

Learning Humility through Church History

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A Warning and a Promise

In Daniel 4 it is Nebuchadnezzar who says of God that, “those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Dan. 4:37). This is a telling statement coming from a man who only recently traversed the behavioral line between man and beast. This statement is also remarkable as it contains, in the words of my former pastor, both a warning and a promise of hope.

For this Babylonian king to say that God is *able* to humble those who follow the path carved by pride is a warning to all those who will follow in his steps. God is, indeed, capable of humbling the proudest person even if it requires a transformation of the natural created order to bring about His desired response.

But this statement also contains a promise of hope. As C.S. Lewis once noted, pride is something “everyone loathes when he sees it in someone else,” but few “ever imagine they are guilty of themselves.” So, for those of us who have been surprised by pride and the depths of it in our own lives, the words of Nebuchadnezzar can bring relief. Even if it requires me to “dwell with the beasts of the field” (Dan. 4:32) in order to shake the tumults of pride, at least there is a way of escape, for God is *able* to humble even those of us who marvel too often at our own “mighty power” (Dan. 4:30).

History as an Instrument of Humility

In the midst of this academic year on our seminary campuses many students are engaging in the study of the history of Christianity for the first time. I personally know of few instruments outside of the Bible more useful for humbling those who walk in pride. This is because the lessons learned in church history class, like the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, serve as both warnings and promises of hope.

Certainly, the history of Christianity has its academic and factual purposes, and students acquire those through reading and writing assignments. However, the far greater purpose, for those called to serve as our future pastors and missionaries, is the growth in humility that comes from the study of church history.

Rejecting Self-Reliance

First, the study of the history of Christianity requires one to reject self-reliance. As one seminary professor recently noted, John Broadus described the study of Christian history as “a subject so vast, and demanding boundless reading.” A student’s pride is weakened when he realizes at the outset of class that in a lifetime of study, much less a semester, he cannot comprehend all that has transpired in the churches since the conclusion of the New Testament. Therefore, a good church history professor will make every effort to “demand boundless reading” to serve this reminder to students and the students will grow in humility as a result.

Likewise, finding oneself in a position where the demands outpace one's ability gives the student (and the professor) the opportunity to learn the necessity of seeking God's help to aid them in things like reading comprehension, attention span, and clear thinking. Daniel and his colleagues were given by God "learning and skill in all literature and wisdom" for the task he had for them (Dan. 1:17). There is hope for student and professor alike that God can and will give those same gifts again to those in whom they do not naturally reside.

Confessing Ignorance

Second, the study of the history of Christianity forces a confession of ignorance. Just as Martin Luther quipped to Desiderius Erasmus, "Your thoughts of God are all too human," the student of the history of Christianity soon realizes that there is a similar humanness to our thinking with regard to God's work in history. We know little and, sadly, too often care little about that which could change much of what we believe and much of how we live.

Students today are more equipped to discuss the world of popular culture than the near-ancient worlds of Christian culture. The tragedy here is that the two worlds, ancient and modern, are not that different. Sin is still sin, God is still God, and man is still man regardless if he reads Charles Simeon or watches Simon Cowell.

Knowledge of such will warn students of the perils of our current situation, while at the same time giving them a promise of hope that change can come. For example, studying the revival that was the Reformation reveals that the intervention of God in the lives and hearts of men and women can drastically change all that is accepted as the status quo. This warning and promise benefits students only when they first admit they do not have the knowledge of such warnings and promises.

Proper Perspective on One's Place

Third, the study of the history of Christianity gives proper perspective to one's place in history. In 12th century England, John of Salisbury spoke of a man who understood well his place in history. He said that this man, "used to say that we are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size." In the same way, the study of church history teaches us that we are merely standing on the shoulders of the giants of the faith that preceded us.

There are many in days gone by who believed wrong things about God, and with whom we would easily disagree. However, given the knowledge available and the faith they expressed as a result, they stood as giants of light in an often dark and theologically murky world. This should warn students that if they see any more clearly today it is because they are standing on the foundation that their forefathers' lives of faith built, even with the errors, and not because of the students' own creative understanding of orthodoxy. The study of Christian history not only helps give the student the humility required to view the past and critique errors, but also to find value in and appreciate the error makers.

Proper Perspective on One's Trials

Fourth, the study of the history of Christianity gives proper perspective to the relative significance of one's trials. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said in his sermon on Psalm 73 that the

study of church history helps us “begin to understand that some of the greatest saints that have ever adorned the life of the Church have experienced trials and troubles and tribulations which cause our little problem[s] to pale into insignificance.” When one reads of the injustices and persecutions faced by the Free-church believers in early seventeenth-century London, somehow the anxieties of life brought on by the complexities of what Neil Postman called the “all-instant society” do not seem as distressing. Seeing one’s burdens against the backdrop of what others have endured can only help bring humility.

However, this backdrop also provides a perspective of hope. The church planter in relative isolation from Christian brothers and sisters can learn that he is not alone in his calling and is, therefore, not the first to venture into the wilderness “not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). The study of Christian history provides the student with an arsenal of experiences and lessons learned from a myriad of people he will never meet.

Eliminating Naiveté

Fifth, the study of the history of Christianity eliminates naiveté and surprise at the actions of humanity. The regular encounter with the proceedings of men and women in the past allows one to see that there truly is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9). As a result, the student is warned that not only do all heroes have faults and sin, but also that those same faults and propensity to sin resides within the one seeing and learning.

My own church history professor often remarked that we should never underestimate the depravity of man. Once we realize that within ourselves we are capable of any sin, humility warns us not to have our spiritual applectart overturned when we see those sins in the lives and actions of others. The study of the history of Christianity only reinforces this pointing us more and more to the One who lived without sin. We turn from history books full of imperfections to the promise of hope held out in the sinless Son of God who is the “founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).

Desire to Serve the Churches

Sixth, the study of the history of Christianity should drive the child of God to desire to serve the churches of God. The thread of continuity that runs throughout history is the work of God to preserve his church (Matt. 16:18). God’s plan is bigger than, although it certainly involves, individualized ministries. Our Lord has designated his churches as the vehicles to carry out the Great Commission. The barometer of faithfulness in Christian ministry is judged not by what one may bring as an individual to the work of the kingdom, but rather what one contributes as a servant in the churches of the kingdom.

This reminder warns the student against a kind of self-exalting ministry that would exist regardless of the people he serves. Service to the local churches is service to the people of God. Without the local church’s recognition of God’s hand on the life of the minister, the minister will only function as well as a head could without its body. If the study of church history does anything, it should lead one joyfully to see the churches of God as more important than himself (Phil. 2:3). When this occurs the student can only help but feel the expectations of hope for a lifetime of ministry for and with God’s people.

Humble Stand for Truth

Seventh, the study of the history of Christianity encourages one humbly to stand for truth in a way that draws attention to the treasures of wisdom and knowledge found in Christ and not in one's self (Col. 2:3). I once heard someone define "encourage" as the act of putting "courage in" someone else. Indeed, this seems the best way to describe the effect of studying the actions and triumphs of the saints in history. When one is encouraged to stand for the truth of God in this posture of humility he realizes he is doing little more than taking his place in line with a host of others the Lord has used as instruments for the preservation of truth. The one standing is not advancing a new or novel movement (however obscure or odd it may appear to his present culture). He is simply asserting with the rare biblical quality of courageous humility that of which he has been merely a recipient—grace and truth (John 1:14).

The Work of God in History

While not everyone called of God is able to attend seminary, I am thankful that seminaries exist and even now many are studying the work of God in the history of the churches for the first time. If their experience resembles mine in any way, they will soon come to know the true value of the study of the history of Christianity. In addition to the study of God's Word, it has been the study of church history that the Lord most often uses to humble this one who too often walks in pride. Thankfully, He does not only use it as a warning, but also as a promise of hope. He is *able* to humble and teach humility even in a church history class.

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