

Why do we study Church history?

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Church history, on the surface, seems to be of little interest to some Christians. At least, that is my initial conclusion from teaching Church history at Evangel Seminary. For various reasons, most students I encounter have relatively little knowledge of the Christian past. Let's face it: church history has fallen on hard times in a fast-paced culture, such as Hong Kong's. We are bombarded with so many issues on a daily basis, all calling for our attention and some decision on our part, and once made, we turn our attention to what comes next. Hence, people have little time or interest to focus on the events of earlier days. Let's just move on with life!

There are, however, valid reasons to give the study of church history our unreserved attention. In what follows, I would like to highlight a legion of reasons why the study of church history is beneficial for any student of the Bible (and hence, for all of us, regardless of our age, profession or level of involvement at church):

1. **To obey the commandment of the LORD.**

'Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you' (Deut 32:7). In this passage, which could be augmented by many others, God tells his people to listen to the experience and wisdom of past generations. We need to study church history for the very simple reason to show obedience and reference to the LORD.

2. **To understand more fully the Bible (Dan 1-6; 8; 11).**

No evangelical would deny that **the Bible is a library of historical records**. In the Old Testament, the section known as history (Joshua – Esther) includes 249 chapters. Over the half of the Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy) as well as many chapters in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and other books are historical in nature. Additionally, every passage has a historical context that needs to be considered for its proper interpretation. We get the same sense when we turn our attention to the New Testament. The Gospels (89 chapters) and the book of Acts (28 chapters) are primarily historical accounts. The rest of the New Testament needs historical elucidation as well. In sum, history is a continuous dimension of the entire Bible. You cannot possibly understand the Bible without it. What about prophecy, which makes up about 25 % of the Scriptures? Prophecy is either exhortation in any given historical context, or it is foretelling of future events, and as such, the latter is simply a continuation of history into the future. Since much prophecy is already fulfilled, it is now history and the connection between the two is completed.

3. **To understand and see God's plan for the Ages.**

We read in Acts 17:26-27: '**He has determined their pre-appointed times** and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they should seek the Lord.' A study of church history helps us to see that God indeed has a plan for the ages, involving all peoples. Although man continues to fail, God continues to

methodically work toward the completion of His work.

4. **To understand and evaluate Christian experience.**

We identify with the spiritual experience of others and we learn from it (cf. e.g. the prayers in the book of Psalms). How often do we identify with the different psalmists and learn how the LORD helped them in particular trials and circumstances – and through them, we also learn what praise and worship looks like. Speaking more of our own times, practical biographies on the life and ministry of Christian workers, such as biographies on Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) or Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) help us **understand the work of God in the lives of his servants.**

5. **To give the believer stability and roots.**

Ps 11:3 reads: 'If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' An ignorance of history makes each person and group feel isolated and unconnected to the work of God. History thus makes those connections for us. **It provides a spiritual genealogy** and connects us with the saints of the past. It makes us a part of something bigger than ourselves and larger than our short lifetime. Our genealogical past does not only extend back to the 19th century (when Protestant missionaries were active in the Greater China region), nor to the 16th century (when Martin Luther launched the Reformation in Continental Europe), but back to the time of the Church Fathers, confessors and martyrs of the early church in the Roman Empire, which connects us with the time following the events in the book of Acts.

6. **To explain present conditions.**

God commands his people in Isaiah 51:1 to look at their origin: 'Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn.' In any class I teach there are students from all sorts of ecclesial backgrounds. This inevitably raises the important question: Why are there so many different denominations? Where did my group (or yours) come from? How did certain doctrines develop? What are e.g. Arminianism and Calvinism, and what are their significance both for doctrine and church life? There are many reasons for the splintering of Protestantism, such as doctrinal, historical, social or other reasons. All these questions and many, many more can only be answered by a robust knowledge of church history.

7. **To see error coming your way and how it develops.**

Paul tells us in Gal 5:9 that 'a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.' Church history shows **how a movement is corrupted** from its original stand and purpose. Make no mistake: Heresy does not come over night, but gradually. Church history helps us to identify this process. It will give you hints as to the spiritual welfare of your church. Paul Woolley (1902-1984), the late church historian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (USA) once said: 'White (= truth) stands out more clearly against the background of black (= error).'

8. **To foresee future conditions and events.**

The teacher of old said: 'There is nothing new under the sun' (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The Bible teaches us that, in a very real way, history does repeat itself. Yes, some of the details are always different. But, in the main, nothing new is happening. Therefore, in order to understand where things are going, you need to understand church history. **History is the foundation on which tomorrow is built.** This leads us then to our last point.

9. **To follow the example of Christ and the Apostles.**

It should not be too difficult for us to realize that Jesus Christ constantly referred to historical events to apply the lessons thereof to the lives of his listeners. In Matthew 23:35 ('from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah'), Jesus sums up the entire Old Testament dispensation by highlighting the persecution true believers have always faced and will face in the future. The same approach was adopted by his immediate followers. In Acts chapter 7, Stephen addresses his audience by drawing their attention to the history of Israel in order to warn them from not to reject Christ, the Messiah. If **history was important to Christ and his most immediate followers**, can it be any less important to us, his followers of the 21st century?

Like the history of ancient Israel, the history of the Christian Church is to be remembered and learned from. Today, our culture is often confronted with new and bizarre religious philosophies, some of which present themselves under the banner of Christianity. This is nothing new. Church history is littered with heresies that have tried to infiltrate the church, including false ideas such as Gnosticism, Marcionism, or Arianism. At the danger of oversimplification, these three examples from the earliest days of church history are still with us today in the form of the New Age movement, an 'NT God who is exclusively love' and the Watchtower Society of the Jehovah's witnesses. Understanding the Christian Gospel, and with it, church history, helps us to separate fiction and fads from the facts and the true doctrine of the Christian faith.