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# The Function of Historical Theology in the Theological Training Program

By WALTER W. OETTING

WHAT is the function of historical theology?<sup>1</sup> Since many of you students are not sold on the value of studying history, to say the least, we need to know at the very outset why it is important for theological students to study the history of the church.

We probably ought not call this course of study simply history, since the basic purpose of this department at Concordia Seminary is not merely that you may learn more history but that you may grow theologically. That is why the department is called the department of historical theology rather than the department of church history. The basic courses, to be sure, are church history. All departments of a seminary ought to be, and at Concordia Seminary are, theological. The purpose of this presentation is to make clear how studying church history functions as part of your training in theology and thus in your development as individuals who will impart the theological life of the church to others. The important question is: "What con-

tribution to a developing theologian does the study of the church's theology, historically considered, and an understanding of the development of ecclesiastical institutions play in the overall development of a theologian?"

## I

The first function of historical theology is that it plays a role in "building up one another." As brothers in the faith we build up one another theologically not only when we are spatially proximate but also when we cross the span of time as we turn back the pages of history. H. Richard Niebuhr put it well when he wrote:

The study of historical theology and of the historical Church, whatever the limits within which it is undertaken, is as necessary as it is an inevitable part of theological inquiry. Under the influence of theories of progress or decline or development in history such study has frequently been carried on for the purpose of explaining the differences between Biblical and modern life before God. But, in effect, historical study is always more important than these patterns of interpretation indicate. What happens in it is that men and communities of the past, confronting strange situations, making new responses and mistakes, yet always concerned with the one God and the same Christ, are included in the conversation of the present theological society. In this conversation chronological priority and posteriority are often unimportant. Augustine's reflections may be more illuminative of the common

<sup>1</sup> This article substantially presents the opening lecture to first-year students at Concordia Seminary in September 1962 as an introduction to the study of church history. It reflects the author's interpretation of the objectives which have been adopted by the department of historical theology. It was felt that this could serve as a fitting tribute to Dr. Hoyer, who spent his life sharing his insights in this area with his students. Perhaps we should add that subsequent lectures dealt with historical methodology, meaning in history, and other topics related to "The Nature and Function of Historical Theology."

subject than the later ideas of Thomas Aquinas; Luther may answer more questions of the modern student about his puzzling situation in guilt and anxiety before God than Schleiermacher; Bernard of Clairvaux may clarify the meaning of the love of God and neighbor more than a twentieth-century theologian. Historical study in theology, when theology is directed toward its chief objects, is always more like a conversation with a large company of similarly concerned and experienced men than like the tracing of a life history, whatever values there are in the latter procedure. But a theological inquiry that narrows the historical community, that excludes from the conversation such men as the early Fathers of the Church, or the medieval theologians, or the Reformers, or the sectarians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the Puritans, Pietists and social gospelers, or such movements as monasticism, scholasticism, Biblicism, et cetera impoverishes itself from the beginning. The study of history is never only the effort to understand the past, or even to understand the human present that has grown out of the past, it is an extension of the effort to understand objects and situations common to the past and the present. It always involves a kind of resurrection of the minds of predecessors in the community of inquiry, and an entering into conversation with them about the common concern.<sup>2</sup>

A negative aspect of this function ought also to be emphasized. To exclude large sections of the panorama of God's people from our theological reflection is to expose ourselves to the danger of becoming provincial. Through conversation with the past we gain a more complete understand-

<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 121, 122. Quoted by permission of Harper and Row.

ing of the expression of our faith. An obvious example of this is Martin Luther. In his early years, when he still accepted what he had been taught and when he was struggling to understand the Gospel, he took up the study of church history and found Augustine's more profound grasp of the meaning of the grace of God. He also discovered that the papacy, as he knew it, had developed after the time of Gregory I and had no basis in the New Testament. Only through this study was he able to clear away the last of the "blindings" that had prevented his grasping the full Gospel.

Heinrich Bornkamm makes a valuable point in defending the historical discipline as necessary training to make theologians fair in judging and evaluating others.

Human life is a many-colored tapestry; and certainly we cannot exclude from this categorization the life of the Church. The greatly varying number of differences in the human heart enjoins upon the Church to proclaim the Gospel in a thousand tongues. It is incumbent upon the historian of the Church to evaluate these expressions without prejudice and to attune a sensitive ear to the tongues and voices in order to determine if under the many variations the unique melody of the Gospel is evident. To make one's individual voice the standard and to refuse to listen to the seeming variations is to violate the commission to proclaim to all.<sup>3</sup>

We could restate this by saying that we study the church's past to *be judged* rather than to judge. We do not uncover what Christians of the past did and said in order to condemn them but rather to listen to them—to hear them out. We humbly listen to them as they expound the Gos-

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Grundriss zum Studium der Kirchengeschichte* (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1949), p. 20.

pel, and we watch them attempt to live it out, and then ask ourselves what we can learn from their strengths and weaknesses and how we can be helped in expressing our own theology and life. To rid us of false sectarian pride is another contribution that historical theology can make. Carl S. Meyer suggests that a development "in critical thinking" through the study of history must lead to humility and caution.<sup>4</sup> He is referring primarily to methodology, but it is precisely this methodology — this critical and informed thinking — that forces us to evaluate continually the assumption that "our present way of doing it" is the only correct one or that the patterns of our church life have been normative for all other generations. We can think of historical theology as that discipline which pulls back the veil and brings into view "the great cloud of witnesses" who have journeyed in the faith before us. (Heb. 12:1 f.)

Obviously this approach should not lead to the opposite of sectarianism, that is, to a permissive approach to all theological positions. This dare not happen! The department of historical theology is only one of four here at the seminary. Its primary function is to help students understand the various expressions of Christianity in their historical setting. Other departments are more specifically responsible for a critical evaluation of these expressions on the basis of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. This does not mean that we will not engage to some extent in critical evaluations of historical positions of the past.

<sup>4</sup> Carl S. Meyer, "The Place of Historical Theology in the Curriculum," unpublished paper presented to the professors' conference at Fort Wayne in the summer of 1961.

Rather this makes it clear that what we say in this class is always part of a larger context.

## II

The study of the past helps destroy fetishes, false ideas, and incorrect concepts that often stand in the way of meaningful theological conversation with others. We think, for example, of the popular notion that the early church was a sort of "Garden of Eden" where everything was perfect until Christians began to read Greek philosophy and corrupted theology because of this contact.

Another opinion that often clouds theological discussion is the assumption that there was a time when the historic church was one. It is frequently suggested that we must return to "the ancient undivided Church." An essay by Herman Sasse, professor of historical theology in Immanuel Lutheran Seminary in Australia, entitled "The Future Reunited Church and the Ancient Undivided Church" disposes of this myth. Through an analysis of the early church's life Sasse shows that there never was an "undivided Church," empirically speaking. The early records show that the church was engulfed in schism and error already in the first century. This cautions us against speaking of a unity of doctrine and life that existed for only a very brief period in the apostolic church.

Another common misconception is that before the Reformation everything was Roman Catholic. The study of church history helps us analyze the various factors that go into the makeup of the concepts and actualities of "Catholic" and "Roman Catholic" as distinct from the various brands of Evangelical and Protestant thought. To rid ourselves of this view of

religious conditions before Luther is most helpful to sound and relevant theology in the 20th century. The area of worship and liturgy can serve as an example. How often the distinction Catholic vs. Lutheran clouds the debate where these labels actually do not apply or perhaps apply in reverse. This is closely related to another abuse, that of insisting upon an ancient pattern of worship on the assumption that there was uniformity in the early church in this area.

Church history also corrects the false idea that the apostles wrote the Apostles' Creed verse by verse. This myth occurs at least as early as Rufinus in the late fourth century and held sway in the church for many centuries. The truth of the matter is that the Apostles' Creed more than likely actually acquired the form we have during the eighth or the ninth century in southern Gaul or northern Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Paul Welsby selects another example of how a better understanding of the past will help the church understand her present potential and purpose better. He points out that "in the church today people say that the church has lost the working classes," whereas actually "a study of history shows that the church never had the working classes." "Church and state are worried about modern youth," he says, "but a certain Peter the Monk wrote in 1274: 'The world is passing through troubled times. The young people today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they alone know everything.'" Welsby goes on to say, "In much the same way, many people today abhor the fact that the

church does not speak to youth."<sup>6</sup> We are not trying to excuse the church here, but a knowledge of the past does give a different perspective to these problems.

### III

Closely related to this point is the fact that the discipline of historical theology is the only approach to issues that have become very complicated and confused with the passage of time. There are some questions that simply must be apprehended in great part historically.

It is obvious of course that 20 centuries have intervened between the New Testament era and our own situation. We no longer live in an agricultural society but rather in an industrial one. We no longer live in an age when travel was often difficult; in our day we see mobility on every side. "The parish" is no longer what it was in the first and second centuries. The problems arising from these changes are very obvious. We shall be able to adapt ourselves and our church life to new situations if we remember that what we know today as "church" is in part a product of historical development. Cicero said, "Not to know what took place before you were born is to remain forever a child." In the area of theology we run the risk of remaining "theological children" if we neglect to study the past.

When Livy attempted to describe what it takes to make a man Roman, he did it by relating the story of the Roman people. Can one understand the nature and character of a people without a knowledge of their past? What is an American? What makes an American an American? This

<sup>5</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2d ed. (London: Longmans, 1960), pp. 368 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Paul A. Welsby, "A Plea for Church History," *Theology*, LXIV (1961), p. 495.

question is answered best by tracing how the American idea came into existence and what has happened to it in the course of two centuries. Will Herberg wrote recently, "Nothing can be really understood about man and his enterprises unless it is understood historically."<sup>7</sup>

Since Christianity began with a unique act of God among men, we speak of it as beginning in history. Unlike other religions that originate as products of the human mind or from patterns in nature and can therefore be discussed as a series of propositions, Christianity is something that happened and must be described. Christianity cannot be divorced from history. The attempt to understand its nature apart from history leads to a misunderstanding of it.

If this is true of the origin, it is certainly true of the various structures that go into the makeup of the church today. Take the papacy as an example. Since the papacy as we know it is a combination of various powers and responsibilities that originated in different periods in the church's life, there is no way to understand the nature of the modern papacy except through a study of its historical development.

Only through the techniques of historical methodology are we able furthermore to analyze the influences of the church on society and the influences of society on the church. Both in the area of values and in the more obvious area of structures Christianity has had a profound influence on our Western society. Recall the contributions that the papacy and monasticism made to the preservation of classical materials dur-

ing the period of Germanic migrations, especially after the fifth century. The influence of Christianity on legal structures after Constantine, on attitudes toward the unfortunate, on music and philosophy, especially in the later Middle Ages, is a stimulating story. Kenneth Scott Latourette, speaking at Concordia Seminary, pointed especially to the influence of Christianity on the question of slavery in the last century.

But the church has also been affected by her surroundings. Emil Brunner writes:

Whilst Christian faith is the same at all times with respect to its foundations and content, it is different in every age as regards the frontier line along which it joins battle. The frontier line of our age is neither as that of the first centuries, which was marked by rival religions, nor as that of the Middle Ages, or that of the Reformation era, when it was marked by rival interpretations of its foundation and content. In our time the frontier line is the alternative to a philosophy of despair, hidden in a number of more or less subtle evasions of the problem.<sup>8</sup>

One can evaluate the subtle changes that have taken place in the thrust of Christianity through the centuries only through the study of history. According to Bornkamm, "Each period of history has its peculiar character and signature, its problems and modes of expression."<sup>9</sup> It is also true that changes occur when Christianity is appropriated by different cultural groups. The expression of Christianity varied as it was handed on from the Christianized Mediterranean culture to the incoming Germanic peoples or was taken by Greek

<sup>7</sup> Will Herberg, "How My Mind Has Changed," *The Christian Century*, CLXXVII (1960), 311—313.

<sup>8</sup> Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Bornkamm, p. 19.

missionaries deep into the Orient. A good illustration of this change is seen in the differences that developed between the Celtic and Gallican churches in the fifth and sixth centuries even though they were originally of the same root. Documents of Syria from the third and sixth centuries, spanning areas that had been touched by Greek culture and those that had not, illustrate how the expression of Christianity was reshaped as Oriental thought categories changed to Hellenistic. Roman governmental structures of the third and fourth centuries and feudal political and economic structures in the Middle Ages had a profound influence on the governmental patterns within the churches. Certainly the economic factors of an industrial society have also shaped the concerns of Christians, especially in what we might call the social burden of the Gospel in our generation.

There are situations confronting every Christian today that are best understood through a knowledge of their historical background. The schism between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church is an obvious example. It involves more than the knowledge of certain Biblical texts or an examination of the *Filioque*, since the causes of the schism are more complex. They lie in rival claims, in cultural and linguistic differences, in competition for mission territory, in personalities. All these factors must be traced over lengthy periods of history. Any attempt at understanding this situation, and certainly any effort toward healing it, must begin with the study of its history.

Theological traditions and heritages have, of course, become a deep concern to those involved in the ecumenical movement, which embraces various church

groups with different historical heritages. It has become obvious that any attempt at cooperation will have to take place by a recognition of traditions rather than by ignoring them. Some months ago we heard a paper on the development of papal authority in the first four centuries. At the conclusion of the presentation some commented that in an ecumenical age we ought to be more concerned about what we have in common than about going back into history to see what divided us. No problem, however, is ever solved by ignoring its history. Any question of cooperation with Rome must necessarily proceed from an awareness of greater cooperation among Lutherans and of individual heritages if it is to get anywhere.

When a pastor encounters anti-Roman or anti-Jewish hostilities among some of his members, he will find it quite difficult to deal with this attitude unless there is a willingness to determine just what such groups have done in the past and what they are accused of. What has happened in Brazil, in Spain, in Russia, and in America to cause this hatred? The historian and pastor will not justify any actions committed, much less the hatred that often results, but he must understand such factors if he is to help the individual.

The necessity of knowing something about history is particularly apparent for those who face the prospect of ministering in another country. As Latourette makes abundantly clear, the modern missionary faces a situation today that is quite distinct from that encountered by the missionary two centuries ago.<sup>10</sup> The emerging nations

<sup>10</sup> See especially K. S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, 5 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961—1963).

in Africa and Asia confront him with a set of biases that he must understand if he is to succeed. Mission boards do not refer to these areas as "mission fields" any longer but rather as "younger churches." The feeling of inferiority that was engendered in these countries by the methods of the past is now forcing a change of approach and even of vocabulary.

#### IV

Finally, we engage in the study of historical theology to give us perspective. As a result of what we learn of the past we are better able both to face the troubles and to appreciate the blessings of the church. Bornkamm suggests that "the history of the church is a stimulus for hope." Through the study of church history it becomes rather clear that God works His will among men through Law and Gospel even when men are oblivious of His purpose. No matter how disturbing the situation may be, we are assured that the living Christ has always been and therefore will always be in the Word and the Sacraments.

When theological difficulties arise in the church we may become so disturbed as to think that the church is on the verge of shipwreck. The study of the history of Christian theology will show, however, that the church has always faced problems and that God's purposes have not been thwarted. Errors in theology, heresy, inadequate statements of the faith, have often been made to lead to a deeper appreciation of the Gospel and to a better understanding of God's revelation in Holy Scripture.

Church history also teaches us that the settlement of disputes takes time. No doctrinal issue discussed in our Synod in recent years is more important than the

doctrine of the Trinity. And yet it took something like 100 years of debate for the church to come to definitive conclusions concerning the correct Trinitarian formulation. In the second century Trinitarian theology was rather inadequate, to say the least. Neither modalism nor adoptionism, nor the *Logos* theology of the Apologists, was an adequate definition. But in the midst of these unsatisfactory formulations certain basic positions were hammered out: the *Logos* is distinct from the Father, the *Logos* is not subsequent to the Father in time, the *Logos* is uncreated, and so forth. Arius used the expression of second-century theology to deny the essential equality of Son to Father in the fourth century. His error was rejected by the church in the statement of Nicea in A.D. 325. The inadequacies of this statement led to further discussion resulting in the clear proclamation of the "three persons" doctrine at Constantinople and probably the drafting of the Nicene Creed. A similar process may be observed with regard to the doctrine of our Lord's true humanity. Because the church fathers were forced to examine the statements of Scripture on this subject vigorously, a greater clarity emerged from this controversy. Wise theological formulations cannot be hammered out overnight.

We are not suggesting that controversy is good for the church. We should be speaking to the world rather than debating with one another. Nor do we mean to imply that error is beneficial. Rather we suggest that we learn to see how God uses even these darker pages in the history of His church to bring men to a better understanding of what He has revealed to them. This perspective, however, will not lead to laxity in doctrine or to the conclusion that



we ought to "agree to disagree." God has always brought greatness to His church when its people strove most ardently to uphold the teachings of Holy Scripture.

In the perspective of history we see not only that the individual Christian is *simul iustus et peccator* but also that the historic church partakes of this dual nature. The historic church leaves a record which suggests that there have been many times when it has backed away from the full implications of the Gospel. This is Law as church history presents it. That is, we stand accused of not having met the obligations of God's people among men. Simultaneously with this, however, is the obvious fact that God has sustained His church through it all. He promised that He would build His church, and history confirms that He has done it. God always found a way to call His people back just as He called the people of Israel back to His promises. Herbert Butterfield has this pertinent statement:

The ordinary historian, when he comes, shall we say, to the year 1800, does not think to point out to his readers that in this year, still, as in so many previous years, thousands and thousands of priests and ministers were preaching the Gospel week in week out, constantly reminding the farmer and the shopkeeper of charity and humility, persuading them to think for a moment about the great issues of life, and inducing them to confess their sins. Yet this was a phenomenon calculated greatly to alter the quality of life

and the very texture of human history; and it has been the standing work of the church throughout the ages. . . . It is impossible to measure the vast differences that ordinary Christian piety has made to the last two thousand years of European history.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes one hears the expression that it would be good to go back and to begin all over again with the days of the New Testament or with Martin Luther. Aside from the fact that this is impossible, it is quite likely that the results of such a reverse of time would prove unsatisfactory to the people who desire it. Perhaps the individuals who suggest it do not understand that God has a purpose in history. We must work in and with the church as God has given it to us at this point in the 20th century. Now admittedly there are things we can do to improve the church, and I certainly hope that you will do those things rather than degrade it. But you cannot go back and start over as if the Holy Spirit has accomplished nothing! Our Lord promised His disciples, "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak" (John 16:13 RSV). The history of the church is the record of God's fulfillment of this promise.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 131.

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