

A Reaction to “The Pastor as Church Historian”

In one sense it seems unfair that I should be a reactor to Pastor Brauer’s paper. The fact that history, and more recently church history, has been a large part of at least 28 of my 37 years in ministry might lead one to assume that there will be a certain bias in what I say. You would expect me to voice my approval in glowing terms. I shall do so, but that approval comes as a result of agreement with his findings and not simply a blatant prejudice in favor of the historical discipline.

The word “seminary” appeared in late Middle English during the first half of the 15th century. Derived from the Latin *seminarium*, a “seed bed” or “nursery,” a seminary initially indicated “a plot where plants are raised from seeds.” A reference to a seminary as a “school for training priests” was first recorded in 1581. In the Post-Reformation period “seminary” quickly came to refer to any special school which provided an education in theology and religious history, primarily to prepare students for service within the ranks of the clergy. Historical studies of one sort or another were a part of pastoral training, even before there was the term or the institution we refer to as “seminary.”

You may have noticed that Pastor Brauer throughout the paper refers to his topic as both church history and historical theology. Technically Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and other seminaries refer to this element in their curricula as “historical theology.” More often than not, however, we simply refer to this discipline as “church history.” In reality historical theology and church history are two different yet very closely related and overlapping subjects. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand church history without also understanding the history of doctrine which often led to different divisions and movements within the visible church. Understanding the history of theology and doctrine helps us to understand the history of Christianity since the first century and why there are so many different denominations extant today.

As our essayist has pointed out, the study of historical theology covers subjects such as the development of creeds and confessions, church councils, and the heresies that have arisen and been dealt with throughout church history. (cf. p 3, “Church history does include symbolics. We study the creeds of Christianity and of Lutheranism in their historical context.”) An historical theologian studies the development of the essential doctrines that separate Christianity from heresies and cults.

The purpose of historical theology is to understand and to describe the origins of the key doctrines of Christianity and to trace the development of these doctrines over time. It examines how people have understood different doctrines throughout history and attempts to understand the development of the doctrines recognizing how changes within the church have affected different doctrines either for better or worse. The study of historical theology and church history also shows that the truth of God’s Word remains triumphant.

Pastor Brauer reminded us that as we understand the theological battles of the past we can be better prepared to resist the errors with which Satan in the future will try to entice us. If pastors, churches and Christians are not aware of church history and historical theology, then they will be more open to falling prey to the same type of false teachings that Satan has used in the past.

Historical theology, when correctly understood and applied, does not diminish the authority or sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture alone is the standard of all matters of faith and practice. It alone is inspired and efficient. Scripture alone is our authority and guide, but historical theology can help us to understand the many dangers of some “new teaching” or novel interpretation of Scripture.

In addition, historical theology can remind us of the ever-present danger of interpreting Scripture in light of the cultural and philosophical assumptions of our times. We often see this danger today when sin is being redefined as a sickness to be cured by drugs or therapy instead of a spiritual condition which no person can overcome. We also see the danger as many denominations leave the clear teaching of Scripture behind and embrace that which is rational and popular. As we look back, we see that this neglect of scriptural truth is nothing new.

Already in the second paragraph of his essay Pastor Brauer points out a key consideration, “History is about people.” I heartily agree. God works through people to share his Word. Sadly, people are responsible for abusing that Word and misleading many away from the truth. Furthermore, “Since history is about people, history teaches us to know people better” (p 17). Rather than church history being simply a laundry list of dates and events, it is a diary of God’s activity and a journal of mankind’s refusal to listen to their Lord. That working definition Pastor Brauer learned as a seminary junior is still valid. “History is the record of God administering his world for the purpose of gathering his elect by means of the gospel” (p 7). “In establishing a definition for church history, the ultimate source to consult is divine” (p 6).

I also appreciated our essayist’s frequent quotation of the “fathers,” recognizing that others have wrestled with the same issues that confront us today. We can learn from them positive ways to deal with those issues as well as what not to do. When I refer to the “fathers,” I am certainly referring to Luther, Koehler, and Pieper. But notice also the references to Eusebius of Caesaria. If there is one area of church history that I personally have grown to appreciate, it would be the writings of those men who led the church in its earliest centuries. True, they didn’t always get it right, but they do remind us that we have much for which to be thankful. Too often we take the battles of the past for granted. We don’t realize that we stand tall today because we are, in fact, standing on the shoulders of the giants who went before us. For example, Pastor Brauer noted, “Eusebius went beyond viewing Christ as the center of New Testament church history. He viewed Christ as the hinge of all history from the beginning at creation to the end” (p 5).

While it is true that “history teaches that change is a constant” (p 12), it is also clear that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In his review of how this subject has been

handled in the lifetime of our seminary, Pastor Brauer describes how the packaging of church history and the methodology of its presentation have changed with the passage of time. Professors have come and gone. Assignments have been modified. New courses under the umbrella of historical theology have been added. Yet the purpose of the historical discipline has not changed and much of the basic content continues to be earmarked for distribution.

Permit me to note one final benefit to be found in this paper. It issues needed words of warning. “Church history shows a debris field of individuals and groups who have tried to predict the future. . . . History teaches us: Don’t make predictions” (p 13). Likewise, “history also gets misused when historical figures get hijacked to support a stance on a contemporary matter of adiaphora” (p 13). “When people stated why they did what they did, that can be especially valuable. But we should always be cautious about dragging deceased historical figures into a present subjunctive state: What would they do?” (p 14). “A final gross misuse of history is to ignore it. . . . History cannot predict the future, but history does allow us to spot trends and take warning when appropriate. We ignore history at our own peril, plus the peril of the people we are called to serve” (p 15).

Historical theology has been a part of the curriculum of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for 150 years. Thank you, Pastor Brauer, for reminding us that this is not the result of one generation blindly following the lead of the generation which went before. Rather church history is a part of our curriculum because it “has its roots in eternity past and its future in eternity to come” (p 2). Church history is a thread which is woven through the passage of time and connects our beginnings with the end that is still to be revealed.

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