

Why Study Christian History?

The Value of Understanding the Past

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According to recent surveys of college students, about half were raised attending church “regularly” or “semi-regularly,” yet more than 85% are functionally illiterate when it comes to the Bible and 95% have virtually no understanding of Christian history. Among college graduates who are church members, nearly 85% are clueless regarding the origins of their own particular church and/or denomination. And even among relatively well-educated and active church members, relatively few know much about Christian history between the close of the New Testament and the present other than some random facts related to the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Reformation.

As a history professor, I’m not surprised by these findings. For years, studies have shown that the level of religious cultural literacy in America is pitifully low. Even among those who were raised in Christian families and grew up attending church regularly, most evince only a superficial understanding of the Bible and even less of basic Christian theology, church history, or Christian apologetics.

Ignorance may be blissful but it is never impressive, and in the realm of religious faith it has serious consequences. Those who never invest the necessary time and effort to study their faith in depth have no real basis for their beliefs other than their own subjective experience or the word of a trusted authority figure. Rightly or wrongly, people tend not to take us seriously if they can’t respect us intellectually, and many Christians who sincerely desire to witness for Christ find that their testimony is ineffectual because they can’t handle the tough questions posed by skeptics. Unfortunately, not only is their own testimony affected, but the integrity of the Christian faith in general is called into question.

The theologian George Ladd once wrote that “The uniqueness of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical

events.” Ultimately, the only reason for being a Christian is if it is true – and as Ladd correctly notes, Christian truth is inextricably connected to historical truth. This makes it all the more imperative that Christians understand the historical bases of their faith.

There is no doubt that many people who have an aversion to history (or most anything else “intellectual”) live lives that are just as happy and contented as those who are life-long learners.

So where is the intrinsic value in history? And is a knowledge and understanding of the past (including Christian history) mainly for those with antiquarian interests or nothing better to do with their time? After all, it doesn’t really translate into dollars. Other than possibly improving one’s performance in Trivia Pursuit, is there any transcendent purpose in studying history?

Many would argue that there is no purpose since history has no meaning. Nor can we even know with any certainty what actually happened in the past. According to Voltaire, history is little more than “a tableau of crimes and misfortunes” and “a pack of tricks we play on the dead.” Nietzsche dismissed it as “the belief in falsehood,” while Henry Ford famously declared,

“History is bunk!” Similarly, the filmmaker James Cameron, producer of the infamous 2007 Discovery Channel docudrama, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, regards history as “a consensus hallucination,” and in Dan Brown’s best selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the main characters (no doubt speaking for the author) asserts confidently, “What is history but a fable agreed upon?”

Ironically, many contemporary historians would essentially agree. Influenced by postmodern skepticism, few history professors would argue that history is anything but a random sequence of events with no ultimate purpose or design, and many prominent historians in recent years have even questioned the value of studying the past.¹ Furthermore, we’re often reminded that “history is written by the winners,” so can we even trust it?

Certainly, if the hedonistic ideal were true and the purpose of life were primarily to maximize pleasure, history would have little to offer. But what if life actually has meaning? – Christians purport to believe that it does. Then the past might be of value. It might even hold the key for making sense of the present. Fifty years before Christ, the Roman statesman Cicero said something rather profound about historical consciousness:

To be ignorant of what has happened before your birth is to always remain a child. For what is the meaning of one’s life unless it is integrated with that of our ancestors by history?²

Cicero realized what all the great thinkers have understood: Those who live shallow, ego-centered lives disconnected from the broader currents of existence will always be, intellectually-speaking, immature children. The wise access the collective knowledge of the ages and learn from it so as to enrich their own life experience. To do otherwise is abject foolishness.

¹ Several studies in recent years have focused on the issue of contemporary historical skepticism such as Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987); Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* (1990); Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991); and Keith Windschuttle’s *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (1997).

² Cicero, *Orator* 34:120.

What History Is

Until the rise of postmodernism in the last quarter of the 20th century, Western civilization had generally valued history. As the classical Greeks defined it, history (*historia*) was a form of research – a process of inquiry into the past. In their lexicon, history was a verb, not a noun: one *did* history, much as we might refer to someone who is *studying* history rather than merely taking a course in it. Traditionally, there have been two fundamental premises on which the whole process of doing history rests: First, it assumes that there are realities associated with the past that we can access, or that real objective truth exists; and second, that apprehending this knowledge matters.

The process of doing history starts with accessing and interpreting facts. **Facts** are the basic building blocks of the discipline – bits of information that coincide with past realities. An historical fact is something that rational people generally accept as true based on credible research and our current level of knowledge. Since facts are beliefs about truth – not necessarily truth itself – facts can change in the light of new evidence. Ideally, that is what **historical revisionism** is all about – new understanding based on more recent (and presumably better) information. But we shouldn’t be cavalier about facts. If we value truth, we must be cautious when it comes to altering our interpretations of the past. The burden of proof should fall on the revisionists, not (as is often the case today) the other way around. There should be convincing evidence to the contrary before we rewrite history, and it needs to be based on solid factual evidence, not current ideological trends.

In fact, all history is a complex matrix of contributing factors, which is why the greatest challenge facing historians is to sift through the material, select what is salient, organize it in a sensible manner, and present it intelligibly so as to illuminate the past. Otherwise, history is chaotic and meaningless – a clutter of seemingly disconnected and random facts (just “one damn thing after another”). As all scholars and students of history can attest, the real value of history comes when we go beyond the basic facts into the realm of analysis and interpretation. But conclusions must be based on solid factual evidence and rational extrapolations lest we become propagandists who use history merely to promote our own agendas. As in every field of

scholarship, some historians are intellectually dishonest; the best ones, however, try to curb their sentiments and let the facts dictate their conclusions.

So history is the process of reconstructing and interpreting the past based on the facts as we understand them: what happened, when did it happen, who was involved, why did it happen, how did it happen, and what were the results?

In a formal methodological sense, the process of doing history is called **historiography**. We usually get our facts from two or three means: primary and secondary sources, which are based on written accounts, and oral sources. Ideally, these are supplemented by corroborating artifactual evidence *via* art, pottery, or architecture. **Primary sources** are original, first-hand accounts, and in most cases they are highly-valued. But just because something purports to be an eye-witness account doesn't necessarily mean it is reliable. It can be misleading, or it can be an outright forgery. Due to bias, people often twist the truth or simply omit crucial information to suit their own purposes.

In best-case scenarios, historians have access to several primary source documents that they can compare and contrast in order to construct a more thorough understanding of an issue or event. This is the principle of **multiple independent attestation**, and it is highly valued among historians. But this is particularly problematical the farther back we go in time. Oftentimes, we are working off only one or a few sources, so our conclusions are, by necessity, more tentative. Therefore, based on the quantity (multiple independent attestation) and the quality of the sources, we can, for example, write the history of the Normandy Invasion of World War II with a much higher degree of probability than that of the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066.

Secondary sources also play a vital role in historical research. Although not written by those who actually witnessed an event, they can still enhance our understanding depending upon (1) how long after the fact was the account written? (as a general rule, the sooner the better), and (2) how knowledgeable and objective was the author? As with primary sources, those who write secondary accounts have their biases and limitations, and part of the challenge of doing history is learning to evaluate documents for factual inaccuracies, unwarranted premises, and hidden agendas.

In some cases, our main source of information comes *via* **oral traditions**. In terms of reliability, oral sources are more problematical than written ones. Especially in lieu of any corroborating evidence, oral source material has to be evaluated with a good measure of prudent skepticism.

The Limitations of History

Like philosophers and theologians, historians presumably pursue truth by accessing the past. Yet the connections between truth and history are often problematical and elusive, and history is far from foolproof. As a form of certifiable knowledge, the historical method has definite limitations.

One problem is that much of what we call history is based on **probability**, not certitude. Even facts derived from multiple independent attestation do not constitute *proof*—at least not in the scientific sense. Historical interpretations cannot be verified in a lab. Nevertheless, sane and rational people can rest assured that certain historical facts are incontestable, although the assurance comes *via* the laws of probability and reason rather than scientific proof. (In fact, this is true of all inductive knowledge.) Did the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ actually happen at a particular time and place in history? This is not a matter that can be proven. But what the Christian *can* argue is that the validity of the resurrection can be established on the bases of sound reason, honest historical research, and the laws of probability. After investigating the issue thoroughly, one can reasonably conclude that the resurrection is the best explanation based on the available data. Therefore, we can accept the historicity of the resurrection as assuredly as we can know that *anything* happened in the past. But this still won't satisfy skeptics who will insist, unrealistically, upon certifiable "proof."

A second problem is that history is by nature **selective**. Not everything that happened in the past has been recorded (let alone, recorded accurately), and not everything recorded has been preserved. In fact, much has been lost. When Julius Caesar's troops burned the Alexandria library and museum in 48 B.C. they inadvertently perpetrated one of the great cultural disasters in history. According to the ancient sources, the library contained nearly a half-million volumes, including copies of all the known books in the world at the time. And of course, similar disasters

have occurred repeatedly throughout time from the destruction of the Assyrian Royal Library at Nineveh in 612 B.C. to the looting of European museums by the Nazis in World War II. The amount of knowledge that has been lost is incalculable. What we're often left with, especially in relation to ancient and medieval history, is at best only a fragmentary record of the past. So we know in part and we write history in part, and the problem is generally worse the farther back in time we go as gaps in our knowledge become gaping chasms.



History is not only unprovable and selective, but highly **interpretative**. In fact, once it moves beyond the acquisition of basic facts, history becomes mainly a matter of interpretation. Although there is a kind of “scientific” method for evaluating historical sources, the writing of history is fundamentally a literary art form, not a science. Beginning in the late 19th century there was a movement in higher education to separate history from the humanities and place it within the realm of the social sciences – a process known as **historicism**. Historicists argued that there are certain fixed processes that determine historical development, and that honest and competent historians can understand and relate the events of the past with total objectivity based on pure facts and sound reasoning.³

³ Two influential voices in 19th century historicism were **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** and **Karl Marx**. Hegel taught a dialectical theory of history in which historical development was driven by “great ideas” – dominant philosophical (or theological) themes that animated civilizations and generated monumental change such as the advent of democracy in classical Greece, the rise of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, the evolution of Enlightenment ideals in 18th century Europe and America, etc. Marx taught a variation on Hegelianism, which he dubbed **dialectical materialism**, wherein he argued that the driving force in history was not ideas but economics – in particular, class conflict and the perennial struggle for control of the major means of production.

At the opposite end of the historical spectrum, contemporary postmodernism categorically rejects both historical objectivity and historical determinism.

But this is obviously fallacious. The research and writing of history has always been a genre of literature. Essentially, it is the narrative *story* of the past and is “scientific” only in the sense that it is a systematic collection and analysis of historical material using criteria and methods that have proved themselves generally satisfactory over time. Although it shares some common characteristics with forensic science, in reality history is as much an art form as a science. It is often messy and complicated – full of ambiguities, contingencies and paradoxes – but these are some of the very factors that make it so intriguing. Like life, it is not neat and simplistic, and those who try to treat it as such only fool (and eventually discredit) themselves.

Contrary to the claims of the 19th century historicists, there is no purely objective, unbiased history because there are no purely objective, unbiased historians. All operate on the basis of certain presuppositions, and all have an agenda

Beginning in the first half of the 20th century, historians such as **Charles Beard** and **Carl Becker** argued that history is fundamentally subjective and relativistic. For Becker, historical facts exist only in the mind of the historian – hence, we can know virtually nothing for certain about the past.

Hardcore postmodernists are essentially epistemological anarchists. Skeptical to the point of cynicism, they contend that history is an elaborate fabrication and merely the product of the historian's own *Weltanschauung* (worldview) – i.e., the particular ideological, psychological, and sociological factors operating upon the historian him/herself. Philosopher Karl Popper typifies this mentality by stating that “There can be no history of the past as it actually did happen; there can only be historical interpretations; and none of them is final; and every generation has a right to frame its own.” [Quoted in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Faith and Apologetics*. Crossway Books, 1994, 172.]

[NOTE: Curiously, the meaning of the term “historicism” has changed since the 1960s to refer to historical relativism – the exact opposite of what it originally denoted.]

As argued below, traditional Christian historiography avoids both extremes – historicism and historical relativism – in favor of a philosophy of history that is biblical, rational, and realistic.

whether they acknowledge it or not. The British historian Lord Acton might have overstated the case when he declared that “Historians are only politicians with their heads facing backward,” but in truth all historians are influenced by the spirit of their time, their environment, and their life experiences. [NOTE: Fortunately, the better ones understand this and conscientiously work to transcend the limitations and prejudices of their particular situation.] This is one reason why historical interpretations vary from generation to generation and are constantly being revised.

Christians should note that these same realities hold true for Christian historians, including the writers of the New Testament. While inspired by the Holy Spirit, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul, and James nonetheless had their agendas and priorities – not to mention their individual temperaments. One of the 20th century’s great church historians, Kenneth Scott Latourette, emphasized this point in the Prologue to his *History of Christianity*:

No one can hope to write history without presuppositions... Every attempt to tell the human story involves [selectivity]. Back of the selection is a conviction of what is important. Governing this ‘value judgement’ is, consciously or unconsciously, a philosophy....⁴

But this is not as problematical as it may seem, nor does it imply, as radical postmodernists so confidently claim, that history is purely subjective and relative. History is grounded in past objective realities: certain things actually did happen in a particular time and place, the results of specific causes, and they produced definite effects. Given a sound mind, the requisite level of knowledge, and adequate source materials, the competent historian can in fact reconstruct and interpret the past with reasonable accuracy. It is not impossible, and in all probability, it happens quite regularly. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig notes, “If a historical reconstruction is logically consistent and provides the best explanation of the evidence, then it ought to be accepted.”⁵

⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (Prince Press/Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. xix.

⁵ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Crossway Books, 1994), p. 182.

Oftentimes, the real challenge facing the historian is not whether the truth is attainable but whether he/she is willing to transcend his/her biases in order to accurately recount what happened. Good historians write as objectively, as fairly, and as truthfully as possible, based on the evidence. They are not propagandists, and they let the facts dictate their conclusions. And of course Christians believe that this was precisely the case with the writers of the New Testament gospels and epistles who were not only honest men but also inspired by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Truth.

As Latourette notes, the reality of subjective bias shouldn’t necessarily de-legitimize historical research and writing since a sterile and detached “objectivity” is not even preferable. To write good history, historians can’t really be passive and neutral; they must *care* about what they research and write. In keeping with Anselm’s apologetical principle, “I believe in order that I may understand,” there is an element of faith, inspiration, and (ideally) even passion inherent in the process.

Truth is not attained by reason [and scholarship] alone. The insight that is born of faith can bring illumination. Throughout the chapters [of this book] is the conviction that the faith which is stimulated by the Christian Gospel, the faith which is the commitment to God of the whole man, body, mind, and spirit, the commitment which is the response in love to God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, opens the mind towards the true understanding of history.⁶

Furthermore – and practically-speaking – there is another contributing factor that helps objectify the research and writing of history. The professionalization of the discipline, beginning in the late 19th century, has established standards that the historian violates at his/her own risk. Scholars such as Richard Rorty may flippantly dismiss the idea of truth as “whatever my peers will let me get away with saying,” but in fact one’s status and reputation within the field, along with peer reviews by one’s professional colleagues, often provide a check on many of the worst impulses of the most ideologically-driven and/or intellectually dishonest historians.

Since the Christian faith is rooted in history, it is incumbent that Christians understand the

⁶ Latourette, p. xx.

problems and limitations of historical methodology (including that of biblical and Christian history). Otherwise, we succumb to the common human temptation to exaggerate and overstate our case. We must be rigidly devoted to truth and understand that the cause of Christ is not advanced by stretching the truth. Those who resort to embellishment, even in a good cause, only lose their credibility and discredit the very faith they hope to advance. Our apologetics should go as far as the facts allow, but there is always a faith factor involved. For in the realm of Christian history, as in every area of life, we live by faith.

Yet we must also acknowledge the reality of historical objectivity. Historical truth exists, despite our limitations when it comes to comprehending and apprehending it. Nonetheless, we can, with confidence, rest assured that much of the past is well-established. This is particularly significant for the Christian as it includes the foundational historical events on which our faith is built.

Why Study History?

Paradoxically, the problems and limitations of history only bolster the case for studying it. History is anything but simplistic, and a serious study of it demands that we think rationally, critically, and comprehensively. The principle of **multiple causation**, one of the central tenets of modern historical analysis, recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of issues and events. Because history encompasses so many fields of knowledge, it compels us to integrate all the contributing factors that impact an issue including the economic, social, political, religious, philosophical, psychological, and cultural components. This often calls for a good bit of intellectual energy, but until we assess history comprehensively we can never rest assured that our conclusions are valid.

There are other, more endemic reasons why history matters and why we should study it. A few years ago in the Q&A session following one of his lectures, someone in the audience asked the renowned historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Why should we study history?” Schlesinger could have pontificated at length on the intellectual and cultural benefits of the discipline, but instead he chose to reply, “Because, first of all, it’s a lot of fun.” He was right in a sense – it *is* undeniably enjoyable. History is, after all, the story of the

past, and who doesn’t love a good story? Like all good literature, it stimulates the imagination. It inspires us with great examples of heroic sacrifice and accomplishment, while also warning us of the deceitfulness of power, wealth, and unchecked egoism. (Biography can also do this, except that scale and proportionality are often skewed in the sense that everything revolves around a single life.) Even more fascinating is the fact that history deals with *true* stories about the most interesting people who ever lived and the most important events that ever occurred. How could anyone *not* enjoy it? – unless, of course, their souls have been impoverished by over-exposure to the stultifying effects of contemporary pop culture.

History is integral to making sense out of life, although one might never know it from the way it is often written and taught. Most people probably consider it largely irrelevant and little more than a mind-numbing litany of names, dates, and pointless factoids from the murky and musty past. Some might even perceive it as an odd fascination with dead people. Others view it as an antiquarian scavenger hunt, a kind of trivial pursuit of information that may be interesting in a quaint sort of way but is nonetheless disconnected from the realities of contemporary life. But in fact, history is remarkably relevant for those who access it for knowledge and inspiration. Those who seek wisdom delight in exploring the past because of the light it sheds on the present. Without a sense of historical consciousness, we are like amnesiacs groping in the dark with little awareness of who we are or where we came from.

History also provides valuable insight into human nature along with our social and cultural development. Although the moral lessons gleaned from the past are often perplexingly subtle, in the final analysis Lord Acton was essentially correct when he referred to history as a “frightful monument of sin.” We study history in part to gain a sense of a common humanity and to discover where our civilization and others came from, how they developed over time, the philosophical and theological foundations on which they are based, and how and why the various world systems function as they do. We all know people who are disinterested in anything outside the boundaries of their own life experience. In their immaturity, they inhabit a small, ego-centered universe in which nothing matters unless it affects them personally. For such people, history holds no interest – in fact, it’s a

bore – presumably because it’s not about them. They usually express the same indifference toward politics, philosophy, religion, current events, or anything else that strikes them as irrelevant to their own personal existence.

When we study history, we broaden our scope of awareness and begin to understand how the major forces that impact our lives have developed over time. In the process, we also acquire greater insight into human nature. George Santayana’s oft-quoted comment that “Those who fail to learn the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat them” may certainly be true in academia in the case of students who flunk a required history course, but outside that context history does not in fact repeat itself. Every historical scenario has its own uniquely complex matrix of ideas, personalities, institutions, social and cultural factors, and a myriad of other variables that collectively affect the outcome. But history isn’t predictable like an experiment in a chemistry lab. What *is* true, though, is that basic human nature doesn’t change, and there are general patterns and cause-and-effect relationships in human interactions that are manifest repeatedly in history.

As Cicero stated, all of us are intimately connected to the past. None of us operate as isolated individuals; we are all part of the human community. More than just being influenced by what came before, we are to an extent, whether we realize it or not, *products* of the past. Most of our values, beliefs, and life situations are rooted in earlier realities. Human beings possess a measure of free choice, but within certain parameters. Our heritage, culture, environment, and life experiences all condition who and what we are. As the historian David McCullough notes, we all are shaped by people we have never met. So when we study history, we glean greater insight into the people, ideas, events, and other factors that have directly or indirectly influenced our own lives.

I often remind college students that the world did not begin when they were born. We are all characters in a real-life epic drama that began thousands of years ago. But with no understanding of the past, we are like actors shoved out onto the stage of life in the midst of a long-running play that we don’t understand. We are disoriented. We are ignorant of what’s going on, why things are as they are, or where we fit into the script. We have no understanding of the plot, the major characters, or anything that

preceded our arrival on stage. Furthermore, what’s the point of the whole production? We are truly clueless. As C. S. Lewis once observed, “The unhistorical are, without knowing it, enslaved to a fairly recent past.” All we see and know is what’s going on immediately around us. And while it’s true that the longer we’re on stage, the more oriented to our surroundings we become, that doesn’t necessarily translate into understanding the ultimate purpose or goal of the play. To gain a clearer perspective, we have to transcend the strict limitations of just our own personal experience.

History also matters because knowledge itself is innately valuable. Like art, knowledge needs no justification. It is the fundamental means by which we access reality, understand the world around us, and comprehend ultimate truth. So history, along with religion, philosophy, literature, geography, political science, psychology and sociology, is essential for processing the issues of life. Whether we realize its value or not, and whether we think that it directly benefits us or not, we need to know about the significant people, ideas, issues, and events of the past. Regardless of one’s level of education or how many advanced degrees one has earned, no one is truly educated if he/she lacks a basic understanding of history and the historical process.

An understanding of history is essential if we are to reach our potential as human beings. Historical consciousness provides breadth, depth and substance to our values, beliefs and opinions. Those without a firm grasp of history will always be limited in their understanding of world systems, human development in general, and themselves in particular. To speak with authority and command respect, we must do so out of a reservoir of knowledge and experience – of which history is a fundamental and integral component.



A Christian Philosophy of History

For Christians, there are even more compelling reasons to understand the past. Most of the Bible is narrative history, and most of the theology and morality we glean from it are presented in the context of actual historical scenarios. Unlike religions that are based primarily on esoteric speculations or pious mythology, the Christian faith is rooted, as George Ladd declared, in “the mediation of revelation through historical events” – the culmination being the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Most significantly, the Christian doctrine of salvation is unique among religions in that it is inextricably linked to actual historical events – particularly, the atoning death and bodily resurrection of Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been resurrected, your faith is futile” and “we are false witnesses about God” (1 Cor. 15:17, 14). In other words, Paul affirms that the veracity, integrity, and salvific power of the Christian faith are dependent upon certain historical facts. Therefore, Christians, of all people, should value history. Ours is the only faith whose truth depends strictly on historical events, as Christian philosopher Winfried Corduan explains in his book on comparative religions, *A Tapestry of Faiths*:

With Christianity, the situation is radically different [than for other religions]. Christianity includes teachings, but it goes far beyond its teachings. In fact, if you take the historical setting away from the teachings, the teachings become impossible moral exhortations and occasional platitudes, but not much of a basis for a vital religion. Without the historical events related in the New Testament, there cannot be genuine Christianity.... Without a historical Christ, without his life and teaching, without his death on an actual cross, and without his actual resurrection from physical death, Christian claims are empty. How can one trust in an atonement that never happened?⁷

The centrality of history to the Christian faith has been acknowledged by Christian theologians, scholars, and evangelists from the time of the apostle Paul. It is, as Jonathan Edwards noted,

the medium through which God has communicated his nature and purpose, and demonstrated his power. Assessed teleologically, the Bible provides ample evidence in support of John Calvin’s declaration that “History is the theater of God’s glory.”

Implicit in every historical orientation is an underlying philosophy that seeks to understand not only the root causes of specific events, but the macro-forces that move the whole process along. Because history and humanity are integrally connected, there is a direct link between our view of history and our philosophy of life. It was this realization that prompted the Christian historian Herbert Butterfield to argue that our historiography conditions our theology.

Our interpretation of history is the most sovereign decision we can take, and it is clear that every one of us, standing alone in the universe, has to take it for himself. It is our decision about religion, about our total attitude to things, and about the way we will appropriate life. And it is inseparable from our decision about the role we are going to play in the drama of history.⁸

Secularist historians who operate from a naturalistic worldview naturally assume a closed universe in which humanity creates history independent of any external or transcendent reality. As Hegel taught, nothing happens in history that does not have its entire explanation within history. Furthermore, history has no over-arching purpose: it is a meaningless, random sequence of events – just “one damn thing after another.” Or as one of my former students declared in a term paper, “History is just an orgy of slaughter.” (Apparently, I over-emphasized the military component in that particular course.) This is a cynical and simplistic assessment, but even the great classical historian Edward Gibbon essentially concurred when he wrote that “History is little more than the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.” Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweere succinctly summarized this secularist view of history:

History has no windows looking out into eternity. Man is completely enclosed in it and cannot elevate himself to a supra-historical level of contemplation. History is the be-all and end-all of man’s existence and of his faculty of experience. And it is ruled by destiny,

⁷ Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 127-28.

⁸ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (Collins, Fontana, 1957), p. 39.

the inescapable fate.⁹

From the early second century A.D., long before Augustine developed a systematic philosophy of history in *The City of God*, Christians held a coherent view of history derived from three sources:

- (1) The lessons of Hebrew national history from Abraham to the post-exilic repatriation of the Jews under Nehemiah and Ezra, as interpreted by prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and others;
- (2) The inspired insights of first century Christian writers such as Luke, Paul, Peter, and John; and
- (3) The eschatological revelations of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature.

Collectively, these sources presented a basic historiography that encompassed three fundamental concepts. First, history is **an open system** and the earthly theater of a **cosmic spiritual struggle** going on behind the scenes. Human history is an epic drama between the forces of Divine Light and Satanic Darkness, with the human soul as the primary battleground. Whether history is, as Calvin proclaimed, “the theater of God’s glory” or the Devil’s playground depends upon whether we view it from an eternal or a strictly temporal perspective.

A New Testament-based philosophy of history acknowledges divine involvement but defies simplistic causal connections – i.e., it recognizes the reality of the supernatural while avoiding superstition. Therefore, the wicked often flourish while the righteous often flounder in this life. Certainly, God interacts in human history both directly, through miraculous intervention, and indirectly, through his guiding presence in the lives of those who are attuned to his will, but the exact manner and extent of God’s involvements are often mysterious.

It is important to note that the traditional orthodox Christian view of history is not an argument for strict determinism or supernatural historicism. God does not micro-manage human history, nor does God, as a matter of course, cause wars, famines, plagues, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks. (To argue otherwise is to

attribute actions to God that contradict his character – a theological absurdity.) Furthermore, God does not contravene human free will. Human beings make history through their own choices, and God is involved in the process primarily to the extent that God inspires and guides human thought and action. So God’s involvement in history, while indisputable, is also inscrutable. Normally, it is subtle and manifest through natural processes and human volition, as C. S. Lewis was careful to note:

We know that we can act and that our actions produce results.... God has not chosen to write the whole of history with his own hand.... [History] is like a play in which the general outline of the story is fixed by the author, but certain... details are left for the actors to improvise.¹⁰

Thus, the traditional orthodox Christian view of history recognizes the reality of a complex paradox incorporating two fundamental theological truths: divine sovereignty and human free will. Without these factors – along with an understanding of the Fall and endemic sin – history truly is nonsensical.

Some Christian historians argue a theory of history very close to strict determinism known as “**providentialism**.” Although there are variations on the theme, a providentialist view typically emphasizes one side of the paradox – the sovereignty of God – to the exclusion of human free will, and contends (or at least implies) that God directly controls everything that happens in human affairs.

There are a couple of serious problems with providentialism: First, few who take an exclusive view of divine sovereignty would contend that God violates human volition on a micro (individual) level – i.e., most agree that God does not impose his will on individuals but works symbiotically and synergistically with those who choose to cooperate with him – and if that is true, why would we argue that it works otherwise on the macro (historical) level? Second, as noted above, providentialism undermines any reasonable Christian understanding of theodicy. If God micro-manages human affairs, does God not also share responsibility for all the evil in human history? To say the least, providentialism

⁹ Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), p. 63.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “Work and Prayer.” Quoted in Walter Hooper, ed., *God In the Dock: Essays On Theology and Ethics*, p. 105.

promotes a simplistic view of life that can lead to erroneous conclusions that ultimately impugn the character of God and undermine the credibility of the Christian faith.

Christian writers who spin history in an attempt to argue providentialism are guilty of the same errors as agenda-driven ideologues who manipulate the past to promote a particular political or social ideology. It is important to note that the antidote to secularistic historical revisionism is not Christian revisionism but a sensible and realistic philosophy of history.¹¹

¹¹ An example of these two contrasting views of history – providentialism versus the traditional orthodox Christian view – is presented in a brief exchange between a Portuguese official and a papal *anuncio* in the motion picture, *The Mission*. The cardinal has just been informed that the native inhabitants of a remote mission deep within the rain forest of southern Brazil have been slaughtered along with their Jesuit missionary leaders – an atrocity to which he had inadvertently acquiesced under pressure from the Vatican and the governments of Portugal and Spain. Upon hearing the report, the cardinal asks ruefully, “And you have the affrontery to tell me that this slaughter was necessary?” “We had no alternative, your Eminence,” the official replies. “We must work in the world. The world is thus” (Implication: “It’s all God’s will”) – to which the cardinal replies, “No, Senor. Thus have *we made* the world.... Thus have *I made* the world.” The cardinal knows full-well that the outcome was not divinely mandated – things would have been different had he followed the dictates of his heart rather than capitulate to political expediency.

In the Old Testament, Moses eloquently articulated this reality in his final charge to the Children of Israel when he declared, “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. *It is not up to heaven....* No, the word is very near to you; it is... in your heart so you may obey it.... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death.... *Now choose life....*” [Deut. 30:11ff]

So where was God in the Brazilian massacre? The simple and obvious answer is that God wasn’t in it at all. Like all atrocities, it was a totally godless act. The officials who planned the campaign and the soldiers who carried it out chose to deny their God-given moral conscience and defy the will of God. For reasons we can never know, God permitted them go their own way and chose not to intervene supernaturally to protect the lives of the innocent.

The second fundamental concept in a Christian philosophy of history is that the historical process is **teleological**. The Bible consistently affirms that history has a divinely-appointed purpose and goal – however vague and enigmatic it may appear without the illumination of divine revelation. In other words, history is more than the sum of its individual parts. Human beings may well make history through their own free-will decisions – in conjunction with a myriad of other complex contributing factors – but Scripture reminds us there is more to it than that. Through the ages, Christians have understood that there is a supernatural force, a kind of cosmic “hidden hand,” that is guiding history toward the fulfillment of its divinely-appointed metanarrative.

Third, history is **eschatological**. Everything is moving toward a grand climax in accordance with God’s ultimate purpose for creation, or as President James Garfield once observed, “History is but the unrolled scroll of prophecy.”

History and Apologetics

So a Christian view of history gives meaning and purpose to the past while respecting the reality of divine mystery. It also has consequential ramifications. When Christians affirm that history matters, this presupposes that human relations are profoundly significant. Such an awareness transforms our whole attitude toward society and culture and how we relate to them. Conversely, if we conclude that history is random and purposeless, it follows that the social, political, cultural, and religious contexts of life also have no real meaning – in which case we have no rational basis for taking interest in, or feeling responsible for, the problems that confront humankind. By extension, it also renders the study of history rather pointless.

Another social implication of a Christian view of history relates to our public witness. True Christian faith is not privatistic but an open and

Thus, a truly Christian view of history acknowledges in all appropriate humility our ultimate ignorance and the inscrutability of God and his ways. “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ says the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” [Isaiah 55:8-9]

public proclamation of the life-transforming power and love of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus warned that “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33). For those who have been truly converted, sharing their faith with others is neither burdensome nor embarrassing; it is a great joy and the natural overflow of a grateful heart. But for our witness to be credible and effective it must be both genuine and knowledgeable. Our testimony must be consistent with our lifestyle and character, but it must also correlate to objective truth.

Evangelism is more than merely sharing one’s personal testimony. When the early apostles and evangelists took the Good News of Jesus Christ into mainstream society, they presented an *apologia*, a reasoned argument, for the truth of the gospel that was based on factual realities. Reasoning from the Old Testament scriptures and testifying to historical truths that many of them had witnessed personally – in particular, the life, teachings, miracles, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus – they led thousands to a saving knowledge of Christ. They practiced what the apostle Peter later preached in his epistle: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have” (1 Peter 3:15) – an admonition that necessitates that we have our facts straight and know what we’re talking about.

Unfortunately, in much of modern evangelism the objective components of the gospel have been subordinated to personal subjective experience. Today, many Christians present the gospel primarily, if not exclusively, by way of a personal testimony. There are some obvious flaws with this approach, most notably the fact that many Muslims and Mormons and New Agers also have personal testimonies of how their religion has changed their life. Furthermore, many skeptics and secularists who don’t identify with any religion at all will testify to being quite satisfied with the quality of their lives. So unless we want to get embroiled in a battle of dueling testimonies (who is happier, more fulfilled, or more peaceful than whom), we would be well-advised to learn from the example of the early church. They confronted a skeptical (and often hostile) world with objective facts, sound reasoning, and the witness of history – the truth of which was augmented and validated by their love for one

another and the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. The result was phenomenal as even their enemies marveled, “They have turned the whole world upside-down.”

In essence, Christian history is the story of God’s redemption of humanity through the agency of the church. In his epistles, the apostle Paul refers to the church as the Body of Christ. In a mystical yet real sense, the church functions as the mind, eyes, ears, voice, hands, and feet of Jesus Christ in this world. From the beginning of Judeo/Christian history with the calling of Abraham, God has been preparing a corporate body through whom he could offer salvation to all mankind. Unwilling to violate man’s free will, God chose not to force himself upon anyone but accepted all who freely responded to his love out of grateful hearts.

In response to God’s initiative, people in every culture were stimulated to seek God. The result was a proliferation of religions which possessed some truth and divine insight in varying degrees, but were also clouded and confused due to the inherent sinfulness of mankind and the noetic effects of the Fall. None of these religions fulfilled God’s purpose, and for some inexplicable reason, God chose the Hebrew race and spent several centuries revealing specific aspects of his character and purpose to them through their prophets and national history. A remnant of Hebrews remained faithful and obedient to God over the centuries, and through their descendants, the Jews, God eventually sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world as the spiritual savior of humanity. Following Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, the Holy Spirit indwelt and empowered those who submitted to the lordship of Christ in their lives. Thus, the church – the community of Christ here on earth – was born, and through it God offers salvation to all humanity.

An essential component of any substantive and effective Christian witness is an understanding of how God has worked through the church since apostolic times. Christian history provides a context for interpreting and applying the Scriptures, illuminates the subsequent growth and development of the faith, offers access to the great Christian minds of the past, exposes the frauds and fallacies that have been perpetrated in the name of Christ, and immerses us in the currents of faith that have carried the gospel over the past 2,000 years. An eclectic and often maddening mix of good, bad, and ugly elements,

we find much in Christian history that is both inspiring and appalling – but we can learn from it all.

Christian History and the Culture War

There is a war going on today for the heart and soul of America. It is fundamentally a spiritual struggle, but it manifests itself on two fronts: the intellectual and the moral. In scholarly circles and the popular media, it is often referred to as the culture war. There is no doubt of the final outcome – God’s truth will prevail and his kingdom will be established here on earth – but in the meantime, we seem to be losing most of the battles.

Most Christians tend to focus on the moral front because it is the most blatantly obvious. The state of our moral culture directly reflects our values, ethics, and beliefs in the realms of politics, economics, law, education, religion, and social institutions – as well as in art, literature, music, sports, and entertainment. But in fact the priority should be otherwise. History teaches that philosophy determines morality. What is considered intellectually credible eventually determines what is socially acceptable and culturally normative.

This is particularly problematic because the consensus Christian theistic worldview of the past is no longer predominant. We now find ourselves living in a culture that is not simply “post-Christian” but increasingly anti-Christian. America today is becoming remarkably similar to the society and culture in which the early church functioned. Like ours, theirs was a pluralistic, multi-cultural society lacking any intellectual, moral, or religious consensus. The Roman Empire in the first century was a hedonistic and materialistic culture rife with political corruption, social injustice, economic exploitation, greed, violence, moral decadence, sexual perversion, and ethical confusion.

If the church is to offer a credible witness today, Christians will have to confront not only the moral challenges but the intellectual ones. This requires a comprehensive apologetic that encompasses not only our lifestyles and values but our beliefs as well. Both our minds and our hearts have to be engaged. The early church understood this, and it offered a wholistic defense of the gospel that eventually changed the world.

Knowledge as an end in itself, disconnected from the Spirit of love and the art of living, is of little value. Ultimately, the greatest apologetic lies not in compelling arguments and irrefutable historical facts, but in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ to transform lives through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Christianity is much more than an historically-based faith or an intellectual belief system – it is an existential reality. But to separate the mind and the heart is to create a false dichotomy that is unwarranted, self-defeating and contrary to biblical principles.

So why study Christian history? Certainly, to learn from the past. To find out what God has been doing in the lives of individuals and in the corporate life of the church for the past 2,000 years so we can better discern what God wants to do in our own life and times. And to provide a context for our own lives, or as Christian historian Justo Gonzalez notes, “To tell the story of those whose heirs we are is to write a long preface to our own life stories.”¹²

Ultimately, of course, the point of the Christian life is not so much to understand the world as to change it. But we can be agents of change only insofar as we allow the Spirit of God to change us, personally and corporately. And in Christian history we have many examples of those who did precisely that. As the writer of Hebrews reminded his first century readers, we have before us “a great cloud of witnesses” from whom we have much to learn.

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¹² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Prince Press/Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. xiii.