

Sunday, September 12, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 1: What is History

Introduction

- Go over course outline.

Different Approaches to History

- *Scientific History*: “the attempt simply to arrive at an accurate account of past events based upon sufficient evidence, without regard to learning lessons, predicting the future course of events, or grasping the meaning of human history as a whole (Nash, 5).”
- In this approach Historians are like forensic scientists (investigators) simply trying to reconstruct past events.
- “Scientific history seeks knowledge for its own sake, without attention to the practical value of the subject or lessons we might learn from the past or help it might provide with regard to future (Nash, 5).”
- *Speculative History (Philosophy of History)*: seeks to grasp “the meaning of human history as a whole . . . to look beneath the surface of events and find their inner ultimate significance.” (Nash, 5)
- The difference scientific and speculative history is similar to the familiar distinction between seeing the individual puzzle pieces and the completed puzzle. Philosophers of History ask questions like:
 - What is the Pattern of History?
 - What is the Mechanism of History?
 - What is the Purpose or Value of History? (Nash, 6)
- Speculative History is important because of the vital role it plays in ones over all Worldview. The horrible deeds committed by German fascists and by communist from many nations were one consequent of their views of history. The Holocaust was the byproduct of the Darwinian view of history.
- This is why we need first need to construct a Biblical Model for conceptualizing history.

Three View of Time: Dots, Circles, and Lines

- Chaotic Time = Dots

- According to chaotic time, human events are random resulting in the notion that history has no path. Chaotic time can be compared to a bound of random dots on a piece of paper. Without lines connecting the pints they remain random and meaningless in relation to each other.
- This idea of pathless time can still be found in many Eastern Religious traditions like Buddhism but has been rejected as a workable historical paradigm.
- Chaotic time's disregard for cause and effect relationships dissolves society's connective tissue. Without cause and effect, people cannot be held morally culpable for their poor choices or to any system of moral or societal obligations. Consequently, chaotic time has never gained much traction as an explanatory historical model.
- Cyclical Time = Circles
- Eventually ancient civilization linked observable natural cycles such as lunar months and solar years with related cycles of human activity.
 - "Cyclical time conquered chaos by repetition, by the parent or hunter or farmer performing the right deed at the right moment in the perpetual circle, much as an original god or goddess performed a similar deed during time's mystical circle. Eventually, great cycles came to mark the duration of kingdom and prophecies, to coming of heroes and shamans, and the aging of lives, generations, and civilizations. Cyclical time is endless, yet also endlessly completed and renewed, propelled by elaborate rituals resembling the modern seasonal holidays." (Strauss and Howe, 8)
- Eternal Return—the notion that the universe has been recurring and will continue to recur in a similar form for an infinite number of times.
- Unlike the chaotic view, cyclical thinking enabled classical civilizations to adopt a moral and legal dimension. As a result, present generations possessed a mechanism whereby they could compare their life experiences with those in previous generations.
- Cyclicity alone will not work as a Biblical model because it offers no explanation for where time and history are headed.
- Linear Time = Lines
- Beginning with Judaism a new paradigm for understanding time began to emerge. Driven by theological ideas, time and history were straightened out into a model that possessed an absolute beginning as well as an absolute end.
 - "Time begins with a fall from grace; struggles forward in an intermediate sequence of trials, failures, revelations, and divine interventions; and then ends with redemption and reentry into the kingdom of God." (Strauss and Howe, 8)

- The great achievement of linear time has been to endow mankind with a purposeful confidence in its own self-improvement.
 - “A linear society defines explicit moral goals (justice, equality) or material goals (comfort, abundance) and then sets out deliberately to attain them. When those goals are reached, people feel triumphant; when they aren’t new tactics are applied.” (Strauss and Howe, 8)
- According to linear time history is headed somewhere. The Protestant Revolution cemented linearism as the predominant historical paradigm Western Europe and eventually the United States. During the Industrial Revolution the views of Karl Marx further entrenched linear history into the psyche of Western Historians.

History of Historical Writing

- Since chaotic time is not workable historical model, all historical writing fits into one of three schemata: cyclical, providential, or progressive. (Gilderhus, 51)
- While the providential and progressive views are similar in that they view history as linear progression along which time moves forward from beginning to end, they view history’s impetus differently.
 - Providential View—Divine Guidance, i.e. God brings about history’s culmination.
 - Progressive Views—Evolutionary Models, Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat.
- Since the Greeks first set pen to paper, all written history has been either cyclical or linear in terms of philosophy of history.

The Greeks and Cyclical Thinking

- Many historians view the Greeks as the first practitioners of history in an organized sense. Herodotus is frequently referred to as the father of history.
- This conclusion is due in large part to the fact that other ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, Assyrians, and Hittites, left artifacts recounting the deeds of great men but showed little appreciation for the effect of one event upon another and the interrelationship between them. (Gilderhus, 13)
- For the ancients, time and history were rooted in observation - things occurred, went away, and then recurred, much in the fashion of days, nights, and seasons. Consequently, the familiar and predictable patterns of nature became a way of organizing the unfamiliar and unpredictable happenings in the human world. (Gilderhus, 13)
- Examples of Cyclical Thinking
 - Buddhist Wheel of Life

- Egyptian Scarab
- Norse Ouroboros
- Despite making significant contributions to the development of historical thought, specifically in pioneering a critical method of distinguishing between truth and error, Herodotus and Thucydides never abandoned the cyclical construct of their peers. (Gilderhus, 15)
 - Expressing a belief typical of his time, he affirmed a cyclical view in the expectation that “what happened in the past . . . will in due course, tend to be repeated with some degree of similarity.” Thucydides intended his writing to have instructional importance as a guide to action in the future. Although history never repeated itself exactly, he anticipated the development of parallel circumstances and believed that the consciousness of history would bestow many benefits. All leaders should learn from the mistakes of the past. Indeed, they could master the arts of politics, statecraft, and warfare only from the study of history. (Gilderhus, 17)

The Christian View of History

- Writing in the wake of the Gothic sacking of Rome by Alaric in 410 A.D., St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote *The City of God*, the most influential statement of the Christian interpretation of history ever devised.
- Deriving his view from a Hebrew construct, Augustine viewed history as moving along a line with a clear beginning marked by creation, middle, and end. For Augustine, endless revolving and pointless repetitions rendered history meaningless by nullifying the notion of divine purpose.
- “Far be it, I say, from us (Christians) to believe this (the Classical philosophy of history). For once Christ died for sins; and, rising from the dead, He dieth no more.” (Oates, 192)
- John Warwick Montgomery, author of *The Shape of the Past*, states the following regarding Augustine’s writings, “Here for the first time Western man was presented with a purposive, goal-directed interpretation of history. The Classical doctrine of recurrence had been able to give substantiality to history, but it had not given it any aim or direction.” (Montgomery, 42)
- Genesis 1:1, Revelation 21-22, Ephesians 1:10—the current heavens and earth will be replaced with a new heavens and new earth with Christ as the head of all things when the Dispensation of the Fulness of Time is ushered in.
- Ephesians 2—Time Past (verse 11), But Now (verse 12), Ages to Come (verse 7)—linearism is inescapable for the Bible believer, especially a mid-Acts dispensationalist.
- Herbert Schlossberg offers the following summation of the Christian view of history, “Christianity . . . is by its nature historically minded. It rejects both cyclical theories of history and notions of the eternality of the universe. The doctrine of creation and of eschatology are explicit statements that history has both a beginning and an end and that it is possible to say something intelligible about both. Events between these two termini are also intelligible, and,

being relation them, have meaning.” (Schlossberg, 29)

- The principals of dispensational Bible study necessitate that linearism must be embraced as the predominate framework for understanding history. To the extent that cyclicity is true, cyclical concepts can be incorporated into a linear framework to arrive at a workable paradigm.

Work Cited

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