

“A Christian’s Books” No. 2 Church History
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We are considering books worth a Christian’s reading. I introduced the value of Christian literature in general last time and now propose to consider various categories of that literature. I begin with church history. The Bible itself is in many ways a church history. It tells a story. And in the Bible the story of the kingdom of God in the world – its eras and epochs, its heroic figures and its villains, its triumphs and its tragedies – is used to teach us the lessons of our faith. There was never any reason to think that Christians would not continue to profit from the study of the history of the kingdom of God as it continued after biblical times. We will not have an infallible interpretation of that history as we have in the Bible, but many of its lessons, its encouragements, and its warnings are so obvious that he who runs may read!

It is an important observation that the church has often been renewed in spiritual life in part because she was reminded of her history. The Reformation was, in part, a theological and spiritual revival prompted by the rediscovery of the church’s past. The great reformers were to a man historians as well as theologians. They mastered the story of patristic Christianity and used it to critique the life of the church in their own day. One of the principal instruments of revival in early 19th century Scotland was the publication of Thomas McCrie’s *Life of John Knox*, a book that reminded the Scottish church of its Reformation inheritance and its calling to prove faithful to it. The *Réveil*, the renewal of biblical Christianity in the mid-19th century in France, Switzerland, and Germany was given great impetus by the publication of J.H. Merle D’Aubigné’s *History of the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, a history much more influential because D’Aubigné was a first-class scholar but wrote for a lay audience. The exhilarating story of the rediscovery of the gospel in the 16th century inspired the church again in 19th. The same might be said of the reawakening of English speaking Reformed Christianity in the years following the Second World War. In many respects the rediscovery of the history of the Reformation and, even more, of the Second Reformation – the period of English Puritanism – and of the Great Awakening in the 18th century was the vanguard of that renewal. And what has been true of entire churches and movements of renewal has often been true of individual believers who have had their hearts stirred and their faith strengthened by reading what God has done in the past. There are many Christians today, I fear, who think very superficially about what it means to be a Christian because they have no standard to measure the Christian life by. They are largely unaware of how Christians have lived, how devout they have been, how much they have accomplished, and how defiant of the standards of the world. You need church history to teach you that and to raise your sights!

A complete novice may wish to begin with S.M. Houghton’s *Sketches from Church History*, a sprightly written and illustrated overview of the story of the church from its new beginnings after Pentecost to the modern period. For early church history, which is often *terra incognita* for modern evangelicals, there is no place better to begin than with the fourth century *Church History* of Eusebius, now published by Kregel in a new and

easy to read translation by Paul Maier with commentary, pictures, charts, and maps. F.F. Bruce's *The Spreading Flame* is an accessible history that takes the story through the 8th century, concentrating on the gospel's advance toward England. M.A. Smith's *From Christ to Constantine* covers the same ground in even less space.

To someone interested in becoming acquainted with Reformation history there are many possibilities from the small one volume manuals (e.g. Owen Chadwick's third volume in the *Pelican History of the Church*) to major studies such as the magisterial new work, *The Reformation: A History*, by Diarmaid MacCulloch from which I have read sections for several years now at the Men's Night of Prayer before Reformation Sunday. MacCulloch does not share our viewpoint as evangelical Christians – he is, in fact, a practicing homosexual – but has provided us with an authoritative and sympathetic history that is magnificently written. I have read many books on the Reformation but have learned many interesting things I did not know reading MacCulloch. Scottish church history, especially important for Presbyterians, is covered very well in A.M. Renwick's little book, *The Story of the Scottish Reformation* and J. D. Douglas' *Light in the North*. Mark Noll, long of Wheaton and now of Notre Dame, has given us *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. If you can find a copy – there is one in the church library – George Hutchinson, a PCA minister, published in 1974 a splendid history of American Presbyterianism, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod*. Faith Presbyterian Church was once a member congregation of the RPCES. A good way to uncover your spiritual roots! A disturbing and cautionary story of developments in English speaking evangelicalism during the second half of the twentieth century – and riveting reading – is provided by Iain Murray in his *Evangelicalism Divided*.

You will appreciate that what I have provided is a tiny selection of what is a vast library. And we haven't begun to consider more specific histories. Consider, for example, our own David Calhoun's (church history professor at Covenant Theological Seminary) highly regarded and very readable history of Princeton Seminary, which is itself something of a history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and an introduction to a number of American Presbyterianism's greatest figures. Covering a shorter period is Bradley Longfield's *The Presbyterian Controversy* that tells the sad tale of evangelical capitulation to unbelief in the Northern Presbyterian Church in the first third of the 20th century. The same dismal story, with regard not to a particular denomination but to the institutions of higher learning in the United States, is told in fascinating detail by the eminent historian George Marsden, first in his *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* and in his history of Fuller Theological Seminary, *Reforming Fundamentalism*. All of these books are interesting, at least relatively easy if not very easy to read, and valuable for the lessons they teach, the inspiration they convey, and the way in which they confirm that the spiritual world of the Bible is the same world in which we live today.

The great difficulty I faced in writing this column was to cull the list of possible volumes to an acceptable length. Looking over those I have mentioned I can say with confidence that those who read these books or others like them will have a grasp of the church's

history and its lessons that will enrich their understanding and appreciation of their faith and sharpen their powers of critical judgment concerning the issues facing the church in our day.