

TURNING POINTS

Decisive Moments *in the* History of Christianity

THIRD EDITION

MARK A. NOLL

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To the Illinois Presbyterians and Transylvanian Baptists
for whom the material in this book was first prepared
and who, though students, have taught me
much more than ever I gave to them

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Preface to the Third Edition

The major change in this new edition has me going out on a limb—since interpretation of recent history is always risky—by designating the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (1974) as *the* critical turning point(s) of the recent past. In a new chapter 13 I try to explain why those gatherings might be considered emblematic for the recent world history of Christianity. My expansion of the treatment on Vatican II and Lausanne in the former edition’s chapter 13 means that the new afterword incorporates some material that was in the old chapter 13 as well as some further reflections on the current trajectory of Christianity in the world. One other substantial change came about due to the kindness of readers who informed me of historical errors in chapter 3 on the Council of Chalcedon. I am grateful for their advice and have tried to make that account as accurate as possible without attempting an entirely new rendition of the critical, but tangled, events of the fifth century.

For the rest I appreciate the opportunity to revise the further reading sections at the end of each chapter, to update statistical information, and to draw upon newer standard editions for some of the documents quoted.

I am grateful that the book has proven useful as an orientation to the broad sweep of Christian history, but I am even more pleased when it has prompted readers to go on to the advanced reading and study that every one of the topics, people, and eras mentioned in this book so much deserves. My prayer is that this new edition of *Turning Points* may continue to provide useful instruction about the past, but even more a growing sense of gratitude to the One who lovingly presides over the present and the future as well as the past.

Acknowledgments

For help on the subjects of this book, some of it going back many years, I am deeply grateful to a large group of teachers, friends, and colleagues:

- To gifted teachers with whom I studied church history, including Harold O. J. Brown, Jack Forstman, John Gerstner, Dale Johnson, H. D. McDonald, John Warwick Montgomery, Richard Wolf, and John Woodbridge. I hope the ones among these expert teachers who are still in the land of the living, as well as especially David Wells, my first teacher in several senses of the term, will take it as nothing but a compliment if a few of their phrases or a hint of their outlines have worked their way through years of rearranging lecture notes to the printed page. Over the last several years the influence of another kind of teaching from Andrew Walls has profoundly deepened my understanding of the history of Christianity.
- To a generation of college students, mostly in classes at Wheaton College, who through patient listening and probing questions have pushed cut-and-dried information into genuine historical engagement.
- To patrons associated with Wheaton College who generously expedited work on the first edition of this book.
- To friends associated with the work of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals who, by being such splendid colleagues on questions of Christian history in North America, have provided a matchless counterpoint for considering the worldwide history of Christianity.
- To Bob Lackie, my first and still among the best ever student assistants, for preparing the study questions.

- To family members who for several decades have encouraged, tolerated, and indulged a fascination with history that leaves me sometimes only half present in the here and now; and especially to my wife Maggie for crucial assistance on this new edition.
- To Robert Brown and Estelle Berger who were essential in completing the first edition, and to Jeremy Wells who was equally helpful for this edition.
- To members and Sunday school regulars at Bethel Presbyterian and Immanuel Presbyterian churches in Wheaton and Warrenville, Illinois, and more recently at the South Bend (IN) Christian Reformed Church, who have shown such eager interest in the Christian past.
- And to the Baptist theological students in Oradea and Cluj, Romania, especially to friends in Oradea who provided an opportunity in the summer of 1989 to condense notes for a two-week introduction to the study of church history onto a single 4 × 6 card and in so doing planted the seed that has sprouted as this book.

Introduction

The Idea of Turning Points and Reasons for Studying the History of Christianity

Among the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples were statements recorded in Matthew, chapter 28, and Acts, chapter 1. These words, though they are important for many other reasons, also outline a framework for the history of Christianity.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Nothing could now happen to the followers of Christ that lay outside the reach of his sovereignty; no experiences that the church underwent, no matter how glorious or how mundane, were irrelevant to the living Word of God.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” The history of Christianity would always involve at least two related actions: a movement outward to reach places where Christ’s name was hitherto not known and a movement inward to train hearts in learning more of Christ.

“[S]urely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.” However the church might wander, whatever the sins committed by Christians as individuals and as a body, the people of God would be sustained, not by their own wisdom, but by the presence of Christ.

“[Y]ou will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” The Christian faith would take root in particular cultures, and it would profoundly shape individual peoples, regions, and nations. But Christianity itself would belong to none of them. Rather, the church would exist to bear witness to God’s love revealed in Christ and to bear that witness throughout the whole world.

These parting words of Jesus do not, of course, provide details about the later history of Christianity, but they do provide orientation for that history. The history of Christianity has wound its way through vast regions across vast stretches of time and in a vast variety of forms. But it remains the history of those who worship the Lord of Life, who seek to serve him, and whose witnesses they are.

One of the most interesting ways to grasp a general sense of Christian history (though there are many others) is to examine critical turning points in that story. Identifying such critical turning points is a subjective exercise, for an observer's decisions about what those most important turning points are inevitably depends upon what the observer considers to be most important. Yet however subjective it is to select a limited number of turning points as *the* critical moments in Christian history, such an exercise has a number of advantages.

- It provides an opportunity to select, to extract from the immense quantity of resources available for studying the history of Christianity a few striking incidents and so to bring some order into a massively complicated subject.
- Concentrating on the turning points of church history also provides an opportunity to highlight, to linger over specific moments so as to display the humanity, the complexity, and the uncertainties that constitute the actual history of the church, but that are often obscured in trying to recount the sweep of centuries.
- Studying specific turning points more closely also provides an opportunity to interpret, to state more specifically why certain events, actions, or incidents may have marked an important fork in the road or signaled a new stage in the outworking of Christian history.

The advantages for organizing an introduction to Christian history around a series of turning points were pressed home to me over a period of several years. First was the need for a framework for organizing an adult education course at my church. Then came the opportunity on two occasions to introduce the sweep of church history in short courses for Romanian pastors and lay workers. Finally was the chance to rethink the best way of teaching a one-semester survey of the history of Christianity to students at Wheaton College. For each of these audiences, a concentration on critical turning points turned out to allow greater focus on specific episodes while also providing more opportunity for interpretive reflection than I had found when teaching such material in other ways.

This book comes directly out of those varied teaching experiences. In each case, much was sacrificed in order to concentrate on a few major turning points. But much also was gained by attempting to combine more focus than a survey usually allows, while still attending to large-scale movements of institutions, people, and doctrines in the history of the church.

The book that grows out of these teaching assignments is intentionally shorter rather than longer. It is written for laypeople and introductory students rather than for scholars. It comes from an author with Christian presuppositions (specifically of the Protestant evangelical variety), but it intends to be as fair and as nonpartisan as such presuppositions allow. It is also written with an intent to present Christianity as a worldwide religion rather than a faith for just Europeans and North Americans.

The fourteen turning points singled out for special attention, as well as the potential turning points for the twentieth century discussed in the afterword, are by no means the only ones that could have been selected. A good case could have been made for including many other events, for example (as only a partial list):

- the mission of Patrick to Ireland in the early fifth century;
- the foundation of the reforming monastery at Cluny in France in 909;
- the arrival of Eastern Orthodoxy in Kyivan Rus in 988;
- the start of the Crusades in 1095;
- the revival of monasticism through the friars (especially Dominicans and Franciscans) at the start of the thirteenth century;
- the fall of the Byzantine Roman Empire to Islam in 1453;
- any number of significant moments in the missionary proclamation of Christianity beyond the West;
- the production of important translations of the Bible (for example, Jerome into Latin ca. 400, the English translation inspired by Wycliffe at the end of the fourteenth century, Luther's translation into German of 1522, the King James Bible of 1611, or some of the many new translations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries);
- the beginning of independent churches in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century; and
- the emergence of significant protest and humanitarian movements that decisively influenced the shape of later history (for example, the Waldensians in 1173, Conrad Grebel and the Anabaptists in 1525, John Smyth and the Baptists in 1609, George Fox and the Quakers in 1652, or William and Catherine Booth and the Salvation Army in 1878).

Attempting to select the fourteen most important turning points in the history of Christianity is a good exercise in itself. I have chosen the turning points treated in this book primarily because I think they reveal vitally important matters about church history, but also in part because these are events I know something about from my own teaching and reading. If the book inspires others to think about why the turning points found here are not as important as other possibilities, it will have been a successful book.

Each chapter begins with a relatively detailed account of the turning point itself, since historical details remind us that “church history” is never just the grand sweep through great eons of magisterial Doctrines, clashing Principles, or inevitable Consequences, but is rather the cumulative result of the often blurred thoughts, often hesitant actions, and often unforeseen consequences experienced by people more or less like ourselves.

Only after attempting to flesh out history in this kind of concrete way do we go on to larger, more general questions of why, how, and so what. Why was this event crucial? How did it relate to what went before and lead on to what followed? And what might those of us at the start of the twenty-first century learn from the event? Answers to these questions must, of necessity, be more general, but they are intended to connect, rather than disconnect, grand historical consequences with sharply focused critical events.

To provide even more context for the turning points, each chapter begins with a hymn and ends with a prayer that was written close to the time of the turning point under discussion. Each chapter also contains several longer quotations from people who took part in the turning point or who were affected by it. These materials, along with maps, charts, and illustrations, are intended in part to provide a more readable book. But they are also meant to put some flesh on the bare bones of history. The great decisions of the Christian past were made by people who sang and prayed with their fellow believers, who experienced the priceless nurture of regular worship and the disillusioning sorrows of intrachurch conflict, and who often expounded at great length on the page or in public speech. To hear their voices is not just to offer window dressing but to show that the great events of church history always involved real people, for whom regular worship, study of Scripture, participation in the sacraments, and attention to preaching and teaching provided a foundation for what gets written up in books.

But why, the question might be raised, be concerned about church history at all? Why think that any sort of knowledge about the Christian past—which can so easily seem obscure, petty, confusing, or complex—should interest or assist Christian believers in the present?

Obviously, some people are more naturally inclined to historical study than others. But for believers in the twenty-first century, there are several reasons why at least some attention to the history of Christianity is valuable. Brief explanation of those reasons builds a foundation for the specific turning points that make up this book.

1. In the first instance, studying the history of Christianity provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the irreducibly historical character of the Christian faith. The Bible itself is rife with explicit statements of that great truth. For instance, God gave the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel in direct consequence of his action-in-history on their behalf: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3). The vision of the New Testament is just as fully taken up with historical realities. The narrative heart of Christian faith, as well as its central dogma, is the truth that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). The apostle John spoke further of the Christian faith in the concrete terms of that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1). Luke wrote at the beginning of his Gospel that the Christian message depended on “the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:1–2). The apostle Paul spoke of events in Jewish history that provided “examples” for believers in the first century (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

The message of these and many other biblical passages is summarized in the key affirmations of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 concerning the historical character of Christ’s work, who for the sake of humanity and our salvation “came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again.”

In a word, since Christianity is not captured simply in a set of dogmas, a moral code, or a picture of the universe—though Christianity certainly involves dogmas, morality, and a worldview—since Christianity is ultimately the acts of God in time and space, centrally the acts of God in Christ, then to study the history of Christianity is continually to remember the historical character of Christian faith.

To be sure, there are dangers in taking history seriously. Throughout the entire history of Christianity, problems have constantly arisen when believers equate the human acts of the church with the acts of God, when Christians assume that using the name of God to justify their actions in space and time is the same as God himself acting. But that danger grows from a positive reality: to be a Christian is to have an infinite stake in the events of God-in-Christ,

with all that led up to the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and all that now flows from those realities in the shape of the church's history.

2. A second contribution of church history is to provide perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. In varied forms, all Christians testify to their dependence upon the Bible, yet as even the briefest reflection indicates, there are vast differences in how the Bible is understood and used. Studying the history of Christianity provides guidance in several ways for discovering the meaning of Scripture.

We may view the Christian past like a gigantic seminar where trusted friends, who have labored long to understand the Scriptures, hold forth in various corners of the room. There is Augustine discoursing on the Trinity; here St. Patrick and Count von Zinzendorf comparing notes on the power of Light over Darkness; over there Catherine of Siena and Phoebe Palmer discussing the power of holiness; across the room Pope Gregory the Great on the duties of a pastor; there the Orthodox monk St. Herman of Alaska and the first African Anglican bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther on what it means to carry Christianity across cultural boundaries; here St. Francis on the God-ordained goodness of the earth; in a huddle Thomas Aquinas, Simeon the New Theologian, and Blaise Pascal talking about the relation of reason to revelation; there Hildegard of Bingen and Johann Sebastian Bach on how to sing the praises of the Lord; here Martin Luther on justification by faith; there John Calvin on Christ as Prophet, King, and Priest; there Charles Wesley on the love of God; there his mother, Susanna, on the communication of faith to children, and on and on.

If a contemporary believer wants to know the will of God as revealed in Scripture on any of these matters, or on thousands more, it is certainly prudent to study the Bible carefully for oneself. But it is just as prudent to look for help, to realize that the question I am bringing to Scripture has doubtless been asked before and will have been addressed by others who were at least as saintly as I am, at least as patient in pondering the written Word, and at least as knowledgeable about the human heart.

Teachers of foreign languages say that you don't really know your own language unless you have tried to learn a second or a third language. In the same way, students of the Scriptures usually cannot claim to have understood its riches unless they have consulted others about its meaning. In fact, Christians are always consulting one another about the meaning of the Bible, whether by listening to sermons, by reading commentaries, or by meeting for Bible studies of one kind or another. The dimension added by the history of Christianity is the realization that in books may be found a wondrously rich reservoir of engagement with the Scriptures from those who, though dead, still speak of what they have found in the sacred texts.

As much as church history offers this kind of direct help in understanding the Scriptures, it also offers a great caution. From the distance supplied by time, it is often quite easy to see that some biblical interpretations that once seemed utterly persuasive were in fact distortions of Scripture. When we find out, for example, that some believers once thought the Bible clearly taught that the Roman Empire was to usher in the millennium or that Christ would return in 1538 or that Africans were an inherently inferior form of humanity, then we can see the role that specific thought patterns or intellectual conventions of an age have played in interpretations of the Bible.

The benefit from noting such mistaken interpretations from the past is to raise the possibility that some of our treasured interpretations of Scripture today may be as dependent on conventions of our own era, and also as irrelevant to the actual message of the Bible as clearly deviant interpretations of former epochs were. For this problem it is difficult to provide examples from the present, since the biblical interpretations I hold most dear are likely to be precisely those that I consider to be least influenced by passing fashions. (It is much easier to see where biblical interpretations I reject are dominated by the thought forms of today!) Still, to see in the past that very godly people were able to maintain bizarre interpretations of Scripture should be a caution for us all.

3. The study of church history is also useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture. To take one pressing, if not all-important, example, many Western churches in the twenty-first century struggle with questions about what kind of music to use in church. Should all the old hymns be dropped in favor of new songs of praise? Should music be provided by an organ? A combo? Should it be performed a capella? With electricity? With drums? Study of the past cannot provide easy answers on how best to use music for Christ today. But to examine periods like the first half of the sixteenth century, when, in response to the tumults of the Reformation, at least five or six different decisions were taken with respect to the use of music in church, would certainly be a help. When Roman Catholics took the path of complex music and professional performance, Calvinists of congregational Psalm-singing with straightforward tunes, the Orthodox of preserving ancient liturgies, Anabaptists of rejecting all “worldly” forms of music in favor of unaccompanied congregational song, Lutherans of combining professional music with congregational singing, and Anglicans wobbling (typically) among Lutheran, Catholic, and Calvinist styles, there were consequences that helped shape each of these Christian traditions. To see what flowed from the decision for traditional, trendy, populist, professional, elaborate, or simple forms of music provides substantial context for trying to think through issues in the use of music today.

On a question that can have life-or-death consequences, modern Christians face weighty choices in how to live as believers in various political situations. Again, the history of Christianity cannot provide definitive answers, but it can provide a welter of contrasting scenarios. Sometimes the church has thrived under tyranny, sometimes tyranny has decimated it. In different eras the church has supported (or attacked) monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy. Churches have both upheld and resisted ruling regimes. Modern believers in California, Iraq, Germany, China, and Kenya are probably going to be looking for direction of different kinds from church history, but all will be able to find some fellow believers who have gone down a road something like theirs before.

And so it is with many other circumstances: Christian engagement with science, Christian attitudes to alien ethnic groups, Christian promotion of peace or war, Christian contributions to different forms of economic organization, Christian discussion about what to eat or drink, Christian strategies for organizing the work of God, and so on.

Even a little bit of historical understanding may benefit modern believers attempting to act responsibly in any of these cultural spheres. The first reassurance is that almost all such issues have been faced before, at least in some form. The second is that believers—guided by Scripture, church authorities, sage employment of worldly wisdom, and the inner prompting of the Spirit—have often acted wisely and well on such cultural matters. The third is that, even where in retrospect it appears that Christians have blundered badly in their decisions, the Lord of the church has not abandoned them to their folly but, despite their misbegotten efforts, has remained to sustain his own.

4. This realization, which historical study fairly shouts out loud, that God sustains the church despite the church's own frequent efforts to betray its Savior and its own high calling, points to another benefit from study of the history of Christianity. Study of the past can be useful, that is, in shaping proper Christian attitudes. It is often easier in reviewing the past than in looking at the present to discriminate between matters that are absolutely essential to genuine Christianity and those that are either of relative importance or not important at all. If we are able to isolate from past generations what was of crucial significance in the church's mission, then we have a chance in the present to order our emotional and spiritual energies with discrimination—preserving our deepest commitment only for those aspects of Christian faith that deserve such commitment and acting with ever greater toleration as we move from the center of the faith to its periphery.

Even more important, study of church history should increase our humility about who we are and what we believe. There is nothing that the modern church enjoys that is not a gift from previous generations of God's people. To

be sure, we modify, adjust, adapt, and expand these gifts from the past, but we do not make them up. Again, if the church is always only one generation from extinction, it also enjoys a peerless inheritance. The more we know about how those gifts have come down to us, the more we may humbly thank God for his faithfulness to past generations, as well as to our own.

Even more than humility, a study of the Christian past can also engender profound gratitude. Despite a dazzling array of God-honoring triumphs and despite a wide and deep record of godliness among believers of high estate and low, the sad fact is that the church's history is often a sordid, disgusting tale. Once students push beyond sanitized versions of Christian history to realistic study, it is clear that self-seeking, rebellion, despotism, pettiness, indolence, cowardice, murder (though dignified with God-talk), and the lust for power along with all other lusts have flourished in the church almost as ignobly as in the world at large. A study of church history can be an eye-opener. The heroes of the faith usually have feet of clay—sometimes thighs, hearts, and heads as well. The golden ages of the past usually turn out to be tarnished if they are examined closely enough. Crowding around the heroes of the faith are a lot of villains, and some of them look an awful lot like the heroes.

And so along with all the positive direction and ennobling examples in church history stands also a full record of human wrongdoing. Our response? It could be to despair at the persistent human inability to act toward others and toward God as God has acted toward humanity. It would be better, however, to consider the hidden reality that the long record of Christian weakness and failure reveals, for what it shows is a divine patience broader than any human impatience, a divine forgiveness more powerful than any human offense, and a divine grace deeper than our human sin.

Despite a tangled history, the promise of the Savior concerning the church has been fulfilled: “the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). But precisely that tangled history points to the reason why Christianity has endured: “I will build *my* church.”

By way of final introduction, it may be helpful to say a few last words about what follows.

Most of the chapters speak more often of “the history of Christianity” than of “church history,” since “church history” entails a stronger commitment to a particular expression of the faith than does “the history of Christianity.” My own conviction is that “Christianity” means something definite with boundaries that are fairly well defined by the major creeds treated in the first three chapters. Furthermore, my own evangelical Protestant convictions lead me to think that revitalized forms of Reformation faith are the truest and best

forms of Christianity. At the same time, however, historical study has convinced me that confessional Protestants have sometimes honored the ideals of the Reformation more in words than in reality. Historical study also shows that believers in other Christian traditions regularly display Christlike virtues and practice humble dependence upon God’s grace more than my confessional Protestant convictions tell me they should. With these facts in mind, I have tried to write with as much respect as possible for the widely diverse forms of Christianity that have been practiced with integrity, and continue to be practiced with integrity, in all parts of the Christian church.

The pages below reflect what might legitimately be called a male bias toward the history of Christianity. In a stellar book on the religious lives of medieval Catholic women, Caroline Walker Bynum writes that “women tended to tell stories and develop personal models without crises or turning points.”¹ That it is mostly men who figure as the principal actors in the turning points that follow is less a statement about the intrinsic character of the faith than it is a reflection of how the church’s public life has been documented through the centuries. It is gratifying indeed to see that the flourishing of scholarship over the past decades on women in Christian history is already leading to the kind of popular general studies that this one also tries to be, but written with a focus on the spheres of Christian life in which the experiences of women have figured more prominently.²

Finally, it may be worth observing that the abbreviation “ca.” is from the Latin *circa*, “about,” and is used to designate a date concerning which there is some uncertainty.



Each of the chapters ends with a prayer taken from a figure related in some way to the turning point of the chapter. It is therefore appropriate that this introduction do the same by enlisting from the Psalms two parts of a great biblical prayer of Moses concerning the rule of God over human history:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.

1. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 25.

2. For example, Ruth Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Margaret Bendroth and Phyllis Airhart, eds., *Faith Traditions and the Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); and Catherine A. Brekus, *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Before the mountains were born
 or you brought forth the whole world,
 from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
 You turn people back to dust,
 saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."
 A thousand years in your sight
 are like a day that has just gone by,
 or like a watch in the night.
 You sweep people away in the sleep of death—
 they are like the new grass of the morning:
 In the morning it springs up new,
 But by evening it is dry and withered.

 Teach us to number our days,
 that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
 Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?
 Have compassion on your servants.
 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
 that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
 for as many years as we have seen trouble.
 May your deeds be shown to your servants,
 your splendor to their children.
 May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
 establish the work of our hands for us—
 yes, establish the work of our hands. (Ps. 90:1–6, 12–17)

Further Reading

Each of the chapters ends with a short list of books and articles that provide further reading concerning the turning point or its broader context. At the end of this introduction it is appropriate to list a few of the many outstanding general studies and reference works that are now available.

Barrett, David B., George Thomas Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Bettenson, Henry, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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