

Class 1
Lectures 1 and 2
11 Jan. 2021

Understanding History

Purpose of this lecture

1. To get the student to think about the nature of history and the issues of history.
2. To acquaint the student with the basic issues of doing history and historiography.
3. To understand the importance and meaning of history, why church history is so important to understanding who we are as individual, 21st century believers, what we believe, why we believe it, and how we got here.

I. What is History, and what is Church History?

A. The importance of ultimate beliefs in the outworking of history.

B. Why is this important?

- Christianity shaped thinking about the value of the individual, the value of all human life, law, government, art, music, architecture, literature, drama.
- No one thought of banning the slave trade and slavery until Christians began to work toward it in the eighteenth century.
- Hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes for the elderly, missions to those left homeless and helpless were all the result of Christianity and the value it placed on human life.

C. This course will give you

D. What then is history?.

1. Introduction: Is history random and meaningless?

2. The Structure of History

a. What is *Historiography*?

COED: “the study of the writing of history and of written histories.”

Voltaire. “no more than critical or scientific history, a type of historical thinking in which the historian made up his mind for himself instead of repeating whatever stories he found in old books.”¹

¹ Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of History*, 1

Hegel and other used it to mean world history or “simply universal” history.²

And later nineteenth-century positivists saw it as simply the discovery of general laws governing the course of the events which it was history’s business to recount.

1. Is history cyclical? Linear?
 2. What is the causation in history?
 3. Is there a purpose to history?
- b. The difference between the DVP of history and HVP.

One example of HVP is that of a very liberal Episcopalian professor Thomas J. J. Altizer.

Thomas J. Altizer holds that the “first requirement” of any intellectual inquiry which will break the impasse of modern thought “is a forthright confession of the death of the God of Christendom, a full acknowledgment that the era of Christian civilization has come to an end, with the result that all cognitive meaning and all moral values that were once historically associated with the Christian God have collapsed.”³

² Ibid.

³ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1997), 3–4.

“God has died in *our* time, in *our* history, in *our* existence.”⁴ He wrote this in 1963

Thomas J. J. Altizer: *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 13.⁵

Altizer continues,

“This meaning of ‘historical’ is intimately related to the modern idea of ‘historicity’: for, in this perspective, ‘historicity’ means a *total immersion in historical time*, an immersion that is *totally isolated from any meaning or reality that might lie beyond it*.” Emphasis added

For modern man represented by Altizer, history has a very different meaning because God has no role in history. History then is something that has become totally divorced from reality, objectivity, and can be shaped however the historian wishes. On

Rushdoony concludes about this that:

“In terms of this faith, history can have no transcendental meaning. The life of Jesus must be read in exclusively naturalistic terms; nothing can be “historical” if it

⁴ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1997), 4.

⁵ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1997).

represents a supernatural power, act, or influence. Jesus is accordingly “demythologized,” and this “Jesus of history” bears no resemblance to the Jesus of Scripture, who is God incarnate and the Messiah of prophecy.”

c. Different philosophies of historiography.

Historiography deals with the underlying philosophy, the underlying worldview of the historian. When it comes to history, five basic worldviews are present. In this opening lecture, I simply wish to acquaint you with them. An understanding of the views of historians is of central importance to the study of history. Since all historians examine the same evidence, why is it that they come to different conclusions, and even contradictory conclusions.

1. *The Cyclical School.*

Definition:

a. history is a pattern of cycles,

b. Tone:

c. In Western non-Christian thought pessimism was hoped to be avoided by dialecticism, but these philosophies have also led to the despair of history.

2. The Judeo-Christian worldview of history.

3. *Progressivism.*

4. *Historicism.*

5. *Marxism.*

Conclusion: progressivism, historicism, and Marxism are all the result of Enlightenment thought which removed God from the picture, elevated humanity to the position of deity, and inconsistently maintained the idea of optimistic progress toward a goal, an idea stolen from Christianity.

2. What is “history?”

A. Robert F. Rea, “History is the study of the past in order to understand the present and to improve the future.”⁶

⁶ Robert F. Rea, [*Why Church History Matters*](#), Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 23..

- B. Hannah provides a definition of history on p. 25
- a. History is “His Story” the outworking of God’s plan in time.

b. “As a discipline, history is the study of the recorded past, with the goal of presenting it to contemporaries; it is learning through historical inquiry, the gathering of records with a view to telling a story. Ultimately, it is an attempt, through the search of the past, to explain the meaning and function of the present while providing hope and direction for the future.”

Let’s break this down a bit

1. *History is the study of the recorded past.*

2. *The goal of presenting it to contemporaries... through telling the story... to explain the meaning and function of the present*

3. *providing hope and direction for the future.*

C. If this is history, then Church History, or for some The History of Christianity, is the History of the visible church, Christendom, we might say.