WHY CHURCH HISTORY MATTERS
FOR A DISCIPLESHIP THAT DEEPLY CHANGES LIVES

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I have been an avid reader and lover of history since college. And I have learned a lot from Scott Sunquist, a close friend for the past 34 years since our days in seminary together. Scott went on to get his Ph.D. in Asian Church history and missiology, and is now a Professor of World Christianity and a Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Many evangelicals have a faulty, mistaken understanding of how the church unfolded around the world since the book of Acts. And, as you will see in the pages that follow, this has done great damage to our discipleship in Christ as well as our witness in the world.

I pray the powerful truths found in these pages will profoundly change your life and leadership as they have changed mine.

Blessings,
Pete Scazzero
Founder, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality
You may not be a great lover of history, but I ask you to stay with me in these next few pages in order to gain a larger perspective of why slowing down is so incredibly difficult and why the antidote will take so much time. William Faulkner, the American writer, said it best, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This applies, not only to our personal shadows, but to institutions, nations, ethnic groups, and churches.

David Bebbington, a British historian, summarizes well the wonderful strengths of the Protestant evangelical movement that traces her roots to The Reformation, the Puritans, The Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with leaders such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finny, John Wesley, Sojourner Truth, and William J. Seymour. These include:

- A commitment to lead people to a personal relationship with Jesus.
- An emphasis on actively reaching the world.
- A deep conviction of the Scriptures as the Word of God.
- A focus on the cross of Jesus Christ. (1)

These 500-year distinctives dwell deeply in our bones. I love our evangelical stream in Christian history and would not be here writing or leading without it.

Yet our emphasis on activity, now joined by the speed of change around us, has resulted in Christ-followers and churches without much depth. We give away truths that we have not lived. We speak of spiritual realities before they have time to take root in our own souls.
We need to learn about slowing down for loving union with Christ in a way that is powerful enough to transform us - and the people we serve. This requires we travel into different territory outside our tradition as Evangelicals/Protestants and learn from other Christians very different than ourselves. And we must do so, without losing the unique distinctives and gifts that we bring to the global church and her mission.

**THE THREE MAIN BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY**

There are three main branches of the Christian Church in the world today – the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, and the Orthodox Churches located primarily in the Eastern part of the world (e.g. the Coptic church of Egypt, the Syrian Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Church, the churches located in Iran, Iraq and in the Arab world.) (2)

For the first 1,054 years of church history, there was only one church - the one, holy, catholic (i.e. universal), church. When problems or divisions presented themselves, the bishops and leaders gathered from the five major cities of the Roman, and later Byzantine, empire - Alexandria, Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople. These became known as ecumenical, or church-wide, councils. They sorted out thorny issues such as the nature of God as Trinity and Jesus being fully God and fully human.
The first Council happened when the Roman emperor Constantine summoned bishops to a council at Nicaea to settle doctrine for the entire church. This resulted in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325.

A second council of bishops met at Constantinople (present day Istanbul) in A.D. 381 to revise and expand this document and to affirm what we now know as the final version of the Nicene Creed (see appendix A).

What makes the Nicene Creed so important is that it has defined biblical Christian faith for over 1,600 years. The three main branches of the Christian Church - Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic - agree that this “rule of faith” outlines the boundaries of Christian belief and provides a measure, or rule, for the proper reading of Scripture. Every week Christians recite this exceptionally compressed creed where each word was intentionally chosen and packed with meaning. To this day, if someone disagrees with the Nicene Creed, they are considered a sect or a cult, outside the boundaries of the Christian church.

While cultural, linguistic, and even theological tensions existed, there was only one church.

**ALL THAT CHANGED IN 1054 AD.**
The greatest division in the history of the church, the great schism of the Eastern and Western Church, struck in 1054 AD.

It had been building for centuries and had complex political, cultural, linguistic and theological roots.

The division broke open when the Roman bishop changed the Nicene Creed without consulting the other churches. In doing so, he declared himself infallible in matters of doctrine and faith. The leaders from the other cities excommunicated him. He, in turn, excommunicated them. Based on where you lived geographically, at that time, determined whether you were in the Eastern or Western church.

This was followed by the military Crusades of the Roman Catholic Church that began in the late eleventh century. In retaking Jerusalem from the Muslims, they also attacked and pillaged the Eastern Churches along the way. The besieging and sacking of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) with her churches, convents, and monasteries in 1204 opened a deep, wide wound that has not fully healed to this day. The Eastern and Western Church didn’t speak to each other for over 900 years.

The later corruption and decline of the Roman Catholic Church led to the second great church schism in history - the Protestant Reformation in 1517 AD.

Protestantism replaced the authority of the Pope with the authority of Scripture. Now each person was empowered to interpret the Bible as they saw fit.
We spent a lot of time in seminary looking at the problems in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. But we failed to acknowledge three things.

The history of the first 1,054 years belongs to all of us - Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox believers. I meet many Christians who ignore this history, acting as if God jumped from the book of Acts to the Protestant Reformation. And if people are not evangelical or charismatic Protestants, then they are probably not Christian. The Nicene Creed writers declared that any church that believed they were the only true church is heretical. This is our church family, our genogram - warts and all.

We have so much we can learn from our brothers and sisters who are different than us. We are not the whole church. A true believer is someone who has a living relationship with Jesus Christ who died and rose again for our sins. They do not have to attend our church or be in our tradition.
There is much we can learn from Catholics and Orthodox believers - even though they have plenty of problems and we do not agree on a number of points. (4)

### We have our own “dirty laundry” and blind spots.

Think about it:

- Martin Luther intensely disliked Jews and wrote essays advising the German nobles to slaughter the rebelling peasants without mercy.

- Ulrich Zwingli condoned the torture and drowning of Anabaptists - some of them his own former students - because they believed in baptism by immersion.

- Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield were slaveholders. African-American believers in our church have questioned me if they were really Christian!

- The great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Asuza Street (1906) in Los Angeles split terribly over race, resulting in black and white churches throughout America for decades.

- Many leaders of the Protestant Missionary Movement, along with a number of contemporary Evangelical leaders, have failed in their marriage and family life. John Wesley, for example, couldn’t live with his wife; their marriage was, by all accounts, deeply troubled.
I remember fielding questions from a scholar with a Ph.D. in medieval church history one sunny afternoon over lunch at a monastic retreat center where Geri and I were on retreat.

She asked with a genuinely puzzled face, “I don’t understand American Christianity, Pete? How can it be that a person with an MBA from a top business school one day declares that he is a pastor and starts a church? He doesn’t have any theological training or understanding of church history. No seasoned ecclesiastical authorities affirm him. And he builds a church based on the best business practices that resembles a shopping mall more than anything else?”


I love our branch of the church. But our genogram also has a shadow. Key dimensions of a full-orbied, biblical spirituality are not strong in our branch - such as silence, stillness, solitude, and waiting on God.

If we are to introduce our people to a discipleship that deeply changes lives, we must learn from Christians very different than us, from those with a long history of expertise in areas in which we as evangelicals are weak. The challenge is to do this while holding firmly to our distinct, unique strengths and contributions.
This is the reason we have spent 21 years developing *The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Courses* for churches. It brings together the best of evangelical discipleship while, at the same time, drawing from the deep well of global church history. Why? So that we make mature, reproducing disciples who can impact the world for Christ.

Let me invite you to watch a short video on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: A Strategy for Discipleship that Deeply Changes Lives at [youtu.be/hUKHIJvfq4s](https://youtu.be/hUKHIJvfq4s) in order to learn more about how you can bring a larger, broader, and deeper discipleship to your church and ministry.
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2 - My good friend, a global church historian and Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that a fourth division exists—the Spiritual Churches of Africa, China, and Brazil. He writes, “Other Spiritual churches that formed in the early decades of the 20th century were not technically Pentecostal in experience or theology, but they also started up independent of established churches (Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox Church) finding their inspiration directly from biblical witness and the Holy Spirit... Spiritual Churches, it can be argued, have been the main story in the transformation of the world Christian movement in the 20th century. See Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Press), 2015.

3 - See Peter Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith, Revised Edition with Updated Epilogue,* (Ben Lomond, California: Conciliar Press, 1992). The author, a Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) staff worker, converted to Orthodoxy from Evangelicalism in 1967 along with 300 others.

4 - Augustine said it well: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”
THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

AMEN.

See Page 15 for Notations
For the first three centuries, the church found itself in a hostile environment, threatened both by persecution from the outside and ideas that were in conflict with Scripture. In the New Testament, for example, we observe Paul exhorting Timothy to “keep the pattern of sound teaching” he had received (2 Tim. 1:13) and to protect the truth from error. This developed in the first three centuries into a variety of creeds, the most famous being *The Apostle’s Creed*.

When Constantine became emperor in 312 AD, he discovered that the empire was fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicts over the nature of Jesus Christ. Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, had argued that Jesus was created by God, and not fully God. This began to split the church and thus the empire. As a result, Constantine summoned a council of bishops from all over the empire to settle doctrine for the entire church. This resulted in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325. A second council of bishops met in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) in A.D. 381 to revise and expand this to affirm what we now know as the final version of the Nicene Creed.

What makes the Nicene Creed so important is that it defines orthodox Christian faith for over 1600 years. The three main branches of the Christian Church - Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic - agree that this “rule of faith” provides the boundaries of Christian belief and provides a measure, or rule, for the proper reading of Scripture.

Every day millions of Christians recite this exceptionally compressed creed where each word was intentionally chosen and packed with meaning. The Nicene Creed invites us to reflect on radical nature of what we truly believe about our God and the large vision of what He is doing in human history.
THE NICENE CREED - NOTATIONS

1 - “We believe” – This says that in the creed we profess the convictions that bind us together as a community. We stand together and recite them. We are a people defined by these words and truths.

2 - “eternally begotten of the Father” – From this point, the language about Jesus is directed to clarify that He was, in the fullest sense of the word, God. They piled phrase upon phrase, most drawn from Scripture, but some not, to assert a simple, but infinitely difficult truth: Jesus is the “only-begotten Son” of God.” This language and understanding comes out of John 1:1,2,14, that Jesus was not made by the Father as part of creation, but is rather an extension of the Father’s own existence. This is not a making by God but a sharing by the Father out of himself.

3 - “one in being” asserting the unity of the Father and the Son

4 - This is the heart of the creed. The all-powerful Creator of the universe entered our humanity and our history – for our salvation.

5 - “who proceeds from the Father and the Son” – this short statement continues to be a source of tension between the Eastern Church and Western Church. It was one of the explicit causes of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox Christians in A.D. 1054.

6 - “the Holy Spirit” is also worshipped and glorified. He is not only a power but a person and is to be thought of in the same manner as the Father and the Son.

7 - “one holy catholic and apostolic church” – The word catholic means universal (not the Roman Catholic church). It refers to the reality that the church of Jesus exists around the world and not simply in one denomination or local church.

8 - “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” – Eph. 4:4-5 states there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” While salvation is by grace through faith alone, all agree baptism is an essential mark of our leaving of the world, receiving of forgiveness and becoming part of the church of Jesus Christ.
A SHORT CHURCH HISTORY READING LIST

Church History in Plain Language, 4th edition - Bruce L. Shelly

The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks (Penguin Classics) - Benedicta Ward

History of the World Christian Movement: Earliest Christianity to 1453 - Dale Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist

History of the World Christian Movement, Vol. 2: Modern Christianity from 1454-1800 - Dale Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist

Church History: An Essential Guide - Justo L. Gonzalez

Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith, Revised Edition with Updated Epilogue - Peter Gillquist

The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity - 1900-2000 - Scott W. Sunquist
APPENDIX C

The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Courses Leader’s Kit

AVAILABLE AT emotionallyhealthy.org