WHY CHURCH HISTORY?

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Christians are interested in Church history because God’s Spirit is involved in history and because God’s work is important to the Christian. As one studies history he learns more of the God of history and the nature of His dealings with men. The knowledgeable and effective Christian cannot overlook the movements of the past any more than an architect can overlook the Parthenon or a composer can overlook Beethoven.

Secularists generally tend to view history from either a strict cause and effect stance or from the point of view of existentialism. Cause and effect historians usually are committed to a “purely scientific” approach to the study of history. Many deny any “supernaturalist” elements in history and are committed to naturalism.

Existentialists generally are committed to a radically subjective approach to life. More often than not, existentialism openly disparages any study of history. A concern for the present and for one’s immediate concerns often leads to a complete eclipse of interest in other men, other movements, and other times.

The Christian historian regards both of these points of view—the naturalist and the existentialist—as seriously lacking. To be sure, the Christian historian must go to the centuries of the past with a view to accuracy; but he refuses to do so with a disregard for divine working in the affairs of men. “Bare facts” simply do not exist in a vacuum; they must be seen in context and they must be interpreted with a view to tracing God’s activity. In short, the Christian historian believes that one

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must come to a study of history with an acquaintance with the Bible and with Christian theology.

Of course there are pitfalls implicit in an insistence that history is a part of God’s working. One may be tempted to see the history of the Church, or the history of one’s own denomination, as the center of history. While this is patently wrong, it nevertheless constitutes a real and present danger. Few have escaped the triumphalist tendencies inherent in studying one’s own particular theological tradition.

But in spite of this danger, the Christian historian seeks to avoid pagan cyclical views and the cause and effect presuppositions of the secular historians. The Christian student knows that history is in a linear development someday to be consummated in the eschaton. To be sure, the student knows only in part. But Christians are sure of one thing: God guides in the affairs of men.

Naturally, all the theological disciplines must work together in harmony if the Church of Jesus Christ is to have the maximum benefit of theological insight. Certainly the study of Church history has its distinct contribution to make. The past is more than a fossil only to look at as a subject of curiosity, disgust, or quasi-worship. History can become the teacher, and as such, an illuminator of God’s truth and will.

The following four theses seem to be important ways in which the study of the history of the Church can benefit the life of the community of faith.

1. **A study of Church history can bring humility to the attitude of the Church.** A spirit of humility and teachableness should be both a prelude and a result of learning about the past. When one immerses himself in the study of history he soon feels dwarfed and humbled in the presence of the giants of the past. When faced with the great variety of traditions and an even greater variety of saints, he is forced to admit that the truth of God is too vast for him to claim a monopoly on it for himself or for his particular group. Regardless of one’s institutional or theological tradition, history forces him to hear the Lord say, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold.”

Church history also teaches that the Church continually needs God’s forgiveness, teaching, and guidance. One must not be complacent about good points or past victories and achievements. Complacency opens him to the temptation to miss God’s will or to lapse into smug self-righteousness. One’s own theology must never become an idol which he erects between himself and God. History teaches that such a danger is never very far from any individual. The simple fact remains
that God and His truth are too vast for the limited wineskins of man.

C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* records the following bit of advice from a senior devil to a junior devil:

Since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truth of another.

The serious Christian of the present is interested in the thoughts and activities of serious Christians of the past, regardless of their theological point of view. In reality only harm can come from ignorance of by-gone centuries. A willingness to “listen” to Christians of the past can be a prelude to a humble attitude which brings growth and maturity.

2. *A study of Church history can bring maturity to the analysis of the Church.* The discipline of Church history implies that all theological students ought to be familiar with the starting point and the methodology of all the major theological traditions of the Christian heritage. One can never adequately understand the present unless he knows the past. A theological education which fails to study any important historical institutional or theological development is sadly lacking.

One cannot jump from the Bible to the present, ignoring the developments within the Church in between. God’s avenues of illumination are multifarious, and He may speak in ways least expected. For example, God “spoke” to the early Church through the heretic Marcion, and the Church saw the need for the development of the canon of Scripture. God “spoke” to the Church through Gnosticism, and the Church saw the need of developing her creeds. Independence from the past is a vain boast because all mankind stands on the shoulders of those who have lived before.

History shows that often one’s view is restricted to the extent that he suffers from a lack of perspective. A preoccupation with secondary affairs or even an exclusive preoccupation with any present theological or institutional concern opens one to overlooking the total scheme of things. For example, it was not shocking to students of the history of the Church that the “Death of God” theologians hearkened back to Tillich as their mentor. An existentialist commitment to theology naturally tended to produce a God which was at first non-personal, and then a God who finally disappeared.
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Only the insight which comes from a familiarity with the long history of the Church can enable one to analyze, in a mature fashion, the current trends.

3. A study of Church history can bring enlightenment to the approach to the Church. The study of Church history is not an end in itself any more than the studies of Greek, homiletics, or systematic theology are ends in themselves. The study of Church history is for the purpose of serving better the Church of Christ. One of the services which the study of Church history performs is to aid in the development of a strategy or an approach to the Church's mission.

Students do not find it difficult to believe that events of history actually happened, but some find it hard to believe that those happenings have any bearing on the modern church. A study of history gives one a knowledge of the past activities of the Church, and this enables him to understand better the present. Such insights aid the Church in its approach to the future. Those who are ignorant of the mistakes of the past frequently are bound to repeat the same mistakes. A knowledge of Church history enables one better to evaluate the host of current options which offer themselves.

Someone has said, "An educated person is one who understands the implications of his beliefs." The implications of one's beliefs can be known partly through reason; but history is often a better, and certainly a more graphic, teacher. One can learn, for example, from Church history that jumping on a theological bandwagon is sometimes easier than getting off again, for the wagon does not always stop just because one finally decides it is headed in the wrong direction. Even if one is able to get off with a measure of dignity yet intact, this is no guarantee that those who followed his lead in the first place will follow when he changes his mind. If anything, history teaches the value of serious reflection on any matter related to the doctrine and life of the Church.

Throughout the history of the Church, four different attitudes toward the cultural milieu have emerged. In the first place, the Church can write culture off as hopelessly corrupt, and then abandon it. This is the attitude of "rejection." Montanism followed this principle, as did the medieval monastics. Today this attitude is seen in some of the sect groups, and in missionaries who demand that their converts totally abandon all their national customs.

History demonstrates that the Church must relate creatively to the world around itself if it is to minister effectively to the world. To be relevant, the Church must include in her witness answers to
questions that the present generation is asking, avoiding all the while
the temptation to overstate or understate the claims of the Gospel. History shows that the rejection of culture in toto leads to a serious be-
trayal of the Church’s commission.

A second possibility for the Church is to lose its distinctiveness by being so closely identified with culture that she becomes immersed in it. Examples of this approach may be seen in the Sadducees of Jesus’
day, in certain of the Renaissance men, and in classic theological liberal-
ism or so-called Culture-Protestantism. This posture is the attitude of
“over-identification.” Such a posture sees little tension between Christ
and the world. Besides attenuating the Gospel witness, this mentality has
never succeeded in winning to Christ any significant number of vital dis-
ciples. Like the approach of world rejection, its record is less than im-
pressive.

A third possibility is for the Church to live two lives—to have a
loyalty to two kingdoms. In this approach to culture, the Church assumes
in one situation one stance, and in another situation a quite different
stance. On some occasions she acts as saint and on other occasions she
acts as sinner. This attitude may be called “split-adaptation.” Examples
may be seen in the ethics of the Christian Church when she began a cruel
policy of persecution as soon as she had it in her power to do so.

While informed Christians realize that the Church faces a certain
ambiguity in some of her choices and courses of action, at the same
time she must be committed to eternal and objective norms if she is to
fulfill her commission from God. The Christian can never embrace a
double ethic any more than he can follow two Christs or two Gospels.

A fourth approach to culture is possible. The Church can assume
its proper responsibility as an institution in society, but at the same
time accept her calling to be Christ’s body. John Wesley is perhaps one
of the outstanding examples of the attitude which seeks to remain
loyal to Christ at every level of life and at the same time accept respon-
sibility for “leavening” society with the transforming power of the
Gospel. Such a posture may be called an attitude of “critical partici-
pation.”

In this approach, culture is not rejected with the bitterness of a
Tertullian or a Tolstoy, nor is it accepted with an uncritical abandon as
in the case of religious humanism, or the so-called “Modernism.” (Modernism may be clearly distinguished from other forms of “Liberal-
ism,” such as the liberalism of a Fosdick or a Rauschenbusch.) When the
Church accepts its responsibility both to Christ and the world, ever present are the divine possibilities for renewal and transformation of individuals and systems.

4. A study of Church History can bring motivation to the activity of the Church. History teaches that God is in His Church working with a divine purpose, and that all events must be seen within a Christian view of eschatology. Christ is building His Church, and His purposes will not be frustrated. Nothing great in the history of the Church has been accomplished without the grace of God and His working in the Church. Only divine aid can explain, for example, the work of the Apostles, the Church Fathers, and the great movements of reform throughout Christian history.

If history teaches the importance of the work of God in the Church, it also teaches the importance of the work of God in individual persons. It is through individual personalities that God chooses to work. There is no limit to what can be done through a single individual or group of Christian believers when there is total dedication. Only a small amount of leaven is needed to leaven the entire lump. Though perhaps not in predictable ways, God always used dedicated men and dedicated institutions. After all, the wind of the Spirit blows where it wills.

Thus, from the study of Church history, the Church can learn of herself: this brings humility of attitude. The Church can learn of others: this brings a maturity of analysis. The Church can learn of opportunities: this brings an enlightenment of approach. The Church can learn of God: this brings a motivation of activity.

Church history speaks an encouraging word to our day: God will use those who are prepared intellectually and spiritually to serve Him with total commitment.