



Why Church History is not Boring

Suggesting that history is not boring is like hearing that Brussels sprouts are good for you. I am not going to write about the many benefits of eating brassicas (from the cabbage or cole family), although they are numerous. But I do hope to entice you to taste some church history, which is really good for you! I am offering you a few important reasons to visit your church library and taste some church history.

We should learn the big picture of church history first

There is a sense in which all history is church history. As believers, we understand that Christ, who has received the scroll with the seven seals, is in full control of all history (Revelation 5). Just as this vision comforted the early churches addressed in Revelation, so we are comforted that all history unfolds at Christ's command for the benefit of his church. The book of Revelation gives us the entire history of the church from Christ's first to his second coming.

After our first parents rebelled against God at the instigation of Satan, God gave them the best promise ever! *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel"* (Genesis 3:15). This promise is often called the mother promise because it gives birth to all the other promises in Scripture. It has been called the *proto-Evangelium*, because it is the first gospel promise in the Bible. The Lord is cursing Satan and telling him that he will be completely crushed. Have you seen the desolation of Smaug, the greedy, destructive menacing dragon of the Hobbit? Well, in Genesis 3:15 God is promising the desolation of Satan through the victory of Jesus by his suffering, death and glorious resurrection. Remember when you study church history that this battle between Christ and Satan has already been won. We see Smaug (Satan, the old dragon) crushed at the cross, but defeated at the second coming of Christ and cast into the lake of eternal fire at the final judgement.

We learn of the triumph of the Gospel through church history

Revelation 20 informs the believer that Satan has been bound by Christ for a thousand years. This is the period from Christ's first to his second coming. This period of Satan's binding has seen the triumph of Christ through the forward march of the gospel. When we study church history, we constantly see the transforming power of the gospel. The nations which lived in the deepest darkness of Satan's deception come to gospel light because Satan has been bound.

Did you know that God used a twelve year old Maori girl named Tarore to spread the gospel in New Zealand? The story of Tarore is fascinating! Your children will love to hear it read over and over again. Here is a brief taste: Tarore was hungry to learn to read at the mission school of the Reverend Alfred Brown and his wife, Charlotte, in the Waikato. Tarore learned so well that she received an award of the gospel of Luke printed in Maori. This gift was so precious to her that she wore it in a kete (weaved basket) around her neck and slept with it there. Now you have to read the rest of the story to find out what happens to Tarore and her kete!¹

We learn from our mistakes and lost battles throughout church history

If we do not learn from the mistakes of the church in history we will not be able to discern our own situation. God often reminded his people in the Old Testament that if they were not careful to remember his works in the past, they would forget his promises for the present and future. You can

read about how we often don't learn from church history in Psalm 78. Here are a few examples of what we should be learning.

You have probably all had Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on your door. When you tell them that you are a Christian, they will make the same claim. But often they are ignorant of church history. Arius, around 300 AD, taught the same heresies the JWs still teach. The Arians used to chant, concerning the person of Christ, *There was when he was not*. Athanasius saw through this heresy and challenged it. Concerning Jesus Christ he said, *He became what He was not without ceasing to be what He was*. When people told Athanasius that the whole world was against him, he replied: *"If the world is against Athanasius, then Athanasius is against the world."* His confession cost him a great deal of personal comfort. Because of his courage and scriptural insight, we recite the Nicene Creed in our churches.²

We have seen a resurgence of Islam in the world today. Believers can learn a great deal from church history. Is Islam really the peaceful religion the media portrays? Although your Islamic neighbour may very well be a decent, peace-loving person, the Islamic religion was never peaceful. Mohammed was not a true prophet but used violence to further his self-revealed religion. Wherever Islam spread, so did tyranny and slavery. When the gospel grew, Christians built hospitals and showed compassion to the poor. Did you know that at the end of the failed Children's Crusade, thousands of European, Christian children were forced into Muslim slavery?

Church History teaches us to be suspicious of teachings within the Christian Church that are relatively new. Did you know that Pentecostalism is just around a hundred and fifty years old? Read about Edward Irving, the tall, handsome Scotsman who left a promising ministry in the Church of Scotland. He ended up sitting in the pew of his Pentecostal church while men and women spoke nonsense in the name of the Lord.³

We learn about the sufferings and experiences of Christians from church history

Church history teaches us that, although Christ has triumphed over Satan, we are still soldiers. We are, in fact, fighting a dangerous enemy that has a short time left. Like the ferocious Nazis near the end of World War II, Satan knows that his days are numbered. The Bible often warns believers that if we are faithful to Christ, we will have to suffer. We need to teach our children that we might very well have to suffer for our faith.

The tears and sufferings of God's people are well documented in church history. Read about the poignant sufferings of the early Christians. Seventy years after Revelation was written, Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna. He was an old man by the time he was brought to the Roman proconsul: they demanded that he say, *"Caesar is Lord!"* In the Roman arena Polycarp was given one more chance to confess the emperor. He then said, *"Eighty and six years have I served Him. Never did He do me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"* Later, as the eighty-six year-old saint was being burned, his voice was heard in the midst of that stadium as he cried to God, *"I thank Thee that Thou didst think me worthy of this day and hour, that I may be a martyr."*

Young ladies will find the story of Perpetua of Carthage moving. She was born into wealth, the daughter of an official of the city. She was just married with a young child when she was arrested for attending a profession of faith class. Even when sorely tempted to renounce her faith to go back to her baby, she refused. She died bravely after first being gored by a wild bull in the arena and then executed by a gladiator.⁴

The life and martyrdom of William Tyndale are wonderful! When Tyndale was led to the stake in Antwerp, his keeper and the jailor's daughter had already been converted to Christ, because they had never seen a man who was so tender and loving to his enemies.⁵

We can learn much about Christian experience from the life of John Bunyan. While in the Bedford prison, he had two books, his Bible and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* in three volumes. He wrote many more, including *Pilgrim's Progress*. Rats crawled through straw which prisoners slept on, if they could afford it. Often he heard the chains rattling of men who were being led to the gallows. He

was afflicted with fears of death and worried about his young wife and blind daughter, Mary. He also says, “I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the word of God as now. Those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before are made in this place and state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen him and felt him indeed.” When fears overwhelmed him he was comforted and supported by the tender grace of God.⁶

We learn to trust our sovereign God from church history

Let’s learn from church history that we do not need to face every new crisis with alarm. We often get quite hyped up about new threats against the Christian family and the Christian faith. The truth is that God has never forsaken his church. In fact, all of history and church history happens for the sake of his church. The next time you might be tempted to despair, read Revelation 5. Who holds the scroll with all of world history recorded on the front and back? Who is opening the seals until the completion of history (the seventh seal)? Who commands the angels with the seven trumpets? Who controls the seven bowls of wrath until the final judgement of history (the seventh bowl)? Hallelujah, for the Lord omnipotent reigns!

We need to sniff out good books and films about church history

It’s hard to develop good reading habits in those who have been conditioned to watch TV or spend many hours on the Internet. I advise parents and church librarians to get the children of the church interested in reading. Homeschooling parents have helped us to be blessed with many excellent church history resources, including kids’ books. And for those who have never experienced the delightful pleasure of reading a good Christian biography on a cold winter day in front of the wood burner, there are many good DVDs.

I heartily recommend all the books I have referenced in the footnotes. I advise churches to buy plenty of books for children. Here are a few more suggestions for church libraries. Recently William Boekestein has written some excellent children’s books on the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort. Simonetta Carr has written some biographies for young readers on Augustine, Athanasius and others. All of these books are beautifully illustrated. *Tolle Lege!*⁷

Leo de Vos

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¹ Cowley, Joy, *Tarore and Her Book With Historical Paintings*, Bible Society New Zealand, 2009

² Coray, Henry, W., *Against the World: The Odyssey of Athanasius*, Inheritance Publications, 1992

³ Dallimore, Arnold, *The Life of Edward Irving: Fore-runner of the Charismatic Movement*, Banner of Truth, 1983

⁴ Vreugdenhill, John, *God’s Care and Continuance of His Church*, 3 Volumes, Netherlands Reformed Publishing, 1991. This is an excellent, thorough resource for young people, and for schooling. Unfortunately, it appears to have been translated into English by a Dutch speaking person, so the language is often awkward.

⁵ Edwards, Brian H., *God’s Outlaw: The story of William Tyndale and the English Bible*, Evangelical Press, 1988. Daniell, David, *William Tyndale: A Biography*, Yale University Press, 1994. A lovely book!

⁶ Cook, Faith, *Fearless Pilgrim, The Life and Times of John Bunyan*, Evangelical Press, 2008. One of my favourite books!

⁷ Latin for “take up and read”.