

THE VALUE OF CHURCH HISTORY

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Abstract

Inquisitiveness or a strong desire to know or asking too many questions and trying to find out about the past has long depicted or portrayed man, starting with Nabonidus, who lived sixth century before Christ in Babylon, to the contemporary historian and archaeologist. According to Tim Dowley, “the recording of history is to tell the story of the human family. The historian has the crucial task of helping each generation to find its bearings. Just as loss of memory in an individual is a psychiatric defect calling for medical treatment, so to any community which has no social memory is suffering from an illness” (2). Christianity earnestly speaking, is basically or fundamentally a historical religion.

God in his wisdom reveals Himself to his subjects or followers, not in relation to or involving a matter of doctrinal declarations or remarks or in relation to theory or abstract, not in empirical studies, however indeed, in the process of developing an account or a narrative of relationship. The exceptional attention or getting more attention than usual in history by Christians is that the very basis or base of their faith which they admit to or declare their adherence to is solidly ingrained in history.

God became man in the person of Jesus Christ and lived in time and space. Christianity is now almost virtually universal and global of every religion that come forth in the earlier period in the vicinity of East and far East, and has also come about more and more exerting or having a lot of influence in the times past or narrative of the human race. Church history according to Earle E. Cairns is “thus a matter of profound interest to the Christian who desires to be

enlightened concerning his spiritual ancestry, to emulate the good examples of the past, and to avoid errors that the Church has frequently made” (13).

Introduction

What is church history?

“Geschichte” is the German noun with the verb form “geschehen”, which means to occur or take place. It looks at history as an occasion or a thing that happen instead of as a series of things that happen or a thing that is grown or produced. Hence, history can be marked out with distinctness; first like an event, real incident or some that happens in point in time and spacious as the consequence of human beings deed. Such happening can only be known directly and completely by God since it is absolute and objective, and cannot be repeated later exactly in another place (Cairns 13).

The English word for “history” “was originally derived from the Greek word historia, which denoted an inquiry, investigation, record or narrative” (Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott 842). According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the word could be used in two senses, “it may mean either the record of events or the events themselves” (529). History, as an English word is developed from historia, a Greek word which is developed from the Greek verb historeo. “This word was used by the Altic Greeks and originally meant to learn by inquiry or investigation. The word was used by Paul in Galatians 1:18 to describe his interview with Peter in Jerusalem. This leads to a third meaning of history as inquiry or research to check as well as find data about the past” (Cairns 13-14). History is a definite field with retrieve or store of data for research. The historian examines the genuineness, truthfulness of origins and unimpaired of his information by conscientious and painstaking study of the circumstances or past events or history as well as the written form of his material or data.

Facts or directory enquiries concerning an incident is the second meaning for the expression “history”. Cairns opines that:

this usually indirect information about the past may be in the form of a document or object relating to the incident. Unlike the scientist who can study his material objectively and directly, the historian is subjectively limited because he is a part of what he studies and has to take God’s accounts in time and space into account, consider man’s role in history as a freewill agent, and realize his data is indirect (13).

The catacombs, mosaics in Ravenna, Saint Peter’s in Rome, and Papal bull are all instances of past events as information.

Historians, who look for answer to questions, for instance, what or who, in addition to who and where will be obliged after that to take into account the question why or the concept that his information or recorded observations denotes. Those Greeks that used the Greek *historkos* as another term for history considered or are under the impression that history in this understanding as the product of inquiry. This eludes interpretation as number four symbolic concepts of history. It is in this vein that Cairns suggests interpretation as a fourth connotation of history to be:

the subjective reconstruction of the past in the light of the data, the historian's own biases as well as the "climate of opinion" of his time, and the element of freedom of the human will. Such reconstruction can never fully tell the past as it was but must be partial, subject to error and human bias (14).

Justo L. Gonzale in his book, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Reformation* posits thus:

As we look at those and other past times and events, we do so through the lens of our own time, our own concerns, our own hopes. History is not the pure past; history is a past interpreted from the present of the historian. Thus, our understanding of the early martyrs and heretics, of monastics, pastors, crusaders and scholars, as well as our understanding of everyday Christian life in the past, will be both marked and enriched by our present-day lenses (5).

As historians take examination of each other's work, an agreement about the past will definitely come forth or come into view. Despite the fact that unconditional or outright truth concerning or with regards to the past can evade or escape from the historian, the historian will, in as much as his data or recorded observation permits, present truth about the past without a doubt or indisputably and neutrally or unbiased. From the above discussion or assertion, we can agree that history may be incident or event, inquiry or process and product, or interpretation or information. History as event is outright, happening or take place exclusively once in time and space; but history as incident, inquiry, information and interpretation is comparative or conditional plus likely to be affected by or to experience modification.

History may be said to be the "branch of knowledge that deals systematically with the past; a recording, analyzing, correlating, and explaining of past events" (Webster's New World Dictionary 665-666). In the same vein, Cairns has defined history "as the interpreted record of the socially significant human

past, based on organized data collected by the scientific method from archaeological, literary, or living sources” (14). To George Thompson and Jerry Combee, “history is the memory of mankind-the written record of what men have done with the time God has given them. On a deeper level, it is the record of God’s dealings with men, since the beginning” (3). History here is methodically and thoroughly recording of the past dealing of God with men from provenance and the interpretation of such datas.

The importance of the study of history cannot be over-emphasized as each generation is of necessity to or must know with regard to people, events, and notions of previous generations suitable or with the intention to produce wise choices or judgment in the present. The church historian must be exactly neutral or unbiased in his gathering of data or information of history as the temporal historian is, although the church historian acknowledges truth that none of them will be impartial to the information. However, that every one of them will make an attempt at the material by means of a set of idea as the basis for interpretation.

Church history then according to W. R. Downing “the study of the history Christianity or the Christian religion” (7). Cairns has defined church history as “the interpreted record of the origin, progress, and impact of Christianity on human society, based on organized data gathered by scientific method from archaeological, documentary, or living sources” (14). This means that church history has to do with the study of otherness of the past. This also entails making an attempt or effort to let that ‘otherness’ to have conversation with or communicate to us. Supposing or in the circumstances that we are to be free from the restrictions of traditional limits and borders of which we give name or describe ‘present’, we have to see life by the perceptiveness of other centuries than that of ours. In this way, we accept the past in the present.

The Value of Church History

Church history is merely a dim or gloomy academic activity designed to develop a skill in the recalling from memory of facts except if a certain number or considerable mind and idea is prone to the substance or stuff of its value to the Christian community. One of the events in Church history is the Reformation. There is great value in the study of church history. This is why the ancient historians had a great deal of greater accurate perception or worth recognition of a treatise on teaching or instructive to teach, practical or realistic, and moral and ethical values of church history than a lot of contemporary historians have. The people or historians who are aware of the values to be attained or obtained in the activity of learning the church history

has influential way of making them to learn this specific area of history of human.

Church History as a Synthesis

The prime value of church history is that “it links the past factual data of the church gospel with the future proclamation and application of that gospel in a present synthesis that creates understanding of our great heritage and inspiration for its further proclamation and application” (Cairns 17). The history of Christian church showcases God’s spirit in action all through the ages of its being or existing from the beginning to the end of the church.

Church History Provides Comfort

Studying the history of the church is all about being with the faith community. Examining the intuitions and discernments of these loyal great men and women, during a long period of time, reading of their stories and learning the truths gives to us the understanding and judgment that our faith is not superficial; rather it is deep and wide. John D. Hannah, a church historian asserts thus: Studying Christian heritage dispels the sense of loneliness and isolation in an era that stresses the peripheral and sensational (2).

The history of the church takes us out from this contemporary way of life that stresses the ostentatious and the attractive and exciting quality of the present situation. This aids us to set up trust or passive self-assurance in the strong religious belief through or with respect to look at the article of faith that is most important to us closely and carefully that have been advanced so as to cover so many years. Christian theology ascertains article of faith previously amidst Christians and making careful reviews or judgment of them and does not create or produce any church history for us today. This grants to or bestows upon us the capacity to cope or make the most of life every day. Unconditionally secure and certain that whatever we are accepting is admittedly and indeed true; to recognize and apprehend that people have been praising, glorifying and worshipping God for over 2000 years the same way we do today.

Church History as a Guide

Another value of the study of the church history is that it guides in “the correction of existing evils within the church or the avoidance of error and false practice. The present is usually the product of the past and the seed of the future” (Cairns 18). In Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11, Apostle Paul reminded us that events of the past were written for our learning and to aid us

to keep away from or abstain from evil and to copy the food. “Historical analysis was central to contemporary thought about the doctrine, liturgy and government of the church, and offered both guidance to, and provided legitimacy for, sixteenth-century Reformers. In England, as elsewhere in Europe, the Evangelical Reformation was an extended conversation with the past as Reformers sought a return to ‘primitive Christianity’ ” (Lewycky and Morton 136). It became so essential that the Reformers have to find the ancient church, thereby justifying their doctrinal change by using it. This is a major ground for many who support false theologies or unpleasant and disgusting habits and practices.

Church History as a Practical Tool

The church history has so many practical values for people who read it whether they are church workers, pastors, teachers, evangelists, or academia. The set of beliefs held and taught by the Church about the Christ, sin, Trinity, and salvation will by no means be correctly understood except individual is conscious of the history of the period from the council of Nicaea to the council of Constantinople in 1680. An ample of exemplative material for pastor, evangelist and teacher who may want to preach from church history supporting that he is looking for materials to warn the people of the dangers of an unseeingly mysticism that places Christian explanation on the same height with the Bible inspiration. In that case, let him or her research the spiritual activities of the Middle Ages or early Quakerism (Cairns 19).

Church History as a Corrective and Guide

The information, understanding and skill of church history “will prove of considerable value to those upon whom will rest the responsibility of guiding the affairs of the church. One of the best preventives of a repetition of past mistakes is to be forewarned, and thus forearmed, by a study of the facts of history. Many of the problems now confronting church leaders have had their parallels in the past. Many methods of church government which have proved successful in earlier periods may be found useful for our own day” (Harper 41). Therefore, church history possibly be useful as a corrective as well as a guide. As the church stands facing and pace up to our complicated era, her leaders possibly obtain direction and back-up from the knowledge and skill that they gained from the past leaders. For instance, there is nothing more exciting and encouraging than the splendid bravery of the Winsome love service of St. Francis; Leo I bold stand in opposing the foreign invaders in Italy; Bishop Ambrose in urging the Theodosius the great Emperor to explain; the

challenging crusade of Luther; the breathtaking life battle of Hildebrand opposing the enemy of the church, just to mention but a few.

Church History as Assistance or a Helper to Thorough Understanding of the Present

Church history has awesome values as clarification or elucidation of the present. If we have some awareness or understanding of the roots of the present in the past, then we can grasp or comprehend the present much better. The principle of separation established place at a time in church history, and the Reformation emphasize and make it more noticeable or prominent. It is fascinating to track down the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United State of America back to England and to denote the starting point of the Anglican Church in the strive of the royal power with the papacy (Cairns 17). In the same way, those of the Presbyterian or Reformed faith will equally take great pleasure or joy in tracking down their church origin to Switzerland. Hence, making us to be conscious or having knowledge of our spiritual ancestry. In the light of the past history, different beliefs and liturgical practices begin to be more capable of being comprehensible.

Church History aid Evolution of Different Confessional Identities

The history of the church performs significant or crucial part in the evolution of various confessional identities. Ecclesiastical history provided inspiration for Reformers; it could legitimize practices of the Elizabethan Church; but above all, it offered spiritual guidance and growth. History addressed questions at the heart of the Reformation processes- Protestant and Catholic: namely, the relationship between an individual, a community and God. Liturgy, theology and ecclesiology: all these were to be found in the annals of church history (Oates 135). However, maybe most significantly, history was additional fountainhead of divine revelation: Similar to scripture, history could be read to suggest the truth of God's will for humankind. Historical enquiry which is the process of writing, reading and discussing the past- were important in the gradual directional change or development of confessional identities. Church history gave direction, legitimation, and of prime importance, and inspiration. History was a means or an instrument of collective spiritual growth and disputatious rummage.

Church History as an Incentive Force

Church history also proffers edifying building up, divine inspiration or eagerness that will induce or provoke or develop lofty spiritual life. Knowledge of the past according to St. Paul in Roman 15:4 would proffer confidence to the life of the Christian. “No one can study the brave stand of Ambrose of Milan, in refusing Emperor Theodosius the Communion until he repented of his massacre of the Thessalonian crowd, without being encouraged to stand for Christ against evil in high political or ecclesiastical circles. The industry and drive that enabled Wesley to preach over ten thousand sermons during his life and to travel thousands of miles on horse-back is bound to be a rebuke and a challenge to Christians who have much better means for travel and study that Wesley had but who do not make adequate use of them” (Cairns 18). Carey’s life account was and it is still a stimulating influence or a supernatural divine influence to missionary activity. Relating to an account of a person’s life point of view of church history is bound to draw a stimulating influence and instigation to student.

Any person who is nervous and afraid or thinking about the church future in countries where it is suffering persecution will begin to be more optimistic when he becomes aware of the undestroyable or unbreakable nature or feature of the church in the past era. It is vital to note down that no internal disloyal of people who are in positions of authority, external persecution or the false theology could stand up in a contrary direction perpetual power of revival that is disclosed in the history of renewal in the church. Secular historians even proffer acknowledgment to the Wesleyan renewal as the instrumentality that saved England from the similar or identical of the French Revolution. The study of church history gives a relatively unchanging power to affect in an era that religious beliefs should not influence public and governmental decisions, for one perceives or witnesses God’s power that operates through transformed lives of the people by the gospel. It is also important to note that though the church is indestructible in any area by unpleasant painful pressure and internal deterioration.

Church History Validate the Truth Concerning Religious Human Nature

Another value of church history is that it attests to the truth relating to religious human nature. Downing writing on the truth concerning religious human nature posits thus:

Human nature has not changed since the fall. Men, though religious, are yet sinners. History witnesses to this scriptural truth. No trial, misunderstanding, opposition, or persecution is unique or even new.

Church history is filled with the record of the treatment of those who sought to stand for the truth and what they suffered, not only from the civil authorities, but from their own “brethren” (11).

A historical viewpoint is a fantastic necessary console in the period of a difficult or unpleasant situation and trial or annoying experience from those “false brethren” who profess to know God, but in their actions, or behaviours, operations they deny him.

Church History as the Past Witness as to the Present

Church history “enables one to call to remembrance the glorious work of God in the past as an encouragement and witness to the present. The God of the Bible is he God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of the Apostles, the God of the Waldenses and others before the reformation, the God of the reformers, the God of the puritans, the God of Whitefield and the God of Spurgeon. He is the immutable God of truth, the Gospel, revival and spiritual awakening” (Downing 11). Church history encourage believers in their own adversity and trial, and to a greater distance provoke them to pray and work hard continuing without regard to discouragement, opposition or previous failure and ardent for spiritual awakening amidst the unconverted ones and awakening and renewal in the churches.

Church History as a Liberalizing Force

Church history has a cultural value. The Western history of civilization will be totally underdone, unfinished and incomprehensible unless with a remarkable ability to understand the function, position or the degree in which Christian religion is involved in the gradual growth or building of that civilization. It is in this light that Cairns elucidates thus:

The history of man can never be divorced from the history of this religious life. The efforts of despots throughout the ages to eliminate Christian religion have always resulted in the substitution of some false religion. Both Hitler and Stalin gave their systems of Statism a religious element by their respective emphasis on race and class (20).

Anyone who has gone through the study of church history will never again associate himself/herself with the issue of denominational provincial. His perception of the unity throughout the ages of the body of Christ will eventually humble him, as he confronts his huge or gigantic spiritual past thereby actualizes what he owes to them. This will also help him to be

additional broadminded to individuals who disagree with him on nonessential, yet accept with him the fundamental doctrines of the faith for instance birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which St. Paul emphasized on in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and Acts 17:2-3.

Conclusion

In conclusion, those being trained as Leaders of church and pastors, the scholars and the general public will discover by study or become aware that the study of church history is of value for more excellent or greater comprehension of the growth of Christian belief and command, as wellspring of their own devotional life, as well as that of their congregations for help or admonition in conducting the activities of the church; and for a profound sympathetic understanding of the importance of Christ Jesus in the history of mankind. The understanding of history of the church is essential or fundamental for the study of all other theological branches curriculum.

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