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Why study Church History?

Tony Lane

I suspect that church history does not figure prominently, if at all, in the private study of many Christians. Rightly, their desire is to study the Bible; to turn aside to church history seems a time-wasting distraction. While I can understand and sympathize with such an attitude, I consider it short-sighted. Church history, in which I include historical theology or the history of doctrine, ought not to be an optional or unnecessary extra. I will set forth seven reasons for my attitude.

The Fact of Tradition

The first reason is the weightiest and the most important. It is simply the fact of tradition. Now for many 'tradition' is a dirty word. It refers to anti-scriptural or at best non-scriptural human traditions which are rivals to the divine word of God. While the term can have that meaning, it also has a broader meaning related to its original meaning of 'that which is handed on'. In this broader sense, tradition is simply the entire Christian faith as it is handed on from generation to generation. The majority of activities in our churches aim to hand on the Christian tradition understood in this all-inclusive sense.

I want to maintain that our grasp of the Christian faith has reached us via this tradition. For example, how did you learn that God is love? Was it through private study of *1 John 4* or through Sunday School, a sermon, a book, a Christian friend, or any of the many other channels of tradition? To go back a stage further, you may open your Bible for the first time at Genesis 1 and read 'In the beginning God'. How do you understand this word 'God'? Do you at once reach for your Concordance and do a systematic study of the word? If you have just begun to read the Bible, you have probably never even heard of a Concordance. Surely the answer is that you come to the Bible with some concept of God, however hazy. All of us most come to the Bible with a certain prior understanding of the Christian faith, however vague, and this remains true all of our Christian lives, not just at the beginning. The prior understanding is of

course open to be improved and corrected, but nonetheless it remains a potent factor. If you accept this, you are acknowledging that your understanding of the Christian faith is deeply influenced by the understanding of it handed on to you by your spiritual forebears. Note, **deeply** influenced, **not** determined. Luther remained deeply influenced all his life by his late medieval background although he had violently rejected much of it.

Whatever the influence on you of these arguments, the study of history shows this to be an indisputable fact. If you do not agree, this is itself a motive for studying history – it will enable you to recognize such a fact for yourself. Let me give one historical illustration. Before Luther, no-one understood the doctrine of justification in quite his sense. Then Luther came and posed certain new questions and reached what we would call the evangelical or protestant doctrine of justification by faith. Since then countless others have turned to the Pauline epistles and like Luther have seen there the doctrine of justification by faith. Now why did no-one see it before Luther, while millions have seen it since? If it is there in *Romans*, as I believe it is, it was there all the time; yet it took a Luther to draw attention to it. Thus we are deeply influenced by tradition in our understanding of scripture, and in what we notice in scripture. It can be added that though the Roman Catholic church sought to reject Luther's doctrine of justification, yet their own doctrine was greatly influenced by Luther's, both positively and negatively.

It is clear, then, that we are all greatly influenced by the history of Christian doctrine (i.e. the history of tradition), whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not. The uneducated Christian who has never even heard about Augustine or Luther is no less profoundly influenced by their thought. He is simply ignorant of their influences upon him.

In this context, there are two sorts of Christians: those who are influenced by tradition without knowing it, and those who are influenced by

tradition and do know it. The former are the unconscious slaves of those whose views they have followed. The latter may, at the very least, choose their masters by comparing them and testing them by the one norm of scripture. This is the first reason for studying church history – the influence of Christian tradition on us all.

Understanding Today

The second reason follows naturally. We would study church history in order to understand today. Our beliefs are the product of 19 centuries of Christian life and thought. (If you do not believe this, I urge you to study history in order to discover that fact for yourself.) It follows that we can fully understand ourselves and the church today only if we know something of those 19 centuries of history. When you make friends with others, you aim to know them better. An important part of this process is to learn about their past. Similarly with understanding the church today and Christian doctrine today. You will never really understand the Anglican church or the Roman Catholic church until you know something of their history. No-one could ever have sat at the drawing board and designed either of these churches from scratch, and so it is

easy for the ignorant to poke fun at them. But when you know something of their history, you can begin to understand them.

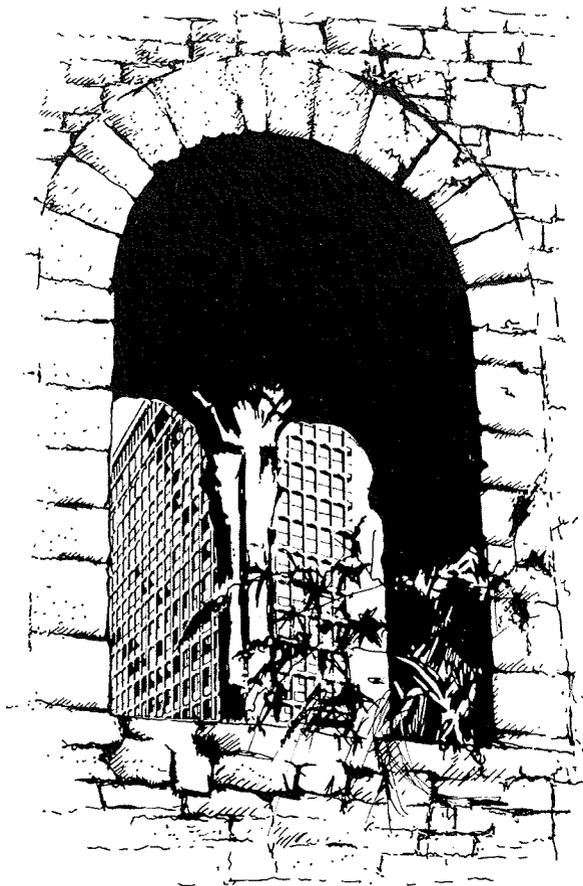
It is vital to understand even your opponents. Until you understand an opponent, you can do little more than hurl abuse at him. When you understand him, you can begin to make intelligent criticisms which even he might appreciate. The history of Protestant/Catholic controversy from 1550 to 1950 is largely one of basic misunderstanding on both sides. Abuse has predominated, so that the debate has become largely sterile and valueless. Neither side could recognize itself in the caricatures presented by the other.

If we cannot understand the church today without knowing something of its history, the same applies to Christian doctrine. I would maintain that it is impossible to grasp the doctrine of the Trinity without knowing something of how that doctrine was formulated over the course of three centuries. To be more specific, without some such knowledge one is vulnerable to the taunts of Jehovah's Witnesses that the doctrine of the Trinity was invented in the fourth century. So, for a proper understanding of both today's church and Christian doctrine today it is essential to know something of the history of both. Imagine a man without a memory. That would be a truly horrific state of affairs, but it is no less serious for a church not to know its own past.

It is not only the church today and Christian doctrine today that are the product of 19 centuries of church history. Our own cultural past may be likened to our parents; we can reject them, but that is simply to replace their positive influence by their negative influence. If this is so, then it is important that we understand how our attitudes and beliefs have been formed. It is only through such understanding that we can begin to be free from them. If we are unconscious of these influences upon us, we are unable to react coherently to them. But if we can see these influences clearly, we are then in a position to react responsibly and wisely to them. We will thank God for some, while we will strive to nullify others. To study church history is to gain a perspective on today's situation.

Thinking Historically and Critically

My third reason for studying church history is to learn to think historically and critically. Even if we seem to remember nothing from our study of history it does not follow that it has been wasted. The learning of skills is as important as the learning of facts. Within historical study we are challenged to study the attitudes and views of



others very different from ourselves and to present them objectively and sympathetically.

This is a vital lesson to learn, as we all meet people in our everyday lives with whom we disagree radically. If we are going to make any impact on such people, be they Muslims, Marxists or Mormons, we must be able to enter sympathetically into their beliefs. We have not really understood a system until we have so entered into it that we appreciate its attraction for those who follow it. It is only then that we can really speak to its adherents. This important outlook can be learned through the study of history. The study of history also trains us to be critical and discerning of the claims people make. For example, it enables us to handle that claim of the Jehovah's Witnesses, that the doctrine of the Trinity was invented in the fourth century; and also to recognize when an account is true in what it actually says, but nonetheless deceptive because it is only part of a truth. Such skills can of course be learned in other ways, but the study of history will help at least to develop them.

We begin to think historically only when we acquire some sense of how history works. Events never take place in a vacuum. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the Reformation took place in the 16th Century. One can safely claim that it could not have taken place in, say, the 12th Century.

You might object that the Reformation took place when God willed it. But if a slate falls off a roof and hits me on the head, I might well feel that God willed it, but that does not stop me from blaming the fact that it was loose. As a study of the laws of nature is not incompatible with a belief in God's providence, neither is a study of the workings of history incompatible with such belief. If we are to avoid naively expecting a carbon-copy of the 18th Century revivals in our vastly different society, it is essential to have some understanding of history. God can work in a mighty way today, but if he does, it will be in a way appropriate to this century, not to some other century. It is our duty to be 20th Century Christians, not pale imitations of the Reformers, the Puritans, the Wesleys, or the pioneer missionaries. Learning to think historically and critically is a valuable product of historical study.

Curiosity

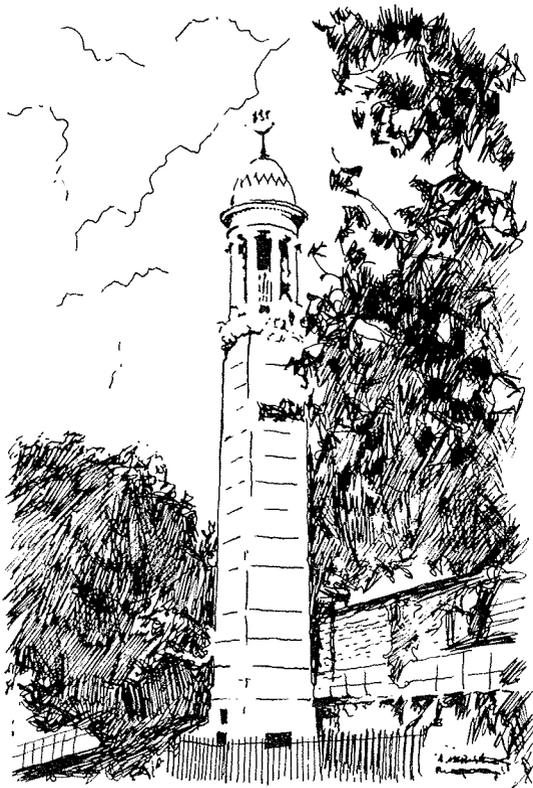
My fourth reason for wanting to study church history is simply curiosity. Curiosity was seen in the Middle Ages as a sin, but there is a sense in which we ought to be curious. As Christians we should be interested in the church of Christ. We should be interested in what happens to Christians in China and South America, to name but two examples. If we are only interested in our

own local church, something is the matter with us, and our horizons need broadening. Likewise, we should be interested to show interest in his or her past life. While such curiosity can be abused, without it we will be greatly impoverished. We are therefore as justified in being interested in our brethren in the past as our brethren in other continents. It is true that we cannot help earlier generations as we can help our own (by prayer and giving), but it is also true that earlier generations have given a lot to us which present generations cannot give. This leads to my next point – the broadening of our experience.

Expanding Horizons

Broadening of experience is indeed an important motive for studying history. Those who have travelled abroad will know how this can be a truly enriching experience. When we see how people live in other cultures, we realize that our own is not the only possible one, that people can live very happily with different practices, and even in certain cases, that we would do well to adopt some of their ways. The study of history can be an experience similar to foreign travel. The historian travels in a fourth dimension, time. Hume rightly said that 'A man acquainted with history may in some respect be said to have lived from the beginning of the world'. This access to other generations is both valuable and enriching. It helps us to see ourselves in perspective. Those who never look beyond their own local congregation may be easily depressed with the state of Christ's church. But those who know the history of the church and what is happening elsewhere will see this differently. They will see that decline in the West is accompanied by growth and expansion elsewhere in the world. They will see that throughout the history of the church there has been movement. The church declined in Palestine to spread to the Greeks. It declined in the East after spreading throughout western and northern Europe. It is declining in Europe after spreading throughout the world. This sort of perspective, which I have admittedly over-simplified, can only come from knowledge of church history.

Our knowledge of the past also gives us a rich source of vicarious experience. Over the centuries the church has made mistakes, and made many wise choices. We are not faced with the same issues and the same choices as they were. Our knowledge of history will show us that; but their examples, both good and bad, can help us evaluate situations. To give one instance, we do not need today to discuss the issue of church/state relations in a purely theoretical way. We have 19 centuries of experience to draw on, some of it good, and some of it bad, most of it a mixture of good and



The Mayflower Memorial, Southampton

bad. So curiosity and a broadening of experience are both motives for studying church history.

The Bible as History

The sixth motive for studying church history is the fact that the Bible itself is history. This reason may seem very simple, but I believe it is extremely important. The Bible is a history book, not a systematic theology. God has chosen to reveal himself to us in history (a very Hebrew approach), rather than to reveal himself in timeless abstract ideas (which is the Greek approach). But you might object that much of the Bible is doctrine. Well, if so, then this is as true of the *Letter to the Romans* as of any other part of the Bible. But notice why *Romans* was written. It was written because of Paul's travel plans (chapter 1 and 15). Notice also how three chapters (9 to 11) arose because of the fact that the Jews were not accepting the gospel. Note also the practical teaching related to the current circumstances of the Roman church (chapters 12 to 15); and one could go on.

God has chosen to teach us primarily through history. If you look in *Judges 2*, you will find a description of the repeated cycle which God's people underwent. They were in a state of apostasy. As a result, God gave them into the

hands of their enemies and eventually this caused them to turn to God, whereupon he sent them a judge to deliver them. This deliverance led on in its turn to apostasy, and so the whole cycle went round again. We could learn this sequence as a theory and that would be of some value to us. But how much more valuable it is to read the book of *Judges* itself and see how this cycle is worked out in successive generations of the people of Israel! This is what it means to be taught by history. And if there is value in studying the history of God's people before the coming of Christ, then there must be value in studying their history after his coming. If God has chosen to reveal himself in history, that is sufficient reason to turn us all into students of history.

The Cry for Relevance

The last reason for studying church history is its relevance. The issue for relevance is important in every branch of theological study. There would be something amiss if our theology was irrelevant, but we must beware of the search of instant relevance. Professor Gordon Rupp has made this point well in his book on *The Making of the English Protestant Tradition*. He acknowledges that we cannot help asking our own questions of the past. But before this comes a prior discipline, patiently listening to earlier generations. We must not ask them our own questions until we have listened to the questions they were asking and have noted what issues preoccupied them. If we fail to do this, we will make of the past a sounding-board from which we catch only the echo of our own voices. To put this truth another way, history is a window, not a mirror. If we simply want to see our own situation and our own issues, we should not bother with history. The value of history as with foreign travel lies mainly in the differences that we note. As we see how different past generations have been, we learn to look on ourselves more critically, and to ask questions we would otherwise never had asked.

It is true that we can learn from the past how Calvin or some other theologian may have answered the questions we are asking. But that presupposes that we are asking the right questions. We will learn much more from the past if we notice the differences and the contrasts, and listen to the questions they were asking. Church history is indeed relevant, but not necessarily in the easy way we would like. Far from providing comforting answers to our questions, the study of history will often leave us wondering if we are asking the right questions.

Tony Lane is lecturer in historical theology at London Bible College. The article is based on a tape transcript.