

J. Philip Arthur,
Why Read Church History?
(Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015),
23 pages.

Among the most precious resources that Christians have to help them as travelers through their time in this world is the history of past ages, especially the story of God's people. It was with this in mind that the eighteenth-century Baptist pastor-theologian Caleb Evans (1737–1791) rightly admonished readers of his day: "Every Christian ought to be a good historian." Given my own conviction of the importance of employing this resource in the living of the Christian life, I turned to this new Banner of Truth booklet with a sense of anticipation of finding an arsenal of good reasons for reading the history of the Church. I was not disappointed, but I do have a specific concern that will be mentioned in due course.

Wrong ways to read the past

Phil Arthur, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Lancaster, England, helpfully opens with a brief personal account of the way that "history has always been one of the great loves" of his life (3). He goes on to note that the Bible itself strongly encourages us to read history (see, for example, Joshua 4:21–22; 1 Corinthians 10:11), and in fact points out one way in which the past is to be read, namely, not uncritically. As Arthur observes, it is "fatally easy to develop an uncritical admiration for our heroes" (5). Consider, for instance, Augustine. There is so much good that the modern Church owes to Augustine, but his thought and legacy are not without their problems, and here Arthur notes Augustine's advocacy of the state's involvement in enforcing biblical orthodoxy (6–7). The perspectives of the North African theologian on suicide and aspects of human sexuality could also have been cited in this regard.

Other wrong ways of reading history include the romantic desire "to escape into the past" since it is "more attractive and congenial than the present" (8), making past days *the* benchmark by which to judge the present (8–9)—in a way, this is to place church history on a par with Scripture—and conversely, the hubristic judging of the past by the present (9–10)—probably the greatest danger of our politically-correct day. Then, there is the danger of missing the wood for the trees, so to speak: getting so absorbed by the human drama of history and failing to see God at work in the past (10, 17). Finally, there is the attitude that is so pervasive in our day: rejecting the study of history out of hand as if it has nothing to really teach us (10–11).

"Tracing the footsteps of God"

Arthur then provides a variety of reasons why history does indeed need to be read. First, it deepens humility, as we are exposed to the remarkable achievements of our predecessors (11, 17)—Arthur could have mentioned our indebtedness to those who have gone before us here, for it can accomplish the same end. Some of the figures he is thinking of here are mentioned further on in the pamphlet: "the [sixteenth-century] reformers and the Puritans" (15), and "great saints" like William Carey and Martin Luther, Samuel Rutherford, C.H. Spurgeon, and John Newton (16).

And then studying history undermines the idea that error is original (11–12, 17) and makes us wise in the face of current folly (12–13). It helps to produce tolerance and catholicity (13–14). As Arthur rightly puts it: “a good test for a British Calvinist”—in fact, any Calvinist for that matter—“is whether he has a place in his heart for that consecrated and zealous Arminian John Wesley” (13). It can force us to confront realistically the present. A patient examination of the way God has moved in reviving power in the history of the English-speaking peoples, Arthur avers, can have a very sobering effect on modern claims about church health and growth (14). And study of the past is vital in understanding why the present is what it is (17).

Arthur notes the commonplace saying that the “past is a foreign country. They do things differently there”—this insightful statement actually occurs as the opening lines in a novel by L.P. Hartley, not a work of history (14)—but he does not follow it up by observing how this impinges on his earlier recommendation about “tracing the footsteps of God” (10). To trace God’s work in the past is not always that easy, for, if Hartley is right, and it seems to me that he is, then we are often confronted by the fact that previous generations of believers thought differently on some matters than we do. This is salutary, for it helps to dispel undue dogmatism about non-primary issues.

What to read

In the final section of this booklet, Arthur rightly seeks to answer his question, “But where should we begin [in studying history]? (17). He mentions two overviews of church history—S.M. Houghton’s *Sketches of Church History* and Nick Needham’s *Two Thousand Years of Christ’s Power*—as well as a few biographies (Brian Edwards’ story of William Tyndale, Arnold Dallimore’s influential two-volume biography of George Whitefield, and Iain Murray’s equally important work on Martyn Lloyd-Jones), the excellent travel guides produced by Day One (here he instances the ones that touch on the lives of John Knox, Spurgeon, Thomas Cranmer, Lloyd-Jones, J.C. Ryle, and the Marian martyrs), and Evangelical Press’ series of “Bite-size biographies” (18–21). A specific list of titles is then provided at the very end of the booklet (22–23) that rounds out this discussion.

It is here, in this application of the advice and reasons given to read church history, that a specific problem surfaces. I can best get it at by citing a comment from Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey*, where the heroine Catherine Morland, states that history “tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me.” Reading through Arthur’s plea for reading church history, I saw nary an explicit mention of any Christians of the female gender. The beautifully-designed cover with four panels from the history of the Church only reinforces this observation: they illustrate Paul on Mars Hill, Luther nailing the *Ninety-five Theses* to the church door at Wittenberg, Whitefield preaching in the open-air (at Moorfields?), and a portrait of Spurgeon. Four men—and four preachers at that. One of the great dangers of the present day—our gender-dominated world—is for evangelicals to overreact to the spirit of the day and forget that women have played a critical role in the history of the Church, from the women of Romans 16 to remarkable Christian women of our day like Elisabeth Elliot and Edith Schaeffer. The rise of the feminist movement (which can be really traced back to Enlightenment figures like Mary Wollstonecraft) has forced historians—and rightly so—to take stock of the contribution of women to history. And Christian historians should not be exempt from this task.

This caveat aside, though, this is a fine introduction to the importance and value of Church history, one that I plan on using in my introductory Church history courses. Caleb Evans' plea for his generation of believers to read history has found a worthy modern-day advocate in this small booklet.

Michael A.G. Haykin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.