

Lecture 1 – “A Long Preface”: Introduction to Reformation & Modern Church History

“We know such things about our future from our study of history, which is simply to say that Christian historiography agrees full well with what the queen said to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*: It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.” *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, 6.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1); “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8); “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about....” Hebrews 11:31

Prayer

From Solomon at the dedication of the temple (I Kings 8: 28-30)

“O Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.” Amen.

“A Long Preface”: Introduction to Reformation & Modern Church History

Why we study church history—

I. To Know the Past

A. The presence of the past

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Gavin Stephens in William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*).

“We cannot be in the church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices...” (Karl Barth, quoted by Alister McGrath in *Christian Theology*, 3).

B. The power of past

1. “A usable past” versus “an accurate past”

“Cromwell was right in demanding that the artist should paint the wart on his nose. But it would hardly do to look at the wart through a microscope and paint it and it alone in this exaggerated light...and label it ‘Cromwell’” (B. B. Warfield, Works 10: 96-97).

2. Church history as a counter-cultural activity

C. The purpose of the past

1. To know who we are

“To tell the story of those whose heirs we are is to write a long preface to our own life stories” (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* 1: xiii).

2. To learn from history

“No man can cause more grief than that one clinging blindly to the vice of his ancestors” (William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*).

II. To Expand the Present

“Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses: whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings” (Samuel Johnson on visiting Iona, *Journey to the Western Islands*, 140-41).

“While I am a great advocate of looking to the past, I would warn everybody against living in the past. The only justification for looking to the past is that we may learn great lessons from it and apply them” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, from a message preached in 1959 commemorating the Revival of 1859). (Ian Murray, *Life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones 2*: 370)

III. To Shape the Future

A. By avoiding the mistakes of the past—“Those who fail to remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (George Santayana).

B. By repeating the victories of the past—“Those who fail to remember the past are condemned not to repeat it” (Calhoun).

“Both by our action and inaction, we are making history” (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity 1*:xvii).

For Further Study

**God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (1977) edited by C. T. McIntire.

By historians.

**Historians of the Christian Tradition: Their Methodology and Influence on Western Thought* (1995) edited by Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber.

About historians.