Silent witnesses: lessons on theology, life and the church from Christians of the past

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MAKING THE CASE FOR CHRISTIAN HISTORY

No neutral ground

The blood of the martyrs testifies to the hostility of the world toward Christ and his people. Attacks on the church by persecutors like Nero and Mao show that history itself is a realm of conflict. But is history in the sense of the activity of telling history an arena of conflict? This will be our field of exploration in this chapter as a conclusion to the history-telling that I have been attempting. It may look like a rarefied question at first glance, of concern only to historians themselves. But I hope to show that the answer to it is actually important for all Christians, because the telling of history is an arena of conflict that we ignore at our peril.

How do you react to the idea at first glance? It is tempting to think that history is 'just history'. There is good history and there is bad history. Good history is history which gets all the true facts in the right order. Bad history is history which is fabricated or mistaken in some way. Surely history is just history, an essentially neutral attempt to repeat the facts? As soon as we think this we have forgotten our theology. There are two theological reasons why we must hold that telling the story of the past is itself an arena of conflict.

First, there is the extent of human depravity. All of the activities of Adamic humanity are fallen. There is no area of our lives where the flesh has not taken its toll. The biblical, Augustinian, and Reformed doctrine of total depravity tells us that every aspect of our being is depraved. If every
aspect of our being is depraved, then every human activity is depraved. It follows necessarily: every part of us, therefore everything we do. In some areas of our lives, in some activities, this depravity is very obvious. But there are other areas where it has a less obvious effect. What about the telling of history? If we think that we can have spiritually neutral history, then we have forgotten that we are a race in rebellion, and that our rebellion affects all of our activities. As Cain wanders in the land of Nod east of Eden, what does he tell his son Enoch about Uncle Abel? Does he explain about his own sin? Or does he complain of his lot? As the Pharaohs recount the escape of the Hebrews, how do they describe the events? As Caiaphas tells his tale, does he speak the truth about the Son of God whose death he deemed expedient? These figures were all historians. As soon as someone speaks of the past, he is an historian. Even if the Pharaohs scrupulously did not speak of this moment in their past, that would be as much an attempt to tell history by omission. Moreover, these figures were spiritually hostile historians, and there is no reason why the unregenerate mind will be different now. The history of the world as told by the world today will be as unreliable as it has always been. We see this in notorious examples such as the Jesus Seminar or the pro-Gnostic literature that stands behind the novels of Dan Brown. Non-Christian history is hostile history that springs from the fallen human heart.

The same is true for every human intellectual activity. The Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til applies this analysis even to the seemingly naked truths of mathematics:

Now the fact that two times two are four does not mean the same thing to you as a believer and to someone else as an unbeliever. When you think of two times two as four you connect this fact with numerical law. And when you connect this fact with numerical law you must connect numerical law with all law. The question you face then is whether law exists in its own right or is an expression of the will and nature of God. Thus the fact that two times two are four enables you to implicate yourself more deeply into the nature and will of God. On the other hand when an unbeliever says that two times two are four he will also be led to connect this fact with the whole idea of law but will regard this law as independent of God. Thus the fact that two times two are four enables him to get farther away from God.¹

³ Essays, p. 199.
The second reason why we should expect hostile history is that all people are historians, including all unbelievers. It is not just a few academic historians, but all people who are doing history which is hostile to the gospel. All unbelievers tell an anti-Christ history. Many today behave as if they think that history is simply irrelevant. As we saw with Mark Steyn at the start of this book, we even use the word ‘history’ to mean ‘irrelevance’. Parts of our culture seem to be allergic to the past, to be afflicted with a kind of neophilia. But this is impossible to maintain. No culture can live long without an articulated history. In telling history we define our world, and we locate ourselves at a particular point in it. History is fundamental to our sense of who we are. For this reason history is an inalienable human activity. Even those postmodernists who see no point in doing history do history—they cannot stop themselves. They maintain, as Jean-François Lyotard puts it, ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, big stories of the world, but then they tell them anyway.4

The reason that all people have histories is that all people are in fact religious people. We read in Ecclesiastes that God ‘has put eternity into man’s heart’ (Eccles. 3:11). Human beings have an innate desire to worship, and therefore worship either Christ or an idol. Every person is religious, and as everyone is religious he is to some extent an historian. To maintain a religion is to tell the story of the world, where it came from, how it got here, and where it is going. There are obvious examples. Think of the materialist who worships this world or our human ability to fathom it: there is a religious person, and there too is an historian. His project generates a particular story of the world that denies its creation by a transcendent creator God, and that rewrites all subsequent history to exclude any divine action. Think of the existentialist who believes that life is meaningless, but who tries to live with passion and nobility. There is a religious person, worshipping his pointless cause, and there too is an historian. The existentialist project relies on history having no purpose and on a vision of heroic individuals pitting themselves against a meaningless universe. Take away the history, and the worldview will crumble. Being an historian is part of being a religious creature, even if the religion is man-made. Here then are two reasons why we must expect hostile history: because human beings who narrate history are fallen, and because all human beings, being religious, narrate history.

Reasons for redeeming history

Necessarily, then, we face the challenge of hostile history-telling. How should we respond to it? My conviction is that as Christians we must engage in Christian counter-history, thus redeeming history-telling itself. First, the Bible itself commits us to being historical because it describes the history of the world and our place in it. Telling history is a fundamental Christian activity because it is what the Bible does. Studying the Bible is being inculcated into a history, the history, the authoritative, defining history of the world. In doing theology biblically we are already engaged in being historians. Scripture does not tell the story of an abstracted a-historical Christ, but of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1).

Does this argument secure solely the importance of the history recorded by the Bible, of the years from Adam to the early church? That would be a strange conclusion to reach, because the historical scope of Scripture itself extends beyond the apostolic era. Scripture speaks about all later history. I do not mean that we should all become students of Saddam Hussein’s project to rebuild Babylon, as it were the literal fulfillment of biblical prophecy, or that we should keep logging on to check the latest reading of the ‘Rapture Index’.5 This is not what I mean by saying that Scripture tells us how we should view post-biblical history; but Scripture does have a pan-historical reach. Think, for example, of the visions in Daniel of the kingdoms, of the stone that grows into a mountain that fills the earth (Dan. 2). Think of the parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed that becomes a great plant that shelters the birds (Mark 4:26–32). Think of the yeast in the lump, leavening the whole (Matt. 13:33). Think even of the Great Commission, of the discipling of all nations commanded and empowered by the Jesus who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18–20). All of these are biblical depictions of post-biblical history. If we are telling the story of the mediaeval period, then we are not telling the story of a period about which the Bible is silent. In broad terms, how we view the last 2,000 years is determined by Scripture itself.


5 You can find this 'prophetic speedometer of end-time activity' at http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html. As I write it stands at 158, against a record high of 182. Is it a spoof? Who can tell?
This argument does not mandate any particular interpretation of a single historical event. There can be great difficulties in ‘reading’ providence, especially with more recent history. Nevertheless, all our history-telling must be located explicitly within the broad biblical framework.

Second, we must engage in Christian counter-history because the Lord Jesus Christ claims total lordship over the earth. The Christian religion must become a universal religion because Jesus is the universal Lord. Jesus has a right to lordship as the creator, the one by whom all things were made: ‘all things were created through him and for him’ (Col. 1:16). He has a right to lordship as the risen one: ‘He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent’ (Col. 1:18). This shows why his right to lordship is utterly exhaustive. There is no nook of the creation that he did not make, no cranny over which his sceptre is not extended. All that is, he owns; all that is, he rules. This means that history, the fundamental human task of telling the story of our world, is subject to his claims. So our history will either be obedient, Christ-serving history, or else it will be history in the death-throes of a tragic and futile rebellion.

Third, we must engage in Christian counter-history because if we do not then we will pick up a non-Christian history by default. If we neglect telling history from a distinctively Christian viewpoint, someone else’s history will fill the vacuum that we have created. We will acquire, probably without noticing it, a narrative from a scroll found in a temple library, a library which resources the worship of a false god. We must be engaged in a battle over history, because if we are not then we will have bought into a Christ-hating history without knowing it.

Turning the tide of history-telling
How should we start? Our first act as we begin to form a counter-history must be an act of self-scrutiny. In being taught history by non-Christians, as most of us probably were, we have been taught history which is hostile to Christ. It is no reply to say that Christ was not even mentioned when we studied the Tudors or World War I at school, since that is precisely the point. To omit to mention the Lord whose kingdom is unfolding is to deny him. We need each to look to ourselves to see what kind of history we have absorbed, and to bring it into submission to Christ. Then we can go on re-forming our historical understanding...

This is a considerable task. I do not mean to burden you; that is my last intention. We can waste a lot of time wishing we knew more about
The self-contradictory success of non-Christian history

Now perhaps you think I have gone a bit over the top. In particular, you may be thinking that what I have just said does not ring true, because non-Christians manifestly can think coherently. Indeed, when it comes to history books, they often write the best and most successful ones. This is true. There is an ocean of non-Christian historical work that is rewarding to study and is in many respects better than the rare volumes of serious history written today by Christians. The point of Van Til's analysis is not to disprove the immediate fact or quality of non-Christian thought, it is to question its consistency and ultimate viability. The upper parts of the edifice may appear secure and well-furnished, but there are deep cracks in the foundations. Non-Christian thought is successful despite itself. It can cohere only because of the coherence of all things in Christ, yet it denies that same Christ. By denying the very one in whom it coheres it is ultimately self-destructive. It rejects the one and only foundation on which it might stand. Van Til puts it like this, describing the non-Christian's attempt to teach:

The fact that he can and does teach is intelligible only because that which he assumes not to be true is actually true. He teaches, therefore, but he teaches by accident. He is able to teach because his own principle is not true and because the principle of Christianity is true.\(^6\)

The more a non-Christian teacher teaches and the better the history he writes, the more acute the tension between the fact of his work and its internal impossibility. The more beautiful the building is, the more alarming its lack of foundation. If a shed is falling we may not worry; when Venice is sinking, we do. Brilliant non-Christian historical work desperately needs a firm foundation in Christ.

It is important to note that emphasis on the antithesis of belief and unbelief, and on the triumph of Christian thought, does not mandate a pietistic withdrawal from engagement with non-Christian history-telling. Scripture teaches the antithesis of Christ and Satan, but it also teaches common grace. By God's grace, non-Christian thought is temporarily protected from its incoherence. The non-Christian, in self-contradiction, does believe things that are true and can do things very well, in some limited senses better than the Christian. The restraining hand of God's grace explains why non-Christians, whose belief system is ultimately incoherent and without metaphysical foundation, can write such brilliant books. The Christian can rightly use the fruits of common grace as they are found in the world. Indeed, he takes what is good from non-Christian writing and relocates it within the metaphysically coherent and grounded Christian faith. The Egyptians press on the Hebrews their treasure as they leave Egypt (Exod. 12:35, 36), and the kings of the earth finally bring in their glory to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:24). Van Til has a memorable picture of what happens to the positive fruits of non-Christian culture:

Though men do not recognize the truth about the world they can, in spite of themselves, produce much culture. They cannot help but do so. They are like the rebellious sailor who tries to burn up the ship because he hated the captain. This sailor, instead of being thrown into the brig, is made to employ his gifts, whatever they may be, so that the ship may go forward to the harbour. When the ship arrives at its destination all the fruits of this sailor's labor will be preserved, but they will be given to others and he himself will be lost. What he has accomplished constructively will enter into the new heavens and the new earth for their adornment.\(^7\)

The humble possession of God's view of history

Many deny that we can have a God's-eye view of the world. The claim is thought to be arrogant and to tend necessarily toward abuse. It is right that we must guard against simply baptizing our own view and claiming that it is God's. We need to be highly suspicious of ourselves. But God has spoken. If we know the mind of God rightly, our knowledge will not lead to arrogance or abuse, but to gentleness. Moreover, given that God has revealed his view of history, it is no humility to refuse to hear that revelation. If he has revealed his mind then it is humble to bow before it, not to pretend that we cannot know it. It is in rejecting it that we exalt ourselves. God calls us to have his view, and not our own, to possess humbly and gently his reading of history, for it is this view that he has revealed to us. May we all in our different ways be humble historians, telling the story of our world to the glory of God. Happy history!

\(^6\) *Essays*, p. 89.

\(^7\) *Essays*, p. 16.