



A CLOSER LOOK

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

January 2001

The Importance of Church History

Fred Dominguez

The Spanish poet and philosopher, George Santayana, wrote the following words in his book, *The Life of Reason*, published in 1905-06: "Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it."

Teachers have used these words, some would say unsuccessfully, for decades to motivate their students in the pursuit of an understanding of and appreciation for the study of history. If you are like most people, history was, and perhaps still is, one of your least favorite topics. Yet, how often has the philosopher's warning proven to be true in any number of the world's arenas?

It is a tragedy for a nation to fail to remember its past, and to thereby jeopardize its future, but for Christians to do so is to risk eternal consequences. This is especially true in today's growing pursuit of "change". Those who know the history of the Lord's church recognize the current "change

agents" as promoting the same kinds of departures from God's word as their predecessors promoted a century ago. Those who know the history of the Lord's church recognize that these "issues" are the same ones that preachers of a generation ago put to flight, most thought, once and for all time. Those who do not know the history of the Lord's church risk being unknowingly swept along with

the rising tide of innovation.

The importance of knowing one's history is not a new idea. It has been at the core of God's will from the beginning. To our God, learning from history is not optional; it is essential. The Bible is a book primarily of history. While every book is not "historical" in the technical sense, every book is full of the history of God's dealings with mankind. Time after time God directly charges his people to remember what He has done and to repeat the story to succeeding generations (e.g. the Passover, Ex. 12:24-27; teaching the law, Dt. 6:1-15, etc.).

Whenever God's people neglected or ignored their history, they always ran afoul of their Lord. The period of the judges begins with the foreboding admission that a generation arose that did not know the Lord or the work that He had done (Jud. 2:6-12). In the time of Hosea, the declaration is, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." (Hos. 4:6a). God goes on to say that it is not just a lack of knowledge, but a rejection of knowledge that results in His wrath being poured out on Israel (Hos. 4:6b). Lest someone think that the importance of history is only an Old Testament theme, Paul reiterates the value of God's history in at least two of his letters to churches (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-11). It is the same God today as in the time of Moses and the prophets. It is the same history today as in that time. It is as important today as it was back then.

This month's
focus:
Church
History

Christianity began with a perfect pattern. If men had been content to remain true to that divine system, there would have been no digression or apostasy. However, such was not to be. In the early days of the church the apostle Paul warned that a falling away would occur. He told the Ephesian elders, "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29, 30 NKJV). Paul warned Timothy, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons..." (1 Tim. 4:1). Again he warned, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine..." (2 Tim. 4:3).

THE PATTERN WAS ABANDONED

True to the prophecies of Paul, the church did fall away from the divine pattern. There was a departure in the work, worship, plan of salvation, and government of the church. What was left was an apostate body in which the true church of Christ could not be found. By A.D. 606 the Roman Catholic Church was complete with its first universal pope. The people were held captive in their superstition and ignorance of more than a thousand years during the Dark Ages. A restoration of the New Testament church was desperately needed, but instead of restoration, various leaders made attempts to reform the corrupt church. Though their attempts were noble and courageous there was no success in reforming what had gone wrong. Ultimately, numerous religious organizations under the heading of "Protestant" came into being, but these did not restore the New Testament Church.

THE CALL FOR RESTORATION

It took men who could see beyond the attempts of reforming the Roman Catholic Church to call for a restoration of the New Testament church. They had to bypass Protestantism as well as Catholicism and go all the way back to the teaching of Christ and the apostles of the first century. To successfully plead for restoration, men such as Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott, along with many others, had to be more loyal to the teachings of the New Testament than they were to their own denominations. The plea of the Restoration Movement was a plea to go back to the very beginning, to take God at his word and follow that word faithfully. It was a plea for the complete restoration of the church which was established on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ in the city

of Jerusalem (Acts 2).

PHENOMENAL GROWTH EXPERIENCED

In the early 1800's the New Testament church with its doctrine and worship was restored. Thousands were baptized into Christ and the church of Christ grew by leaps and bounds. The major growth did not begin until 1827 when Walter Scott preached the primitive gospel on the Western Reserve of Ohio and baptized 1,000 people in one year. By 1836 the disciples numbered over 100,000. From 1850 to 1860 those who joined together to restore the New Testament church were the fastest growing religious group in America. The conservative census figures of 1860 listed the membership of the church as 192,323.

DIVISION COMES


Even when the picture appeared to be the brightest, on the horizon ominous clouds of division were forming. Liberalism was already at work and would eventually split the church wide open. Those who resisted the liberal tendencies and insisted on a "thus sayeth the Lord" for what they

The Need for Restoration

V. Glenn McCoy

TURNING POINTS

Steven M Lloyd

 Mark A. Noll, McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College in Illinois, expounds on a dozen significant historical events in church history in his book, *Turning Points*. They are:

1. The Fall of Jerusalem (70)
2. The Council of Nicaea (325)
3. The Council of Chalcedon (451)
4. Benedict's Rule (530)
5. The Coronation of Charlemagne (800)
6. The Great Schism (1054)
7. The Diet of Worms (1521)
8. The English Acts of Supremacy (1534)
9. The Founding of the Jesuits (1540)
10. The Conversion of the Wesleys (1738)
11. The French Revolution (1789)
12. The Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910)

To make such a list or to even take issue with one or more he selected or to add events you might consider as significant presupposes a workable knowledge of history. Of course, it must be taken into consideration that Mr. Noll has composed a list of what he considers some of the most significant events in church history from a denominational background.

It is regrettable that the history of the Restoration Movement is not known more widely than it appears to be or that it is ignored if known. I could not help but wonder why no mention of it appeared in this work.

I also find it rather ironic that much of the history that is covered in the typical church history course is really not a history of the church at all, but rather a history of the goings on in the denominational world; of things done in the name of men. It is nevertheless a fascinating study and one that both articles in this edition of *A Closer Look* urges us to know lest we not learn from the successes and mistakes of the past.

did religiously more and more were referred to as "Churches of Christ." The liberal element usually preferred "Christian Church." The U.S. census taken in 1906 for the first time listed the Churches of Christ separately from the Christian Church. The Churches of Christ were outnumbered by the Christian Church by more than six to one. Many were forced out of their church buildings to start over again in homes and rental halls. Today, those who were once the minority have grown to be the majority.

LIBERALISM IN THE CHURCH TODAY

The devastating effects of liberalism in the 1800's resulted in the church of the Lord being torn asunder. Unfortunately, liberalism is again at work in many of our congregations and schools. As liberalism infiltrated the Lord's church of the nineteenth century, so it threatens the church of the twenty-first century. Some of the areas faced by the church today are basically the same as those dividing issues of a century ago. Today we hear some advocating that baptism is not absolutely essential to salvation, that salvation is at the point of faith before obedience, that open fellowship should extended to other churches, that instrumental music in worship is acceptable, that the church of Christ is just a denomination, that authority is determined by the "new hermeneutic," that restoring the New Testament church is not relevant, and that silence of the Scriptures gives license to have innovations in worship. These are not new positions but the same old errors.

Members of the Lord's church today have a great and important challenge before them. As can clearly be seen by the list of present day departures, our job is not concluded. We cannot look back at the work done by the pioneer preachers of the 1800's and rest comfortably on their achievements. Sadly, in each generation there are brethren who would gladly surrender all that was won in the past by those who cared enough to devote their lives to preaching the Truth. We must reaffirm our stand for the Truth and renew our conviction to firmly adhere to the pattern for the New

Just as knowledge of the biblical text is important, so also is knowledge of the history of the church in the period following the completion of the scriptures. In order to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good;” (1 Th. 5:21, NASB), it is essential to know from credible sources the course of events from the first century to the twenty-first century. Luke records the fact that the Berean people verified the message they were being taught, even though it came from an inspired apostle (Acts 17:11). None would dispute the validity of this attitude on scriptural teachings, but many routinely ignore this important perspective with regard to the church’s history. Now more than ever, Christians must verify what they hear about the history of the Lord’s church.

Much of the “change” that is being promoted in the church today is being facilitated by revisionist interpretations of the church’s history, and those who do not know that history have no means to effectively resist that change. A generation has arisen that not only does not know the scriptures, it does not know the great things that the church and its pioneer preachers have accomplished. Therefore, they are easily swayed by the smooth words of the “change agents”.

Two things will meet and defeat this challenge. The first is what it has always been. Christians must know and follow God’s word, first and foremost. The second is that Christians must study and remember the history of the church. As a word of caution, beware of works that trivialize the distinctions between the Lord’s church and the denominations. Revisionist history is a primary tool in the arsenal of those whose chief desire is to remake the church in the image of the denominations.

There are a number of good books that can provide a balanced view of church history. Among these are: *The Eternal Kingdom* by F.W. Mattox, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, by Earl West, *Church History in Plain Language*, by Bruce Shelley, *Church History: Early and Medieval* and *Church History: Reformation and Modern* by Everett

Testament church as revealed in the word. It is important to study Restoration history so that we can learn from the past and hopefully avoid repeating a sad history.

(Editorial Note: Glenn wrote and published a book by the title, *Return to the Old Paths: A History of the Restoration Movement*. When I was filming Luke at WVBS last year I was told that the man coming to tape the course on Restoration History said Glenn’s book was the single best source on the subject. When you consider the number of volumes that have been written on the Restoration Movement, he paid this volume a high compliment. You can order the book from Glenn directly by e-mailing him at vgmccoy@aol.com. No doubt, it would be a valuable resource to anyone’s library.

Glenn currently attends the St. College congregation in Anaheim, California.)



(The Importance of... Cont'd)

Ferguson, and *The Story of the Restoration* by Bill Humble.



(Editorial Note: Fred Dominguez is a graduate of S.C.S.E. Not too long after he graduated he was invited to serve as one of the school’s Directors. He moved to Abilene, Texas a number of years ago and has taken classes under Everett Ferguson, one of our brotherhood’s most respected church historians. Fred is the head of the Abilene Christian University Bookstore.)



*A Closer Look is edited by
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