference between that and the real spiritual heritage of the body of Christ, because in every age, even in the darkest ages, there were real Christians who really loved the Lord, really followed Jesus and really believed things that we would regard to be more scriptural than what the institutional church actually stood for. We don't hear about those people as often, but that's the movements I really want to focus on most in our studies, because that is where the heritage of the evangelical faith is, I believe. Many of the people that were in the movements that I'm referring to were burned at the stake and branded as heretics throughout almost the entire dark ages.

But that doesn't change the fact that many of them were true brethren and heroic at that, tremendously heroic people whose names you may have never heard. But it's an inspiring thing to realize what has gone on before us with some of the great names. You know, the writer of Hebrews felt there was some value in reminding his Jewish Christian readers of the heritage of faith through the Old Testament.

In Hebrews chapter 11, he starts back with Abel and goes through Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and goes through basically the whole Old Testament history, naming by faith this person did that great thing and by faith that person did that great thing. And he obviously wants his readers to feel connected to that and say, yeah, the heritage of godly faith is a great heritage. And to be reminded of that, again, sort of lifts our sense of our own expectations for what we hope to accomplish ourselves and what standard we'd like to live up to.

There have been others before us that have set standards. The question is whether we'll live up to those standards. Well, we're less likely to if we don't know what those standards were.

And it's good for us to know exactly what the standard of holiness and godliness was that was held up by the godliest sort throughout church history. There has been a continuous stream of true Christians throughout the ages, even though many of the people in the organized churches were hardly Christians by any biblical definition of the word. Also, of course, the godly heritage we have throughout the ages, we definitely need to focus on once in a while because of the value of giving us a proper perspective about persecution.

We have known no persecution of any consequence in the land that we live in. But this is a very unusual situation. It's even unusual in our time in the world because there are many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted today as much as they ever were in the past.

But we have to realize that until about 200 years ago, there was not a land in the world where Christians were not persecuted if they were free thinkers. When I say free thinkers, I'm saying that if you always were willing to go along with what the institutional church said, there was always a time when you could avoid persecution from that body. Although sometimes by being loyal to that body, you'd come under the persecution of the Muslims or the state or some other organization.

But free-thinking Christians have always been the brunt of persecution from all sources, not only from the Muslims and from the state, but also from the institutional church in many times in history. And that being the case, if we face persecution in the future, and I think it very likely that we will, we may think it's strange concerning the fiery trial that is coming to try us as if some strange thing happened to us. And Peter advises us not to think it's strange, and we're less likely to think it's strange if we bear in mind that this has been the lot of Christians from the time of Christ, right up until modern times, throughout the entire world.

And in modern times, the exception only exists in a small part of the world, the Western world where we live, and that is very probably only a temporary reprieve for the church in this area. In James chapter 5, verses 10 and 11, James said, My brethren, take the



prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed, we count them blessed who endure.

You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. Now, what James is saying is we need to remember those before us. Now, in James' day, there wasn't much church history to look back at, so we look back at the Jewish history.

The prophets who suffered in the name of the Lord, Job, who wasn't even a Jew by all indications, but who was a godly man, a man of faith, and these people are said to be our examples to be remembered with reference to suffering. Now, we live 2,000 years later than James and his readers, and because of that, we have a lot more names we could add to the list of those who have suffered for their faith. In fact, there have been far more who have suffered in the past 2,000 years as Christians than there were whoever suffered in the previous 2,000 or 4,000 years before Christ came.

There have been tens of millions of Christians, perhaps hundreds of millions of Christians, who have suffered. In fact, it's been estimated that just between the years 500 A.D. and 1500 A.D., which is only about half of the period that we call church history, something like 50 million Christians lost their lives in martyrdom. So it helps to give us some perspective on that, too, because we may need it.

Right now, if the government would turn against us, if we would be persecuted, if some of our leaders would be martyred, we'd think, what's going on? This is crazy. You know, is God still God? Is there still a God in heaven that he's allowing this to happen? And we would show ourselves so naive by having such thoughts as those because there are Christians in the world today who face that as a daily prospect, and that has been what Christians throughout most of history have faced at one time or another all over the world. And studying the history helps us to bear in mind those things which help us to realize that if we suffer for our faith, we're just following along in the normal steps of being Christians.

That's what's supposed to happen to Christians, actually. A third reason for studying church history is because we can possibly gain from the mistakes of others the ability to avoid making the same mistakes ourselves. Paul said that to the Corinthian Christians in 1 Corinthians 10, when he was reminding them of the history of the Jews who came out of Egypt with Moses, he lists some of the things they experienced, and he says in verse 6, 1 Corinthians 10, 6, Now these became our examples to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted, and do not become idolaters as were some of them.

As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play, nor let us commit sexual immorality as some of them did, and in one day 23,000 fell, nor let us tempt Christ as some of them did, or also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents, nor

complain as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the ages have come. We live actually in the, well, let's just say in the advanced stages of church history, and all the things that have gone on before are for our example.

But what examples do you have? The mistakes the Jews made. They lapsed into idolatry, they lapsed into immorality, they lapsed into complaining, they lapsed into this and that other mistake, and they suffered for it. And he says, now that was an example to us.

That was so that we won't do the same thing. It's been observed that a wise man learns from other people's mistakes, whereas a fool has to make his own mistakes, sometimes doesn't even learn from those. And a much more famous quote than that, but I forget to whom it is attributed, is that those who will not study history are doomed to repeat it.

So one of the values of studying church history is to avoid making the mistakes others have made before. If you do not know history, it is true, we will make the same mistakes people have made before us. We're not smarter than our ancestors.

We only flatter ourselves that we are. Our culture is not more enlightened than was much of the culture in some of the earlier days, although we flatter ourselves that our culture is more enlightened. That's just because people flatter themselves.

But there's not any basis for this belief in reality. The fact of the matter is we are just as prone to make mistakes as any previous generation of Christians was prone to do, but less so if we know about the mistakes they made and what they suffered for it and where they went wrong. So I hope we can gain a perspective that is informed by a sense of continuity with the early Christians and that we can gain the encouragement of godly heritage and that we can learn from the mistakes of others by studying church history.

And that's one reason I enjoy studying it myself and certainly one of the reasons I'm desiring to teach it. Now, before we go into any kind of detail about the history of the church, we have to define our terms. What do we mean by the church? I have found that most of the church history books I have follow the history of what the writers call the church, but I don't necessarily fully agree with their definition.

You see, in the Bible, the word church is used more than one way. It is indeed used of the visible congregations that are organized as regular assemblies. For example, in the book of Revelation, there are seven letters to seven churches.

Now, some of these churches, if you read of their characteristics, you wonder how they could even be called churches. There are some churches there that have a woman named Jezebel who is teaching the people to commit immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. There's another church that has those teaching the doctrine of

Balaam, which is apparently the same thing, to commit immorality and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

You have one church that has a name that it is alive, but it's dead. And you have another church that's gone so lukewarm that Jesus says he's about to vomit it out of his mouth. Another church has left its first love, and he's threatening to remove their lampstand from the place where he dwells.

These churches, some of them are on their last legs. In fact, five of the seven are in big-time decay. Such churches, if we attended them, some of us might be tempted to wonder whether these are really churches in the sight of God at all.

And yet, each of them is called a church. The church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Thyatira, the church in Pergamos, etc. But the word church there is being used not necessarily in the way that the Bible frequently uses it.

It's a special usage which speaks of organized congregations. Now, very early on in the church, the believers were organized into local congregations. And these were called churches.

You have the churches in each of these towns, and they were organized with certain leaders and so forth. But the Bible usually uses the word church to speak of something more spiritual, something more organic, something that Paul calls the body of Christ, that is more of an organism than an organization. It's made up of living components, living cells, living stones built up into a spiritual house, Peter said in 1 Peter 2. This is something made of living stuff.

And in the Scriptures, the true church is made up of all people who are regenerated, all those who share the same spirit of Christ and all those who follow Him. All are the church. And there is a sampling of such people everywhere that the gospel has ever been preached.

These people are found in the organized churches and sometimes outside the organized churches. There are also people in the organized churches who are not part of this church. They're not part of the body of Christ because they have no relationship with God.

They have a relationship with an institution, with a religion, but they have very little in terms of any real vital connection to God. And this being the case, we have to make a distinction between the living phenomenon that the Bible usually refers to, for example, in books like Ephesians and Colossians where the church is discussed. Paul has never, in those books, never discusses the local assembly.

He never discusses the organized church. He always talks about the church as the body of Christ, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the global phenomenon built on the foundation

of the apostles and prophets. This is the church as Paul usually speaks about it.

But we acknowledge that the organized system called the church here and the church there is also called a church. And in church history, as we study it, we'll find there are both phenomena. There is the organized church, and this gets more and more organized and more and more institutionalized as time goes on.

As you get past the generation of the apostles, you find already some very alarming degrees of institutionalization of what was once a spiritual reality. But all the while, you see this institutional thing, which becomes actually a monster at certain points in history and becomes a bloodthirsty harlot rather than a bride. Yet alongside it, you will find that God always has that living element, that living family on the earth.

They're not always in the institutional church. Sometimes they've been burned by it, literally burned at the stake by it or otherwise driven out of it, banished or whatever. But there are both phenomena in church history because there are both phenomena in the world.

There are both phenomena in the book of Acts. The organized church and the spiritual fellowship of believers, which is the true church. Now, I'd like before we get started to tell you what I consider to be the principal characteristics where the institutional church differs from the original movement that Jesus started.

And I think that some people would say that the changes have been an improvement. I am not one of them. I personally think that the way Jesus set it up was probably the best possible of all plans.

But man gets his hands involved. And as soon as Jesus is out of the picture, men start organizing. Men start seeing better ways to do things than the way Jesus did them.

More efficient, you know, gets the job done better. The pragmatist in human nature comes out and says, well, you know, Jesus did it this way, but we could organize it into a well-oiled machine and keep this thing going and growing. And suddenly the methods that Jesus followed and the principles that he taught and followed are nowhere to be found.

You instead have a machine called the church. And this thing truly becomes a monstrous and ugly thing at a certain point in history. And I dare say that to the degree that the church is defined in institutional terms, it remains a rather ugly thing.

I'm not saying that institutional churches are bad. I believe they are true Christians in some of them and most of them probably. And I believe that many of them are run by true Christians, in which case the degree of overlap between the true spiritual church and the institutional church may be greater or lesser in different movements.

But they are not identical. There is a need to make the distinction. Let me talk first about the movement that Jesus started, which I believe is the original church.

I've given you in your notes four features, both of the original movement that Jesus started and also four features of the institutional church as it evolved. First of all, the original movement that Jesus started was a family. Jesus did not start a religion.

He didn't need to. The people he came to already had plenty of religion. In fact, they were about as religious as people can be.

Their whole life centered around a religious building called the temple and local little assemblies of religious instruction called the synagogues. The leading citizens were men of full-time religious ritualistic occupation called the Pharisees. The actual governing body in political and civil matters was the religious institution of the Sanhedrin, which was made up and governed by the priesthood.

So it was religious through and through. There was really hardly anything secular in the life of the Jewish people that Jesus came to. They had religion coming out the wazoo.

But Jesus didn't come to give them more religion or even a different religion. He came to give them less religion and more life, more reality. There is a difference, as he pointed out, between the wine and the wineskins.

Jesus was approached in Matthew chapter 9 by some of the disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees. And they said, why is it that we are always fasting twice a week, showing how good and religious we are, and your disciples don't ever fast at all? What's the problem here? And Jesus said, well, can the children of the bride chamber fast and mourn while the bridegroom is with them? No, but when he's taken away, then they'll fast or they'll mourn. But he said, a man doesn't take new wine and put it into old wineskins.

Because if he does, the wine bursts the skins and ruins the wine and ruins the skins too. He says, no, new wine needs new wineskins. This teaching of Jesus comes from the fact that every Jew knew that wine, when it was fresh and unfermented, was put into sealed goatskin bags that were filled with it.

And as it fermented, it spread, it expanded. It gave off gases that required space, and the wineskins would stretch. And good, fresh, new wineskins had the capacity to stretch a great deal.

And therefore, there was no loss of wine, because as the wine required more space, the skins accommodated that by growth, by stretching. But once they had stretched, they reached a certain point beyond which they couldn't stretch anymore. If you would take such an old, stretched-out wineskin and put new wine in it and seal it up, and that new wine has to grow, but the skins are not going to accommodate any further life and

growth and development, then you're just going to have that wine burst those skins, and you'll lose the skins and the wine.

Jesus said that that's sort of what the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist would have liked to do to his movement. They'd like for him to make his disciples follow the same religious practices that they were doing. Now, they were about the most religious people around, the disciples of John.

They're fasting twice a week. They were matching the Pharisees in that. The Pharisees were doing that before the disciples of John were there.

But apparently, the Pharisees were regarded as the most religious guys around. They did it twice a week, so the disciples of John, not to be outdone by the Pharisees, had to fast twice a week too. But the disciples of Jesus didn't pay any attention to those religious practices.

Jesus didn't encourage them. That is, to do those things. Jesus didn't put any value in them.

Jesus just taught them how to love people and how to live a holy life and things like that that weren't very religious at all. It had a lot more to do with character and practical service and behavior and stuff like that. It has a lot more to do with just relationships than with religion.

In fact, Jesus indicated that everything that God is concerned about boils down to relationships, period. That the quality of relationships is everything to God. To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength defines the kind of relationship we're to have with God.

And to love your neighbors as yourself, which defines your relationship with your brother and your sister. And he said that all the law and the prophets, you know, hang on those two things. Nothing else is needed.

There was no religion in Jesus' teaching. In fact, that is the thing that made him so offensive to the people who crucified him. Jesus was not crucified by the Romans.

Physically, of course, they drove the nails in his hands, but the Romans didn't have any rights with Jesus. He was not a political figure. People tried to get him involved politically, but he never took the bait.

At one point in John 6, they tried to forcibly make him king, but he just snuck off and wouldn't have anything to do with it. On another occasion, they tried to get him all riled up by telling him about Pilate killing a bunch of Galileans as they offered their sacrifices. Jesus just said, well, if you don't repent, you'll all likewise perish.

He didn't get politically involved. That wasn't his issue. It was not the Roman government that found him troublesome.

If they did, Pilate would hardly have tried so hard as he did to release him. He knew that Jesus was not a political agitator, never had been, never spoke any political words. And when people try to reconstruct the life of Jesus, as most of the modern Jesus movies that are made by non-Christians do, I mean, that is to say, if they're not made by Christians, the movies usually recast Jesus in an entirely different role than that which the Bible portrays him as.

They always make him one who's kind of a political radical. He didn't seem to have any interest in politics at all. What he was interested in was getting people to love each other.

What he was interested in was getting people freed up from the idea that God is a religious God and get them turned on to the idea that God cared about how people love each other. And that's all that Jesus really ever taught about. You never find him teaching about religion.

And that's why it was the religious community that railroaded him and got him crucified. The Romans were simply the patsies of the Sanhedrin, who were basically, Pilate was blackmailed by the Sanhedrin to crucify Jesus, according to the records. And so Jesus was not starting a religion.

What was he starting? He was starting a family. He said he came to bring us to the Father. He said, no one can come to the Father but through me.

If you read the Sermon on the Mount, only three chapters long in Matthew, seventeen times in that sermon, Jesus emphasizes the Father, the Father. The Father knows you have any of these things. Pray to your Father.

And he was always continually trying to restore the Father's prodigal children back to relationship with their Father. That's what he was about. He was about starting a family.

He never gave any religious instruction that I can recall. And in my mind, I have read the Gospels quite a lot of times, and I can't remember any religious instruction in them, except where he said, well, when you bring your sacrifice to the altar, which he assumed they do because they were Jewish, he said, if you remember your brother has something against you, leave your sacrifice there. In other words, forget about the religion and go back and make up with your brother.

Concern yourself with the relationship and let the religion take back seat, if it even continues to exist at all. You see, Jesus didn't start a religion, but when you read church history, you read the history largely of a religion. And there is a distinction there between the movement that Jesus started and that which gains prominence of place in

many church histories, which I would call simply the institutional church.

John said that as many as received him, Jesus, verse 12 of John chapter 1, to as many as received him, he gave the power to become the children of God, not to become members of a religious institution, but to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, not those who join a church, those who believe in his name, who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God. This is a divine thing. This is a supernatural thing.

Jesus started a family that people enter through a supernatural experience called, we call it regeneration, or Jesus called it being born again. And this phenomenon, which is being born of God, causes people to become children of God. And Jesus taught people how to live as children of God in such a way as to not bring displeasure to the Father.

He did not teach us how to submit to some ecclesiastical structure or behave in some religious system. Never taught on such things. Never once that I can recall.

And if he ever even touched on it, it certainly never became an emphasis of anything in his teaching. So there is one thing to know about the original movement Jesus started. He started a family, not a religion.

Secondly, another characteristic of Jesus' original movement is there were no bosses in this movement. There were no power struggles. There was no hierarchy of dominion.

Jesus, in fact, said to his disciples that their family should operate exactly the opposite of the way that Gentile organizations operate in terms of authority structure and power and so forth. In Matthew chapter 20 and verse 25 and following, Jesus said, he called his disciples to himself and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. What's wrong with that? Isn't that the way every corporation runs? People in authority exercise authority over people? How is that going to be? Well, he said, yeah, that's the way the Gentiles do it.

He says, Yet it shall not be so among you. But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. So to be great here does not mean that you wield authority. It means that you serve.

Your service may confer on you a genuine kind of authority that can be recognized by others and voluntarily followed. But Jesus didn't start a family where there's bosses who command and people jump and do what they say. And if they don't please their rulers in this organization, they have horrible consequences that come upon them.



That's not what Jesus started, nor did Paul believe that. See, many people think, you know, Paul's the guy who institutionalized the church. Hardly.

When it comes to power struggles, Paul didn't believe in them at all. He didn't believe in this kind of hierarchical dominion. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:3, he said, The head of every man is Christ.

The Apostle Paul made every person answerable to Christ himself directly. There is not some kind of priesthood. There is not some kind of in between authorities, pastors or, you know, church authorities that stand between you and God.

According to Paul, in this family, everyone has the same father. Remember, Jesus said in another place in Matthew 23, he says, Don't call anyone father or don't call anyone teacher because you have one teacher, Christ and so forth. What is Jesus saying? He's saying, Don't allow this family to be replaced by an ecclesiastical structure where individuals have authority over others and are regarded as father or lord or master or teacher.

There's only one person you can call father and only one person you can call your teacher and lord. That's the father and Jesus Christ. So Jesus kept it strictly a family dynamic.

So did Paul. Now, you might say, Well, didn't Paul have authority in the churches? Wasn't he an apostle? Yes, he had authority, but he never wielded authority. He in fact, let me show you what his opinion of his own authority was.

You see, it's one thing to have authority in the sense that God gives you such revelation that you speak with truth and truth itself is authority. I mean, truth, we're all subject to the authority of truth. Doesn't matter who it's coming from.

Doesn't matter if it comes from Paul or from the janitor in the church. If what is spoken is the truth, truth carries its own authority. Paul and others were ordained by Christ to be special spokesmen of the truth, but not to be lords to have dominion over the churches.

Paul himself fully understood. In Second Corinthians, chapter one, Paul's very upset with some of the things going on in the church because there's a general falling away from the things that he taught there. And he indicates that he's going to have to come and he's going to have to face those people who are causing the problems.

But he says this in Second Corinthians, chapter one, verse 24, is not that we have dominion over your faith, but we're fellow workers for your joy. For by faith, you stand. In other words, we don't stand between you and God.

We don't have dominion over your faith. You stand by your own faith before God. I'm here to help.

I'm here to serve. I'm here to help you troubleshoot when you've got problems. But I don't have dominion over you.

And if anyone could have had dominion over the church in those days, especially the Gentile church, it would have been Paul. In fact, that same church, he said to them elsewhere, he said, though you have many teachers in the faith, you only have one father in the faith because I begotten you in the Lord. Now, he's not trying to take authority as a father.

He's trying to remind them that they, in a sense, should consider what he taught them instead of a whole bunch of thousands of other people with conflicting ideas because they learned the faith from him. He's not trying to wield authority. He says, I don't have dominion over you.

You stand by faith yourself. Now, it is true that Paul and Barnabas and others began to recognize elders in the church at an early stage, actually during the first missionary journey. But there is no evidence in Scripture that these elders possessed anything like what we call political authority in the church.

As near as I can tell, these elders had a spiritual authority that was not political in nature. They were not there to stand in between every man's conscience and Christ. And that is the third point I want to make about the original movement of Jesus.

And that is that there was an assumed freedom of conscience in the spirit. There was not some kind of standardized set of dogmas, which if a person didn't believe them out of good conscience because they just didn't think that's what Jesus said or meant, that they'd be somehow castigated. Now, of course, if they were sleeping with their father's mother or father's wife or something like that, that is an unmistakable, unambiguous breach of godly conduct.

And there was such a thing as church discipline for such. But there was not the requirement that everyone hold every particular viewpoint the same in the early church. But eventually, when the church was institutionalized, that did become a requirement.

And many people were burned at the stake for differing on some small matter. Now, that was not the case in the movement Jesus started. Everyone answers to Christ.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3, 17, where the spirit of the Lord is, there's liberty. But in many religious movements, there is certainly bondage. And there is demand that people conform to a very strict pattern of creedal belief.

Now, I believe there are, of course, some beliefs which are so far afield of anything Jesus said that they cease to be Christian beliefs, obviously. Buddhism, for example, doesn't have any resemblance to Christianity. Maybe some ethical things, but in terms of, I mean, Buddhism doesn't even say there's a god, you know.

And therefore, there are some beliefs that are so different from Christianity that they don't even fall within the pale of what could be called Christian convictions. But within Christian convictions, there's a wide range of possible beliefs on a lot of different subjects. And the early church allowed a great deal of latitude for people on this.

Look at Romans chapter 14, for example. Here's Paul again, showing what kind of authority he wields. In Romans 14, beginning with verse 1, Paul said, Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Now, that's a conviction. Different people have different convictions in that church.

Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat. And let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.

Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another. Another esteems every day alike.

Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord. And he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it.

He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. And he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and he gives God thanks. What's Paul saying? Now, Paul's saying there are some differences of religious convictions in the church of Rome.

Some people think you should keep a Sabbath day holy. Others don't seem to have any convictions about doing such. Some believe there should be restraint on diet.

Others feel pretty strongly that that's not necessary. Now, Paul certainly shared one opinion over the other. He certainly favored in his own convictions one of those views over the other.

But he didn't come in and impose it. He just said, well, listen, let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. If you choose to eat meat, eat it to the Lord and give God thanks.

If you choose to abstain from meat, well then, abstain unto the Lord and give God thanks. If you choose to keep a day, do it unto the Lord. If you choose not to do a day, then do what you do unto the Lord.

In other words, everything you do, you're answerable to the Lord. You're not answerable to some standardized religious ritual or some religious practice that may go against your conscience. You have a conscience before God, and there is a sovereignty of the individual conscience assumed throughout Scripture.

Paul said in 1 Timothy 1 that when people abandon the cleanness of conscience that is normal for the Christian life, then that means that you do what your conscience tells you, and you don't do what your conscience tells you not to do, no matter who's telling you to do otherwise. Even if he's a priest or a Sanhedrinist or whatever. Peter said we have to obey God rather than men.

They were not into religious hierarchy and power trips. They said, listen, we'll do what God says. You can judge us for that if you want to, but that's what we're going to do.

And Paul understood that. He didn't try to impose his own preferred view about Sabbath-keeping or not, about eating meat or not. He knew there were differences.

He knew he could come in and say, listen, I'm the apostle of the Gentiles. I'll just clear this right up. We've got some disagreements in the church.

I'll just clear this right up. He knew there were deeply held conscience issues here, and he felt like, well, instead of imposing his own enlightened view, he'd just say, well, do whatever you feel you can do unto the Lord, whatever your conscience tells you to do. There was freedom in the early church.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. It was when liberty began to be replaced by forced conformity that the Spirit of the Lord was no longer seen in the church, it seems to me. And related to this, of course, in the early moment of the family of God, there was structural flexibility.

These days, if a person doesn't join himself to an institutional man-made organization called a local church, he will probably be accused of being backslidden or in danger of backsliding. And he may well be accused of simply being a lone ranger, have a Jezebel spirit, an independent spirit and so forth. You know how I know that? Well, I won't tell you how I know that.

But anyway, that was not the attitude of Jesus, although it was the attitude of his disciples before he instructed them. If you look at Luke chapter 9, in Luke chapter 9, verses 49 and 50, it says, Now John, who later was known as the disciple of love, but hardly seemed very much like it here. Now John answered and said, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he doesn't go to our church.

That's because he does not follow with us. But Jesus said to him, Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side. Whoa! Whoever is not against us is on our side? Let him do what he's doing? He's not in our congregation.

And by the way, if there was any congregation where it was really happening in those days, it was the congregation that Jesus was pastoring. And these guys who were casting out demons in his name weren't even in that congregation. And so the disciples said, You

can't do anything in Jesus' name.

How can you do that? You're not even in our church. You're not part of our movement. And Jesus said, How dare you say they're not part of our movement? They're casting out demons in my name.

What movement is it? It's just not in our little group. It's just not in our denomination. Now I'm, of course, trivializing this by calling it a denomination.

There were no denominations in those days. But what I'm saying is that the disciples assumed that for anyone to be in the will of God and qualified to speak for God or serve God, they had to be in their organized group. And Jesus said, No, I think you got that wrong.

It looks to me like they're on our side. What they're doing isn't against us. Better let them alone.

Better let them do it. And Jesus was far more open-minded than the disciples were at that point. Although I think later in their lives, when the Spirit came, they were open-minded too.

But later generations of Christian leadership closed down on that. Eventually, if you're not in the institution, you're not saved. In fact, the popes eventually formalized the notion that there is no salvation outside the church.

And by church they meant the Roman Catholic institution. And so that really got far afield of what Jesus had said on these subjects. Now those are some of the characteristics, I think, very important for us to note about the original movement that Jesus started, which I believe the Bible usually refers to as the church.

But there is now and has been for many centuries, or not many, yeah, many centuries, probably 19 centuries, a phenomenon that's also called the church, which is the institutional church. This is made up mainly of wineskins, inflexible in many cases because institutions can't be infinitely flexible. Or if the institution comes apart at the seams, organizations have to be organized by definition.

And if they are organized, then of course there has to be some strong controls and leadership. And people can't be allowed to think for themselves too much because then they become troublesome to the organization. They might end up in another organization, might even start a rival organization.

Such things have been known to happen. And so these are some of the characteristics, I believe, of the institutional church that differ from the characteristics of the original spiritual movement that Jesus began. One, the organization.

There became an early attempt, and it was with Ignatius at the early, early part of the second century. And he lived in the transition from the first to the second century. When he was on his way to Rome to be martyred, which he was, he wrote letters to churches exhorting people to be subject to the bishops of the churches.

He actually held that baptisms could not be conducted without the bishop present. And communion could not be taken without the bishop present. In fact, church meetings could not be held at all without the bishop present.

Why? Because the bishop kept things under control. Now, when you substitute the control of the Holy Spirit for the control of a man, however good a man that may be, you've definitely taken several steps down a road toward institutionalization. And that was at the very end of the first century that Ignatius wrote these letters, and he is considered to be one of the first to ever sort of institutionalize the office of the bishop in a politicizing sort of way, where the church becomes only functionally legitimate if the bishop is present.

Well, there's nothing in the teaching of Jesus or the apostles that would support that. But it soon began to try to organize and embalm, really, what had been a living movement. And, you know, you embalm something so it won't rot, but you only have to embalm it because it's dead.

And the church, in many cases, began to be spiritually dead. It began to be replaced with an organization. Now, I'm not saying there's no reason to have any form of organization.

I believe that a church or any company of people, in order to function as a team, will spontaneously or even maybe not spontaneously, maybe by very strict design, organize themselves and distribute different parts of the task to be done, just like any team has to do. But to define the church as that organization is a step beyond, you see. I mean, I won't deny we've got a high degree of organization here at this school, not as high as most schools have because I hate organization, but we cannot function without some degree of organization here.

But if I would begin to say that, therefore, the kingdom of God is somehow associated with this school, and if this organization ever would dissolve, that somehow the kingdom of God would be the poorer for it, then I've already gotten the wrong idea about God's work. Because the kingdom of God can do very, very well without this school, can do very well without my radio program, can do, believe it or not, very well without me. But I hope that, you know, as long as we have a school or some of these other ministries, I hope that God may use them.

But that's because I believe the kingdom of God is a spiritual phenomenon that existed before there were organized religious groups and will continue after all religious groups have gone back to the dust from which they came. There is a reality of the family of God

made up of spiritual components and defined in spiritual ways. It is not an organization.

It is an organism. It's a living thing. Another characteristic of the institutional church is church politics.

Now, I have been privileged to have been in both positions in the organized church. I've been a leader in a political office called Elder. I've also been one of the ordinary sheep that warms the chairs at the meetings in other churches.

I've sometimes been a leader in some churches and following in other churches. I've been on both sides of that one. And I have had a good glimpse of church politics and power struggles.

And I know that it is possible today, because of the institutionalizing of the church, something that could never have happened before it was institutionalized, is that people can be made leaders who don't even know God. Or there can be people who do know God maybe somewhat. They may be true Christians, and I do not wish to doubt that they are true Christians, but who are motivated by very base motivations or are very much power hungry and so forth.

There is much of this in almost every organization, including religious ones. And I just don't think that Jesus had that in mind at all. Jesus said that's what the rulers of the Gentiles do.

But I happen to have seen from the inside, as a leader in a church and as a follower in other churches, abuses in this area. And that is because the early elders and bishops, elders and bishops were the same thing, interchangeable words in the New Testament, they were men who were qualified by spiritual quality. And their function was not to rule over and have dominion over people's faith.

It was to teach them, to teach the Word of God to people. They were teachers in the church. And just like the presence of the synagogues were.

The presence of the synagogue didn't have any authority over anyone. In fact, Jesus specifically said, you know, the rulers of the synagogues, the scribes and the Pharisees, they sit in Moses' seat. That was an actual chair in the synagogue where they expounded the Word of God.

He said, therefore, whatever they say, go ahead and do it, because obviously that's the Word of God they're speaking. But don't follow their example. They're saying they don't do it.

They don't even know God. The synagogue had become institutionalized, but Jesus didn't want his disciples to fall into that trap themselves. True spiritual leadership is based on spiritual qualities, spiritual qualification, spirituality, love and maturity and spiritual

gifting and so forth.

These are the issues that really qualify some for leadership. But you don't have to institutionalize that leadership. If someone has those qualities, you don't have to put a label on their forehead that says bishop so and so.

You don't have to wear a name tag like the Mormon 19-year-old elders do. It should be called youngers, but they, you know, Elder Smith and Elder Brown and so forth. They have to wear a tag to tell you they're an elder, because they aren't.

And you wouldn't know it if they didn't have a tag that said so. They are not elders in any sense of the word. They're not older, which is what the word elder means.

And they're not particularly in possession of the spiritual qualities that would convince anyone they're an elder. So they have to have a church-generated name tag. Now, not to pick on the Mormons, most churches I've been to, you'd have to say the same thing about them.

The leadership are called elders, but in many cases, there's rarely been a church I've been in where all the elders were truly spiritually qualified. Now, I'm fairly selective about the churches I've joined, and in most of the churches I've been in, there are some spiritually qualified elders in them. I'm not denying that there are any.

There are some. But I've hardly ever been in a church that didn't have someone on the eldership who was there for political reasons and didn't have the spiritual qualifications. And that is a possibility in a church that's institutionalized.

The leadership is hierarchical. The leadership is structured. It is organized.

It is institutionalized. And someone becomes a leader, and then they may never have had spiritual qualities, or if they did and they lose them, they're still a leader, because it's defined institutionally who's the leader here. And that, I don't think, was the way Jesus set things up.

I think Jesus set things up so that the people who were spiritual and older were recognized by the people who were younger as having some wisdom, having some truth. And it was, again, the sovereignty of truth, not of officers of the church that Jesus indicated would govern the lives of the believers. But the institutional church defines bishops and elders by office.

And I don't believe that was the case in the early church. I do believe there was recognition, formal recognition, laying on of hands, and so forth, of elders. But I don't believe that that laying on of hands conferred on them a political kind of authority.

And the reason I say that is because Jesus himself said, It shall not be so among you. He



said, That's exactly the way it is among the Gentiles. You get, you know, the guy becomes the CEO, the guy becomes the president, the vice president of whatever in the organization, and he's got an office of authority.

He said, That's not how it should be among you. Exercising authority over each other isn't what it's about. It's serving.

It's being a slave of all. That's what makes you chief. That's what makes you leader.

That's not the path to leadership. That is leadership. And so when you institutionalize leadership, it turns it on its head.

It makes it the opposite of what Jesus taught about it. Another characteristic of the institutional church is the creeds. To my mind, the creeds are a way of replacing reality as central to the Christian life.

The Christian reality with descriptions of reality as central. You know, the words about reality. You see, the reality is Jesus.

Reality is knowing God and following Jesus and having, you know, a real life of the spirit in your life. That's the reality that Jesus brought and that he intended for the church to be known by. But the creeds were ways of talking about reality, ways of describing and defining it, systematizing it.

Now, do I believe in systematized theology? I do. I believe that truth, all truth, whether it's theological or biological or physical or chemical, I think all truth is systematic. I think truth is a very self-consistent realm.

And I think that you can find how all truths connect with each other. And they, you know, some truths are subordinate to others and so forth. It would appear in almost all realms of knowledge, including theology.

But what I'm concerned about is that when the creeds became the way that the church defined its perimeters, suddenly it was not having a relationship with the triune God that saved people and made them part of the church. It was being able to explain the triune God. It was the ability to tell exactly what was the nature of the hypostatic union between the Father and the Son or between the human nature of Christ and the divine nature of Christ and exactly how much of what he did was in the human nature and how much was in the divine nature.

Did Jesus ever talk about those things to his disciples? Not in my awareness he didn't. Did the apostles ever write about such things? Not to my knowledge they didn't. It was the church fathers who decided these were all important things.

And that if people couldn't explain them properly, then they were heretics. Or if they

knew the explanation that the councils came up with and put into the creeds, if you didn't quite go with all the wording the way they had it, suddenly you're a heretic. Now you might say, Steve, don't you believe there is such a thing as heresy? Of course there is heresy.

Jesus recognized heresy among the Pharisees. The apostles recognized heresy even within the church in their day. There are beliefs, as I say, that are so far afield of what is taught in the scripture that they don't resemble Christianity at all or they're a terrible perversion of it.

But what I'm saying is the creeds, they weren't defining the broad, fully agreeable things of Christianity that anyone could find in the scripture. They were talking about the little tiny nuts and bolts of the esoteric, theoretical aspects of theology. And I'm not saying that there isn't some enjoyment of such studies.

I like to study the trinity. I like to study the nature of Christ. I like to study the nature of salvation and so forth.

But, you know, when it becomes, the fascination becomes how do we talk about these realities rather than do we have these realities? Suddenly the church is institutionalized. People are part of it by agreeing with these statements instead of by knowing Jesus Christ Himself and being a follower of His and having the life of His Spirit living through them. And by the way, I believe there were a lot of people who knew Jesus as well as you or I do who were walking in the Spirit, who were excommunicated from the churches because they simply couldn't sign on to some of the ways those creeds were worded.

I'm not in a position to tell you which people they were. I don't know. God knows.

But I'm saying that Jesus never defined who could be His disciple and who could not be His disciple in terms that the creeds later laid out. Some of you may be a little alarmed. You might say, Steve, it sounds like you're kind of weak on the Trinity doctrine there.

I don't know if I'm weak on the Trinity doctrine or not. I would say this. I believe the Trinity is a biblical doctrine.

I believe you can sort it all out and come up with it. And I believe that you can do so legitimately. I just say that the fact that you have to do so much sorting to come up with it makes it seem like it must not be one of the more important doctrines of Scripture or else it seems like the apostles would have said something a little more clearly on the subject.

It seems like Jesus would have mentioned it once or twice. It seems like the apostles would have laid out some kind of statement about the Trinity if that was all so important to understand. Now, I'm not saying I don't believe in the Trinity.

I do. It happens to be the way I systematize the things the Bible says about God that I believe the Trinity is true. But the question becomes, is a person a heretic because he doesn't explain the Trinity the way I do? What if he's a modalist? A modalist doesn't believe there's three persons in the Trinity.

They believe there's one person who was at one time the father, then he became the son, then he became the Holy Spirit. Do I believe that person's right? No, I don't. Do I believe they're a heretic? Not on the basis of that belief, I don't think.

Where did Jesus explain it otherwise than that? That's the question we have to say. What is Christianity? Christianity isn't conformity to man-made creeds, as well thought out as they may be and as orthodox as they may indeed be. Christianity is following Jesus Christ, believing what he said and following his teaching and loving him with all your heart, loving God with all your heart, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

If you can find a different form of Christianity than what I've just described in the Bible, then I'm looking for it. I'd like you to show it to me. You can find a lot of different kinds of Christianity than that in the church history, but only in the institutional church.

No, I shouldn't say that. There were non-institutional Christians who got into those kinds of problems, too. They had creedal statements of their own, too.

But the fact of the matter is, when the church is institutionalized, suddenly the reality as central to Christianity, the reality of God in the life as the Lord and as the leader and as the life giver, that's the reality that Jesus brought. That is replaced in the institutional church with words about that reality become central. Descriptions of that reality become the central issue.

And that is a shift from what the church was supposed to be in the direction of institutionalization. I'm going to wind this up in about ten minutes' time here. The fourth characteristic of the institutional church that differs, I think, from the movement Jesus started is the whole area of doing business, the church doing business.

The church does business in many ways comparably to the way the world does business. There's competition. Initially, the church competed with the pagan religions in the Roman world and, of course, Judaism in the Jewish world.

Nowadays, of course, churches compete with other churches for membership. After all, you've got to pay for the mortgage on the building and the new wing and the gymnasium. You're not going to be able to do that unless you have a good number of tithing members.

And the trouble is, for every tithing member that church across the street has, that's one that you don't have. So there's competition just like there is in business. And, by the way, I mean, there is genuinely.

Jesus, in his original movement, was in competition, too, with the devil and with falsehood and with error and, frankly, with much of what was in Judaism, in Phariseism. He was in competition with it, but he didn't conduct his activities in that competition in a business-like way. And churches eventually began to do so, following worldly marketing structures and public relations structures and financial things.

I mean, today, it's incredible the kinds of form letters and stuff that are sent out to raise funds by religious organizations. They often hire marketing firms that aren't even Christian because they know how to raise money, collection agencies and so forth. I mean, the modern church does things in an ultra-modern Madison Avenue sort of way in many cases.

Now, they didn't have this ultra-modern Madison Avenue techniques back in the second, third, and fourth century, but they had their ways of doing business, too. They were competing. They knew how to run public relations campaigns.

They knew how to win people with architecture. They were in competition with paganism. The pagans had these big ornate temples.

The early church didn't have any church buildings. They met in homes and didn't care about buildings because someone in their past said that God doesn't dwell in buildings made with hands. But they eventually realized that the pagans are much more attracted to these religions than big ornate buildings.

So, we'd better build some big ornate buildings. See if we can get an influx here. It worked.

They had an influx. Not of the right kind of people, though, but that's just what, of course, began to happen more and more is the wrong kind of people, people who didn't have any love for Jesus at all, began to be attracted to Christianity or what they perceived as Christianity for the same reasons they'd formerly been attracted to paganism. Big buildings, mystical rituals, authoritarian leadership, great public relations campaigns, festivals and feasts and celebrations and parties.

I mean, these are the things that the church began to adopt to do business and to compete with the world. Jesus never did try to compete with the world in those ways. He spoke the truth.

Sometimes he alienated more people than he attracted. In fact, most of the time he did. He didn't seem to be that concerned about it.

He said, all that the Father gives me will come to me. And he was ready to let God build his movement, not man's techniques and business policies and methods and so forth. And I think that the way that the church is today, it often does business in a very worldly way.

I was talking to a pastor in this very town some years ago, told him I didn't believe in church membership in the way it's usually spoken of in the Bible. We don't have such a thing as church membership. The only membership in the church the Bible speaks of is you're a member of the body of Christ, like my arm is a member of my body.

That kind of membership. You don't ever have membership like joining a club and having your name on the roll somewhere. That was foreign entirely from the New Testament.

And he said, well, then how could a pastor know who he can count on to help him with the, you know, things that need to be done in the church? And I thought that question was such a sad question for a man to have to ask. How does a pastor need to have a list of names on paper to know who in his congregation he can count on? And how does a list of names answer that question anyway? Most churches have twice as many names on their register than they have people who even attend the church. You can't tell by looking at a list of names who you've got inside.

You know that by spiritual reality, by relationships. Any pastor knows who he can count on in his church who he can't, even if they're not on the membership rolls. I know many churches.

One of the biggest churches in America, the third largest church in America, doesn't have a membership roll at all. Never had any trouble getting things done. The pastor always knew who he could count on because there's reality.

There's relationship there. There's real... You know, the man doesn't have to go to a list of names and say, well, I think it's this person's turn to serve in the Sunday school because there's not a checkmark by that name. I forget who that person is, but they haven't done much recently, so we're going to put them on this duty.

I mean, that's organization. But that's not spiritual leadership. That's not spiritual.

That's not what Jesus said. Let me real quickly here, in about the five minutes I have left, take you to the other side of the page I've given you. I think as part of our introduction, I want to give you just the survey of the whole 2,000 year history real quick.

And what we'll do in the following sessions is look at the smaller pieces of this in more detail. So we're going to just give a broad outline here of what's been going on for the 2,000 years since Jesus was here in his name. Church history divides into three major periods.

The first we could call the ancient period. The second is the medieval period. The word medieval actually means middle, so the middle period.

And the third period is the modern period. In general, the dates that I've given you for the ancient period are from 30 A.D., which is the year of the crucifixion, to about 600

A.D. That's when Gregory the Great became what is usually recognized as the first of the popes. And that ended the ancient period of history and brought us to the medieval period of history, which is the longest period that has come along so far, from the time of the first pope, Pope Gregory the Great, in the year 600, till basically the convulsions of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in around 1550 with the Council of Trent, you have what would be the medieval period.

And then from the Council of Trent in 1550 to the present time would be the modern era, or the modern period, I should say. Now each of these periods can divide into two subunits also, which will give us a total of six eras to consider. There's two eras in each period.

The ancient period divides into what we could call the infant church era and the adolescent church era. The infant church would be from Pentecost in 30 A.D. to the time of Constantine. Constantine came to power before 325, but it was in 324 or 325 that he actually assumed total power over the Roman Empire.

He shared it with another ruler for part of that time previously. And Constantine became the universal ruler of the Roman Empire, a professing Christian himself, changed everything for the state and fortunes of the church, and that pristine purity, which was already fading somewhat before that time, kind of was dealt a death blow by the accession of Constantine. The infant church period could be said to have ended with Constantine in 325 A.D. From Constantine until Gregory the Great, the first pope, would be the adolescent church.

The church was somewhat wedded to the state from Constantine on, but the authority within the church wasn't so highly organized as it later came to be until about 600 A.D. with Gregory the Great. So from Constantine to Gregory the Great would be the period of the adolescent church, from 325 to 600. And those two together, the infant church era and the adolescent church era, make up the ancient period of the church.

Now the medieval period also breaks into two parts. The first of those would be the Roman church era. And of course that's from the first pope, Gregory the Great, to the Renaissance.

That would be from 600 to 1300, the Renaissance about 1300 A.D. And the Renaissance, of course, was a rebirth of a lot of free thought and innovations in culture and art and thinking and philosophy, and that caused the Roman church to lose a lot of its grip on the minds and souls of people. And so that began the motions that erupted in the Reformation. And so the first part of the medieval period was the Roman church era from 600 to 1300.

The second part of the medieval period would be the Reformation church era from 1300 to 1550. Now many Lutherans would be upset that I don't begin or end one of those

periods at 1500, more like, because that's Luther. But the Reformation really began with roots that go back long before Luther, a couple hundred years back to the Renaissance, around 1300.

Things began to change. You've got your Tyndales and your Wycliffs and people, you know, John Hus and people like that who were forerunners of the Reformation. And then the Council of Trent in 1550 was sort of the Catholic church's response to the Reformation, and it's solidifying some of its Catholic distinctives as over against the distinctives of the Reformation.

That's what we could call the counter-Reformation. So the Reformation church era would be from 1300 to 1550, approximately. And so the Roman church era and the Reformation church era make up what we've called the medieval period.

And the final period, the modern period of church history, also we could divide into two sections. From about 1550 at the Council of Trent until about the French Revolution in 1789, we could call that the denominational church era. That's when a lot of denominations were forming.

There have been many more since then that have formed, but the church was dividing and finding distinctive camps around different convictions and so forth, and we see the proliferation of many denominations, principally in the Protestant churches during that time. And then from the French Revolution in 1789 to the present moment and beyond, probably, we have what we should call the global church era, the missionary movements of the church that have spread the gospel far beyond Europe, where it was largely confined for a long time. Not entirely confined, certainly.

There was the Coptic church in Egypt long before that, and there were many other movements elsewhere. In India, there was a church back in the days of the apostles. But certainly the major things happening in the organized church were in Europe up until the 18th century, and then with the modern missions movement beginning, which is still continuing, the church is seeing tremendous new life all over the world in places where it has never been before.

So this is the general breakdown of the whole period of 2,000 years. You've got three periods, each period divided into two eras, and we will spend time looking in detail at each of those in our successive sessions here. But we must bring this one rapidly, suddenly, to a close because we're out of time, and we've spent enough time on this introduction.