

Church History: Those Who Shaped the Christian Faith

Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*..... 3
To the Leader 4
Session 1. The Early Church: Forbidden, Permitted, and Defined..... 5
Session 2. The Middle Ages I: Preserving, Expanding, and Flourishing 9
Session 3. The Middle Ages II: Discipleship, Scholarship, and Leadership..... 14
Session 4. The Reformation: Lutheran, Reformed, and Radical 19
Session 5. The Modern Period: Rationalism, Pietism, and Global Expansion ... 23
Session 6. The Twentieth Century: And Now for Something Completely
Different 28

Writers: Melissa Kirkpatrick and Boyd Lien

Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. In some instances, adaptations have been made to a Scripture or a confession to make the language inclusive.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included here. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgment, proper credit will be inserted in future printings once notice has been received.

© 2011 CMP, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), A Corporation, Louisville, KY. All rights reserved. Except where permission to photocopy is expressly granted on the material, no part of these materials may be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

Meet the Writers

Melissa Kirkpatrick is a certified Christian educator in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has served in the education ministry of several churches in National Capital Presbytery, and has been active at the presbytery level, co-chairing NCP's Worship & Theology committee for several years and serving as a commissioner to the 218th General Assembly. Dr. Kirkpatrick teaches Reformed theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in an adjunct capacity, and is a member of the Company of Teachers of the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington, under whose auspices she regularly teaches topics in American church history. She lives in Northern Virginia.

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. In addition to serving in Augusta, he has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; and Richmond, Virginia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, The Logos Ministry, and the Kerygma program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently he has authored the revised Resource Book and Leader's Guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.



Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Early Church: Forbidden, Permitted, and Defined

Scripture

Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 2:17; John 16:13

Main Idea

From a sect of Judaism centered in Jerusalem to a world-transforming movement, Christianity's earliest years were spent defining and shaping a theology that confessed the lordship of the risen Christ.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Examine the growth of the church in its first five centuries.
2. Explore the demands of discipleship as represented by the early martyrs.
3. Consider the implications of the church's legal status and the definition of its theology.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Index cards and pens

Hymnals with the hymn "O Jesus, I Have Promised"

Leader Prep

Church history is often dismissed as unnecessary for church education programs. Yet, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to have some idea of how the basic doctrines of our faith were decided and why it matters. What is amazing about the growth of the early church is how rapid it was, how extensive it was. In a time when travel was hardly rapid, when communication happened by letters and messenger, communities of disciples popped up all around the Mediterranean.

One of the common threads running throughout this session is the idea of Christian identity. Note how Perpetua and others were willing to suffer martyrdom because they understood themselves, in the most fundamental way, as Christians. Early church councils struggled to lay out the theological elements of Christianity. Augustine met the challenge of heresies with writings that further defined what Christianity was against and what it was not. The ideas contained in these heresies did not go away just because they were defined as unorthodox. Many of the ideas that Augustine fought still linger. Heresies persist because they continue to be meaningful to those who ponder the deep questions. The church, however, had to define its core values. The great questions could be discussed, but there had to be limits. How the church came to understand itself as a community of faith is a prime question in studying its history.

As you lead this course, consider supplementing one or more sessions with the video clips from the *Frontline* production, *From Jesus to Christ*, which features conversations with scholars about the first four centuries of church history. Go to pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/watch to access the video clips. In Head, participants will need copies of the Nicene Creed, which is available for free at oga.pcusa.org/publications/boc.pdf. Consider inviting an accompanist to lead the singing in Depart.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Have each participant write one fact (as unusual as possible) about his or her family history on an index card. Collect and shuffle the index cards. Read each one aloud and invite the group to guess the identity of the writer.
- Pray together the prayer in the participant's book.

Head

- Read Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 2:17; and John 16:13. Ask: *How do these Scripture passages illustrate the challenges and concerns of the early church as Dr. Hansen describes them?*
- Dr. Hansen mentions Constantine's call for the Council of Nicea and the issue of Christ's identity that had to be resolved. Read the Nicene Creed. Ask: *Which phrases in the creed do you think may have been controversial? Why?*

- Look at the ideas that generated Augustine’s writings. Ask: *Why would it be important to say that Jesus was “of one substance” with the Father? What would it mean to our understanding of who Jesus was if that phrase and idea were not affirmed?*
- Explain that the popular phrase “I’m spiritual but not religious” contends that a life of faith does not require any particular knowledge or adherence to any point of doctrine. Ask: *Why did early Christians find it important to define what they believed about the nature of God and Christ, especially after Christianity became a legal religion?*

Heart

- Dr. Hansen describes martyrdom as “a holy calling.” Invite the group to describe the kind of faith that upheld martyrs like Perpetua. Help them understand that the most important charge against the Christians was that they refused to sacrifice to Caesar, the Roman ruler, or to pray to him. Ask: *What similarities to modern discussions of martyrdom do you see in the story of Perpetua? What differences? As a disciple of Jesus Christ, how do you react to that level of commitment?*
- Discuss Dr. Hansen’s question about Christian witness: “Imagine that today in our society, it is still the era of the martyrs. You are talking with friends about bearing faithful witness to Christ. What must a Christian do today to be a witness? What would you never, ever do, even if the government said you had to do so by law?”

Hands

- Invite participants to imagine that they are living during the era when Christianity became the sanctioned religion of the Roman Empire. Have participants consider each scenario: You previously worshiped other gods, but have become Christian hoping to garner the favor of Constantine. You are well-to-do and have a high social status. Ask: *What outward changes will you make in your home? How will you change your lifestyle?*

You previously worshiped other gods, but now feel pressured to become Christian. You have a stall in the marketplace and find that your customers no longer pay attention to the household gods of the past. Ask: *In what ways will your private life change? In what ways will your work life change?*

You have been a longtime believer. In the past, you knew who the Christians were. Now people who profess Christianity look and live like any other Roman citizen. Ask: *How do you feel about these new “converts”? How do you try to keep your particular identity as a Christian?*

You are a member of the Christian clergy. To date, small groups of people became Christian and you had a chance to teach them so they knew what they were professing at their baptism. The risk of calling oneself a Christian had often been great and no one took this step lightly. Now you are facing hundreds of people who call themselves Christian for many reasons that you suspect have nothing to do with professing Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Ask: *How do you teach these new “members”? How do you help them become part of the existing church?*

- Ask: *In what ways do these challenges of the ancient church remain with the church today?*

Depart

- Read or sing together the first stanza of “O Jesus, I Have Promised.” Ask: *What would these words mean to someone like Perpetua? What do they mean to you?*
- Offer a benediction, based on Hebrews 13:20–21:
May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, make you complete in everything good so that you may do God’s will, working among us that which is pleasing in God’s sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Let God’s people say, “Alleluia! Amen.”

Church History: Those Who Shaped the Christian Faith

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
Introduction to <i>Church History: Those Who Shaped the Christian Faith</i>	4
Session 1. The Early Church: Forbidden, Permitted, and Defined	5
Session 2. The Middle Ages I: Preserving, Expanding, and Flourishing	11
Session 3. The Middle Ages II: Discipleship, Scholarship, and Leadership	17
Session 4. The Reformation: Lutheran, Reformed, and Radical	24
Session 5. The Modern Period: Rationalism, Pietism, and Global Expansion	31
Session 6. The Twentieth Century: And Now for Something Completely Different.....	37
Suggestions for Further Study.....	44

The Early Church: Forbidden, Permitted, and Defined

Scripture

Acts 1:8 This prediction of the risen Christ summarizes the story of the early church: faithful witness and vast expansion.

1 Peter 2:17 Peter's advice looked different at first when emperors commanded idolatry, and later when the church came to be the emperor's favored religion.

John 16:13 In its early centuries, the church struggled to understand great issues and laid a foundation for our theology today.

Prayer

Thank you, O God, that in early centuries when Christians could suffer and die for being your followers, many remained faithful even unto death. They bore witness to Christ—and the church grew and flourished. Thank you, O God, that when the church was made legal, it continued to flourish, expanding in numbers, in worship, in art, in organization. Thank you especially for those who loved you with great minds and great learning. They asked good questions and searched for wise answers, shaping what we still believe today. Help us to find models for faith in these, your witnesses. Amen.

Introduction

In its first five centuries, the Christian church traveled a great distance literally and metaphorically. Beginning in and around Jerusalem, the church reached all the way around the Mediterranean and beyond—to what is now England to the West, and perhaps as far as India to the East. Beginning as a ragtag band led by fisherfolk, it came to be a well-organized, highly unified organization that could boast of the greatest minds in the Greek, Latin, and Syriac speaking worlds. Beginning as a sect of Judaism, it came to embrace and transform Hellenistic philosophy and culture. Beginning with a simple confession of the lordship of the risen Christ, it came to have a rich and sophisticated theology, capable of expressing the mysteries of the God who is ever One, but who is also eternally Three Persons;

and the saving work of Jesus who is one person with two distinct natures, fully God and fully human.

This week we will look at three great themes that illustrate the complicated story of these centuries. The first is the era of the martyrs, when the church had at best no legal standing, and at worst was subject to severe official repression. The second is the era begun by the emperor Constantine, who made Christianity legal—one of the greatest turning points in church history, with many consequences both good and bad. The third is the growing clarity and definition that came with the work of some amazing theologians, whether in the official councils of the East, or the solitary Western voice of a North African bishop.

In all three arenas the early church laid important foundations for us. Of course each of these periods came to an end, and life in the church was very different then than it is now. But in each case the themes, and the people who embodied them, shape the understanding we bring to our faith, including our ideal images of faithful witness, our assumptions about how the church relates to the society around it, and our basic views on a wide range of issues.

Perpetua (d. 203), Christianity Forbidden

When the risen Christ was talking with his disciples, he told them they would be his witnesses. He used the Greek term behind our word *martyrs*, used for those who went to their death bearing witness to their Lord. Many think early Christians were hiding out in the catacombs, and every time they popped their heads up, the soldiers were there to snatch them and throw them to the lions. That was not really the case, though Christianity had no legal standing for its first three centuries. Christians did get thrown to wild beasts in the arena, but not every day. Persecution happened occasionally, and was usually a local matter. Sometimes government officials just didn't know what to do: Christians seemed to undermine the safety of the Roman Empire by refusing to make traditional religious offerings. In A.D. 112 one regional governor wrote to the emperor, Trajan, for advice. The reply: if someone makes a public accusation, you have to prosecute, but don't go looking for them. It was the original "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

The record of a young woman named Vibia Perpetua and her companions martyred under Septimius Severus (reigned 193–211) is an especially vivid, reliable account, with portions written by the martyrs themselves. They were recent converts preparing for

baptism, and they were sentenced to die. Perpetua's father, not a Christian, tearfully begged her to relent out of pity for him, or at least for her infant son. She just had to make a sacrifice, he said, implying it was no big deal. Her response, bearing witness to the truth of Christ, was to say she could not call herself anything other than she was. She *was* a Christian.

The story gives hints of the brutality of Rome and the courage of the martyrs. Felicitas, Perpetua's servant, gives birth prematurely in prison.

Refusing to wear garments of pagan priesthood, they are sent into the arena naked, milk dripping from Felicitas's breasts. Even as they are gored to death by a wild cow, they call to their companions to stand firm in the faith. Their male companions are cheekier, gesturing to indicate that as the officials have judged the Christians, God will judge the officials.

We also get a sense of the important roles martyrs played in the growth of the church. The guard seems to be converted by their witness, and indeed the theologian Tertullian (died c. 225) said the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Their testimony was heard and the church grew. Its members were also given courage to be faithful in a world that was hostile to them. Perpetua's story points to this. In a vision she sees herself stomping on the head of a serpent; in a vision of one of her companions, Perpetua is seen in heaven with rank and authority to reconcile a teacher and a bishop who were quarreling. Martyrdom was a holy calling.

Constantine (died c. 337), The Church Legalized

Everything changed when Constantine came to power. He rose to the role of co-emperor on his father's death, partly by the acclamation of his soldiers in England. He then set about consolidating the empire under his sole rule. First stop: Rome. There another co-emperor, Maxentius, was in power.

In 312, as Constantine was approaching Rome, he had a dream or a vision (sources differ) in which he saw a cross or the "Chi-Rho" symbol (the first two letters of the Greek word *Christ*), and heard the message, "In this sign you will conquer!" He had the symbol put on the shields of his soldiers. Whether you believe in the vision or not, it was a great piece of strategy: Christians in Constantine's army might feel more righteous

Her response, bearing witness to the truth of Christ, was to say she could not call herself anything other than she was.

She was a Christian.

about the conquest and fight harder, and Christians on Maxentius's side might hesitate. Constantine swept to victory.

In 313, Constantine and co-emperor Licinius signed a letter known as the Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal and ending

This was a revolutionary change, setting assumptions about the place of Christianity in society that are only now being left behind.

governmental persecution. Christianity was not yet the required religion, but the church was increasingly favored by the government, and it was influenced by government as well. This was a revolutionary change, setting assumptions about the place of Christianity in society that are only now being left behind.

The consequences were many. The church could freely own property, including beautiful places of worship. Constantine's mother, Helena, was a devout Christian, and she traveled to the Holy Land to identify the sites of biblical events (as well as, she believed, discovering the cross on which Christ was crucified). She had churches and shrines erected that are travel destinations for Christian pilgrims to this day. The persecuted flock's view of Jesus as gentle shepherd gave way to images of Christ the king enthroned in power. Theological writing and preaching flourished as highly educated and gifted people came to leadership.

As if in protest against this easier Christian life in the midst of society, many went to live a monastic life in the desert. Only "as if," though, because the most famous Desert Father, Antony of Egypt, began his ascetic life in 285, and others were earlier still. They were not running from anything, but straight into spiritual battle, to be spiritual athletes and living martyrs.

Constantine himself was not baptized until the end of his life. It was not uncommon to postpone baptism, since that would require rigorous discipleship. An emperor would, by the nature of his work, break God's commandments from time to time, and restoration to fellowship after major sin was not simple.

But this did not hold Constantine back from involvement in the life of the church. When the church was divided by Arianism (the idea that the Son, incarnate in Jesus, was created rather than being fully God), it was Constantine who called the Council of Nicaea in 325. And it was Constantine who provided the crucial word as they wrote the Nicene Creed, saying that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father.

Augustine (d. 430), The Faith Defined

Nicaea was the first of seven ecumenical councils where bishops from around the Christian world settled disputes. To these councils we owe our understanding of the Trinity: God is One God, existing eternally in Three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also owe them our understanding of Jesus Christ as one Person in two natures—fully human and fully God. These teachings still define orthodox Christian theology in all branches of the church, East and West.

Quite apart from the councils, in the West one person came to dominate theology: a Roman from North Africa named Augustine. His mother, Monica, was a Christian, but Augustine pursued other goals. He had ambitions as a professor and passion for sex. As a scholar of great literature, he also had a hard time with the Bible, especially the Old Testament. One by one, God conquered Augustine in each of these areas. Augustine saw it just that way. Following Christ was not something he could do by his own will. Sin had caused too much damage. Only when God took action and helped him could he even start. At 32 he was baptized, and soon he was made bishop of Hippo.

In the course of a long career he battled with three major groups. His arguments shaped the thinking of the church for generations to come.

First was Manicheism. This religion, which once claimed Augustine for a follower, rejected the Old Testament. Augustine argued one could take its troubling stories allegorically, looking for lessons about the spiritual life. Manichees were also dualists believing in a world where God and evil are in a pitched battle. Augustine argued that evil is not a “thing” fighting against God. *Everything* that exists was made by the good God, so no thing is evil. What we call evil is the *absence* of good—God’s good things misused.

Second was Pelagianism. Pelagius was a monk who was scandalized by Augustine’s claim he could not follow God’s ways. If a just God commanded it, we can and must obey. Augustine pointed out that no one lives without sin, and only God’s gracious action can save us. Our assurance, for Augustine, is in Paul’s teaching that we belong to God because we are predestined (elected) for salvation.

The third was Donatism. The Donatists were a North African movement that saw the main church as illegitimate because of a bishop who had not stood firm enough during the persecutions. This man continued in ministry, administering sacraments and

consecrating bishops. Augustine, as well as pointing out that the Donatists did their share of sinning, argued that the nature of the church is found in Christ's parable of the wheat and the weeds: it is always a mixture of saints and sinners, holy only because it belongs to Christ.

We may disagree with Augustine on many points. But in the West it is usually Augustine's questions we still want to answer; it is Augustine's answers we find ourselves questioning.

We may disagree with Augustine on many points. But in the West it is usually Augustine's questions we still want to answer; it is Augustine's answers we find ourselves questioning.

Spiritual Practice

In a journal or notebook, pray for the good company of the Holy Spirit, and write:

- What from the early church inspires you—or leaves you cold?
- What in the early church sounds similar to Christian life today—or different?

Let this lead to prayer for yourself and your church.

Questions for Reflection

Imagine that today in our society, it is still the era of the martyrs. You are talking with friends about bearing faithful witness to Christ. What must a Christian do today to be a witness? What would you never, ever do, even if the government said you had to do so by law?

Imagine that today, in our society, it is still the era of the councils. What issues would you call a council to settle?

This lesson portrayed a number of issues as important in the early church. Which ones do you think are still important, and why? Which do you think are now unimportant, and why?