



Truth

On Tough Texts

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Why Study Church History?

Isaiah 51:1

HEARKEN TO ME, YE THAT FOLLOW AFTER righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.

As mentioned in TOTT #60, I have had the honor in the last couple of years to share a series of messages on the Five Solas of the Reformation at various churches and at the Haiti Bible Institute. At one such church, I was also asked to teach a combined Sunday School class, at which I taught the material in this article to (hopefully) spark people's interest in Church History and encourage them to attend the rest of the meetings. Since the last several issues of TOTT have included a great deal of history, I thought I would also pass that material on to our readers.

The story is told of little Johnny who said to his father, "I don't want to discuss the grade I got in history, because that's all in the past." Clever, but not wise. Do you like history? I didn't until college. I had a professor who just opened it up, and now I love it.

What often hangs people up about history is that they think it's just about a bunch of *dates*, *deeds*, and *dead guys*. Who cares, right? But history is far less about dates and events as it is about *causes* and *consequences*. For example, what about the Reformation, which we have recently explored? What's important is not so much that it started on April 18, 1521 when Martin Luther delivered his famous "Here I stand" speech. What's important first is what *caused* that event, namely, the apostasy and abuses of Roman Catholicism that had been building for a thousand years. Second, what's also crucial are the *consequences* of that event and what we can and should learn from it.

History is, therefore, critically important. A pastor

friend of mine told me that he once met another pastor who felt strongly that not only should pastors today have a degree in Theology but another in History. His point is well taken. While we might not agree that a degree is necessary, we should recognize that pastors should be trained in History. Why? *Because we actually can understand little Theology without History.* After all, are we not reading history every time we open our Bible?

Amazingly, many historians and philosophers see no purpose or plan of History. They say such things as: "There is no secret or plan to history"; History is made up of "irrationalities" of which no one can make any sense; there is no "harmony" in historical events; History is made up of "random events" in which we see "one emergency following another." Shakespeare reflected this attitude in the character Macbeth, who pessimistically declared that history is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."¹

How foolish. In contrast, no better words have been uttered on this than those of philosopher George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."² Sadly, we today are, indeed, forgetting. I also read just recently what is perhaps the best explanation for studying history. It was uttered by the blind Czech historian Milan Hubl to the novelist Milan Kundera:

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.

If we may interject, that is exactly what is happening in America more every day. History (especially American history) is being removed from the school curriculum.

So, if all that is true for history in general, how much more important is it for the Christian to have at least some basic knowledge of Church History. As one of the greatest of church historians, Phillip Schaff, wrote, and which has been quoted many times:

How shall we labor with any effect to build up the church, if we have no thorough knowledge of her history, or fail to apprehend it from the proper point of observation? History is, and must ever continue to be, next to God's Word, the richest foundation of wisdom, and the surest guide to all successful practical activity.

Likewise, Evangelical Lutheran theologian and professor Joseph Sittler well said:

There is certainly nothing wrong with the church looking ahead, but it is terribly important that it should be done in connection with the look inside, into the church's own nature and mission, and a look behind at her own history. If the church does this, she is less likely to take her cues from the business community, the corporation, or the marketplace.

We note also the great 17th-century mathematician and Christian Blaise Pascal: "The history of the church should more accurately be called the history of truth."³

The Christian faith we know today was not just handed to us on a silver platter, but was planted, cultivated, and grown over the centuries. If I may repeat, *we can understand little Theology without History*. I would, therefore, offer **seven** reasons why we should study church history. For most of them, I'll also submit an historical event that I hope will encourage you to desire to know more.

I. The Command of God

The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, repeatedly exhorts us to search out and remember the past. God instituted festivals and ceremonies, in fact, as a reminder. Passover, of course, reminded the Jews of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. During the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) the people lived in huts made of boughs. It commemorated God's provision for them through the wilderness and celebrated the autumn harvest. It also foreshadowed the peace and prosperity of the millennial reign of Christ and will be celebrated during the Millennium (Zech. 14:16).

Our text is one of those truly beautiful verses of the Bible: **Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.** In the next two verses God goes on to say, in effect, "Remember your past; remember where you came from; remember that your nation exists only because of My

power that created that nation from an old man and an old woman who were beyond the age of child-bearing." We, too, should remember what we were—lost, hell-bound sinners! But God loved us, had mercy on us, and sent His only begotten Son to die in our place. But we should also remember the countless events of church history that have help mold our historical faith. As the aforementioned "Five Solas" series graphically illustrates, for example, we cannot understand or appreciate Christianity without an understanding of the Reformation. Sadly, however, many so-called evangelicals are trying to undo the Reformation.

II. To Comprehend Today

It has been wisely said, "History is not about the past but the present." Most people just do not realize that we cannot comprehend the present unless we understand the past. It shows us that we are really no different from our Christian brothers and sisters who have gone before us. It enables us to understand and sympathize with the difficulties they faced. It also helps us avoid the sins and errors they made.

During the first four centuries of the Church, it grew progressively more secularized, and the same is occurring today. This caused (and is causing) serious doctrinal errors as well as a departure from Biblical exposition. There were some, however, who saw what was occurring. Writing in the middle of the 2nd-century, the apologist Justin Martyr described a typical worship service of his day:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen.⁴

That is of tremendous importance. Mark it down—*the reading and explanation of the Word of God was the absolute center of the worship service*. Not today. Central today is music, drama, comedy, discussion, or anything else we can think of *except* preaching. Today the pulpit ministry, that of expository preaching, is all but gone. This leads to a third reason.

III. To Consider Tomorrow

Such comprehension of the past and present, leads us right to considering the future. Where are current trends going to lead us? Where are patterns of conduct and doctrine going to take us ultimately?

I can think of no better illustration than what Charles Spurgeon faced in his day, namely, the Down-Grade Con-

trovery. The Controversy began in 1887 as a result of several articles that appeared in Spurgeon's magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, which referred to the modernism that had crept into the Baptist Union. Spurgeon was deeply troubled by the Higher Criticism,⁵ the deemphasis on preaching, the decline of the historic doctrines of salvation,⁶ the resultant diluting of the faith, and the general attitude of pragmatism of the age.

In the March and April issues, Robert Shindler, a Baptist pastor and close friend of Spurgeon, wrote two articles about these trends. In the first article, he cited how numerous liberal beliefs, such as Rationalism,⁷ Unitarianism,⁸ Socinianism,⁹ Arianism,¹⁰ and Arminianism,¹¹ had replaced the pure Gospel preached and lived by the Puritans. He also cited the coldness and lifelessness of preaching even among Evangelicals, as well as their willingness to fellowship with those who were teaching false doctrine.

Even more important was Shindler's second article. He continued his outline of the decline of Christianity, but even more critical was *the reason he offered that such a decline occurred*. He submitted that the Down-Grade was being caused by the same thing that caused similar declines throughout history. It was not due to doubting some particular doctrine or calling into question some principle of orthodoxy, rather *the first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures*.

Shindler hit the proverbial nail on the head. Historically, the Word of God is the first casualty in any war on Christianity. It must be this way, for once the authority of any system is destroyed, whether it be a religious system, political system, or any other system, then that system will crumble. In a very real sense, Christianity has never recovered from the Down-Grade. It resulted in attack after attack: Lower (Textual) Criticism, Higher (Historical) Criticism, Modernism, Neo-Evangelicalism, Pragmatism, Relativism, Open Theism, and the Emergent Church. Where are we headed next?

IV. To Contemplate Providence

There are three aspects of the Sovereignty of God: His *decrees*, His *preservation*, and His *providence*. Space permits only brief mention of the last one. God's *providence* means that He continuously fulfills His original plan and design through the events that occur in the universe. What a staggering thought! I constantly ponder the providence of God in history and repeatedly marvel at how He has worked to bring certain things to pass through amazing events that most people just call "coincidence." Mark it down: *Our sovereign God is always at work through providence*.

To illustrate, when Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) became Queen of England in 1553, she was determined to put an end to the Protestant Reformation once-and-for-all and re-establish Roman Catholicism as the national religion. While she was challenged by the English Protestants, she

was not deterred. Almost 300 Protestants were burned at the stake and hundreds more escaped to Europe. Many of those godly exiles, among whom were some of the finest theologians and Bible scholars in history, found refuge in Geneva, Switzerland and were determined to translate a Bible into English, and with that the *Geneva Bible* was born. Coming over 50 years before the 1611 KJV, the Geneva was translated from 1557 to 1560 and was the first English translation to be translated solely from the original Hebrew and Greek. It was even the first Bible that could be classed as a "Study Bible" because of its abundant notes, annotations, cross references, and commentary.

King James I, however, was infuriated by the strong emphasis of the Doctrines of Grace in the Geneva Bible (as are many people today), not to mention its sanctioning of civil disobedience when rulers violate God's law (e.g. Ex. 1:19). This prompted him to authorize a group of Puritan scholars to produce a translation without such notes. It has been speculated, in fact, that if it had not been for James' outrage, the also excellent King James Version might never have been born.

It's significant, indeed, that when the Pilgrims set foot in the New World in 1620, it was the *Geneva Bible* they held in their hands, and it continued to be the Bible of the home for 40 years after the publication of the KJV and went through 144 editions. It was the *Geneva Bible* from which the Scottish Reformer John Knox preached at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, and it was the Bible of William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyon, and, of course, the Puritans.

Sadly, it lost this prominence only after the KJV was widely promoted by the King and after he outlawed the printing of the Geneva in the English realm. While it has often been called "The Forgotten Bible," the *Geneva Bible* has also been rightly dubbed "The Heartbeat of the Reformation." Outspokenly anti-Roman Catholic (especially in Revelation), it was hated by Rome, just as Rome hated (and still hates) the historic doctrines of the Reformation. It's ironic, indeed, that while many Protestants today, myself included, lovingly embrace the KJV (which reads 90% the same as the Geneva), it is really the *Geneva Bible* that is our true heritage. While in the end the KJV makes for a better and richer translation, the Geneva laid the solid foundation. In fact, even the preface to the KJV, titled "The Translators to the Reader," took its own Scripture quotations from the *Geneva Bible*.

V. To Conquer Error

One of the most important aspects of Church History is how Theology has developed through the centuries. One of the main reasons for that has been the reaction of godly men against error and apostasy. One doesn't have to study very long to discover *repeated* examples of error. Error is recorded in Scripture (such as the Judaizers of Acts 15 and the entire book of Galatians). Knowing Church History is a

priceless tool in fighting error today.

For example, countless cults and false religions deny the Deity of Christ. To the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus was not equal to Jehovah and was not God in human flesh but was rather a created being and was actually Michael the Archangel in his preexistent state, having a brother named Lucifer who rebelled against God.¹² Likewise, to the Mormon, Jesus—like all men, in fact—was a preexistent spirit who took his body at birth in this world; He is set apart from the rest of us only by the fact that He was the first-born of God's spirit-children.¹³ Other cults, such as Christian Science, the Unity School of Christianity, The Way International, and others illustrate why they are all called "a cult," namely, because they deny the deity of Christ or in some way pervert that doctrine.

But all this is nothing new in Church History; it is simply a revival of the ancient heresy called Arianism. Arius, a 4th-century parish priest in Alexandria, taught that Jesus was not coequal with God and was, in fact, a created being.

The popular book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown (Doubleday, 2003) is another graphic illustration. While seemingly just another thriller novel set in the present-day, it has a hidden agenda that makes it far more. Starting with the murdered curator of a Paris museum, the hero and heroine of the story must decipher the clues left behind by the murdered man and thereby uncover an ancient and sinister plot. *And what is that ancient secret?* The supposed "true" story that Christianity has been trying to hide for 1,600 years, namely, that Jesus was just another man who actually ended up marrying Mary Magdalene.

Error is everywhere, but knowing history makes it much easier to spot.

VI. To Compare People

Have you ever been reading an incident in history where a person did something remarkable and then thought, "I could never have done that?" Indeed, comparing ourselves to some of the great people of history will humble us like nothing else will. Not only will studying people of the past teach us about *them*, but it will also teach us about *ourselves*.

For example, one of the fundamental traits missing in society today is personal *integrity*. The essence of integrity is allegiance, standing firm for what is right without duplicity, double-mindedness, or divided allegiance.

Whenever I think of the word *integrity*, I am immediately reminded of the Huguenots of 16th-century France. They held strong morals and possessed high integrity. To be "honest as a Huguenot" was said to have been the highest praise of one's integrity. Put simply, what the Puritan was in England, the Huguenot was in France. A conservative estimate says that by 1561 one-sixth of France was strong in the historic doctrines of Christianity, which were reasserted in the Reformation, and blameless moral character; other estimates say one-fourth.

But history then reveals that the Huguenots were forced to leave France in 1685 and hence settled in England, Prussia, Holland, South Africa, and the Carolinas here in America. (I had the joy of once visiting a Huguenot Church in Charleston, South Carolina.) What's especially significant about that exodus is that it was a terrible economic blow to France, since most Huguenots were skilled artisans and professional men of the middle class (paralleled by the tax-paying middle class in America). Does that not explain the intellectual emptiness and moral debauchery that permeates France to this very day? Does that not explain the virtually incomprehensible ramblings of French philosophers such as Voltaire (1694–1778), André Maurois (1885–1967), and especially Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980)?

In a day when there is little integrity among politicians, businessmen, and sadly even some religious (and "Christian") leaders, the need for integrity cannot be overemphasized. While society today places virtually no value at all on personal integrity, it is a trait that is at the very core of a true believer.

VII. To Cultivate Endurance

Our Lord declared, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mk 13:13). The true believer is the one who endures to the very end. We also read in Hebrews 6:11, "And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end." James likewise declares, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (Jas. 1:12).

When we look at faithful people of the past, it is a tremendous encouragement. There are scores of those who have endured hardship and even death for the faith. They have each been committed to the Truth and have anticipated Christ's return. They did, indeed, endure to the end.

Of countless illustrations, I am often reminded of William Tyndale (1494–1536), a brilliant linguist who mastered six languages besides his native English (French, German, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin). He understood that the Roman Catholic Church's allegorical method of biblical interpretation enabled it to isolate itself from the common people. Since the meaning of the Bible was hidden in such allegory, the people couldn't possibly understand it. This was made all the worse by the Bible being written in Latin. He also discovered that even most of the clergy knew nothing of the Bible, only what was quoted in the Missal (Mass Book). In a heated argument one day with a priest, who said, "It was better to be without *God's* laws than the *Pope's*," Tyndale responded, "I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spares my life, I will cause a young farm boy to know more of the Scriptures than you do."

In defiance of the Roman Church, which would never

allow an English translation of the Bible (or any other vernacular language for that matter, as Luther discovered), Tyndale defied Rome and went into exile in Europe and evaded his pursuers for a decade to carry on his work. It was in 1525, in the German city of Worms, where Luther had taken his stand just four years earlier, that Tyndale completed the New Testament and then had it printed with great difficulty. Bibles were then smuggled into England in bales of merchandise, but the Church burned every copy it could find. Finally, Tyndale was betrayed, accused of heresy, and imprisoned, which included a winter of severe cold for which he had almost no protection in his cell. After 17 months of cold, lonely misery, Tyndale was tied to a stake and burned in 1536 at the age of 42.

What was the result of such endurance? Within a year, King Henry VIII approved an English Bible that he had no idea was 70 percent Tyndale's work. That work led to other better translations and eventually the KJV, which remained the standard for three and a half centuries. Ninety percent of it is, in fact, Tyndale's work and remained the foundation for most English translations until the 20th century. Sadly, however, much of that legacy of endurance has been lost in our day by the minimizing of the reliability and even value of that history of the English Bible.

Let each of us pray for such endurance to the end. And let us each cherish our Christian heritage.¹⁴

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

- ¹ *Macbeth*, 5.5.19.
- ² Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Vol. 1., 1905.
- ³ *Pensées* (Section XIV, polemic 858).
- ⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1; Ages Digital Library, "The First Apology Of Justin," Chapter 67.
- ⁵ An attack on the authority of the Bible by denying its historical accuracy. See TOTT #62.
- ⁶ In contrast to Arminianism, recognizes man's total depravity and helplessness in sin and God's total sovereignty in salvation.
- ⁷ The belief that reason, apart from any outside authority, such as the Bible, is the only guide. See TOTT #62.
- ⁸ Holds that Jesus was merely human, human character can be perfected, the Bible has a natural not supernatural origin, and all souls will ultimately be saved.
- ⁹ Rejected the pre-existence of Christ, the propitiatory view of atonement, and puts a limitation on God's omniscience.
- ¹⁰ Denies the full deity of Christ.
- ¹¹ In contrast to Calvinism, elevates man's "free will" over God's sovereign choice in salvation. Teaches that God chose people for salvation based on His foreseeing that they would believe.
- ¹² *The Kingdom is at Hand*, p. 49. Cited in *Handbook of Today's Religions*, p. 46.
- ¹³ *Handbook of Today's Religions*, pp. 70-71.
- ¹⁴ **Recommended Reading:** If you would like to go further in a basic study of Church History, an easy starting place is S. M. Houghton's excellent *Sketches from Church History* (Banner of Truth Trust). Another that provides simple, daily readings, but which must be read with discernment, is Rick Cornish's *5 Minute Church Historian* (NavPress). I recommend starting with the former. To go a step deeper, read Bruce Shelley's excellent *Church History in Plain Language*, 3rd Edition (Thomas Nelson); note the review below.

Book Review: *Church History in Plain Language*

By: Bruce L. Shelly

To be honest, I actually stumbled onto this book. One of the ladies in our church asked me about it so I took a look at her copy. I am thankful for that.

It starts by dividing this immense subject into 49 short chapters organized into eight "ages": Jesus and the Apostles; Catholic Christianity; Christian Roman Empire; Christian Middle Ages; the Reformation; Reason and Revival; Progress; and Ideologies. It then proceeds to present history as it should be presented: *as a story*. With a cast of thousands, the author delves into *what* people did and *why*, along with contributions and consequences.

The major feature for me in evaluating any Church History book is how it views Roman Catholicism and the Reformation. While Catholics won't like it or agree (I read one scathing review by a Catholic), Shelly tells the truth.

Of the Council of Trent, he writes, "Everything the Protestant Reformation stood for was vigorously—one could almost say violently—rejected at Trent" (p. 277), which refers particular to the "five solas." He also con-

cludes of the much touted Vatican II that while it "did represent a significant break with the angry spirit . . . of Trent and the defensive mood of Vatican I," in the final analysis, "the traditional theology and papal government of the Church remained intact. . . . In spite of all the fine words of the Council, little changed in practice" (457–8).

One complaint I have is the sparse footnotes and absence of a bibliography. There is, however, a list of suggested reading for further study at the end of each chapter, so it's probably safe to say that these comprise the bibliography.

There are many books on Church History, but this one has taken its place at the top of my list for concise (500 pages) yet thorough coverage from an evangelical perspective. It is easy to read and is accessible to high school age and up. I've dreamed of writing a Church History book for years, but while I have the knowledge, I don't have the credentials. Shelly does, and his scholarship, style, and sensibility are impeccable.

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A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641

www.TheScriptureAlone.com
docwatson3228@qwest.net

A F.I.R.E. Church
www.FireFellowship.org

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

This publication is sent free of charge to anyone who requests it. To aid in the ministry, tax-deductible donations will be greatly appreciated, but never demanded. If you know someone you think would enjoy TOTT, please send along their address.

Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.