

Church History

A 15-minute class summary — Pleasant Springs Church, Discipleship School

Full thirty-three-lesson series: ps-church.com/discipleship/church-history

Before you start — notes for the teacher (*not read aloud*)

Timing. About **15 minutes**. The bracketed times are cumulative. The **[9:30] modern era section is the designated cut. Never cut the last two sections.**

⚠ **What this lesson cannot be.** Thirty-three lessons cover two thousand years. Fifteen minutes cannot survey that, and **do not try** — you will produce a list of dates nobody remembers. This lesson picks **six hinges** and one through-line. Tell the class plainly at the start that you are skipping almost everything.

⚠ **The charity rule, and it matters here more than anywhere.** This series runs through the Great Schism, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and Vatican II. Somebody in the room has Catholic family. Somebody was raised Pentecostal and has been condescended to about it. **Every tradition in this story contains people who loved Jesus more than we do.** The series states each position fairly and names our own plainly. Teach it the same way.

The through-line to land: the church has been in trouble in every century, has been rescued by God in every century, and **the thing handed to you was handed through other people's hands.**

Scripture. All English, ESV.

Time of day. Deliberately time-neutral.

THE SCRIPT

[0:00] Open — you did not invent this

Something is in your hands that you did not make.

The Bible you read was collected, copied, argued over, translated, smuggled and printed by people whose names you do not know. The words you say in the creed were hammered out by men in a room who disagreed. **Somebody died so you could read Ephesians in English.**

Church history is not a hobby for people who like dates. It is the story of how what you believe got to you — and who carried it.

Fifteen minutes, thirty-three lessons, two thousand years. **I am going to skip almost everything.** What I want to give you is **six hinges** and one thread.

Psalm 145:4 (ESV) — "One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."

That verse is the whole discipline. One generation, to the next.

[1:30] Hinge one — the church outlives its own collapse (AD 70)

Start with a catastrophe. In **AD 70** Rome destroys Jerusalem and burns the temple. The centre of Jewish worship, the place where God had put his name, is gone.

⚠ **By every reasonable expectation the Jesus movement should have died with it.** It was a Jerusalem-based sect built around a temple city that no longer existed.

Instead it spread. The generation that followed — the **Apostolic Fathers**, men like Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp, some of whom had known the apostles personally — held it together and handed it on while being hunted.

Lesson one of church history: the church has survived the end of its world before.

[3:00] Hinge two — the church says what it means (AD 325 and 451)

By the fourth century the question is no longer survival but **identity**. Who exactly is Jesus?

Nicaea in 325. Chalcedon in 451. These are the councils where the church did the hardest intellectual work in its history and said, carefully, that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

⚠ **This is not men inventing a doctrine.** It is the church being forced to say precisely what it had always worshipped, because somebody had started saying something else. **A creed is a fence built after a trespass.**

And notice the cost of getting it right. Chalcedon's own summary is a masterpiece of refusing to say too much — the church stating the mystery accurately rather than explaining it away.

Jude 3 (ESV) — "...appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

Contend for — not invent, not update. **Guard something you were handed.**

[5:00] Hinge three — the church splits (1054 and 1517)

Now the hard part, and I want to be careful.

In **1054** East and West formally separate — the Great Schism. In **1517** Luther posts his theses, and the West fractures again.

⚠️ **Do not let anybody tell you a simple story about either.** The Reformation recovered things the church urgently needed: Scripture in the language of the people, justification by grace through faith, the priesthood of all believers. **It also broke the visible unity of Christ's body**, and Jesus prayed against exactly that:

John 17:20–21 (ESV) — "...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Both of those are true at once. We are Protestants and we will not pretend the division cost nothing. The Counter-Reformation produced genuine holiness too — people who walked the plague streets while the rich fled.

Charity here is not weakness. It is accuracy.

[7:00] Hinge four — the Bible gets into your hands

This one is personal, because you are holding the result.

The **Masoretes** preserved the Hebrew text with obsessive care for centuries. **Jerome** translated the whole Bible into Latin. And then the long, dangerous fight to put it into English — a fight people were burned over.

⚠️ **Sit with that for one second.** The reason you can read Romans at your kitchen table in your own language is that **specific people accepted death as the price**. Not metaphorically.

Acts 17:11 (ESV) — "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily** to see if these things were so."

That verse describes an ordinary congregation checking the preacher against the text. **For most of church history most Christians physically could not do that.** You can. It cost somebody.

[9:30] Hinge five — the fire comes back — (cut this section first if short on time)

Then a pattern that repeats: the church goes cold, and God sets it on fire again from an unexpected corner.

The **Puritans and the Moravians** — who prayed in shifts, around the clock, for a hundred years. The **First and Second Great Awakenings**. The **Wesleys**, whose conversion reorganised English religion. **Pietism and Bach**, who wrote *to the glory of God alone* at the bottom of his manuscripts. **Holiness and Pentecostalism** in the twentieth century.

⚠ **Note the pattern, because it is hopeful:** revival almost never starts at the institutional centre. It starts at the edges, usually with people nobody important was watching.

[11:00] Hinge six — and it is not our story any more

Here is the fact that should reframe how you think about the church today.

The centre of gravity of world Christianity has moved. It is no longer Europe or North America. It is **Africa, Asia and Latin America** — Nigeria, China, Korea, Brazil. The typical Christian alive today is not a Westerner.

The series ends there on purpose, with the martyrs and pastors of the Global South.

Revelation 7:9 (ESV) — "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

Every nation, all tribes, peoples and languages. That is not a sentiment. **It is a demographic prediction, and it is coming true in our lifetime.**

[12:45] The thread through all of it

So what holds thirty-three lessons together?

First: the church has been in serious trouble in every single century. Persecution, heresy, corruption, schism, complacency. ⚠ **There has never been a golden age.** If you are waiting for the church to be what it used to be, you have misread the history — *it never was*.

Second: it has been rescued in every single century. Usually not by the people in charge.

Third, and this is the one to take home: you are a link.

2 Timothy 2:2 (ESV) — "...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

Count the generations in that verse. There are four. Paul → Timothy → faithful men → others also. That is the whole mechanism. **That is how it reached you, and it is the only way it leaves you.**

Hebrews 13:8 (ESV) — "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

The church changes in every century. He does not. That is why there is still a church to have a history of.

[14:00] Close

Two things to carry out.

Be less impressed with yourself, and less despairing about the church. Every argument you are having has been had before, often better. And every crisis you think is the end has an older sibling that the church survived.

And take the handing-on personally. Somebody taught you. Somebody prayed for you before you had any idea. **The line does not continue by itself** — it continues because in each generation particular people decided to pass it on.

Hebrews 12:1 (ESV) — "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Surrounded. You are not the first runner, and you will not be the last.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for two thousand years of people we will never meet who kept this and handed it on — the copyists, the translators, the martyrs, the mothers who taught children to pray. Forgive our arrogance toward brothers and sisters in other traditions, and our despair when the church is weak. Make us a faithful link in a long chain, and let what was handed to us be handed on whole. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

If you only remember three things

1. **There has never been a golden age.** The church has been in serious trouble in every century — and rescued in every century, usually from the edges rather than the centre.
 2. **You are holding what other people paid for.** The Bible in your language cost specific people their lives.
 3. **2 Timothy 2:2 has four generations in it.** Paul → Timothy → faithful men → others also. You are a link, and the line does not continue by itself.
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The full series — ps-church.com/discipleship/church-history

Thirty-three lessons, plus a two-thousand-year timeline.

Era	Lessons include
The first centuries	The apostles and the writing of the NT · the fall of Jerusalem · the Apostolic Fathers · apologists and the Gnostic crisis · Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian
Councils and creeds	Nicaea (325) · Chalcedon (451) · Augustine of Hippo
The long middle	Benedict's Rule · the Masoretic Text · Jerome and the Vulgate · Charlemagne · the Great Schism (1054) · scholasticism · the morning-star reformers
Reformation	Luther at Worms · Calvin and Zwingli · the Anabaptists · the English Reformation · the English Bible · the Counter-Reformation
Awakening	Puritans, Quakers and Moravians · the First and Second Great Awakenings · the Wesleys · Pietism and Bach · the Restoration Movement
The modern world	The French Revolution · Edinburgh 1910 · Holiness and Pentecostalism · Vatican II · the Chicago Statement · the Global South

Our posture: every tradition in this story is stated fairly, and our own commitments are named plainly.

Discussion starters — if you have time after

1. Which century of the church did you imagine was the "good" one? What did you think it was like?

2. People were burned for putting the Bible into English. Does knowing that change how you handle yours?
 3. The Reformation recovered something essential **and** broke something Jesus prayed for. Can you hold both without flinching toward one?
 4. Revival usually starts at the edges. Where might that be happening now?
 5. Who handed the faith to you — name them out loud. Who are you handing it to?
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