



*Why Church History Matters:  
An Invitation to Love and Learn  
from Our Past*

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## Ignore Church History at Your Own Peril

To ignore Christian history is always a huge loss to the church. It chokes Christian community by restricting our interaction with believers of our own time, who are already very much like us. The result is that we unknowingly overlook otherwise obvious blind spots in our view of the Christian landscape. We limit the breadth of our community, and we surrender opportunities for historical accountability. We also miss important opportunities in exegesis, spirituality, personal relationships, interchurch relationships and methods of practical ministry.

Why have Bible-focused Christians neglected the Christian tradition? In the sixteenth century Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others raised serious questions about the church's departure from Scripture. This led to significant conflict. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Roman Catholic Church responded by affirming both Scripture and tradition as authoritative. Since the Council of Trent, most Protestants and Roman Catholics have assumed a fairly strict dichotomy between Scripture and tradition. Many Protestants came to equate emphasis on tradition with rejection of the authority of Scripture, or at least pollution of the authority of Scripture. Protestant leaders, especially those from more Bible-focused groups, often have spoken of tradition as the antithesis of Scripture, even though frequent recourse to individual denominational creeds rather than Scripture (or the early universal Christian creeds) seems inconsistent with such a position.

This prejudice against tradition has other consequences. First, it fosters the tendency among Bible-focused groups to de-emphasize or ignore the history of the church. This is true at the congregational and denominational levels, sometimes reinforced by the fact that unfortunate educational experiences have left many with the distinct impression that the only thing more boring than history is church history.

But this neglect is evident also in theological education. Most Bible-focused educators give the nod to the importance of Christian history, but few of them articulate convincing reasons as to why. Many college-level ministerial training programs no longer require the traditional courses in Christian history. Those who do so generally require only one course, which sweeps through two thousand years in the blink of an eye, hitting the highlights and often missing the magic in the process. Most evangelical seminaries give heavy emphasis to biblical and practical courses with more abbreviated emphasis on historical and theological investigation.

A second consequence of the prejudice against tradition, it seems to me, is that Protestant scholars tend to differentiate between church history as one area of study and historical theology as another. This suggests that since absorbing names and dates and documents is difficult and often consumes the lion's share of our time and energy, we can bypass

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## BOOK EXCERPT



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“history” and go straight to what matters, “theology.” In other words, we study the past in order to understand the thinking of a few key people. This assumes that if we concentrate on their thoughts apart from the causes and contexts of their thoughts, we can get to the kernels of historical investigation without some of the difficulties of historical investigation.

For Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, of course, such a differentiation makes no sense. I contend that they are correct. I have often been described as “not a church historian, but a historical theologian.” Although I appreciate what I hope is intended as a compliment — “He doesn’t just repeat the facts, but teaches theology that students can use” — such a separation for most students (and most believers) is artificial and can be misleading. How can we understand the development of Christian thought and practice apart from the contexts in which each developed?

— Adapted from the Introduction