In Defense of History

Don Closson critiques the postmodern notion that we have limited or no access to history, except through biased lenses. He vies for a humble, but confident view of history as a scholarly pursuit, while writing in defense of history as a bedrock of Christian truth claims.

A convenient claim of our postmodern times is that historical truth does not exist, or, at the very least, is not accessible to us. It is fashionable to believe that all historical writing is fiction in the sense that it is one person's subjective opinion. History as an enterprise is more like the creation of literature, say some, than a scientific investigation. Because we cannot be certain about the events of history, all perspectives must be treated as equally valid. One historian has written, "The Postmodern view that language could not relate to anything but itself must . . . entail the dissolution of history . . . and necessarily jeopardizes historical study as normally understood."{1}



If history is something that we create rather than uncover via the rules of scientific historical research, why do history at all? The postmodern response is that all history is politically motivated. French philosopher Michel Foucault became famous for insisting that power creates knowledge rather than the traditional assumption that knowledge is power. He wrote that since there is no access to value-free historical information, the need to write about history must come from the desire to control the past for political purposes. In effect, all historical writing is a form of propaganda.

This popular way of viewing history has dramatic implications for Christians who share their faith. One of the first objections that a Christian is likely to encounter when

sharing the Gospel is the denial of any confident access to what has happened in the past. Since Christianity is a faith that is tied to history, this creates an immediate impasse. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been raised from the dead in a real historical sense, then our preaching is useless, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all men. Christian evangelists and apologists often point to the existence of archeological remains, ancient manuscripts, and written accounts of historical events in arguing that Christianity is a reasonable faith and that the Bible is a trustworthy and accurate account of the life of Christ. The Judeo/Christian tradition stands on the belief that God acts in history and that history reflects this divine incursion.

The Argument Against History

Until recently, students of history had two competing approaches to their craft to consider. One approach, represented by Sir Geoffrey Elton, argued that historians should focus on the documentary record left by the past in order to find the objective truth about what actually happened. These pieces of data are then used to construct a narrative of political events which, in turn, becomes the core of any serious historical writing. Put another way, it's the facts that count, and the facts should be used to understand the actions and motivations of political leaders who determine the paths taken by nations or kingdoms. All of this assumes our ability to discover objective truth about history.

The other approach represented by E. H. Carr and his book *What is History?* argues that history books and the people who write them are products of a given time and place. Therefore, history is seen and written through the lens of the historians' prejudices. This is often called the *sociological view of history* where a study of the historian is just as important as the comprehension of his writings.

Over the last three or four decades, Elton's emphasis on facts has been slowly losing ground. As one writer put it, "Few historians would now defend the hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton."{2} Even worse, Carr's sociological view is being replaced by one that is even further removed from seeing history as objective truth. The arrival of postmodern theory in the 1980s eradicated the search for historical truth and diminished the voice of professional historians to be just one discourse among many.

Historian David Harlan commented that by the end of the 1980s most historians—even most working historians—had all but given up on the possibility of acquiring reliable, objective knowledge about the past.{3} By the mid-1990s some historians were saying that "History has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations."{4} An Australian academic went so far as to declare the killing of history.{5}

The denial of objective historical knowledge is impacting our culture and the church. Individuals involved with a movement called the Emergent Church generally agree with postmodernity's denial of our ability to know objective historical truth. They also claim that those who believe they can be certain about the past are dangerous. But it is the culture at large, and especially the unsaved that makes this issue so important.

A Double Standard

A close look at this issue reveals a growing tendency to utilize a double standard when it comes to determining what happened in the past.

It seems that the only historical record that Western culture is certain of is that the Nazis committed mass genocide against six million European Jews. The rest of history is relegated to the uncertainties of our postmodern suspicions.

This loss of confidence has become so extreme that some nations, especially in Europe, have resorted to the force of law to regulate what can and what cannot be said regarding some historical events.

Let’s look at one example. France has made it a crime to deny the Holocaust and has successfully prosecuted a number of authors who have questioned the particulars of the event. Once a nation goes down this path of legislated historical truth, it’s difficult to turn back. French lawmakers recently attempted to legislate away denials of the Armenian genocide in 1915 by the Turkish Ottomans. The problem with these actions is not the historical accuracy of the position taken by the French government (the historical evidence supports the French view), but rather that history is being decided by legislative acts rather than by a consensus of historians who hold academic standards in high regard.

The temptation to legislate historical truth lures the other side to legislate its own version. Turkey has now prosecuted authors for admitting the possibility that the Armenian holocaust actually happened in 1915. It was decided that such a view was un-Turkish.

If objective historical truth cannot be discerned, it doesn’t make much sense to legislate one version of it. This Orwellian response to a loss of academic confidence only creates mistrust and a greater opportunity for the abuse or propagandistic use of history.

How should Christians respond to this battle over the past?

History is important to the Christian faith. We need to encourage high standards of academic scholarship, even when the outcome doesn’t immediately support our biblical views. We also need to humbly concede that the process will be inexact, and that absolute certainty regarding any single event will always escape our grasp. Our goal should be to find a middle

position between absolute certainty about what happened and the complete despair that some postmodernists advocate.

Converging Lines of Evidence

Can we really know anything about history? Thus far we have considered some of the arguments against what is called objective historical knowledge or historical certainty. Let's look now at three ways of thinking about doing history that might help restore confidence in the process.

The first method is called the *converging lines of evidence* approach. How would this technique apply to the subject of the Holocaust? The first sources of evidence would include written documents and photographs from the period, including personal letters, official papers, and business forms. German administrators were highly efficient record keepers, thus making significant amounts of data available. Another source of evidence would be eyewitness accounts from survivors. These have been carefully collected and recorded over the years. Evidence from the physical remains of the concentration camps themselves and inferential evidence from comparing European population counts before and after the war provide more resources. None of this information is taken at face value, and no one line of evidence is conclusive. But as the evidence accumulates our confidence in understanding the event rises with it.

The second model for acquiring historical knowledge is called the *hermeneutical spiral*. This method argues that every time we ask a question regarding a topic, the research gives us answers that bring us a little closer to understanding the event. It also gives us new questions to research. Each pass we make at understanding brings us a little closer to the event itself. If applied to understanding Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, one might begin by reading the letter in English and attempting to understand its purpose or message.

This would raise questions about Paul's audience, prompting research into the culture of the first century. Eventually one might learn biblical Greek to better understand exactly what Paul was trying to communicate. As D. A. Carson writes, "I hold that it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively or omnisciently."{6}

The third approach is known as the *fusion of horizons* model. Just as no two people have an identical view of the horizon, no two people will have an identical perspective on a historical event. They will interpret the event differently because of their cultural backgrounds. To overcome this, the learner must try to step out of his or her current cultural setting, with its beliefs and presuppositions, and then become immersed in the language, ideas, and beliefs of the past, attempting to step into the shoes of those participating in the event itself.

History and Christianity

Bernard Lewis, perhaps America's foremost scholar on the Middle East, writes that great efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda.{7} How does this falsifying of history impact Christians and the church?

First, the Christian faith stands on a historical foundation. Unlike other religious systems, a real person, not just teachings or a life example, is at the center of Christianity. Jesus provided a once-for-all payment for sin, and it is our faith in that provision that makes salvation possible. Christians also believe that God has revealed himself through the inspired writings of the Old and New Testaments. Since their influence depends on both their antiquity and authenticity, archeological remains and ancient manuscripts are vital for making a defense for the authority of the Bible.

Second, historical knowledge is important when we answer critics of the Christian faith. A current example is the comparison of Islam and Christianity regarding tolerance and civil rights. The myth of Islamic tolerance was created in the seventeenth century when French Protestants used Islam to shame the Catholic Church.{8} Unfortunately, they had little or no firsthand experience with the brutality of Islam towards those under its rule. This tolerance myth has been utilized in recent decades by Muslim writers in the West to continue the misinformation. Only recently have scholars begun to speak out and refute the tolerance myth and uncover the brutality of worldwide jihad over the centuries. It is ironic that as this program is being written, the president of Iran has convened a conference to promote the idea that the Jewish Holocaust is a myth created by the west to impose a homeland for the Jews in the Middle East.

Whether it's the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the slave trade in the west, we need to be able to trust the consensus of historians who are committed to high academic standards to get an accurate picture of what actually happened so that we can give a wise response to our critics. In some cases, we may need to apologize for those who acted in the name of Christ yet whose actions violated the teaching of Scripture. In other cases, we may have to gently correct misconceptions about an historical event in the media or in our schools that are the result of inaccurate or incomplete information.

If we give up on the possibility of acquiring historical knowledge, we also give up an important tool for showing that our faith is reasonable.

Notes

1. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 4

4. Ibid., 3
5. Ibid., 4.
6. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2006), 116.
7. Serge Trifkovic, *Defeating Jihad* (Regina Orthodox Press, 2006), 265.
8. Robert Spencer, ed., *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005), 17.

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