Why Care About History?

Jerry Solomon discusses the importance of history to the Christian worldview, encouraging believers to enjoy the blessings of God's work in space and time.

Why Care About History? Because History Defines Us

Let's listen to a typical conversation between two people who are meeting each other at a convention.

Carl: Hello! My name is Carl Simpson.

James: Hello! My name is James Cameron.

Carl: Where are you from, James?

James: Well, I grew up in the Miami area, but I've lived in Dallas for the past twenty years.

Carl: Really? I grew up in the Miami area.

James: Oh yeah, where?

Carl: Near Little Havana.

James: That's interesting. I grew up in Coral Gables.

Carl: Did you attend Coral Gables High School?

James: Yes, I did.

Carl: Did you play football?

James: As a matter of fact, yes. I was the starting fullback in 1963, my senior year.

Carl: You're kidding! I was the starting middle linebacker that year and the next. We must have "butted heads" a few

times.

James: Actually, now that I think about it, I can remember running over you a few times during the ’63 game. You do recall that we won and went on to win the state championship, don’t you?

Carl: Well, I certainly don’t remember you running over me. But yes, I do remember your success that year. Of course you remember you won our game because of that ridiculous pass interference call on me in the end zone with 30 seconds left, don’t you?

James: That was you, wasn’t it? Well, looking back I have to admit it was a pretty lousy call.

Carl: I’m amazed that we’ve met like this after all these years. What’s your occupation?

James: I work for a computer consulting firm in Dallas. That’s why I’m at this convention.

Carl: That’s remarkable! I work for the same type of company in Miami.

James: Well, it looks as if there is a lot we can talk about. What are you doing for dinner tonight?

Carl: I don’t have any plans at the moment.

James: Great! Why don’t we meet in the lobby at 6:30 and go to dinner?

Carl: Wonderful! I’ll see you then!

This fictional encounter is not so farfetched that we can’t identify with it. Even though we may not have been football players, all of us can share stories of how we have met people. Usually we enter such encounters by sharing our past—our history. And we listen as the person we are meeting

does the same. Our history defines us. Before we share who we are in present time, we usually share our past. In this way, and many other ways, we demonstrate the importance of history in our personal lives.

In much the same way, we tend to think of historical markers that provide us with a collective sense of cohesiveness. For example, some vividly remember the day President Roosevelt declared war on Japan. That day is indelibly written on their minds. They probably have many stories to tell about where they were and who was with them when they heard the declaration. They can share their feelings about how that day changed their lives. The same can be said of those who first heard of the assassination of President Kennedy. Or many can relate the experience of watching television as the first man walked on the moon. Events such as these will be passed from generation to generation as personal and collective markers.

What are the historical markers in your life and the lives of those you love? Do such markers make a difference in your lives? Surely the answer is a resounding “Yes”!

Why Care About History? Because the Bible Contains History

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). This most famous of biblical verses has been referenced for a variety of reasons. Let’s give thought to it in light of its historical implications.

Consider the opening phrase: In the beginning. The Hebrew word for beginning means “the first—in place, time, order or rank.” Thus the verse asserts that God was making history. He was doing something for the first time. He was creating the universe. An event was taking place. The Bible is clear about the fact that this was the first historical event. The universe was created, thus it is not eternal.

This amazing starting point provides a harbinger of what is to come in the biblical record. It is as if this initial declaration is intended to alert us to a critical element of the Bible: it is a historical record. It contains a record of God's actions within His creation, especially His interaction with man. "The Bible clearly delineates the decisive issues in the human struggle as a course of events in which God is everywhere active either in mercy or in judgment."{1} Thus a student of the biblical chronicle is challenged to take history seriously. This has been true from the time of the early Hebrews. "In a world where others interpreted all that happens as cyclical process, the Hebrews with their awareness of God's active revelation in external human affairs instituted the very idea of history."{2}

In our time it is critical that Christians continue in the line of the ancient Hebrews. History is under attack from many quarters for many reasons. "Some . . . consider the past without value because they assume either that anything historical is insignificant or that anything temporal is relative, or that the present has evolutionary superiority, or that only the supertemporal and eternal has divine import or, more radically, that no God whatever exists to reveal himself in history."{3} A Christian worldview, based on Scripture, cannot subscribe to such perspectives. If such views were given credence, Christianity would no longer depend on the events on which it is based. Instead, it would be viewed as the product of the mythology that some claim for it. The record of God's work among us would be reduced to nothing more than the result of someone's vivid imagination.

Of course a Christian who is mentally and spiritually vigorous will continue to affirm the authenticity of the history contained in the Bible. Consider the way in which the text propels us forward toward a grand consummation. One is hard pressed to mangle the Bible in order to assert anything other than the hand of divine providence. To put it in contemporary

terms, biblical history is going somewhere. This perspective is in contrast to those who see all history as chaotic, circular, or meaningless. The linear nature of the Bible teaches us that what has happened is important, because it touches what is happening and what will happen. “From its inception, Christianity has been a religion with a past. Without that past, Christians could have no grounded hope for the future.”{4} Genesis speaks of the beginning, Revelation speaks of the end. In between, the Bible gives coherence to the beginning and the end, because the God of both is Alpha and Omega.

Why Care About History? Because Jesus Took History Seriously

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1). This startling introduction to John’s gospel gives us a wealth of insight about Jesus Christ, the Word. Among those insights is that Jesus is introduced in both eternal and historic terms. As the first chapter continues, we note that the Word has entered time and space, as Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying. Consider some of the phrases:

There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man [v. 9].

He was in the world . . . [v. 10].

He came to His own . . . [v. 11].

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory . . . [v. 14].

. . . grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ [v. 17].

Note the verb forms in these phrases: coming, was, came, became, were realized. All of them are indicators of the fact

that Jesus, the Word, entered history. The importance of such observations cannot be exaggerated. Jesus entered history and made history. In fact, He is the Lord of history. Let's consider how this Lord affirmed history after such an auspicious beginning.

Early in His ministry Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth, entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and began to read from the scroll of Isaiah. In particular, He read from what we now know as chapter 61, which contains a strong prophecy concerning His ministry. After reading the text, He sat down and boldly proclaimed, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). He followed this amazing statement with a brief exposition of events surrounding the prophets Elijah and Elisha. His audience reacted by driving Him out of the city and trying to kill Him.

As always, much could be written about this incident, but let's simply reflect on what Jesus implied about history. First, Jesus took Isaiah's prophecy seriously as history. In other words, what Isaiah wrote is to be seen as something written in past time in reference to an actual future event. Second, Jesus claimed to be the one about whom Isaiah prophesied, a claim guaranteed to get the attention of His Jewish audience. Third, by referring to Elijah and Elisha, Jesus proceeded to give assent to biblical history.

One of the most profound ways in which our Lord emphasized the importance of history is found in the event of the Last Supper. "And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me'" (Luke 22:19). The last phrase, "do this in remembrance of Me," indicates how His disciples are to focus on this singular event. It is a historical marker we are not to forget.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul affirms the historicity of the Lord's Supper by quoting Jesus'

statement. Paul then interprets the supper by teaching about the result of our obedience. He writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Thus, when we partake of the Lord’s Supper we are proclaiming the awesome nature of Christ’s crucifixion within the unfolding historical drama of God’s work of redemption.

Why Care About History? Because Christian Beliefs are Based on History

If you call yourself a Christian, how would you explain what that means to others? Would you include historical emphases? Would you base your statements on events that took place in the past? Or would you only share what is happening in your life now? What is happening now certainly is very important, but present experiences are valid because of what happened in the past. For example, to say something about “the Christ” in your life can be meaningless historically. But the person who turns to Scripture when referring to Christ must endorse a real person acting in real history.

One of the most significant ways to establish the importance of history for Christian beliefs is to focus on two biblical turning points, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. “Christianity is . . . a historical religion in the sense that the actual occurrence of certain events like the crucifixion and the resurrection is a necessary condition for its truth.”{5} This necessity distinguishes Christianity from the world religions. In contrast to the Buddha, for example, the weight of the claims of Christ rests on what He did in space and time, not just what He taught.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul expounds on this.

[v. 3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

[v. 4] and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, v. 5 and that He appeared. . . .

Let's note several things about these verses. First, Paul uses the phrase of first importance to alert his readers; there is nothing of greater importance than what he has to say to them. Second, he writes that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the events of first importance. Third, Paul not only stresses the importance of the events, he interprets them theologically and historically. Jesus died for our sins, a crucial theological statement. He was buried, and He was raised on the third day, which are historical statements. All of this was the historical culmination of Scriptural prophecy. Fourth, Paul asserts that Jesus physically appeared to over 500 people, including Peter and the disciples, James, and Paul himself.

After his stress on the historical death and resurrection, Paul continues by reasoning with his readers concerning the emptiness of Christianity without the resurrection. Ponder these familiar verses and see if one can claim to be a Christian without affirming Paul's reasoning.

[v. 12] Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?
[v. 13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; v. 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.

Please note the word *vain* and apply it to what it means to be a Christian. The word also can be translated *empty*. If the resurrection didn't happen historically, Christianity has no anchor; it is empty of ultimate meaning. Jesus is a dead prophet, or He was just another in a long list of religious teachers.

Thank God we can call ourselves Christians because Christ has been raised. There is hope; there is meaning; the Christ of the true Christian is alive.

Why Care About History? Because History Touches Our Lives

Have you ever had amnesia? Do you know someone who has suffered with it? Most of us can't affirmatively answer either of those questions. We can only imagine what it would be like to forget the past. What if you couldn't remember your name or where you were born? What if you couldn't remember your parents, or your spouse, or your children, or any of your friends? These questions help us consider how history touches our lives. In ways we seldom consider, history affects us, both positively and negatively.

We are inseparably linked to people of the past. "Without examples, without imitation, there can be no human life or civilization, no art or culture, no virtue or holiness."{6 }Think about ancient Greece, for example. It still lingers in our midst. We have been touched in numerous ways by Greek government, art, literature, and philosophy. People like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle affect contemporary American life, even if we aren't consciously aware of it.

Now think of Christian history. The Christian who chooses to take history seriously will note that he has a significant lineage. The New Testament book of Hebrews emphasizes this. In chapter 11 the writer reminds us of the faith of biblical characters such as Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, David, Samuel, and many others. In chapter 12 such characters are referred to as a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) who are to serve as examples to us. Their deeds within space and time are important now. Then the writer focuses our attention on Jesus by stating that Jesus is " . . . the author and perfecter of faith . . . who . . . endured the cross,

despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12: 2). Note that these statements are centered on actions, such as perfecting, enduring, and despising. Such words are indicators of historical events—events that are critical for those of us who apply the word Christian to our lives.

Of course the Christian's legacy continues beyond the biblical record. Our forefathers' lives still resonate in our lives. A Roman historian wrote this about the early church: "The contagion of this superstition [Christianity] has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well."{7} This remarkable analysis provides a stirring picture of our inheritance. Wouldn't it be marvelous if those who follow us would read that we were equally contagious?

If we were to continue a retrospective of church history, we could consider the lives of people such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Then we could enter our own era and discuss who we think will leave the strongest legacy. Such thoughts are worthy of contemplation, but there are dangers. That is, we can lose sight of how we are touched by those lives that may never enter a history book. In addition, we may be in danger of belittling how God uses us to impact His kingdom, His history. "One of the obvious features of the experience that fills our lives every day is that we never can know what will flow out of it."{8} So we may not know the result of our history, but we can know that our lives are important. We are leaving a mark within God's kingdom. He honors us as His instruments within history.

Notes

1. Carl F.H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows,* vol. II of *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 250.
2. Ibid., 253.
3. Ibid., 281.
4. Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical*

Understanding (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Probe, 1984), 153.
5. Ibid., 12.
6. Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 122.
7. Pliny the Younger, quoted in Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1970), 4.
8. Daniel J. Boorstin, foreword to *The Timetables of History*, by Bernard Grun (New York: Simon and Schuster, A Touchstone Book, 1975).

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