

REFORMED WITNESS

Volume VII, October 1999, Number 10

The Value of Studying Church History

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At Hope Protestant Reformed Church the celebration of the great Protestant Reformation is a highlight of the church year. We are unashamed of the history of the Reformation and love the great and glorious truths of God's Word that were restored to the church through the Reformation. The Reformation is a mighty event in church history. There is great value in the study of church history. I learned this well during my years of theological school training. I had the privilege of sitting under Prof. Herman Hanko at the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches in Grand Rapids Michigan. Prof. Hanko had an excellent perspective in his teaching of church history.

Our October mailer is as usual a consideration of some great theme of the Reformation. We usually also recommend books and pamphlets for our readers. One purpose of this mailer is to encourage to reading of Prof. Herman Hanko's new book entitled "Portraits of Faithful Saints." This book is hot off the press. The book is a collection of essays on faithful saints of church history.

Our purpose in this month's mailer is not only to promote the above mentioned book but also to call attention to the value the study of church history. We do that below by quoting from the Church History notes of Prof. Herman Hanko.

A. WHAT CHURCH HISTORY IS

In his large and scholarly work, Philip Schaff gives a view of Church history which may well be considered representative. He finds the history of the Christian Church as composed of two elements: the divine and the human. The divine element is God working through Jesus Christ in the realization of His eternal purpose. The human element is man working in cooperation with God in the pursuit of his calling. To these two elements must still be added a third: the element of satanic intervention-an intervention which has as its avowed purpose the defeat of God's cause. However, Satan is always overcome by God's superior wisdom and power.

This view of Church History must be avoided. The following objections can be raised against it:

- a) It is the position of synergism which has its roots in Pelagianism. It describes the history of the church and the work of the kingdom in terms of a cooperative venture of God and man. It is therefore contrary to scripture and does not give us the proper perspective to interpret the history of the church correctly.
- b) Satan's intervention and final defeat is dualism which is expressly condemned by the Word of God. It pictures the power of Satan as outside of God's sovereign and universal control.
- c) It gives us an erroneous and dangerous conception of our own place and calling in the stream of church history.

If we are to understand correctly the history of the church we must take our starting point in the work of Christ Who came in the fulness of time. Paul writes in Galatians 4:4 and 5. "But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law to redeem them that were

under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." It is to the expression "fullness of time" that we must particularly call our attention.

There are two words in Scripture for "time" (transliterated from the Greek "Chronos" and "Kairos"). The first of these two words is the general word for time and describes time in terms of succession of moments and passing of the moments of history. The second word (kairos) is the more particular word and means a portion of chronos, a particular segment of time, an epoch. (Cf Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament, pp. 209 to 212).

Since the word "chronos" is used here, the meaning of the text is that Christ came when all time was full. Time had been completed: the cup of time was filled to the brim so that any addition would cause an overflow; time was brought to its conclusion. This can only mean; therefore, that the coming of Christ, strictly speaking, marks the end of time. It is the end of history, the end of the world. This is, however surprising, exactly the view of scripture. It is for this reason that Old Testament prophets never distinguished in their writings between the "first" coming of Christ and His "second" coming. There were not mistaken in this respect. They were correct in their view. And this is the reason why Peter, on the day of Pentecost could quote the prophecy of Joel in being fulfilled on Pentecost-a prophecy which, quite obviously , refers to the end of the world.

But the question must be asked: how is this possible? especially in the light of the fact that we live almost 2000 years after Pentecost, and the end is not yet. There are several points which we must bear in mind to understand this:

a) Scripture always looks at the work of Christ as one work. We may (and in this too we follow scripture) look at various segments of that work; but this does not alter the fact that Christ's work is a whole. It begins with the incarnation when Christ was made flesh; it continues through all His earthly ministry culminating in the cross and resurrection of Christ from the dead; it is still carried on when Christ ascended into heaven to His heavenly Father's right hand from which position of authority He rules over all things; and it shall only finally be finished when Christ comes again upon the clouds of heaven to establish the everlasting kingdom of righteousness.

b) Secondly, this coming of Christ begun in the incarnation and completed at the end of the age is the principle end of the world. It is the fulness of time. All time which preceded it looked forward to this event. And this event fills time to the brim, brings the cup of time to the point of overflow. Thus the end of history is the New Dispensation.

c) Thirdly all of this implies that Christ is the goal, the end, the "telos" of time. Time concentrates in Him; has its explanation, its meaning, its importance, its interpretation, only in Him: reaches its conclusion, is filled in Christ and all that He does. This dispensation in which church history takes place, is the dispensation of the coming of Christ.

Now all of this has important implications for our understanding of Church History.

a) In the first place, Christ is the center of all history. He is the firstborn of every creature; He is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the ending. He is first in God's counsel-not in order of time but principally. And He is the first and the last in history-the revelation of the counsel of God in time. History in the Old Dispensation pointed ahead to Christ; the New Dispensation is the dispensation of the coming of Christ.

b) But, inasmuch as this is true of Christ, it is equally true of the Church. Christ and His Church are one. There is no Christ apart from and without the Church; even as there is no Church apart from Christ. Christ came as the Head of His elect Church. For this elect number He died securing redemption; on their behalf He rose again from the dead; these are those destined to inherit the everlasting kingdom of righteousness. Hence, even as Christ is the center and focal point of all history, so also is the Church-the elect and eternally chosen body of Christ. Thus the Church is the goal of all that happens in history.

c) All this must be interpreted in terms of Christ's sovereign rule over all things in this dispensation. By His conquering death and His victorious resurrection, Christ gained a position of universal rule at God's right hand in heaven. All authority is given unto Him. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. His rule is in the strictest sense of the word universal. He rules over all the brute creation; He rules over angels and devils; he rules over all wicked men governing in such a way that their affairs are strictly under the sway of His sovereign scepter; He also rules over His own elect Church. And in all this rule of Christ, the purpose of God is realized—the glory of the only Adorable God through the salvation of the elect in everlasting glory.

d) Yet we must be careful to distinguish properly between the rule of Christ over His elect people and over the wicked. Failure to make this distinction will inevitably result in a destruction of the antithesis and in the error of some form of post-millennialism. The rule of Christ over the wicked and the devil surely is a sovereign rule. Nevertheless, Christ rules over them in such a way that they, serve Christ's purpose in spite of their rebellion and hatred of God and His Christ. They are wicked, desperately intent on destroying the kingdom of Christ and establishing the kingdom of darkness. They take counsel together and plot against the Anointed of the Lord. But Christ rules over them so that, in spite of their hatred and rebellion, they nevertheless accomplish all the purpose of God.

But it is different with the elect people of God. Christ rules over them too. But He rules over them in such a way that their hearts are changed. They are called out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They are made citizens of the kingdom of heaven which Christ came to establish. Their wills are bent to the service of Christ. They are made, by the power of sovereign grace, willing subjects of Christ who bow before Him and subject themselves to His rule. And presently they shall be taken into Christ's everlasting kingdom when that is perfectly established at the end of the age.

e) But there is a relation between the rule of Christ over the wicked and over His people. Christ rules over the wicked so that they must serve the Church. All that they do is for the purpose of the realization of the kingdom of heaven. Even Christ's rule in the brute creation and in the realm of the angels must be subservient to the final deliverance of those for whom Christ died. "All things are your's; and ye are Christ's and Christ is God's" All things work together for good to them that love God, who are called according to His purpose. It is the establishment of Christ's kingdom which is the purpose of all things and the goal of Christ's universal rule. Then the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever.

It is this principle starting point which must control our entire view of Church History. Church History is the important history of the world. All other history is subservient to the Church. Only when we apply, in the strictest sense, this principle, will we come to a proper understanding of the history of the Church. We must see Christ's scepter swaying in all the events of time. But we must see that this is for the realization of Christ's kingdom which the elect of God shall inherit.

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING CHURCH HISTORY

Inquiring now into the reason for studying Church History, we discover the following:

Principally, the reason for studying Church History is to be found in all that we have said. History in general and church history in particular is the unfolding of the eternal counsel of God through Jesus Christ. Hence, a study of Church History leads us to see the glory and wonder of the works of God. We come to know God through Church History as part of His revelation to us. And this is in order that we may bow in adoration before Him Who is worthy of all praise.

It is not the place here to enter into a discussion of the relation between God's revelation in Scripture and in creation and history. It will be sufficient to point out that there is no possibility of understanding God's revelation in history without standing by faith upon the truth of Scripture. Scripture gives us the eyes to see God in history and the knowledge to understand God's truth revealed there. And this must be our approach throughout.

But there are other reasons why the study of Church History is important.

a) The history of the Church is the history of the Church to which we belong. It is our history therefore; and we have solemn obligation, as members of the church to know our own history.

b) Secondly, the history of the Church can never be separated from the history of doctrine. And therefore, the history of the church is the history of the Spirit of Truth which Christ promised to give to His Church. To ignore this history is to despise the work of the Spirit of Christ. Thus, Church History serves as necessary background for the History of Dogma.

c) Thirdly, it is essential to have thorough acquaintance with the history of the Church in order that we may fulfill our own calling in our present time. It has been well said: "The present is the fruit of the past and the germ of the future." To understand our times, we must know the past; to prepare for the future we must labor in the present.

Specifically this means that we cannot fight the battle of faith today in defense of the truth once delivered to the saints unless we know the battles which the church before us has fought and won. The battle never changes materially. The enemy is the same, the weapons with which he fights and with which we fight are identical. To fight successfully means that we have studied the battles of those who are now made perfect. The church lapses into error when she loses the consciousness of her heritage.

Further, only when we know the truth as it was developed in ages gone by can we take this heritage of the truth and develop it further. We build on a foundation already laid. We can uncover yet greater riches of the knowledge of God only when we work with the heritage entrusted to our care. A Church which loosens itself from the moorings of the past is a church hopelessly adrift in the seas of time, doomed to be smashed to pieces on the shoals of error. Faithfulness requires that we know the fruit of the Spirit of Truth.

d) Finally, we shall someday live glory with those who have belonged to the same Church in which we live and die. They were prepared for their place in the perfected temple of heaven by their life in their day. Likewise we are prepared for our place by God, fashioned and fitted by the Master Builder. And they with us and we with them shall enjoy perfectly the communion of the saints because all of this is true.

<http://www.hopeprc.org/reformedwitness/1999/RW199910.htm>