

Why Knowing History, and Especially Church History, Is So Important

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The Bible reveals God's original perfect creation, the destructive disobedience that manifested such widespread disharmony, and his plan of redemption of his creation to restore it to perfection in and through Jesus Christ. Throughout the Bible we read of God's mighty deeds in and through people and places that also appear in historical writings and archaeological findings. The Bible, the Word of God, is filled with narratives of God and his people acting in conjunction with historical figures and locales in many nations and cultures. Here are just a few that can be easily cited.

God called Abraham to be the father of the people with whom he would establish his covenant, the visible manifestation of which is the church, through whom Jesus the Messiah would come. The church, the body of Christ, is his main means through which he is carrying out his plan to complete his redemption of his creation from the destructive effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldeans, likely on the Euphrates River in what is now southern Iraq, which archaeological research has found was a well-established civilization and culture in the time of Abraham.

Moses and Aaron with God's help convinced the Egyptian Pharaoh, who strong evidence indicates was likely Amunhotep II, to let the Israelites leave Egypt in ca. 1446 B.C. With God's help King David overcame such historic foes as the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites, the Ammonites, and other nations to establish the kingdom that God proclaimed would be an everlasting kingdom, the one the Messiah would rule forever.

God disciplined King Rheoboam and the people of Judah for abandoning the law of the LORD, by sending Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak to attack Jerusalem and subject Rheoboam and Judah to the king of Egypt in 925 B.C., "so they may learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands." (2 Chronicles 12:8. This defeat is recorded in hieroglyphics on the Temple of Amun at Karnak [Thebes] in what is now Luxor, Egypt. See the video clip in the "Prolegomena" section of the PowerPoint presentation, [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#).)

Luke records that the birth of Jesus took place in the "days of Caesar Augustus, who issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." (2:1-2) Historical records show that Augustus was emperor from 31 B.C.-14 A.D. and that Quirinius was in office in 6-4 B.C. A census was taken in that period and also in 6-9 A.D. when Quirinius also was in office. Many other citations could be made of historical people and events through whom God worked to accomplish his purposes.

No other religion outside the Bible is grounded in history. Thus the study of history helps us to understand more of God's Word, its interpretation, and its applications. The study of history is valuable also for helping God's people in subsequent centuries, indeed millennia, as well. Let's look at just a few examples of valuable learning we obtain from our study of history in general and church history in particular.

Benefits of Knowing History in General

One of the first reasons that comes to mind for the study of history was uttered by the Roman historian Cicero who said, “To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain a child always.” Centuries later Spanish-born philosopher Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás, known as George Santayana (1863 – 1952), added the classic rationale when he said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” He implies the study of the past helps us especially to avoid the tragic errors, among which we Christians would include the very destructive evil aspects, of human history.

There are more positive reasons for reading and reflecting on history, such as to learn from and to appreciate the valuable contributions of others’ cultures as well as our own, and insights from the past still stimulate, inform, and guide current innovation. For example basic mathematical and mechanical principles guide contemporary science and manufacturing.

Respect for the intelligence of past generations comes from becoming informed of our history. In our egocentric and narcissistic age, especially in the West, many if not most who are unaware of history think people in the past were largely ignorant and nowhere near as thoughtful and intelligent as we are. In the minds of those who know better, such a view discloses and discredits those who hold such opinions. Let none of us be counted among them. If you are not well-informed about history, do not embarrass yourself, as many do, by ridiculing people in the past and calling them ignorant. Surely, some were, but many were not, and the latter made numerous and important contributions.

An honest respect for the intelligence of past generations keeps one from committing not only unwise but harmful errors. For example sometimes people today admit that a philosophy they like previously failed, but they still want to promote and implement it because “we know so much more than they did in the past and we can make it work now.” A more informed understanding of the outstanding people in human history, what they did, and under the often daunting circumstances in which they lived and worked, is a helpful corrective of such bias.

By studying history, and especially church history to which we’ll turn our attention shortly, we are freed from the limited perspectives of our own culture. Historian Chris Armstrong quotes Cambridge Professor C. S. Lewis’ observation that a man who is familiar with world history is like one who has traveled widely. He “is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is *therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.*” (Emphasis mine)¹

However, I would add, and I’m sure Lewis would concur, that one needs to also read the Bible along with history in order to avoid succumbing to the philosophy of cultural relativism. While all cultures have helpful insights, ultimate truth transcends all cultures. The Bible, which is the only Scripture that is rooted in history, including the history of several countries and cultures, is

¹ Chris Armstrong, “Christian History Corner: Top Ten Reasons to Know Christian History,” *Christianity Today*, 03/28/2003.

the inspired Word of God and thus at the same time transcultural and universal. Therefore the Bible is God's standard and the criterion for us to discern what is true and untrue in each culture, including our own.

Some of Church History's Major Contributions

We benefit even more from a study of church history. George Santayana's observation, learn history to avoid the mistakes of the past, also applies in the church. It is sad to see many Christians and churches struggle with issues and problems today, which their predecessors in ages past worked through, sans the predecessors' wisdom. One way we can still benefit from their wisdom is by studying church history, including historic Christian theology.

As has the church throughout history, the church today continues to face blasphemy from without and heresy from within. How can we recognize and best answer these apostasies, which God has called us to do? (2 Timothy 3:16 et al.) Further, not only is the church faced with such hostile proclamations, but it also has to offer explanations of Bible passages that well-meaning fellow believers struggle to understand. None of these blasphemies, heresies, and questions is new. Though they are sometimes couched in contemporary jargon, they are easily recognized and addressed by those who've studied historic Christian theology and the brilliant responses honed by the Spirit-filled minds of the finest of Christian scholars for millennia.

Providentially, our predecessors in Christ from many different cultures and countries met together in ecumenical councils and ratified the decisions of the churches on key issues of the Christian faith. Those churches that remained faithful to God's Word, the Bible, and their representatives in the councils published strong theological treatises, catechisms, and creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, that explain and clarify the passages of the Bible that are disputed by individuals and groups. These and later brilliant scholars the Lord raised up continued to write, speak, and teach throughout the succeeding centuries.

When Christians today are faced with such questions they don't have to theologically "reinvent the wheel;" they can turn to the treasure trove of profound Biblical theology that has been written by erudite Biblical scholars and theologians and draw on their insight, knowledge, and wisdom for answers to their and others' questions. These rich resources are helpful for answering questions that continue to arise, and seem new to multitudes of people, but are actually questions that have been asked for thousands of years to which we who are knowledgeable of history have ready answers.

Ignorance of how wise theologians in the past and from other cultures approach and manage issues is a disservice to people today. It's like having a tool someone needs and not providing it for him or her.

From Bible times, in the early church, and throughout the history of the church, God has empowered believers in and followers of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to proclaim their faith in him in spite of the threat of death if they would not recant that faith. They persevered, maintained their faith, and died rather than deny Jesus. In so doing their martyrdom bequeathed a moving and powerful heritage and model for others, who continue to die rather than deny

Christ. More people have died for Christ in the last century than in all the previous centuries combined; clearly their testimony writ large on the pages of church history is used mightily by the Holy Spirit to strengthen believers in and followers of Christ Jesus today and in the future, including those who will also lay down their lives for the Lord. Such profound witness for Christ is bringing many to him today as it always has.

These are only some of the many reasons to study history, and church history in particular. Every church should add classes on church history in its youth and adult education ministries in order to equip God's people to serve him more effectively in the 21st century and beyond.²

Great insight and resolve emerges through the study of the lives of outstanding Christians in history as they wrote and took courageous stands while writing and speaking God's Word and its application to issues in their culture and time. Further, the historical context broadens our understanding of our own time, culture, and calling, as well as our appreciation of and respect for Christians throughout the world in the past, present and future.

The future? Indeed, as we sense the continuity in which we exist with the past, and its significant impact upon us, we see implications for how what we think and do will affect future generations.

² See <https://fromacorntoak12.com/> and <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/research>. For church history subjects to include in church education, see <https://foundbytes.com/chhistmenus/>.