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Ten Great Books on Church History

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Ten Great Books on Church History

Abstract

"We are blessed to live at a time when a number of gifted scholars devote their time and talents to illuminating the story of the Christian church. They stand on the shoulders of giants from centuries past whose work has passed on to us the legacy of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us."

Posting about great books on church history from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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Keywords

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Disciplines

History of Christianity

Comments

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Ten Great Books on Church History

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Scott Culpepper

We are blessed to live at a time when a number of gifted scholars devote their time and talents to illuminating the story of the Christian church. They stand on the shoulders of giants from centuries past whose work has passed on to us the legacy of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. I have suggested a few of the most outstanding recent works on the history of Christianity for your personal reference or to help you choose the perfect read for that person on your Christmas list who is fascinated with the history of Christianity.

1. [The Story of Christianity, Justo Gonzalez, Prince Press, 1999.](#)

Justo Gonzalez provides an excellent narrative introduction to the history of Christianity in this survey which is available in two volumes or in a combined edition. The narrative style and short chapters are ideal for college students or for the layperson who wants a basic introduction to Christian history that is also a gripping read. Gonzalez is a theologian as well as historian who captures well the nuances of Christian thought and Biblical interpretation. Another of the particular strengths of this text is a significant treatment of Christianity in the global East and South. The thorough treatment of Latin American church history in the Story of Christianity is a rare and valuable contribution for a survey text.

2. [Jonathan Edwards: A Life, George Marsden, Yale University Press, 2003.](#)

George Marsden's comprehensive biography of eighteenth century pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards was the winner of the 2004 Bancroft Prize. It is the magnum opus of one of the most gifted living Christian historians. Marsden traces Edwards' life and ministry from his formative years to his final months as president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Edwards' ministerial vocation and his famous role as the theologian of the First Great Awakening are explored with great depth and insight, as are his darker periods when his Northampton, Massachusetts congregation was embroiled in internal strife. Marsden's unique contribution here is to firmly place Edwards in his eighteenth century context as an intellectual as well as a theologian. He compares Edwards to his esteemed contemporary Benjamin Franklin to illustrate how both men embodied different cultural tendencies of their age. For those intimidated by the length of Marsden's text, there is also an abbreviated version available from William B. Eerdmans entitled A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards (2008).

3. [Calvinism: A History, D. G. Hart, Yale University Press, 2013.](#)

D. G. Hart ambitiously set out to portray the grand sweep of Reformed history and theology in one volume. The result, Calvinism: A History, captures the vibrancy and depth of the Reformed tradition in all of its diversity. Hart's firm commitment to the Anglo-Scottish Presbyterian tradition does not deter him from giving an equally compelling treatment of the Dutch, Swiss, and German branches of the Reformed family. It is sometimes easy to get overwhelmed by the flood of details in this survey, but it is worth the effort to work through them. This book is great both for those who want to understand their own Reformed background better and also for people trying to understand what Reformed Christianity is all about.

4. [Church History in Plain Language, Bruce Shelly, 4th ed., Thomas Nelson, 2012.](#)

Bruce Shelly's Church History in Plain Language has long served as a favorite introductory text for undergraduates and seminarians in church history courses. It is one of the best single volume

introductions to the history of Christianity. Shelly's writing style is accessible to anyone, making his text a great resource for any person with an interest in learning about the development of the Christian church. His division of church history into a series of "ages" can seem a little too simplistic at first glance, but the device serves as a helpful organizational tool.

5. [The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America, Thomas Kidd, Yale University Press, 2009.](#)

Thomas Kidd's *The Great Awakening* covers the explosion of evangelistic fervor that gripped the American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century. Kidd provides an entertaining and informative analysis of the various movements and personalities that propelled the First Great Awakening to become a pivotal event in American history. His threefold categorical scheme for identifying different groups during the period is a nice revision of the dated "Old Light/New Light" labels.

6. [The Reformation: How A Monk and a Mallet Changed the World, Stephen Nichols, Crossway, 2007.](#)

Stephen Nichols' *The Reformation* unfolds the exciting story of the Reformation movements of the sixteenth century in sparkling prose. The book covers the gamut of Reformation personalities from Martin Luther's principled stand against indulgences to Henry VIII's less principled quest for a divorce. It is a great book for either personal reading or as a resource for group studies of the Reformations.

7. [Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat, James Bratt, William B. Eerdmans, 2013.](#)

Abraham Kuyper was a towering figure in the history of Christianity whose life and contributions are too little known in the larger Christian community. James Bratt set out to correct that omission with this first comprehensive biography in English of the nineteenth century Dutch theologian and statesman. Bratt's work is a good beginning to what will hopefully be a number of future attempts to explore Kuyper, his times, and his legacy.

8. [The Lost History of Christianity: How The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died, Philip Jenkins, HarperOne, 2008.](#)

The Lost History of Christianity makes the list both because it is a great read and also because it illuminates a previously neglected chapter in the history of Christianity. Jenkins reminds us that Christianity was once a powerful influence in some parts of the world where we find less Christian presence today. He reminds us through this fascinating account of the early churches that our faith originated in a context that was tinged with eastern cultural influences.

9. [Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America, Randall Balmer, Oxford University Press, 2014.](#)

This twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* pulls back the curtain to reveal the vibrancy and diversity of the American evangelical subculture. Balmer approached his research for this book more as an investigative journalist than strictly as a historian. Each chapter of the book contains Balmer's observation of a different evangelical group and his interactions with the central players. The wide range of different contexts in which Balmer interacts with evangelicals demonstrates the breadth of evangelical influence on contemporary American culture.

10. [Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Mark Noll, Baker Academic, 2012.](#)

Mark Noll's *Turning Points* serves as a "greatest hits" list of important pivotal moments in the history of Christianity. From the Christological debates of the earliest church councils to missionary movements of the twentieth century, Noll hits the essential highlights of Christian history. Noll includes song lyrics,

prayers, and other devotional items from each time period to give readers a sense of the worship practices Christians observed. Turning Points is another great resource for individual or group study.

This list contains only a few of the many great books on the history of the Christian church. Tell us about your favorite church history books and resources in the comments section.

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