



IN THE
YEAR
OF OUR
LORD



*Reflections on
Twenty Centuries
of Church History*

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

ENDORSEMENTS

“Whether you are being introduced to a new restaurant or returning to your favorite cuisine, few things are as delightful as a sampler plate prepared by a master chef to give a taste of various delicacies. Such is this book. Sinclair Ferguson, a wise teacher of Christian theology and history, has given us a chef’s tour of the Lord’s sweet mercies across the last two thousand years. This is no bland synopsis. Ferguson’s clear summaries of each century are festooned with juicy morsels taken from classic Christian writings and savory biographical stories. This little book will be a blessing to earnest Christians and a boon to those who would provide future generations with deeper roots in our rich Christian heritage.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“As a general rule, I give this counsel to everyone who will receive it: Read anything and everything by Sinclair Ferguson! This book is no exception. *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* walks us through our Christian family history, in twenty short, easy-to-read chapters, always ultimately emphasizing the great work of Christ in preserving His church. There are tremendous lessons to increase our discernment and aid our encouragement stored up in this little book. Read, savor, and be edified.”

—DR. J. LIGON DUNCAN III

Chancellor
Reformed Theological Seminary

“There is nothing better to encourage, humble, and challenge Christians living in the Global South than to read how the Lord Jesus has kept His promise to build His church in other parts of the world since the beginning of Christianity. Dr. Ferguson’s book made me weep and rejoice.

This is history told from the perspective of faith in God's promise. As biblical Christianity grows and expands in the Global South, we need to learn from the history of the church how God preserved His people in the midst of great suffering, and especially how He has preserved the true gospel through the ages in spite of so many errors that have threatened the church. As we face the grave errors of the neo-Pentecostal movement in Latin America, this book gives us hope in the God who has preserved His church always and everywhere."

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES
Vice president
Presbyterian Church of Brazil

"Church history as it should always be written—theologically grounded and pastorally applied. A marvelous read."

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS
Senior minister
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.

In the Year of Our Lord

I N T H E
Y E A R
O F O U R
L O R D

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To
Vesta Sproul
and
in deep gratitude
for R.C.

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INTRODUCTION

The letters *AD* form the abbreviation for the Latin phrase *anno Domini*, which means “in the year of our Lord.” It goes hand in hand with another abbreviation, BC, “before Christ.”

At first glance, these seem to be a strange combination of languages. Why does AD indicate two words in Latin, whereas BC represents two English words? Perhaps the simplest answer is the correct one: the abbreviation for “before Christ” in Latin might also be AD (*ante Dominum*, “before our Lord”).

Whatever the reason, a significant change has recently taken place in this time-honored tradition of dating. Now—especially in scholarly works—the letters CE (common era) and BCE (before the common era) have gradually replaced the traditional style.

This book retains the old style. It does so out of theological conviction, not simply out of antiquarian interests or from personal preference or, for that matter, out of prejudice. This change in format of dating history recognizes that we cannot avoid the significant impact on history of Jesus of Nazareth, but it removes from view His titles (Lord, Christ) and thus downplays both His personal uniqueness and His role in shaping our world-and-life view. In this sense, it is all of a piece with the radical transformations in worldviews that have taken place in the Western world over the past 250 years. The impact of what is usually referred to as the Enlightenment has gradually worn away the distinctiveness of the Christian faith in general and the incarnation as the center point of all history in particular.

The Change

Evidences for this change abound in the world of higher learning. The biblical mottoes of ancient universities are now abbreviated to disguise their origin. What were once known as faculties of theology or divinity have been renamed departments of religion or religious studies. In many places, what in the early European universities were the highest of the faculties have now been merged into the faculties of arts or social studies. In essence, they have become branches within the broader concept of anthropology (the study of man, his environment, and his philosophy and literature). The object of study is no longer God Himself (*theology*), but man and his spiritual experience (religion). The uniqueness of the Christian faith with its conviction that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ is now subordinated to what is common to all religious experience.

Against this background, the title *In the Year of Our Lord* has been deliberately chosen. For almost two thousand years now, the gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached and exemplified by men and women from virtually every corner of the globe. During that period, it has been the single most dominant influence on world history. Christ has left His mark indelibly on our world. These pages tell some of the stories of the two Christian millennia.

In the Year of Our Lord is not a history of the church. For one thing, its author is poorly qualified to attempt that, even in popular form. Rather, *In the Year of Our Lord* is more like a personal tour of some of the people and places its author has encountered over the years.

But why turn that into a book?

Hegel's Lament

In one sense, it is because we can never know enough about our Christian family. But we modern people tend to be so enamored of the present, so engulfed by contemporary media, that we know very little about history before our own lifetime. As the philosopher Hegel once lamented, we learn from history that we learn nothing from history. Taken at face value, this judgment sounds both harsh and cynical. It is, however, not without evidence.

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In the closing weeks of 1999, in the run-up to what was commonly thought of as the close of the second millennium and the opening of the third, one of the best-selling popular newspapers in the United Kingdom published the results of a poll it had sponsored. The findings underlined my suspicions about our general knowledge of history. Readers were asked to name the most significant man and the most significant woman of the previous millennium, AD 1000–2000.

The winners?

Male: Nelson Mandela.

Female: Princess Diana.

Doubtless, reactions to these names differ widely. Perhaps, indeed, they were the two most “celebrated” or iconic figures of the second half of the twentieth century. But what of the 950 preceding years? And what did this result reveal about the average reader? Probably that we know almost nothing about history beyond what we have been fed by the popular media.

It would be easy to be cynical and to go beyond even Hegel’s lament by saying that now we learn no history!

If this is true in general in our society, then it is also likely to be true of Christians. But Christians, by definition, have an interest in history, for a particular view of history and its importance is built into the Christian faith. The faith is founded in the long story narrated in the Old Testament, and its focus is on Jesus Christ as its climax. We may not be professional historians (although some Christians are). We may not know all of the facts of history (who does?). But we understand the deep significance of the past for the present. We believe that history has a pattern and a goal. And, in addition, we belong to the Christian family, which not only stretches throughout the world, but also back into history. So, history is important to us.

Yet, despite this, it is perhaps also true that we Christians do not know as much as we feel we should.

The poverty of our knowledge of the past is by no means entirely our own fault. In recent years, our Christian subculture has paid little heed to the past, in terms of the literature we have read (usually “the latest thing”), the songs we have sung (frequently contemporary, non-Trinitarian, rarely

expressing lament, often oriented toward the self), and the worship in which we have engaged (often pleasure-seeking rather than God-centered, graded occasionally by organizations expert in the field rather than by God and His Word).

If this is so, then we have denied ourselves some of the greatest delights of walking the Christian way. For we possess a vast multitude of brothers and sisters in Christ from whose lives we can learn, through whose stories we can be challenged and encouraged, by whose writings we can be instructed, and by whose hymns we can be inspired to worship and live with greater devotion to our Lord.

Tracing the Story

Against this background, *In the Year of Our Lord* is intended to be a very simple but (I hope) informative, encouraging, and enjoyable introduction to some members of “the Christian family”—the worldwide, history-deep, eternity-long church of Jesus Christ. It is a book of people, stories, words, and songs—a kind of family narrative accompanied by a songbook. It is not a history of the church, but simply fragments of her story. It is not the work of a professional historian but of a family member. It does not tell the whole story, only that part that specially belongs to the Christians with whom the author has most rubbed shoulders.

Thus, *In the Year of Our Lord* traces parts of a grand narrative that flows from first-century Jerusalem to the present day. But that narrative divides into many smaller narratives along the way to the twenty-first century. Were the story written by an African or Chinese or Latin American or Lebanese or Russian or Korean Christian, the story of how the gospel got to his or her “here” from within the same grand narrative would inevitably follow different twists and turns along the way. In some instances, the road would divide earlier; in others, later. To tell the whole story, even in brief form, would require a large volume indeed. Indeed, we might apply the words of the (presumably smiling) Apostle John that if we were to recount all the great works of Christ by the Spirit in the past two thousand years, the whole world would not be able to contain the books that would need to be written (John 21:25).

Nobody Is Perfect

In the world of twentieth-century moral philosophy, a view known formally as “emotivism” was held by a number of thinkers. Its basic tenet was that moral judgments are not objective statements of fact but simply expressions of approval or disapproval, likes or dislikes. According to this theory, when I say something is “good,” I mean little more than “I like it.” By the same token, if I say it is “bad,” I am simply saying, “I don’t like it.” Emotivism is an ethical philosophy without moral absolutes, and ultimately therefore without real moral power. It has been well caricatured as “The Boo-Hurrah Theory of Ethics” (“bad”=“boo”—I don’t like it; “good”=“hurrah”—I do like it).

It is possible to fall into a similar “boo-hurrah” approach when we survey the story of the church, mistakenly pigeonholing individuals or movements as either wholly saintly or wholly reprehensible. Thus, evangelical Christians will find it easy to say “hurrah!” for the names of Athanasius, Augustine, and Luther, but “boo!” for Arius, Pelagius, and Socinus—and so on. And sometimes we do so without any firsthand knowledge of what they wrote and taught.

But even our heroes have feet of clay, and it is important to try to see professing Christians in the context in which they actually lived. Christian faith knows only one perfect man and one perfect work—Jesus Christ. Every saint, every work, every movement is a mixture of God’s gracious operations and our often sinful and inadequate actions. So, none of the figures featured in these pages was perfect. Some of them did much good, wrote much that is helpful, and demonstrated enormous courage. But sometimes they also did harm by their inadequate or confused teaching about the Christian faith or by the style in which they lived it. Like us, both personally and intellectually, their sanctification was not complete. So what we can honor and imitate we should, but we ought never to be blinded by unthinking admiration.

At the end of the day, the source, the praise, for all that is good belongs to the Lord. Yet at the same time, He wants us to be thankful for the gifts He has given to men and women to help us on the way. We

are called to learn from them, to admire their labors in the gospel, and to imitate them insofar as they imitated Christ (see 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; Heb. 13:7). It would be myopic, therefore, if we expected that a book like this, however brief and superficial, would describe only the perfect.

Almost every student of the Apostolic Fathers (the men who immediately followed the Apostolic period) is struck by the huge difference between the clarity and power of the Apostles' teaching and the sometimes impoverished grasp of the gospel in the writings that followed only decades later. John ("Rabbi") Duncan, professor of Hebrew at the Free Church College in Edinburgh, Scotland, expressed a wise perspective when he spoke of Polycarp, the second-century bishop (minister) of the church in Smyrna, who in his eighties was martyred for his confession of faith in Christ: "Polycarp would have stood a bad chance in an examination by John Owen"¹; elsewhere he notes, "But oh, Polycarp and these men were notable men, to burn for the cause of Christ."²

Duncan understood what we will see again and again in these pages: that it is possible to have hearts that have been washed cleaner than our heads. Sometimes it will be hard for us to appreciate why Christians did not better understand the gospel. But then, we are often unaware of the privileges we have enjoyed because of the context in which we have lived our Christian lives—where each of us has our own copy (probably multiple copies) of the Scriptures and access to Christian literature and a wide array of helpful biblical teachers. Thankfully, our Lord providentially overrules our weaknesses without minimizing our responsibility for our mistakes. He has never gone back on His promise: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

The Church-Building Program

Jesus is always building His church. He has been creating His new covenant community for two thousand years. And He has been doing so in enemy-occupied territory. The gates of Hades may withstand, but can never prevent, His ultimate triumph.

INTRODUCTION

Christ's kingdom is advancing. It has not done so, as far as we can see, in a straight line, like a steadily and consistently rising graph. Indeed, in keeping with the biblical plotline, it appears to advance in epochs and on occasion seems hidden and almost dormant. At times and in certain places, it seems to suffer great loss, and at other times and places it makes great gains.

Thus, today, in many parts of the West, the professing church is marked by rapid numerical decline and suffers from a hardening of the spiritual heart arteries. Meanwhile, elsewhere the church experiences persecution and great suffering, and yet through this it grows and makes great advances. It is not insignificant that the twentieth century may have witnessed more martyrs for Christ than any century since the beginning of the church. Yet at the same time, more people have become professing Christians than ever before.

The river of the church's story flows into the whole of our modern world, north and south, east and west. One book could not possibly tell the whole story.

There is an important difference between a panorama and a vista, although the two words seem frequently to be confused or treated as synonyms. This little book is intended to be both: a panorama in the sense that it covers twenty centuries of the life of the Christian church, but a vista—a narrow view—in the sense that it is written by a Scottish Presbyterian whose church experience has been largely confined to the United Kingdom and the United States. I hope it will inform, challenge, and stimulate to further exploration. Remembering Hegel's lament, I have interspersed the story of the past with some lessons we might take to heart for the life of the present and future church.

I hope these fragments of the church's story will encourage the assurance that the Lord Jesus has indeed been building His church and will continue to do so until He comes again in majesty and glory.

The format of each chapter is simple: it opens with a quotation on which to reflect, followed by a brief narrative of individuals and events from that century. Each chapter concludes with a hymn written in the same century. I hope these pages will express something of the flavor of

the Christian life, tell the story of the advance of the gospel, and give some sense of the worship of the church throughout the ages.

Origins

In centuries past, it was customary for authors to express their reluctance to rush into print by saying in a preface that their book was being published because of the desire of friends that material they had heard or privately read might reach a wider audience. These pages fall into that category. Their origin lies in a series of talks I gave in our church during the closing months of 1999 when the turn of the millennium was uppermost in many people's thinking. Having long held the suspicion that many Christians know very little about the great family history of the church, I decided to take a few minutes early on in our evening worship to talk about each of the Christian centuries. That segment of our worship (which in some ways I justified on the basis that the Apostolic letters themselves do precisely this—provide Christians with information about fellow believers elsewhere) was always climaxed with the singing of a hymn written in the century about which I had been speaking.

It is one thing for someone with some knowledge of church history and the story of theology to sit down for a few minutes and think of interesting and informative people and events in the passing of a century and to give a brief talk; it is quite another to accede to requests to put the material into writing. What can be hidden in a talk is exposed when put down on paper with no personal context! But now, stimulated by various considerations, the opportunity has arisen to expand that simple material into book length.³ *In the Year of Our Lord* represents a much fuller and, I hope, richer form of this material. I am grateful to Reformation Trust and the staff of Ligonier Ministries who in this, as in so many other things, have given me every encouragement. As always, my wife, Dorothy, has provided the mainstay of human love that has made it possible for me to devote time and energy to writing.

A Man with a Dream

Authors sometimes dream that their books will accomplish more than one goal. Books can, it is hoped, be enjoyed by their readers. But a book

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can also be the means by which an author can express his or her affection and appreciation for others by way of the time-honored tradition of a dedication. *In the Year of Our Lord* has been written with both of these goals in view.

Many years ago, over dinner, a young man told me of a vivid dream he had experienced. In it, he had seen an army of theologians coming over the brow of a hill and marching toward him out of the past. How he knew they were theologians was, I think, part of the mystery of the dreamworld. He could make out Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and other great figures from the past. But the striking feature of the dream was that they were all being led toward him by someone he also recognized—a contemporary Christian leader who, through his ministry of teaching, preaching, and writing, had first introduced these heroes of the faith to my young host. That someone was R.C. Sproul.

In all likelihood, no one in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has introduced as many ordinary Christians to the story and theology of the church as did R.C. In that task he was constantly encouraged by his wife, Vesta. Through four decades, R.C. and Vesta befriended and encouraged me. In addition, they gave me many privileged opportunities to share in the remarkable and multifaceted work of Ligonier Ministries, which began life in Western Pennsylvania and now touches the far corners of the earth.

R.C. went to be with his Lord on December 14, 2017. He was a good soldier in Christ's army and a faithful servant of God, with an outstanding intellect and great gifts. But he was also my friend, and it was in large measure out of a desire to thank him and Vesta that this book was first written. It is with deep gratitude for their friendship and fellowship in the ministry of the gospel that this book is dedicated to them.

THE FIRST CENTURY

THE EARLY GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

John the Divine sees the whole story of the church in a vivid vision full of biblical allusions. The following text is from Revelation 12.

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was

defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

What do you know about the first century of the Christian church? It divides into three periods. The first third of it should be most familiar to every Christian. Somewhere around the year AD 30, Simon called Peter, a fisherman from Galilee, confessed that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-expected Jewish Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus in turn promised His small group of disciples, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

This is a key statement in world history. Twenty centuries later, we can see that Jesus’ promise has proved breathtakingly true.

We must not run ahead of the story. Yet simply to read these words is to sense that they have a programmatic ring to them.

Why He Came

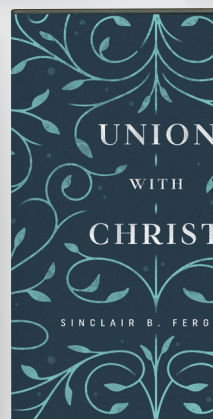
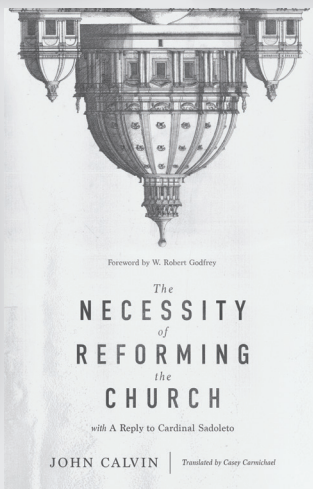
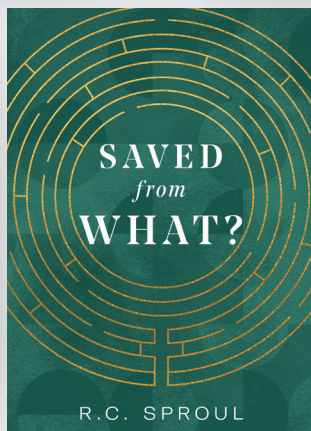
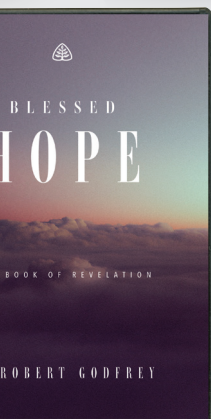
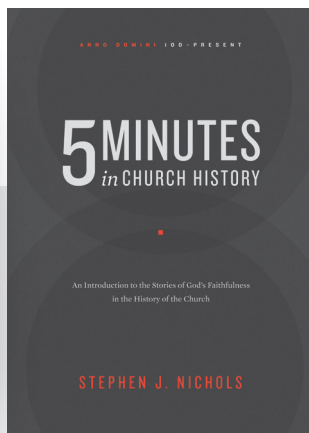
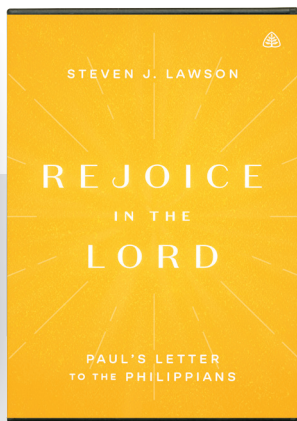
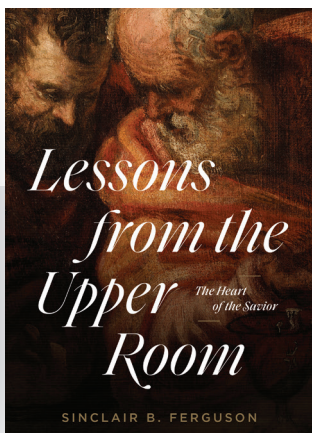
“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” Paul wrote (1 Tim. 1:15), echoing the confession of the early church, according to which the essence of the Christian gospel is this:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor. 15:1–3)

But He did this not merely to save isolated individuals. If one of the disciples had asked Jesus, “What did You come into the world to achieve?” He would have said, “To seek and to save the lost.” But He would also have emphasized, “I also came into the world to build a church, a new community of redeemed people.” And so He lived and taught, did works of mighty power, died on the cross, and rose again from the dead in order to fulfill this promise—“I will build my church.”

The Apostle John provides a further perspective on the ministry of his Savior: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). In one sense, these words encompass the entire plotline of the Bible from the beginning to the end. Immediately after the fall, God pronounced a judgment curse on the tempter.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES