

Learning from the Past to Be Faithful in the Present: Four Reasons Why Church History Matters

June 14, 2019

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God's people are a people of history. Because our faith stands or falls with the historical events of Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15)—not to mention all the historical events leading up to Christ's advent—Christians are a people who *should* care deeply about history. Yet, often we don't.

Non-denominational Christians, especially, know little about what happened before Billy Graham. Many know something of the Reformation, but few know what happened between John on Patmos and Martin Luther in Wittenberg. This is unfortunate, because we learn a great deal about our faith, the church, and the gospel by looking at all periods of church history.

To that end, this Sunday and next, we will consider deacons from an historical perspective. While our doctrinal formulations and church practices are founded on Scripture, we are benefitted by looking at church history to see how faithful (and unfaithful) churches have thought about and employed deacons. Still, before considering that subject, it might be worthwhile to remember why church history matters and how to rightly approach church history.

Getting Into Church History

As Protestants, we abide by the conviction of *Sola Scriptura*. Our authority is found in God's Word, not church tradition or personal experience. Still, *Sola Scriptura* does not mean *Solo Scriptura*.

The Reformers often appealed to history. And Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli never intended for the church to cut itself off from the ministerial authority of the church or the instruction of church history. Indeed, the church does not have magisterial authority—authority that is reserved for God and his Word alone—but the church must learn from its past, as a rich source of wisdom for God's people

So with this in mind, here are four reasons why church history matters and why Bible-believing Christians should grow in their appreciation and knowledge of church history.

1. Knowing God

Jeremiah 9:22–23 says the wise man boasts in knowing the Lord. Indeed, because such knowledge is God-given, this “boast” is not self-exalting. It acknowledges God’s own kindness in making his grace and truth known.

Truly, the way God makes himself known is through his words and works in history. And in response to this divine disclosure, we are called to remember him and what he has done. Throughout the Old Testament, God calls his people to remember (Deut. 5:15; 8:2; 9:7). And in the New Testament, the apostles make a habit of reminding God’s people of works of God (see e.g., 1 Pet. 1:12–14). In this way, we see that knowing history means knowing something of God’s power, providence, and presence.

The same is true in church history. Though we do not have inspired interpretations of the events after the apostles and prophets, we do see how the church has been sustained through 20 centuries. In this way, we see how God honors his word, stands against pride, hears the prayers of his people, protects his people, and moves history towards the return of Christ.

Truly, we do not hear in church history God’s voice like in the New Testament, but we do see how the Word of God is having an effect in the world. And when we give attention to this history, it recalls the way God is working all things for the good of those who have been called according to his purposes. By looking at the people who are being remade in the image of God, we learn important truths about God himself.

2. Knowing Ourselves

Second, we learn something of ourselves when we study church history. Just as Calvin observed *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that “true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves,” so studying history teaches us something of God’s providence and man’s absolute dependence.

In studying church history, we learn to see the weakness, folly, sinfulness, and desperation of mankind. As Paul calls us to learn from the errors of Israel (1 Cor. 10), church history teaches us the errors of men who sought to build the church or teach doctrine that stands against God’s Word. In the mirror of church history, we are confronted with our own proclivities to falsehood and idolatry, and we are called to repent (cf. Luke 13:1–5).

More positively, we see in church history how enduring faithfulness to God’s Word produces slow but steady results. We discover how those who defended the church by means of accommodating truth invited devastation for themselves and future generations. Meanwhile, those who remained steadfast in Word and prayer often produced bountiful harvests of Spirit-born fruit. Indeed, God honors those who courageously honored his Word, and church history teaches us this again and again.

Altogether, a knowledge of church history teaches us to trust God’s Word more and trust ourselves and our cultural idols less. In this way, breathing in the airs of other centuries helps us better assess our own.

3. Knowing Our Faith

Third, various eras in the church have produced and clarified various doctrines. Academically, “retrieval theology” is the discipline of *retrieving* doctrines from various ages of the past. Practically, this looks like learning the Trinity from the Councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451), justification by faith from Luther and Calvin; and the inerrancy of Scripture from the

theologians of Princeton (19th C.) and the authors of the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy (1978).

Indeed, in studying church history we learn how doctrines developed and how various churches and leaders deviated from the truth. We are better equipped to evaluate various doctrines, as a result. The ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries give us the orthodox grammar for Christ's deity, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the person of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, the Reformation gives us a clear vision of justification and the authority of Scripture that explains why Protestants and Catholics have different doctrines of salvation. Knowing how the Pentecostal movement came through three "waves" in the twentieth century equips to think more carefully about the continuation of tongues and the miraculous gifts.

As it concerns deacons and deaconesses, church history provides a helpful chronology to show where this office has been effective or where it has gone astray. Meanwhile, because the New Testament says so little about deacons, learning from various traditions how deacons have served in the church, helps us to see the flexibility inherent in this office.

In the New Testament we find great clarity on the office of elder/overseer/pastor, but we do not see as much specification for deacons. Clearly, this is intentional, for the word of God is sufficient for life and godliness—for individuals and for the church. Still, the scant attention to deacons in the Bible leaves questions about practice and application.

This is where church history informs our doctrine. Church history does not add revelation or authoritative instruction, but it does show us what doctrine in practice looks like. When we see how deacons have and have not served in church history, we learn how they might be best employed in our church, and what faithfulness to Scripture looks like.

4. Knowing How to Walk in Faith

Finally, if church history helps us know our faith, it also helps us walk in faith. As Kevin Vanhoozer has termed it, the church is "gospel theater." The Bible is our script; the members of the church are the players who believe the gospel and act out what they believe. Pastors are directors, teaching and insisting that the church keep to the Script(ure). And church history, therefore, serves as a sampling of dramatic performances of the gospel, from which churches can learn and apply.

Again, Scripture is our first and final authority. But learning how various churches have faithfully re-presented the Word of God helps us carry out our present calling. And what is that calling? To proclaim Christ and to order our lives together according his Word.

This is the Great Commission: "Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." And because the Great Commission stands at the center of our discipleship, we do well when we learn from other disciples—especially other locally-gathered bands of disciples (i.e., churches)—in how to fulfill this calling.

Certainly, "all nations" means that we can and should learn from churches across the world. But it also means we should learn from churches across the ages. Indeed, walking faithfully before the Lord is not something we can do on our own. We need God and all the means he has given us. This begins with the Word and the Spirit, but because the Word and the Spirit create churches, we are also called to learn from church history.

Learning from the Past to Be Faithful in the Present

For these four reasons and more, we look at the history of deacons this Sunday. We will start in the early church and work towards the Reformation. The following Sunday, we'll move from the Reformation to the present. And in these two history lessons, we will have a better sense of how *to do God's Word* (James 1:22), so that Christ would be seen in and through our corporate witness.

May God help us to learn from his works of providence in previous ages, so that we might be faithful servants in this age.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds