

Church History: What's in It for You?

By Ethel Herr

Church history, the record of God's interaction with His people through the ages, teaches invaluable lessons on the nature of God and the nature of man.

God has always used history as a tool for revealing Himself. He knew that His people in each generation would lose their identity if they had no knowledge of His relationship with them in the past. So, in the law, He gave the people of Israel specific instructions for teaching their children that He was the faithful God of Israel. They were to tell them the stories of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings and to build monuments and celebrate rituals He designed to illustrate these historical events.

Later, He inspired His prophets with a perpetual call to repent, based on historical recall: "Thus saith the Lord . . . Look back at what I've done for you . . . Remember Me . . . Learn from your fathers' errors. . . ." Jesus used history to identify Himself as their promised Messiah.

Finally, when the Apostle Paul addressed difficult contemporary problems in the Corinthian Church, he grabbed these new believers by the hand and led them on a journey into their spiritual roots in Jewish history. In I Corinthians 10 and 11, he left for the Church illustrations of five ways that a study of the history of God's people can equip us to deal with life's challenges and stimulate personal growth.

Insight into Today

First, learning about the past helps us to understand the present (I Corinthians 10:1-10). "Now these things occurred as examples" (v. 6). It is much easier to detect evil in the actions of another person in another time and another place. Distance reduces emotional involvement and increased our objectivity.

Paul began with a remote time. He reminded the Corinthians of the sins of the Israelites: They set their hearts on evil things, they were idolaters, they committed sexual immorality, they tested the Lord, they grumbled (vv. 6-10). Then, lest the Corinthians feel smug about their superior righteousness, Paul warned them: Don't *you* set your hearts on evil things; don't *you* be idolaters; don't *you* commit sexual immorality; don't *you* test the Lord; don't *you* grumble.

If he were writing today to the Church of San Francisco or New York, he would probably draw further examples from apostolic Carthage, medieval Rome, Reformation Germany, colonial Boston. Then he would point the finger at our twentieth-century evils—misplaced priorities, materialism, relaxed morals, worry, insensitivity.

Looking back helps us to understand where today's trends come from. Each of us is the product of a long line of circumstances, human achievements, opinions, and movements. We have not only genetic roots but also intellectual, social, and spiritual roots that link us with every era of history. Likewise, twentieth century society and churches are rooted in the past. All modern philosophies, moral values, and thinking patterns are simply old trends sporting new colors, tailored to fit a new generation. When we study our roots, we open our minds and hearts, as C.S. Lewis once wrote, to the "clean sea-breezes of the centuries"¹ and see ourselves and our times more clearly.

Help for Modern Problems

Second, Church history has a tremendous capacity to help us deal with problems (I Corinthians 10:11-13). “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (v.11).

We often try to solve life’s problems by applying a set of handy theological maxims: “Jesus saves and satisfies,” “trust and obey,” “let go and let God.” While each of these maxims may be biblically sound and practical, if we apply them automatically to complex issues they will keep us from coming to grips with the deep, underlying problems at the heart of our struggles.

By contrast, “History is truth teaching by example.”² We learn to apply abstract truth more readily when we meet it in a story. The examples of Church history take our doctrinal statements, clothe them in flesh and blood and emotions, and give them purpose.

Defense against Complacency. Paul told the Corinthians that the examples of history would equip them with two indispensable tools for dealing with daily problems. First, it gave them a defense against becoming too self-satisfied. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (v.12).

Studying history jolted me out of complacency. I was startled to learn that Martin Luther, a man mightily used by God, was so far from perfect. I was shocked when I read the writing of well-respected Reformation church leaders who each accused the others of being atheists because they didn’t see God in exactly the “right light.” If these people had problems, how much more should I daily open my life to God’s scrutiny?

Many a church has started with a pure fire of devotion to Jesus Christ and His honor, only to get sidetracked by some obscure issue and begin to make compromises. With the passing of generations, greater compromises follow. An eventual blurring of God’s purposes has completely changed the courses of whole church groups.

When we look at these examples, we cannot face our church problems complacently. They show us that the full impact of our actions may not be felt for many years. Studying the graphic illustrations of history helps us avoid disaster by determining the long-term effect of proposed quick-fix solutions.

Defense against Temptation. In addition, a study of history convinces me that I am not alone in my tendency to be tempted to sin. “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man” (I Corinthians 10:13). It also assures me that God is faithful to rescue all who cast themselves on His mercy and strength. “And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”

Further, history models God-honoring solutions to problems: “He will also provide a way out.” The revival begun in Korea [seventy] years ago burns brightly yet. Many contemporary church leaders visit and study this spiritual phenomenon in search of clues for solving the problems of their own churches.

Hoping to gain some insight into the thinking patterns of the seventeenth-century European Calvinists, I picked up a little book entitled *Use and Non-Use of the Organ in Churches of the United Netherlands*. I did not expect to be edified, only informed. But this unconventional little book held a surprise for me. I discovered that the reasons for concern in the seventeenth century were very appropriate for today. The author boiled the whole controversy down to a consideration of the function of music in the church. Was it to provide a forum for display of talent? Or was it to offer worship to the God of the

universe? Reading this seventeenth-century document has influenced my whole approach to the music ministry in my own church.

Finally, we can find stability to resist temptation in a base of reference that does not constantly fluctuate with the winds of change in a world hostile to God. History binds us together and relates us to the headship of Christ in His body. A modern historian writes,

Loss of history indicates always the decay of the people. A people without history is a people without character, without soul. They have then no Fatherland in which to be rooted and to which to be attached. . . . Both country and people become a spiritual wilderness, an empty room, where demons hover about, a refuge for anarchists and criminals.³

Our western cosmopolitan civilizations have grown up out of a vast, indistinguishable underground network of intertwined “Fatherland roots.” Today, more than at any other time, we need desperately the strong, binding, “Fatherland” influence of a solid sense of Christian roots as revealed in Scripture and exemplified in Church history.

A Guard Against False Teaching

Third, studying Church history prepares us to discern false doctrine. The Corinthian believers were trying to determine what to do about meat offered to idols. In I Corinthians 10:14, Paul put his finger on the heart of the problem that they perceived to be one of simple personal liberty. “Flee from idolatry,” he wrote. The Communion ordinance was an outward act of worship of the true and living God. A history lesson showed how Israel’s sacrifices, too, were acts of worship to the same God. By contrast, the “sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons. . . . You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too” (vv.20-21).

The object of man’s worship has always been the core issue in false religions—in Corinth, in Ur, in Rome, in Miami. Often these come to us as such subtle imitations that we need special wisdom in discerning truth from error. We know that now, as in apostolic days, “many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I John 4:1). If we do not know our Scriptures or our history, we may be swept away by these convincing counterfeits.

A Guide to Spiritual Growth

Fourth, studying Church history helps us grow in our relationship to the Lord and to one another (I Corinthians 10:23-11:1). “Everything is permissible,” the Corinthians had said. As long as they were not worshipping the demons, their consciences were clear, so now they thought they could do what they liked. Paul reminded them that the issue went deeper than their own consciences. “Not everything is beneficial,” he countered. “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (vv.23-24) and “the glory of God” (v.31).

To support his argument, he pointed them to the historical example of Jesus Christ. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”(11:1). He brought them

face to face with the One who emptied Himself of every right He possessed in order to redeem others who were weak and unable to help themselves

Just as considering Christ's example helped Paul to form godly attributes and priorities, historical study has broadened my perspective and clarified many issues. It has shown them to me from more than the circumscribed, narrow point of view I grew up with.

Until I married into the military, my religious life was loaded with fringe doctrines I had been taught to regard as marks of orthodoxy. When my husband and I began working in military chapel programs, we made an amazing discovery. Many of our co-workers were as orthodox as the Bible on basic issues of faith and salvation. Yet they disagreed with us on prophecy, definitions of worldliness, modes of baptism.

God provided a wise chaplain's wife who guided me past the prejudicial blind spots of my heart to see the historical, extra-biblical origins of some of our confident orthodox positions. She challenged my viewpoints and taught me how to distinguish absolutes from negotiables. This freed me to dig deeper into history, where I was able to crystallize my thinking, stabilize my roots, and deepen my commitments to the things that count. Only in this historical approach to life have I been able to hope for some sort of mature balance in thinking, believing, and living. Lacking this balance I had spent a good many years falling off the log at one end or the other.

Headed For the Future

Finally, history prepares us for the future (I Corinthians 11:23-34). The Corinthians were so involved in their here and now that they lost sight of history's examples. This was especially evident in the way they used their celebration of the Lord's Table to promote petty, selfish goals. To counter this problem, Paul recited another history lesson, recalling the night Jesus instituted this sacred meal. He concluded with Jesus' words for all future generations: "'Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (vv. 25-26). They had to look back to look forward. They had to do both before they could handle the present responsibly (vv. 27-34).

The Yestermorrow Christian

History will go on until God Himself steps in and brings it to a glorious culmination in eternity. Only when we know how the discussion began and how it has progressed can we learn to function as intelligent citizens of the future.

In I Corinthians 10-11, God is calling us to "move from yesterday to tomorrow—Yestermorrow."⁴ Of all people, Christians should be most eager to gain a "yestermorrow" mentality, for our roots are deep and rich and our prospects indescribably exciting.

As "yestermorrow" Christians, we gain a balanced view of the extent and limits of our responsibilities. History frees us to see that we are not personally responsible to cure all the ills of our society—not even of our families. Some things we must tackle with confidence in the God of history. Others we must turn over to others, again trusting God to superintend. A host of other things we must wait for, pray for, trust God for while we maintain a hands-off stance.

More important, the “yestermorrow” Christian can face each day, even the specter of future disaster, with intelligent confidence rather than panic. Jesus told His disciples, “I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Even so, at times we feel alone, cut off from support in dark moments of our ever-present *now*. Then we find immeasurable comfort in the accounts of suffering Christians who displayed courageous faith in every age of Church history. They were sustained by the certain immanence of His promised Second Coming. We remember that our plight is not unique. We, too, are sustained to face the future and the present.

If our goal is to study to know Jesus Christ better, why should we spend time studying Church history? Church history is the record of God relating to man through Jesus Christ. When we approach it from this perspective, something wonderful happens to us. We learn to know Jesus Christ better. For such study frees us to look beyond the gloom and pain and confusion of this life to the glory and comfort and clarity of our eternal, “yestermorrow” God.

Notes:

1. C.S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 202.
2. E.M. Bounds, *The Possibilities of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 68.
3. W. Aalders, “Laatste Woorden Willem I Waren van Grote Betekenisl,” trans Ethel Herr, *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 29 Mei, 1984, p.7.
4. Kurt W. Marek, *Yestermorrow: Notes on Man’s Progress*, trans, Ralph Manheim (Westminster, Md.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

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