

Does being a Christian matter in writing history?

Certainly what actually occurred does not change; but does the storytelling? Would a Christian see more or less than a non-Christian historian? Would different things be seen? And as for the big picture, would opposite interpretations necessarily emerge?

These questions represent some of the intellectual challenges I faced in completing a Ph.D. in church history. Alongside these challenges was a growing sense of God's call on my life to write history. The booklet you hold is my attempt to answer both sets of concerns at once. In doing so, the booklet itself provides an example of what it might look like to write history as a Christian.

*The Preacher sought to find delightful words
and to write words of truth correctly.*

—Ecclesiastes 12:10 (NASB)

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My Sense of Calling as a Christian Historian



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as a
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to promote the worship of God
through the exposition of Scripture,
the explanation of history,
and the application of faith in Christ to all of life.*

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To
Dr. Tom Nettles,
Advisor, Brother, and Friend.

Preface

The following autobiographical work originally appeared in May 2001 as a classroom assignment for the Historical Studies Colloquium at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The professors assigned various readings about historians and historiography. The professors then asked each student to respond with a paper describing his task as a Christian historian. The paper I wrote incorporated much of the assigned reading, and so owes its life to the wisdom of my professors. After returning my paper, Dr. Tom Nettles encouraged me to rework it into an article. I did, but never submitted it. Instead, I have reshaped it into a booklet to introduce myself and my aspirations to others, who may sense that God is calling me to serve with them as a professor of history. May the words written here benefit all who read them!

Robert Arthur Snyder
Switzerland County, Indiana
February 1, 2005

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Introduction

Christian maturity is necessary for writing Christian history well. Though many have the gift of writing Christian history, only those who also excel in the graces of faith, hope, and love are able to write excellent Christian history. As proof, consider how each of the three cardinal graces of Christian maturity informs Christian historiography.

First, faith strongly affects Christian historiography, for an understanding of the essence of Christianity must precede any story of its progress. For example, calling the work of Marcion a blessing or a curse will depend on whether I believe Christianity resembles Adolf von Harnack's filial piety or William Cunningham's doctrinal fidelity. But if I lack a firm concept of what Christianity looks like, how can I discern its path through the crowded streets of the past? This is no idle warning. The possibility of chronicling an undefined subject occurred to me when I reflected on one of H. E. W. Turner's critiques against the redoubtable Walter Bauer. In a book entitled *Orthodoxy*

and *Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Bauer surprisingly “fails to attain an adequate view of the nature of orthodoxy,” and in turn, this failure to define his subject “inevitably vitiates his treatment to some extent.”¹

Second, hope is necessary in writing Christian history well, for hope sets the criteria for describing change. In other words, my expectation of Christianity’s ultimate goal in this world will determine whether I describe a particular change in the past as either progressing toward or digressing from that goal. For example, even though Christopher Dawson and Roland Bainton both acknowledged the changes to Christianity under Martin Luther, the first described them as a digression; the latter, as progression. Why is that? For Dawson, the ideal Christian culture subordinates the individual; for Bainton, the individual is supreme. Could their assessment be anything else? Can a postmillennialist speak with approval of Anabaptist separatism? Or can a dispensationalist favor

¹These quotes from Turner are taken from Georg Strecker’s essay “The Reception of the Book” (translated by Robert A. Kraft), which appears as Appendix 2 in Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Georg Strecker, Robert A. Kraft, and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, 2nd ed. (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1996), 300. For the original context, see H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: Mowbray, 1954), 80.

John Winthrop’s ideal of a New Israel? Eschatology strongly affects Christian historiography.²

Finally, love is necessary in writing Christian history well, for love brings objectivity. By “objectivity,” I am not referring to a totally detached viewpoint of this world, such as God alone possesses (Job 28:20-27). This concept of “objectivity” is in fact the very one that I am combating, for I am arguing that the best Christian history will be written by the best Christians—in other words, by the best insiders! While some may argue that an insider’s perspective will actually decrease its truthfulness in favor of bias, I assert that love will supply the necessary objectivity. When we say to one another, “Let’s be objective about this matter,” we are really saying, “Let’s step back and look on ourselves as if we had nothing to gain or lose here. Rather than letting our minds be overcome by fear or anger, due to potential loss, let’s speak the truth.” In this description, objectivity means that I look on things, not as if I were *God*, but as if I were another *man*. Can a Christian historian approach such objectivity? By grace, he can. “Love rejoices in the truth” (1 Corinthians

²For a description of the historiography of Christopher Dawson, Roland Bainton, and other leading historians, see Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber, eds., *Historians of the Christian*

13:6). In love, a mature Christian can write a true history of Christianity for the sake of others.

Therefore, a Christian historian's character will strongly stamp his historiography. The heart will tutor the mouth. Though no Christian will attain perfection here on earth, it is nevertheless true that the more Christian I become in my beliefs, expectations, and motives, the better Christian history I will be able to write. No amount of external methods or interpretive grids can replace the necessity of being transformed by the Holy Spirit in faith, hope, and love, for the spiritual man "judges all things" (1 Corinthians 2:15).³

Tradition: Their Methodologies and Influence on Western Thought (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995).

³In one sense, the necessity of Christian maturity in writing Christian history well resembles the general need for any historian to add subjective sympathy to objective analysis. Who he is will affect what he writes, whether for ill or for good. As a negative example, consider the famous historian of dogma, Adolf von Harnack. According to Jaroslav Pelikan, "Where Harnack's appreciation of the orthodox Christian tradition gave him the capacity to resonate even to a piety he could not share, he was able to interpret it with real empathy as 'the deepest root of dogma;' but where a lack of understanding for the liturgy made such empathy impossible, the result was deficient, not only theologically but above all historically" (*Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971], 105-06). As a positive example, the richness of common experience invigorates page after page of Elisabeth Elliot's biography of Amy Carmichael, who was her model in missionary self-sacrifice (see *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael* [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1987]).

This strong tie between the Christian historian and his task also explains the personal nature of this essay. In its remaining pages, I will attempt to describe my own task as a Christian historian. Though the specific calling of each Christian historian will differ, as the Lord Jesus directs, there is enough commonality as Christians for us to gain mutual benefit by reviewing each other's calling. The task and the historian should be seen together, since one is inextricable from the other.

Before I begin, let me pause for two disclaimers, one pertaining to gifts and the other to grace. As to gifts, I sincerely embrace the warning that the king of Israel issued Ben-Hadad: "Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off" (1 Kings 20:11). Many seasoned Christian historians have already faced the question posed by secularism, "Do evangelical Christian scholars pursue their science or discipline differently from the way secularists do?"⁴ To these historians, I already owe a great debt and thank God for their work. Therefore, my own views are

⁴George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 151. For a recent discussion of this question among evangelical historians, see Tim Stafford, "Whatever Happened to Christian History?" *Christianity Today*, 2 April 2001, 41-49.

offered for what they are—the ideals of a novice, rather than the reflections of an expert.

As to grace, I almost gave up the ambition of writing Christian history four years ago. At that time, I asked the church I served as pastor to pray specifically whether I should continue my education or not. My heart faced concerns over both my deep-seated love of learning and my weakness in the face of continual scholarly assault on my faith. I desired to know from the Lord, whether it was His specific will that I enter this particular temptation. According to the Gospel, the Christian's normal course is to pray, "Do not lead us into temptation," thereby following both the Lord's warning, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation," and His example, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 6:13; 26:39, 41). Only doing the will of God trumps this healthy level of self-distrust (cf. Matthew 6:10, 13; 26:39). God was pleased to answer my prayers within two days. People I trusted—my father, a close deacon, and my school supervisor—all impressed upon me the necessity of being a good steward of the Master's goods by striving to do as much good for His cause as possible. Those who seek merely their own salvation will be called "wicked and lazy" by the Master on the Great Day

(Matthew 25:26). Having been liberated from my dilemma, I have now grown fond of the prophecy that the Messiah's people will be a freewill offering in the day of His power (Psalm 110:3). Thus I can truly say that this essay describes my current understanding of my *calling* to be a Christian historian.

The Christian Historian as Christ's Disciple

As a Christian, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. His yoke sets my ideals. What He says is true, I believe; what He says to do, I obey. This yoke governs all my actions, including my task as a Christian historian. Accordingly, the Bible has strongly guided my thoughts about writing Christian history, and so will be quoted freely in this essay.

The Bible has influenced my task in more than one way. In addition to its content, the Bible's very form has informed me. Just as "it is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher" (Matthew 10:25), so it is enough for Christian history to be like biblical history. Imitation in this instance will in no way be restrictive, for biblical history includes more than narrative, stretching from Solomon's bill of materials to the trilogy of Psalms 104, 105, and 106. The Bible, in fact, gives exemplary guidance for almost all genres of

literature. Therefore, as a Christian historian, I aim to write in accordance with Scripture and in imitation of Scripture.

Christian history does differ from biblical history in one important respect—inspiration. While the Bible is the inerrant word of God, the word of a Christian historian may fail. In this respect, a Christian historian is more like the sage of Old Testament wisdom literature than the prophet who heard God telling him the very words to say. As in Old Testament wisdom, a Christian historian must rely on observation—either his own or that of a witness—and then wisely discern patterns in the data. But even this analogy is not an identity, for biblical wisdom itself has inspired observations! Nevertheless, since Christian history is a form of wisdom, albeit fallible wisdom, the goal of the wise man of Ecclesiastes has become mine in writing Christian history: “The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly” (Ecclesiastes 12:10, New American Standard Bible). This goal contains three objectives, which I shall describe as content (“words of truth”), style (“delightful words”), and purpose (“the Preacher”).

Content: “Words of Truth”

That a historian should strive to write only the truth may seem self-evident. Who would say otherwise? Certainly not a Christian. In the language of the Decalogue, no amount of academic freedom will ever justify bearing false witness against my neighbor (Exodus 20:16). The Gospels were certainly written with a concern for historical accuracy (e.g. Luke 1:1-4). But while the duty of truth is not disputed, the concept of truth certainly is. Therefore, before addressing the special Christian problem of truthfully relating providence to Christian history, I will first address the concept of truth and its relationship to writing history.

Truth and Interpretation

In modern times, questions over truth have largely given way to questions over interpretation. Instead of saying to someone, “You are wrong,” moderns often say, “That is your interpretation.” The difference between the two is great. The question of truth is discrete, demanding a yes or a no (1 John 2:21; cf. Proverbs 12:17). In contrast, the question of interpretation is on a continuum of greater or lesser understanding. Shifting from truth to interpretation allows for more latitude in tolerating different

viewpoints and even for all-out relativism. In witnessing the fruit of this shift, J. Gresham Machen became quite suspicious of the root itself, telling the inaugural class of Westminster Theological Seminary, “I hesitate to use that word ‘interpretation;’ for it is a word that has been the custodian of more nonsense, perhaps, than any other word in the English language to-day. Every generation, it is said, must interpret the Bible and the creeds of the church in its own way ‘to suit the modern mind.’”⁵

Understanding the difference between truth and interpretation is crucial for historians, who often speak of each other’s interpretations of the past. The legitimacy of this practice largely hangs on the legitimacy of all modern talk of interpretation. Therefore, let us first consider the notion of interpretation in general.⁶

The essence of every use (and abuse) of “interpretation” is a two-step approach to understanding. The data cannot be understood directly, but only

⁵J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State*, ed. John W. Robbins (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), 147-48.

⁶The following paragraphs concern metaphysical issues that are difficult to define and even harder to prove. To those who will justly conclude that I have oversimplified the case, I plea both the limits of this paper and, even more, the limits of my mind.

mediately through an interpreter. To me, it is only legitimate to speak of “interpretation” when there is truly a need for such a mediate step, as in understanding foreign languages or figures of speech.⁷ In those cases, the language itself demands the need of an interpreter. But is interpretation necessary in all cases? Though understanding may be hindered by words that lack specificity or by hearers lacking adequate background experience, the idea that all language needs interpretation is frankly misleading. Not all of language is metaphorical.

Two evil fruits result if interpretation is pressed for all language. First, words no longer speak truth. Instead of saying that this word is true or false, the word’s meaning comes under scrutiny. No final verdict can be given because the possibility always exists that we have “misinterpreted” the word. In contrast to interpretation, truth implies a direct link between reality and the word. If my words are true, they are so because they correspond to what is real. Similarly, if my life is true, it is so because it portrays reality. A true word, therefore, is a fair representation of what really is. In

⁷Scripture gives examples of both, especially in the Gospel of John (e.g. 1:38, 41, 42; 9:7; 11:11-14; 16:25). When plain speech replaced figurative speech, John notes that there no longer remained a need for anyone to ask Jesus for a mediate word (16:29-30).

the ultimate paradigm, because the Word is the unique image of the Father, the Word is the Truth (John 14:6-7, 9)! But if all words must be interpreted, the direct link between word and reality is broken and the concept of truth vanishes.

Second, if interpretation is pressed for all language, blame also vanishes, for speech is right to the extent that it conforms to the truth. Truth and righteousness are closely related. When a false answer is given to a question, the interrogator replies, “That is not right! The truth is such and such.” Similarly, an unrighteous, wrong lifestyle is living a lie. The relationship between truth and righteousness also grounds the duty to believe the truth. When words are presented to me, I have the option either to receive them or to reject them. If my mind receives them, that act of faith unites them to my mind (Hebrews 4:2). After that point, the word is now in me (cf. 1 John 1:10). In one sense, what I believe has become “true for me.” But here is where blame may enter: Does what is “true for me” conform to the truth? If it does, I am right; if it does not, I am wrong. Without words as direct images of reality, blame is shifted from us to the words themselves. If everything needs interpretation, then blame (if any should exist) must lie not in the

interpreter, but in the allegedly unclear data.

If the evil fruit of interpretation is the loss of truth and righteousness, what is the taproot of this noxious weed? C. S. Lewis identified the taproot in his classic book, *The Abolition of Man*. Moderns have denied “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”⁸ In other words, moderns deny the created order.

In light of Lewis’ observation, I believe that the ultimate solution to the interpretation game is to reassert both the reality and continuity of creation. Meaning does not lie in words. Words can only signify. They point. Meaning lies in the things themselves. The Creator has invested everything in creation with real being and intrinsic worth. It is by creation, not by convention, that a man is said to have more worth than a sheep (Matthew 12:12). This difference in worth exists whether there is mind there to perceive it or not. In other words, this worth exists at a deeper level than even “truth,” for truth is the portrayal of that worth to another

⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 12.

mind. Sadly, an egalitarian spirit has beguiled modernity into thinking that there is no hierarchy of intrinsic worth, as if gold is not intrinsically good or sparrows intrinsically worth little (cf. Genesis 2:12; Matthew 10:31). But if there is no fixed reality, then it is not surprising that truth itself becomes meaningless, for there is no reality to represent.

While the reality of creation is what makes truth possible, the continuity of creation makes truth actual. Communication is based on common experience of creation. Everyone is born and everyone dies, passing from one to the other underneath the same sun (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11). God's solemn covenant guarantees stable cycles to life as long as the earth shall stand (Genesis 8:22; cf. Jeremiah 31:35-36). Within these covenanted cycles of creation, there is "nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Not even redemption, which alone brings true progress to this world, threatens the stability of common experience. While God's covenants of grace have progressively added more light and life to this world, continuity still exists, for all things shall be summarized in One—Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Within this covenanted stability, words are able to communicate across time and across cultures. If this

were not so, how is it that man is able not only to learn and understand any current language, but even to resurrect a dead language? The modern illegitimate extension of interpretation to all language is no semantic accident, for modern discussions imply that what others say cannot be directly understood without experiencing the *exact* experience for oneself. In contrast to this claim, the Bible says that creation's reality and continuity together produce a kind of "revelation" that leaves men "without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20).⁹ Ultimately, the common Reality and Continuity behind creation is the triune God Himself.

With respect to writing history, the legitimacy of interpretation may appear self-evident. Since the past has passed, it is no longer accessible to direct observation. Only witnesses survive. Therefore, since these witnesses give only a bare skeleton of data, should we not clothe the account with an interpretation?

⁹The force of this argument is not blunted by the fact of depraved blindness. Though hereditary and paralyzing, man's blindness is nonetheless willful, and thus sinful—they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). Even the light of the Gospel is somehow sensed, though perhaps not seen, in that evil men know enough to hate the light and flee from it (John 3:19-20). Depravity perverts the sweet aroma of Christ into "the aroma of death" (2 Corinthians 2:16). At any rate, according to the Bible, the created order is both public ("manifest") and revealing, i.e. emitting meaning about God and man, all day long and in every place (Romans 1:19-20; cf. Psalm 19:1-4).

Furthermore, while one interpretation may fit the skeleton better than another, who is able to say that either one is not true? In reply, it may justly be asked, “Since an interpretation only approaches the truth asymptotically (for when can understanding claim that it has exhausted its subject?), who is able to say that any interpretation is true?” It really appears that truth has been impaled on the horns of a dilemma. But does this fitting-room approach to history sit comfortably with Christianity?

By definition, a Christian has “come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Since this is so, will not a Christian historian take more pleasure in speaking the truth than in speaking his interpretation? Luther once told Erasmus, “To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all.”¹⁰ Therefore, rather than use the language of interpretation, I desire to speak of claims and then ask whether they are individually true or false.

¹⁰Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 66. Though Luther qualified this statement by saying that only assertions with regard to Scriptural teaching are pious, he later included extrabiblical matters as well under the caveat “so far as the weakness of my flesh permits,” for he confessed, “Uncertainty is the most miserable thing in the world” (ibid., 66, 68-69).

In addition to the loss of truth, the fitting-room approach to history also errs in placing the source of meaning in the historian rather than in the reality that God created. Instead of truth, we hear of “perspectives” and “worldviews,” as if the world itself was too unclear to convey its own meaning. But has the blood of Abel ceased to speak? Or have the works of Jesus stopped giving testimony? According to the Scripture, “The heavens declare the glory of God,” daily uttering “speech,” so that “there is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (Psalm 19:1-3). The created reality can reach out and grab me. I listen, and I write.

Since knowledge of the past relies on witnesses, this knowledge is gained not scientifically, but forensically. Historians reside in courtrooms and not in laboratories, for the past is not repeatable. Though modern lawyers seem fond of circumstantial evidence and inanimate “witnesses,” the Bible’s forensic practice relies on the word of animate witnesses. The primacy of words over circumstantial evidence is prescribed by the Old Covenant and confirmed in the New Covenant through the words: “By the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (Deuteronomy 19:15; cf. 17:6; Matthew 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19). God himself has

sealed this method of verbal witness by His own practice of having a written word (see Deuteronomy 31:19-21; Isaiah 30:8). Because the moral certainty generated by two or three independent witnesses is so great, the inability of false witnesses to agree in their testimony against Jesus is tacit proof of His innocence. Christian history should contain a lot of verbal narrative.

The stress on multiple witnesses is important, for it implies that any lack of confirming witness nullifies all assertions, let alone an “interpretation” that claims to connect the dots. Extrapolation beyond the witnesses is not really history, but *historicism*, as C. S. Lewis once demonstrated.¹¹ As a Christian, I should forego such speculation and rather humbly stay within the evidence available. Let me begin with safe

¹¹See the essay, “Historicism,” in C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. W. Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 100-13. According to Lewis, historicism is “the belief that men can, by the use of their natural powers, discover the inner meaning in the historical process” (ibid., 100). Lewis wrote the article to show that “Historicism is an illusion and that Historicists are, at the very best, wasting their time” (ibid., 101).

As proof, Lewis cited two problems facing every historicist. First, the end of the story gives the point to the details of the story, but no historicist knows the end: “We ride with our backs to the engine. We have no notion what stage in the journey we have reached. Are we in Act I or Act V?” (ibid., 106). Second, the historicist possesses so few details of the story: “The point I am trying to make is so often slurred over by the unconcerned admission ‘Of course we don’t know *everything*’ that I have sometimes despaired of bringing it home to other people’s minds. It is not a

assertions and then slowly increase specificity as witnesses appear, while all along asking myself whether my claims are true or false.

In addition to human witnesses, the Christian historian should also cite the divine witness of holy Scripture. I contend that quoting Jesus as a witness of our heavenly country is just as valid as quoting Alexis de Tocqueville on our earthly country (see John 3:11-12). What Christian should be ashamed of quoting his Teacher? Quoting Jesus is even more necessary when the historian’s subject is a Christian, for Jesus’ words form much of that person’s intellectual context. It is surprising how seldom Christian historians will identify the Bible as a source behind the thinking of theologians, in comparison with how previous theologians are cited.¹² This tendency may be a form of a correlation fallacy, in which a later theologian borrows from an earlier one not in mere dependence, but for the very reason that the

question of failing to know everything: it is a question (at least as regards quantity) of knowing next door to nothing” (ibid., 107).

¹²One interesting example is D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). This excellent work has one significant omission. In a book about a New Testament scholar, the New Testament is rarely cited. In contrast, Hart makes many comparisons to secular conservatives. The omission was unnecessary. For example, Hart could have profitably compared Machen’s libertarianism to his view that Galatians 3:28 is an ideal to be achieved in time.

earlier theologian plainly exhibited a truth of Scripture. In practice, this tendency acts as if the Bible is inherently unclear and thus theologians really are the sources of ideas, contrary to their usual claim of Scriptural authority.

Both the visible events of time and the revealed truth of Scripture come from one Source; therefore, the believing historian should engage all of reality, and then present that reality as one seamless cloth. Though the unbeliever will probably object that the Christian has unfairly put on his spectacles (to borrow John Calvin's analogy), this objection assumes that the spectacles somehow emit meaning rather than merely admit a meaning that has already been generated in the external world. Because the Bible is not some interpretive grid that I impose on the data, I prefer the word "wisdom" to "worldview." Perhaps a better analogy for Scripture is medicine. The Scriptures heal my poor eyesight, thereby enabling me to discern more of what is already visible and public, as well as understand more of what Scripture itself says. "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7b). Therefore, let the wise man—the mature Christian historian—fully embrace all that God has revealed (for it is true), and fully integrate it with everything

trustworthy in the evidence. If it is all true, let it be presented as one harmonic whole!

In addition to the general concern over witnesses that all historians share, the Christian historian has a special concern pertaining to God: "How much of the past should be ascribed to God?" Answers to this question fall under the doctrine of providence.

Providence

A Christian historian must exercise great caution regarding providence. By "providence," I mean God's "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions" (1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Question 15; cf. Nehemiah 9:6). God is not merely "in control," watching and intervening from time to time. God is active in everything as the hidden first cause of all (see Isaiah 45:7; Lamentations 3:37-38). Working through secondary causes in such a way that He is not to blame for any moral evil, God is nonetheless working all things out according to His sovereign good pleasure (Ecclesiastes 3:1ff; Psalm 135:6; e.g. Genesis 50:20). As such, it may be tempting to ascribe everything to God, pecking out sentences of "God did this and God did that." Caution here is necessary for two reasons.

First, though the Bible teaches us that providence is true, not even the Bible explicitly and pedantically ascribes all actions to the Almighty in its narrative books. For example, the book of Kings only occasionally mentions God's motions, and even less often His motives (e.g. 2 Kings 13:23). The book of Ruth explicitly ascribes to God only two actions (Ruth 1:6; 4:13). One event in that book even uses the language of chance (Ruth 2:3). Even more startling, the book of Esther does not even mention the name of Jehovah at all! Yet in these books, the providence of God is remarkably apparent through the events themselves. This subtlety provides a model for Christian historians. If prophets clothed their narratives with a few jewels of explicit references to God, what right have mere historians to a gaudy display of God-talk? Moreover, if God is truly behind the events, let the events themselves—His very works—give Him praise!

Second, though providence is true, my limited knowledge of specific providence summons my caution. For example, even though it is true that God sends every storm, am I qualified to say why God sent it? Of course, if the narrative demands, it is not wrong to say that God "gave" this land to a nation (Deuteronomy 2:5, 12) or that God "sent" this person over there (Genesis 37:26-

27; 45:5; 1 Samuel 9:16), without specifying why He did so. But even these modest descriptions, if used too much, soon become tedious and pedantic. Worse yet, overuse may dishonor God by giving the impression of arbitrary action on His part. No, our limited knowledge demands caution. Unlike the angels on high, I am not privy to the Councils of Heaven (e.g. Job 1-2). And were I even to join the angels, I would still be learning, for God's wisdom continues to unfurl as history unfolds (Ephesians 3:10; cf. 1 Peter 1:12).

The finite mind is particularly limited in two directions—the infinitely large and the infinitesimally small. By analogy, these limits correspond to the decrees of God and the will of man. Unaided, we do not know the mind of God or the heart of man. Though our eye can search out and see much, only God sees everything (Job 28). Full knowledge of His mind is the prerogative of His Spirit alone (1 Corinthians 3:11). So also is the knowledge of our hearts (1 Kings 8:39; Jeremiah 17:9-10). Granted, whenever God Himself speaks, light is shed on both the infinitely large and the infinitesimally small, for prophecy reveals His plan and lays bare our hearts (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). But even prophecy gives only partial knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:12). Therefore, whether we point to the limits of our

knowledge, to the limits of the angels, or even to the limits of prophecy itself, we are led to exclaim, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter” (Proverbs 25:2a)! Truly we are bound to show humility in our claims for history.

With humility, the Christian historian should nonetheless resist turning caution into an argument for silence about providential causes. Psalm 107 is a beautiful statement of how a wise man can discern from certain events what God has done and why He did it. The psalm concludes, “Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD” (Psalm 107:43). Again, the historian’s character is crucial. To discern God’s providence, the historian himself must become one of the wise men, who “by reason of use have their senses trained to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:15). Much of reality calls for a mind of wisdom (cf. Revelation 13:18; 17:9).

Rather than writing as a prophet, the Christian historian should aspire to write as a wise man, one who discerns patterns within the lines set by the prophets. Understanding the difference between the prophet and the wise man is necessary for a historian’s humility. So-called “providential history” slips all too easily into the

language of a prophet.¹³ In contrast, wise discernment within prophetic parameters adds boldness to a historian’s humility, as seen in the following two lists of historiographical guidelines and parameters. The guidelines are based on the consistency of God’s ways. The parameters are based on the prophetic teaching of the Bible.

Guidelines for wise men. Because God’s character—His *name*—is constant, there is a regular pattern to events in this life (Exodus 34:6-7; cf. Jeremiah 9:23-24). Telling proverbs is testimony to this regularity. For example, it is a proverb of life in general that Jehovah shall “render to every man according to his works” (Proverbs 24:12). There is often a haunting harmony between actions and their results. This is true even of forgiven saints in this life (Psalm 99:8; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:17). According to Jesus,

¹³The providential histories of colonial New England substantiate this warning. For example, when Increase Mather claimed that King Philip’s War (1675-76) was a judgment of God, and one that Mather himself had forewarned, prophetic language followed: “Hearken to the voice of God in the Ministry of his Word, mind what the Messengers of God speak in his name, for surely the Lord will do nothing, but he revealeth his secrets to his Servants the Prophets.” For this example and quote, see David Paul Nord, “Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630-1730,” *The Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 21, 30.

this justice is both knowable and yet quite subtle (e.g. Revelation 2:22-23 says that because Jezebel incited others to jump in bed, she will be consigned to bed by illness). While the book of Job cautions against undue confidence in proverbial wisdom, the Christian historian should examine the records for a correlation of kind between actions and results. Though some historians may object that the search for causation belongs to metaphysics and not to history, ignoring causation may give a false impression. The difference between murder and manslaughter, for instance, is in the motives.¹⁴

Here are some preliminary guidelines for discerning causation:

1. **Sowing and Reaping:** Search for an organic link between a person's actions and his fate, for "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Not all of these links will have a positive, direct correlation. For instance, because David slept with another man's *one* woman in *secret*, his son slept with *ten* of David's women in *public* (2 Samuel 12:11).

¹⁴According to David Hackett Fischer, "It is not self-evident that problems of cause are properly a part of a historian's work. Can any causal question be answered by an empirical method?" (*Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* [New York: Harper & Row, 1970], 164). Granted, causal postulations should not be dogmatic, but express probability. While God's name is unchanging, He exercises His constant attributes in surprising ways according to His free sovereignty. This is largely the point of Job (see Douglas Jones, "Playing with Knives: God the Dangerous," *Credenda/Agenda* 16 [2004]: 4-8).

2. **Father and Son:** Search for possible causes in a person's ancestry, for the iniquities of fathers are routinely visited on subsequent generations (Exodus 20:5; 34:7). Similarly, God often bestows favor on children for the sake of their father (Exodus 20:6).

3. **Wisdom and Success:** Judge the merits of an action by its fruit, for "wisdom is justified by her works" (Matthew 11:19b mg.). This guideline does not apply to short-range results, but to long-range outcomes, after the fruit has fully ripened. For instance, though the early church's invocation of patristic tradition helped to ward off the Arians (e.g. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*), such a practice eventually brought the church under its "Babylonian captivity" (to borrow Luther's phrase).

4. **Heart and Words:** Describe a man's character through his words, for there is a necessary connection between who a man is and what he says. Jesus taught, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34b). This necessity substantiates the following forensic rule: "A tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). According to Jesus, serpentine Pharisees were *unable* to say anything good, for they were evil men (Matthew 12:34a). In light of this truth, access to a man's writings is indeed access into his soul. Without this verbal access, little can be said of a man's character, for "even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace" (Proverbs 17:28).

5. **Heart and Deeds:** Similar to the last guideline, describe a man's character through his deeds, for there is a necessary connection between who a man is and what he does. Both deeds and words are the fruit of the heart (Matthew 15:18-19).

Despite sheep clothing, ravenous behavior betrays a wolf (Matthew 7:15-20). Normally, it is more difficult to know the heart through deeds than through words, for deeds often look mundane and require eyewitness records for preservation. The one exception to this obscurity is a crisis, for it is by trial that God acknowledges what is hidden in a man's heart (Jeremiah 17:9-10). Only a fool would deny that the Diet of Worms revealed Luther's true mettle.

6. **Prayer and Answer:** Look for a connection between prayer and event. Psalm 107 teaches that answers to prayer are visible to the public and discerned by the wise mind. This is especially true of corporate prayer (Matthew 18:19-20; e.g. Acts 12:3ff).

7. **Leaders and Sheep:** Concentrate on leaders. People are like sheep. Because the mass often strays (Ephesians 4:13), history should often concentrate on the leader who led the mass astray or on the leader who led them back. The Bible often does this in its history (e.g. Solomon and Jereboam in 1 Kings). Even the beautiful account of Ruth's lovingkindness, which is true and edifying in itself, finds its greatest significance in a leader—David (Ruth 4:17-21).

In all these guidelines, factual verification should be sought through at least two independent witnesses. Following this rule may decrease the quantity of material that can be written, but it will improve the overall quality.

Even with these guidelines, the Christian historian must realize the limits of generalizing based on historic patterns. Again, consider how the proverbial wisdom of Job and his erstwhile friends led to wrong conclusions. Quick judgments are foolish, for God may be feigning something, even as Jesus did on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:28). Moreover, some causes await their effect at the end of time. Though it is true that God has often "exalted the lowly" in history (Luke 1:52; cf. 14:11; 18:14), the visible display of Jesus' exaltation awaits the end of time (cf. Philippians 2:9-11; Romans 14:10-12). Such delay is common, for judgment according to deeds will only fully be given on the Last Day (Romans 2:5-11; Revelation 20:12, 13). Even so, a Christian historian can give urgent reminders of that Day through pointing out how God has rewarded in this life (e.g. James 5:11).

Therefore, let us speak as wise men and avoid the language of the prophet. As N. T. Wright once pointed out to Richard Lovelace, such advice accords well with apostolic practice:

One of the key words [in interpreting history] is Paul's little word *perhaps*, which he uses in Philemon . . . "*Perhaps* this is why Onesimus was parted from me for a while, so that you could have him back not just as a slave but as a brother" (Philemon 15). When Christians try to read what

God is doing even in their own situations, such claims always have to carry the word *perhaps* about with them as a mark of humility and of the necessary reticence of faith.”¹⁵

Prophetic parameters. Christian history, which comprises the last two thousand years, has some prophetic commentary, which sets the parameters within which a Christian historian should write. Before its canonical closure, the New Testament made the following prophecies about the coming millennia:

1. **Mission:** According to Acts, which is the only inspired history of Christianity, the central theme of the Christian era is the unstoppable spread of the word of God. Paul said in prison, “The word of God is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:9; cf. Isaiah 59:21; Matthew 24:35). Christian missions must reach every people (Matthew 24:14), for Jesus’ presence guarantees this success (Matthew 28:19-20). Therefore, missions should be the theme of the Christian historian.

2. **Martyrs:** Paul’s imprisonment reminds us that ultimate success in missions is not postmillennialism. The word of God triumphs, but the messenger is often killed. In fact, Jesus taught us that this age will be characterized by Christians being “hated by all nations” (Matthew 24:9). Even “Christian” rulers have frequently persecuted zealous Christians. Consequently, there is a

¹⁵Quoted in Stafford, “Whatever Happened to Christian History?” 47.

legitimate bias for looking for true Christianity within any society among the outsiders. This principle vindicates earlier Baptist histories that saw more continuity with the Waldensians than with the medieval Catholics. Moreover, Revelation teaches us that martyrdom is both a victory and worthy of high honors. Therefore, just as mission expansion is the theme of Christian history, martyrs and all those who take risks in serving Jesus are the heroes (Philippians 2:29-30).

3. **Controversy:** Since orthodoxy utilizes the “sword of the Spirit” and heresy comes from “deceiving spirits” (Ephesians 6:17; 1 Timothy 4:1; cf. 1 John 4:1-3), battles in theology are the manifestation of spiritual beings facing off with one another. Though spirits act covertly, their actions are nonetheless historical, for spirits are personal beings (see Ephesians 6:10-17). Furthermore, the saints overcome these spirits through open confession and holiness (cf. Revelation 12:10-11; 14:3-4). Therefore, historical theology should be presented as spiritual warfare, rather than merely a chain of ideas.¹⁶ Controversies should also be compared, for though the issue may be different, the spiritual tactics may be the same (e.g. monophysitism resembles hyper-Calvinism in its practical negation of the human aspect).

4. **Schism:** A historian should not condemn a teaching solely because it caused a division among

¹⁶The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles may serve as a model. For example, Athanasius and Luther qualify as “one of David’s [i.e. Jesus’] three mighty men,” for when all others fled, each man held the lentil patch and thus turned the battle’s tide (see 2 Samuel 23:8-12). Such modeling may be easy at times, for Luther’s polemic language against the papists lends itself to warfare narrative!

men. Jesus did not come to bring peace to human society (Matthew 10:34-35). Nor has God ordained even the church to be without schisms. In fact, controversies and their subsequent schisms are often the place for historians to observe those whom God has approved and those who were never true Christians all along, for in controversy the former are “recognized” and the latter become “manifest” (1 Corinthians 11:19; 1 John 2:19).¹⁷

5. **Churches:** No period of Christian history has ever lacked the true church, for Jesus promised, “I shall build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Therefore, the Christian historian should look closely for indications of real spiritual life in every era, even in the Dark Ages. In addition, the fact that Jesus said *He* would build His church also indicates that He has been active for two thousand years, and that He deals with Christians as the church and not solely as individuals (cf. Revelation 2-3). Therefore, the rise and fall of the church, as a group entity, should be traced and generally ascribed to the supervision of Jesus Christ.

6. **Governments:** Although the saints have not yet inherited the kingship, Jesus Himself already has (Luke 22:29; Revelation 2:26-27; 3:21). As “King of kings,” Jesus currently presides as the active “ruler over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). Therefore, the rise and fall of regimes should be

¹⁷John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, which has been condensed into Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, gives an interesting example of exploiting controversies, for Foxe relied heavily on court scenes.

related generally to their submission or rebellion to Jesus Christ, just as Psalm 2:10-12 prophesies.¹⁸

7. **Revivals:** The repetition of Pentecost-like conditions throughout the book of Acts leads to the conclusion that revivals of religion, caused by fresh and great outpourings of the Holy Spirit, will occur again in church history. Therefore, the Christian historian should look for and expect to find such revivals, which then should not be described as if they were merely human productions.¹⁹

¹⁸The inclusion of Herod’s horrendous death in Luke’s history of the Christian mission justifies the inclusion of pertinent politics within Christian historiography (see Acts 12:20-23). Similar to Herod, though less gruesome, the death of Queen Anne may have divine implications. She died on the very day that her revocation of religious toleration in England was to go into effect. Some Baptists of that era saw more than coincidence at work. See H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 189-90.

¹⁹While it used to be common among Christians to speak of revivals as works of God, the opposite seems true today, at least among evangelical historians. Many shy away from supernatural language. This fact surfaced recently in Mark A. Noll’s review of Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994). Murray explicitly sets out to prove “in the period of our study, American history was shaped by the Spirit of God in revivals of the same kind as launched the early church into a pagan world” (ibid., xx). In the review, Noll calls such history “tribalism” that only “insiders will find credible” (borrowing language from Grant Wacker). In Noll’s estimation, Murray erred by ignoring modern historians; as a consequence, Murray “ignores works by contemporary evangelical historians who, while open to spiritual interpretations of history, nonetheless concentrate on features of the past that can be studied empirically and whose interpretation does not require pre-existing commitments to a specific theological viewpoint” (Mark A. Noll, “How We Remember Revivals: The Virtues and Vices of Tribal History,” *Christianity Today*, 24 April 1995, 31-34).

Interestingly, Noll’s critique rests squarely on the dichotomy of data and interpretation. By relegating the spiritual

This list could perhaps be expanded if the book of Revelation describes a continuous history between Christ's two advents. But regardless, the Christian historian will find that Christ's words have been coming true. Christian history writes in the same tradition as the Gospel, which described what Jesus "began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), but without prophetic authority or new content to the faith.

Style: "Delightful Words"

Writing history well is more than writing the truth about the past. The truth is the minimum requirement. Once the truth has been learned, it should be dressed in an appropriate style. The Christian historian should concern himself with style not merely because history is a literary art, but also because style is a matter of righteousness. Is it right to describe a glorious subject in dull prose? Is it right to pain readers

dimension to the realm of interpretation, Noll can chide Murray for going beyond "features of the past that can be studied empirically." I demur. While Murray's criteria of good evidence may indeed be "non-public" in that the world neither sees nor knows the Spirit (John 14:17), the evidence is nonetheless historical and external. A *Christian* historian should not be ashamed to own it. That said, I largely concur with Noll's criticism that Murray should have interacted with contemporary scholarship. To give Murray credit, he does make it explicit at the beginning of the book why he passed by modern historians. In his opinion, they too often fail to distinguish between revival and revivalism, and so impugn the former with the abuses of the latter.

with nine hundred pages of unsweetened letters? On a lower level, style is also a matter of pragmatics. What is the use of saying that only the truth of the argument matters, when no one wants to read the argument? After all, most people are looking for a "good read."

In a similar vein, Samuel Eliot Morison once complained that the academic factory kept producing only bland histories. Where were the popular histories, written by academics but not necessarily for the academy? He announced, "What we wish to see is a few more Ph.D.'s in history winning book-of-the-month adoptions and reaping a harvest of dividends."²⁰ Here is where the Christian historian parts company. In striving to be readable and enjoyable, as Morison rightly urges, the Christian should not strive for popularity—not because wages in teaching are not rightly earned (1 Timothy 5:17-18), but because mere man-pleasing cannot join hands with true discipleship (Galatians 1:10). In today's culture, excellent literature may not ever achieve popularity, for (as C. S. Lewis pointed out) literary criticism is as much a judgment on the reader as

²⁰Samuel Eliot Morison, "History as a Literary Art," in *Harvard Guide to American History*, eds. Oscar Handlin, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1954), 45.

on the book.²¹ But wise men will love the words of the wise (Proverbs 9:8-9). We write for them, and for those who will become like them (Proverbs 1:2-6).

In striving for readability—to find the “delightful words” of the Preacher—two issues are pertinent for today: brevity and poetry.

There used to be a day when brevity was more of an economic necessity than it is today. In medieval times, vellum was often used as paper. Vellum is the skin of an animal. Now just imagine what would result if writers today had to justify the worth of their compositions over the survival of some farmer’s cow. This is not to say that ancient times did not use other things for paper, or that no large works appeared then. Livy did many lives! It is just a comment on our current glut in publishing. The Preacher warned us of endless books (Ecclesiastes 12:12), and Proverbs teaches that fools babble (Proverbs 10:8, 10). Instead of editing, we hit the print key and reams flow. Do we seriously desire to have our material read by a fast-paced society? If so, let us search for epitomes that paint the man in one paragraph. Let us exploit the mottoes that galvanized a

²¹See the chapter, “The Few and the Many,” in C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 1-4.

whole generation. In short, let both our selection and our diction be brief.²²

In addition to brevity, I am committed to writing historical poetry and to incorporating poetic devices into my prose. Epics used to be standard fare, even in the antebellum America of Longfellow; but who has written an American epic since Stephen Vincent Benét?²³ While I myself will never rival the shadow of such skill, I do regret the loss of poetry for several reasons. First, poetry demands more than one reading to understand, but once understood it remains long in our minds. Much of our literature has lost the allure of the second read. Second, poetry allows one to be accurate without undue precision. This ambiguity fits our humble ability to know. Moreover, the right use of poetry—and

²²The economy of an epitome came home to me while I was scanning the end of a biography on E. J. Carnell, the brilliant apologist with a tragic death. The biographer captured the inner instability of the man with the following two sentences: “It is an image we have seen before—a lone figure dressed in formal black clothes, complete with homburg hat and cane, walking the beach at Santa Barbara. . . . The existentialist in Carnell has symbolically been drawn to the sea, sky, and sand, but the rationalist in him has selected the wardrobe” (Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 228). Whether the scene is real or fancied, or whether even the claim is true or false, the image epitomizes a character.

²³E.g., Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown’s Body* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1927, 1928); idem, *Western Star* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1943).

especially a proverb—can sometimes make an argument by itself without elaborate statistics, because its general truth is apparent. For example, does “haste makes waste” require statistical verification? Third, poetry uses concrete language, which is often the quickest road to clarity and force. But beyond pragmatics, concrete language is obedient to God, for it utilizes the world God has made as the medium of communication.²⁴ Finally, some forms of poetry can be sung. It is my hope that the church will imitate the psalms in creating anthems for Christians to sing about their two-thousand-

²⁴Language develops as we continue to name the reality that is there. In this way, language signifies, or points to, the meaning that is already out there. Did not Adam experience this in naming God’s creatures? Thus, the real world is not only the guarantee of communication between common inhabitants on this earth, but also the very medium of communication. As an example, consider Agar’s observations how ants signify diligence, locusts self-direction, and the eagle majestic mystery (Proverbs 30). So also in Solomon’s wisdom, knowledge of God’s living creation contributed substantially (1 Kings 4:33). In contrast, sinners “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” by retreating from the real world into their own speculations (Romans 1:18-22). Mumbo-jumbo terminology from an abstract imagination often masks their lies. Aping Wittgenstein, we might say, “While Adam *named*, his sons have *gamed*.”

In making these comments, I am indebted to various articles by Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson of *Credenda/Agenda*, many of which appeared in Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson, *Angels in the Architecture: A Protestant Vision for Middle Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1998). See especially Wilson’s chapter, “Poetic Knowledge” (ibid., 181-99). I also received stimulus from Jonathan Edwards’ view of concrete language, which is summarized in Janice Knight, “Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (3rd Series, October 1991): 531-55.

year experience of God’s grace in Christ (cf. Psalm 78). Whether I can ever contribute to such an ambitious project, or simply must pray for some modern Asaph to arise, is Christ’s decision. But as a father and a preacher, I yearn for historical hymns.

Striving for brevity and poetic clarity will not come easily. Personally, I lack this training and hence will probably never excel in it—but I can try. One way is by imitation. Modern histories may not help much, but the Christian historian has a huge advantage over other moderns. The Bible itself has much history, and Hebrew historiography in particular excels in poetic structure, just as Hebrew poetry excels in brevity. Though imitation alone will not suffice, for English is not Hebrew, mastering the Hebrew style should chasten my prolixity and augment my imagery.

Purpose: “The Preacher”

By definition, a preacher proclaims the word of God (2 Timothy 4:2). He speaks authoritatively, based not on immediate revelation, as if he were a prophet, but on the basis of God’s written revelation of “the faith which was once for all [time] delivered to the saints” (Jude 3: cf. Titus 1:9; 2:15; 3:8). History is part of that faith, for even the Gospel itself declares a real-world

event—the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Without this history, preaching is vain and Christians are fools (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Therefore, true Christian preaching involves, by definition, the history of God’s workings with His people through Christ Jesus His Son.

But is it possible to use regular Christian historiography to preach? Certainly every solid preacher knows the power of historical anecdote. A stunning illustration from history may provoke someone to ask, “How can that be? But if it happened then, why not to me?” Similarly, few things provokes the soul more to love and good deeds than an excellent Christian biography (Hebrews 10:24). Using history in this way certainly has the imprimatur of the apostles, who expected Christians to *remember* their leaders, to *consider* the outcome of their lives, and to *imitate* their faith (Hebrews 13:7). The apostles also filled their writings with Old Testament names and events. They reasoned that God not only wrote the accounts, He even caused the events themselves to provide “examples” for Christians (1 Corinthians 10:11). Therefore, in light of the New Testament, preaching the word not only allows for history, it demands history.

But beyond the pulpit, the Christian historian also has the opportunity to preach, that is, to proclaim the glory of God and of His Son, as that glory is exhibited within the history of the church for the last two thousand years, according to the guidelines and prophetic parameters outlined above. Doing so is as much an act of worship as pedagogy. The emphasis on preaching also gives a needed caution in light of today’s professional societies. While the Christian historian should utilize all that unbelieving historians have gathered—even from the most wicked (Ecclesiastes 2:26)—as well as offer to them in love all that he himself has gathered, he should never forget that they are not on the same team, striving for knowledge and truth together. Only one group knows the truth. Therefore, like the servant of God, the Christian historian should “not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility [lit. meekness] correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they make know the truth” and escape the devil’s captivity (2 Timothy 2:24-26). In this way, he should preach the truth to his generation.

Personally, having reflected on who I am and on how God has led me so far, I sense three ways that He is perhaps calling me to serve Him as a Christian historian.

Christian Culture

Culture may be defined as the educational means of transferring ideas and ideals from one generation to the next. Culture is what Asaph created when he opened his mouth in a parable, to make known to his children “what our fathers have told us” (Psalm 78:2-3). Sadly, American Christians have little of their own culture. Traditional education in the United States stems from Noah Webster and others, who wanted to make the new nation as culturally independent of England as she was politically independent.²⁵ By this intentional effort, song and lore of the American past are available. While much of this is commendable in its own place, for we should respect what is virtuous in America, and seek the peace of our land of sojourning (Jeremiah 29:7), I ask, “Where are the historical hymns and tales of English-speaking aliens on a pilgrimage to the Celestial City? Where are the tomes that extol the mighty men of Jesus? John Foxe served Reformation England; who will serve modern America?” If any could, Baptists should, for they have never held aspirations for a national church. Instead, even they

²⁵For Noah Webster’s aim, see Lawrence A. Cremin, *The National Experience, 1783-1876*, vol. 2 of *American Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 262-63.

often ape the rebellious march of contemporary culture and music.

When culture is mentioned, educational institutions often come to mind. While it is true that schools are often the incubators of culture, schools are nothing without men and materials. Looking at it biblically, Jesus bequeathed the role of bearing culture to living, gifted men, who in turn have the privilege and responsibility of equipping the saints for their work of service (Ephesians 4:11-12). These spiritual teachers should furnish fathers, and all who aid them, with materials for bringing their children up in “the training [lit. education] and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Conceived in this way, the men and materials for Christian education exceeds the bounds of any one institution or even denomination, for “all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas”—whether Luther or Calvin or Wesley (1 Corinthians 3:21).

Fundamentally, Christian teachers should strive to restore the Bible to its central place of study within Christian schools. As inspired, the Sacred Writings are profitable for education and capable of giving saving wisdom (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Similarly, Christian historians should strive to restore the history of redemption to its rightful place as the main theme of

history. Like Erasmus, who put the adages of the ancients back into circulation, the Christian historian should strive to put names and anecdotes, phrases and key doctrines of the church, back on the lips of God's men. In addition, forms of English-speaking Christianity should be retrieved from the past, preserved (for we are "salt"), and developed for the future. In this way, schools and homes will possess the Bible as well as "parables" from church history suited to their particular language and people—materials that imitate how God educated His particular people in the Old Testament. By utilizing both the Bible and history, Christian teachers and fathers will resemble that scribe of the kingdom, who "brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Matthew 13:52).

Baptist Heritage

While it may surprise brothers from other denominations, I believe that knowledge of the Baptist heritage is important for all Christians. I readily acknowledge the genuine piety of many believers from other evangelical denominations, and genuinely respect their conscientious service to Jesus Christ, knowing that our differences do not directly prohibit our entrance into

the Kingdom of God by His grace. Even so, knowing the Baptist heritage is important for two reasons.

First, the Baptist insistence on believer baptism by immersion sets a ritualistic fence around the Gospel. Evangelicals should not forget that just as Christ instituted church order for the protection of sound doctrine, as seen in Paul's letter to Titus, so by analogy, the ordinances of the church protect the simplicity and purity of the Gospel through two tangible pictures. Recognition of this general fact compelled the Reformation churches to take the so-called sacraments very seriously, though at times with words and means that are regrettable.²⁶

Second, the Baptist denomination represents the true culmination of the Protestant Reformation. Like all Protestants, historic Baptists held to the sole authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice, as well as to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In addition, like many Congregationalists, Baptists rejected all hierarchy over the church except the lordship of Christ Himself, and

²⁶When John Calvin was called upon in 1544 to address the emperor on behalf of Reformed Christianity, he explained, "The Sacraments and Government of the Church . . . were instituted for the preservation" of those doctrines involving the due worship of God and the Gospel of salvation (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church* [Audobon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1994], 4-5).

insisted upon the ideal of regenerate church membership. But in contrast to the New England Way, which was a failed experiment in reaching these ideals through a democratic church-state and infant baptism, Baptists insisted on true religious liberty and believer baptism. By rejecting the last vestiges of popery, which itself embodied an apostate return to Old Covenant religion—complete with hereditary rites, earthly rule, and sacerdotalism—the Baptists represented, though imperfectly, a return to New Covenant religion, as embodied in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). This return seems to have pleased Christ, who granted Baptists the honor of beginning the modern missions movement under William Carey.

Therefore, knowledge of the Baptist heritage is important for both the safety and advancement of the Gospel in the future. Two recent developments make this historical task imperative. On the one hand, intramural discussions among evangelicals were cut short by the rise of higher criticism. This direct attack on the Bible fractured all Protestant denominations and has often led evangelicals to focus on apologetics more than the mystery of Christ. As a result, combined with other factors, both Christ's doctrine and His rituals suffer from neglect, in contrast to the rich, fervent

sermons of the Baptist past. On the other hand, Baptists themselves have largely apostatized, emphasizing the liberty of the individual conscience over both the liberty of the corporate conscience and the objective authority of the literal Word of God. Thus the very identity of a real Baptist has come under fire today.²⁷

In light of these developments, I hope to contribute to our knowledge of antebellum American Baptists. Historian Paul Johnson has rightly identified the years 1815-1830 as the “birth of the modern” age.²⁸ This is no less true for American evangelicalism and Baptists in particular. During the antebellum era, creeds and discipline receded as organized missions and revival measures advanced. While my dissertation examines the ministry of one Baptist evangelical, I hope someday to write a complete volume on the Triennial Convention

²⁷In noting the authority of the corporate conscience over the individual conscience among nineteenth-century Southern Baptists, Gregory A. Wills has argued, “The heritage of exclusivism prevailed over modern forms of individualism” (*Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, Religion in America Series [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 4). For a helpful reprint of historic Baptist manuals, see Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D. C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

²⁸Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), xvii.

(1814-1845), the first national attempt at organized missions among American Baptists.²⁹

Doctrinal Development

Through several professors, the Lord has led me to consider the difficult subject of doctrinal development. The more I read, the more I am convinced that grasping this phenomenon holds one key for the Church's effort to "keep the faith." Along with hermeneutics, doctrinal development has been one of the chief weapons that modern heretics have used to undermine orthodoxy. J. Gresham Machen observed this insidious tactic seventy years ago. When a fundamentalist would get all heated over the truthfulness of his creed, the modernist would smile, agree that the creed was useful for its day, but then suggest that new times have demanded an updated creed. As proof, the modernist would point to the historical development of doctrine in the past and then ironically conclude that he, in fact, was the conservative, because Christians have always adapted their doctrines to new cultural

²⁹Robert Arthur Snyder, "William T. Brantley (1787-1845): A Southern Unionist and the Breakup of the Triennial Convention" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).

environments.³⁰ This argument poses a legitimate challenge to those of us who hold to a faith "once for all [time] delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Who can deny that doctrine has changed to some degree over the years?

Though neither this essay nor my callow experience allows for extended discussion, I do want to list some possible leads toward harmonizing doctrinal development with a once-for-all-time faith:

1. **Old Testament:** The Old Testament is our doctrinal reservoir, written specifically for us (1 Peter 1:12; cf. Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 9:10; 10:6, 11). Because it was intentionally written to be obscure regarding the Christ (e.g. Isaiah 6:9-10), resembling figurative speech (Matthew 13:10-17), the Old Testament will never be fully understood by the Church. Consequently, any theory of doctrine developing out of a kernel of truth should be abandoned. Christian doctrine did not start as a small stream of teaching, which then slowly grew into the cascades of Trinitarian theology and so forth. No, the Old Testament itself is an ocean of truth (to borrow Isaac Newton's phrase). Christian doctrine began with Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to give Christians understanding into both the Old Testament and His words (Luke 24:45; John 16:13; cf. 1 John 2:27). Accordingly, Paul is the pinnacle of Christian doctrine, for no one has equaled his self-confessed "knowledge in the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4).

³⁰See the chapter, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," in J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 157-67.

2. **New Testament:** The New Testament does not need “interpretation,” but the intentionally obscure Old Testament does. In truth, the apostles are the official interpreters of the Old Testament (e.g. Romans 16:25-26). Therefore, studies on doctrinal development should not speak as if the later church did the interpreting (often by means of Greek tools). This slights the perspicuity and authority of the New Testament.

3. **Terminology:** The word “doctrine” is capable of equivocation. If it refers to what God has given in His Bible to believe, there is no growth (Jude 3). If it refers to what has been taught by Christians since the New Testament, there is great variation. Change in the latter in no way implies change in the former. As an analogy, an individual Christian’s growth in understanding does not imply a change in the doctrine taught to him (cf. Ephesians 4:11-14).

4. **Humanity:** There has often been a great lag between God’s revelation and His people’s understanding of the revelation (e.g. Deuteronomy 29:4; Matthew 13:17; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Though God could simply “zap” knowledge into our minds, He normally uses means to do this in conjunction with our nature’s capacity to grow (e.g. Exodus 13:17; John 16:12). This observation especially applies to phenomena that are historically contingent, such as scholasticism and church/state relations. Though Jesus could have prophesied about how to respond to the emperor’s favor, as he did with the fall of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15ff), He did not. Christians had to begin this education later.

5. **Experience:** God does not use teaching alone to produce doctrinal development. As a father

educates his child through both the rod and reproof (Proverbs 29:15), so also the Lord educates through both His word and His rod (Proverbs 3:11-12)—both before Christ came (e.g. Deuteronomy 8:3, 5) and now afterwards as well (Hebrews 12:5-11; Revelation 3:19).

Combining all five points, I conclude that doctrinal development belongs to God’s marvelous effort to educate a *people* for His Son. As proof, consider how God leads His people through the wilderness in part to teach them the sufficiency of His word for life (Deuteronomy 8:3, 5). Similarly, the return after exile taught them that Jehovah’s name is holy (Ezekiel 36). Today, when Christ disciplines one church, the “churches” learn (Revelation 2:23). In this way, growth in doctrine, that is, in what the Church teaches based on the unchanging Bible, is neither explication nor Thomistic deduction, but rather a real growth in corporate wisdom, having at its core a lively interaction with the word of God by the Spirit of God, and all guaranteed by the covenant of God (Isaiah 59:21).³¹

³¹In the seventeenth century, Catholic thinkers explained away developments in doctrine by calling them either explications of unclear teaching (so J. B. Bossuet and other Gallican apologists) or Thomistic deductions from syllogistic premises (so some Spanish Jesuits). See Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19, 25.

The chief metaphor of doctrinal development is neither a philosophical pyramid of ideas nor an organic growth of seeds, but a maturing man (Ephesians 4:13-14). But unlike John Henry Newman, who also used this metaphor, I am neither hypostasizing one corporate mind nor am I implying some kind of quasi-revelation.³² Corporately, as members-in-one-body, we are learning as the church. Jesus never ordained for us to learn atomistically. He gave us a teaching ministry, so that we might all speak “the truth in love” and thereby “comprehend with all the saints” the grandeur of God’s glory in redemption (Ephesians 4:15; 3:18).

Several practical lessons result from this vision of doctrinal development. First, creeds will continually need to be written and confessed. Since a creed is not “the faith” (which is truly the Bible), but our confession of some aspect of the faith in light of both enduring and contemporary concerns, the church will always need

³²Although Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) is justly famous as the first extended treatment of doctrinal development, his seminal ideas are more clearly (though less poetically) presented in his fifteenth Oxford Address, “The Theory of Doctrinal Development in Religious Doctrine,” having as its text, Luke 2:19 (see John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A. D. 1826 and 1843*, 3rd ed. [London: Rivingtons, 1887], 320-21, 323.) The original edition appeared in 1843.

For substantiation of the accusation “quasi-revelation,” see the conclusion to Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*.

revised creeds that are faithful to God’s word. Ironically, scholastic theology shows that a creed will freeze doctrinal development whenever it replaces the faith. No creed can ever equal the Scriptures in limitless breadth and instruction (Psalm 119:96, 99).

Second, since God is educating a people through both His rod and His word, doctrinal development should never be isolated from church history. The German model of a chain of ideas should be abandoned. In fact, the Christian historian is in a better place to understand doctrinal development than the Christian theologian. Positively, the historian can showcase the life that results from “sound teaching” (lit. healthy teaching) in such areas as moral reform, zealous missions, and melodious piety. Negatively, the historian can trace heresies to the lust they seek to justify (2 Timothy 4:3-4).³³ Therefore, let “Exposition and Experience” be our motto! Perhaps this is in part why

³³The priority of the historian over the theologian in examining doctrinal development has been the underlying thesis of the work of Jaroslav Pelikan, author of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971-89). For his thesis and the reasoning behind it, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 42, 144. In contrast to Pelikan, who asserts the primacy of the historian because Christian doctrine originated in Christian experience, I assert that the Bible is clear and powerful enough to define the proper limits of doctrinal development.

the New Testament delivers doctrine through letters rather than through treatises.

Third, since all doctrine is learned corporately, even the doctrine of doctrinal development is a call for the entire Church to seek understanding together. Pragmatically, few men ever achieve the breadth of reading required to qualify as a general historian of doctrine. Therefore, I hope to understand this doctrine with my brothers (perhaps within a school), rather than as an isolated individual. In particular, I am interested in the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed tradition. Whether I will research this theme or another, I hope to contribute something toward the Lord's work in educating His people.

Final Thoughts

The Lord has been so gracious to me in sending me to study church history at Southern Seminary. In coming, I had little idea of the benefit I would receive from both my professors and from the past. I thank God for my teachers and for those who have supported me in this endeavor through their prayers and generosity. I pray that the output of my life will match the investment made, for "to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). In particular, I pray for holy

ambition. Instead of striving for my own glory, in thanksgiving may I make known the name of Him who died for me! Instead of striving to make a school great, may I join others in adorning the Bride of Christ, for He is worthy of a "glorious church, . . . holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27; cf. Revelation 19:7-8; 2 Corinthians 11:2)! To Him, and to His Father, be the glory both now and forevermore. Amen.

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