

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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**Most of the artwork pictured in this issue hang in classrooms, in hallways, and in Kramer Chapel on the CTS campus.**

# Church History and Pastoral Formation

By the Rev. Dr. Cameron A. MacKenzie

Any religion or philosophy that seeks to explain life's big questions will have an impact upon one's understanding of the past. But Christianity bears a special relationship to the study of history, because right from the outset Christianity has presented itself as a historical religion. If one considers just the Apostles' Creed, in the second article he comes across that little phrase, "under Pontius Pilate," a phrase that marks the intersection of eternity with time, for this is a reference to a real person who lived at a particular time and place and through whom God accomplished His redemptive purposes. Thus, Christianity is not a set of disembodied truths or precepts. Instead, it is basic to the Christian faith that God has acted in time and space for the salvation of people. Take away history and you take away Christianity.

Indeed, most of the New Testament documents present themselves either as eyewitness accounts or as accounts once removed from the eyewitnesses of what God has accomplished once and for all in history by means of a real human being—and much more than a human being—Jesus of Nazareth.

Furthermore, those same documents assume that, although God's activity in Christ was unique in human history, Jesus' coming was the culmination of many previous divine interventions in time and space as documented by the Old Testament. In fact, large sections of both testaments present themselves as history—sacred history, but

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**Today's Christians have very much in common with previous generations of God's people: the challenges, failures, hopes, and dreams of today are often the same as those of yesterday, so that one can learn in part from history to distinguish the tried and true from the silly and superficial and also to see how God keeps His promises of preserving His flock in all times and places.**

still real history; narratives of men and women who once lived and breathed, walked, and worked upon this globe as much as any other historical figures or as much as any of us. The fundamental documents of the Christian religion are filled with history, and to be a Christian means, among other things, to confess a certain history.

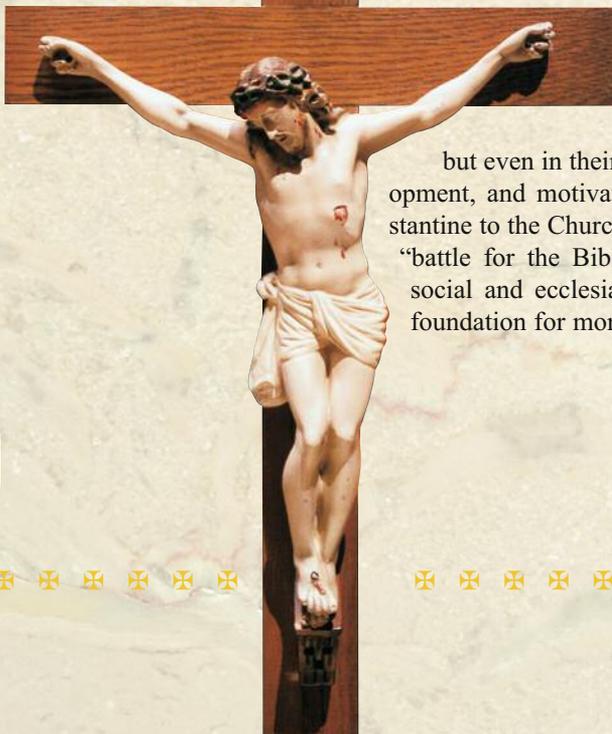
But Christianity also offers reasons for studying post-biblical history. First of all, through its doctrine of Providence, the idea that God is guiding human affairs, the Christian religion maintains that there is some sense to what happens, that there is significance to what human beings do. Christians do not believe in a universe governed by randomness or chance, but in a God who governs the universe for the sake of His people.

Moreover, under God's guidance, history is going somewhere; and we are in the midst of a narrative that has a beginning (creation), a middle (redemption), and will have an end (the judgment). Therefore, what historians investigate is a part of a story that makes sense. This is not to say that historians are trying to read the mind of God. No, historians study "secondary causes," the means that God employs to carry out His will among men, everything from the weather to the business cycle; and by arranging events into sequences of cause and effect, historians offer explanations of the past that they study. Such explanations are not complete—the story is not over yet—nor are they always right, as historians make mistakes. But the Christian view of history provides a framework for attempting to understand history in the first place. There is a story to tell.

Besides the doctrine of Providence, Christianity also teaches human responsibility. This doctrine encourages the historian to study the past from the perspective of those individuals who have made the decisions, fought the wars, forged the peace, built the cities, and done everything else—not like robots at the hands of impersonal forces, but people like us; people who respond to circumstances, moral agents who choose between right and wrong, individuals whose actions are subject to the judgment of others and, ultimately, the judgment of God, but in the meantime, the judgment of historians.

But what can we actually learn from history and why should future pastors in particular study it? First of all, we should probably admit that church history may not be immediately relevant, i.e., it may not provide a list of ideas for boosting church attendance or for increasing per capita giving. But it is relevant at a deeper level, in that church history helps the clergy to maintain a proper perspective about themselves and their ministry. It provides a set of glasses through which to look more clearly at the church and society in which pastors and parishioners live and work.

For example, history helps ministerial students to understand the context in which they will minister—the multiplicity of social and ecclesiastical forms, theologies, and world views that they will confront daily not just in society, but even in their churches. History demonstrates the origins, development, and motivations for everything from the conversion of Constantine to the Church Growth movement, from liturgical renewal to the "battle for the Bible"; and thus, it fosters understanding of today's social and ecclesiastical milieus, and this understanding provides a foundation for more effective ministry.



But besides helping future pastors to understand their context of ministry, church history also aids in identifying continuities between this and previous generations of Christians. Today's Christians have very much in common with previous generations of God's people: the challenges, failures, hopes, and dreams of today are often the same as those of yesterday, so that one can learn in part from history to distinguish the tried and true from the silly and superficial and also to see how God keeps His promises of preserving His flock in all times and places. In fact, for most of those who study it, church history is a powerful reminder that the communion of saints exists not just in the here and now, but also stretches back through time to the beginning, as well as forward to the consummation of history in the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises at the end of this present age.

Furthermore, while looking backwards, we should also note that church history enables voices from the past to take part in the conversations of the present. Many of the issues the Church faces today are similar to those addressed by previous generations; and as Christians today seek to deal with those issues faithfully and effectively, it is good to hear what others have said about them and to see what they have done about them in the past.

Luther, for example, spoke to liturgical questions; Walther to communion practices; and Augustine to new translations of the Bible. Of course, this does not mean that in our times Christians must say exactly the same things on questions like these or do the same things as previous generations. Our forebears were sinners as well as saints (like us), and we can learn from their mistakes as well as their triumphs. But it is the height of foolishness not to consult those of our faith and commitment who have had to deal with situations similar to our own. And church history is the discipline that best permits us to have these conversations with the past.

Of course, systematic theologians can also say that they converse with theologians of the past when they read the works of Luther or Walther or Augustine; and that's true. But systematic theology tends to ignore the personalities—it abstracts theology from the theologian and emphasizes the truth that is confessed rather than the one who confesses it. Church history puts flesh on the bones and revels in the personalities. It does not let us forget that the Church has always consisted of real, flesh and blood people with all of their faults, flaws, and weaknesses—real people who confessed their faith, built their institutions, and put their Christianity into practice at particular times and places. And ultimately, this truth is very encouraging, for it demonstrates that God works to accomplish His good purposes through people like us. He does not let human faults and frailties deter Him from keeping the promises of His Word.

Finally, just as stories are more appealing than essays and drama more interesting than lectures, history can move us as well as challenge us, inspire us as well as instruct us. The Christian faith is not just an intellectual system, but a way of life that derives from particular historical events. When we study church history, we can see how the events surrounding the coming of Christ—His death and resurrection—continue to ripple through time in the lives of real people—people like us—because God is at work keeping His Word on behalf of His people now, in the past, and until the end of time.

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