

The Genesis of History

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A biblical theology of history gives the basic model for historical interpretation that sees the kingship of Christ as central to the unfolding of events, yet does not make meaningless that which takes place outside the church. Other philosophies achieve a Christocentric view of history at the price of making “true” history hidden or mystically religious, leaving the world apart from the church without significance; or pursue a barren abstract universal history without evaluating specific events in terms of God's kingdom. A biblical theology can be applied by the working historian.

Of course I do not intend to write an historical history. There are enough histories, many of them well written, in which the problem of the city's creation and development are treated for every part of the world. The Aztec city, the polis, the urbs, and the medieval free town have retained few of their secrets. But beside and under this superficial history there is a true history. There is Jesus Christ, who, in the approximate words of Karl Barth, makes history, because he is history. To state this brilliant but delphic formula more explicitly, there are forces running through history that form its substratum—the horsemen of Revelation—and which because of Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ are in permanent action as the explanation and the reality of history. These forces are the very form of his action. —Jacques Ellul¹

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great image representing the successive kingdoms of man ends with its destruction by a rock cut out without human hands, which smashes the image completely and then becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. As Daniel explains: “In the times of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to other people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” (Daniel 2:44) Though Daniel says

1 Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970) pp. 148-149.

“the dream is true and its interpretation trustworthy” historians find it extremely difficult to write their specific accounts of the past with such a theological interpretation of the events in view.

How does the historian make sense of the claim that Jesus Christ is the central active power in history? Jacques Ellul shows us one way. As a Barthian he expounds a history beyond history, or as he puts it, a history not historical. As with Barth's theology this history is highly Christocentric. But his Christ is somehow elusive, beyond access of the methods of the ordinary working historian whose business it is, after all, to write historical history, to reconstruct facts and actualities based on evidence.

As we go further into Ellul's philosophy of history the working historian's problems deepen. Only in Christ is there history, and the nations outside Christendom are outside history. Paganism has no history. Can the historian really do serious work from this perspective? Can he really afford to set aside what transpires in the larger world? Isn't Ellul really redefining history, so that true history now appears strange and esoteric, something just for theologians? But even within Christendom Ellul seems not to care about the stuff of history. “Jesus takes no part in the city. He rejects her money, arms, sciences. He ignores the capital and the progress of civilization. He knows that if he accepts man's wandering, he is building the kingdom where man will finally be able to come home from his millennial flight and find his full development in truth.”² Here we have a rather Bultmannian concept of Christianity. True history is something hidden that happens along side of the apparent history. The Kingdom does not transform apparent history as it grows, rather Jesus “refuses man the possibility of settling down in the city, ... he 'sends forth' his disciples, with no respite, ... he condemns the city...”³ Instead of seeking his security by creating a stable, even beautiful culture, the disciple must seek security only in Christ while following the cultural wandering of true discipleship. (But if they don't care about material and cultural security, why are Barth, Bultmann and Ellul all socialists?)

Yet despite the problem of how to make its claims concrete the Church proclaims that Christ is the meaning of history. The very times are called BC and AD in relation to his life of earth, and he is now the enthroned Lord of whose kingdom there will be no end. Furthermore, in the quotation at the head of this essay Ellul puts his finger on the right text. Revelation does depict the sovereign direction by Christ of history and his active participation in it in relation to his covenant people. How then can the point of view of the theologian and that of the historian be put together?

I met a shocked reaction when I once described Ellul's views to a Dooyeweerdian. Of course the pagans have history! The modal spheres are an aspect of creation and unfold the meaning of creation for all creation. The pagans are as much God's work as anyone else; the universality of history cannot be denied.

2 Ellul, p. 122.

3 Ibidem.

But how are the modal spheres related to the specific action of Jesus Christ? How are his Church and his Kingdom related to the universal spheres of meaning that develop in creation? Here speculative philosophy can provide many generalities, but is not much help to the working historian who wants to interpret the meaning for God's Kingdom of the particular events in his area of study. Even harder is to determine the meaning *for* these events *of* God's Kingdom. That is, it is hard for the historian to see how Christ is shaping historical events to bring the fullness of his kingdom.

But if the Bible gives us a guide to interpreting history we can get beyond speculative generalities to make progress on the project of writing history with a definite Christian interpretation. Because the Bible is an historical book we would expect to find the beginning of a Biblical interpretation of history at the beginning of the Bible. We turn therefore to Genesis for a primer on what makes history go.

Positively Antediluvian!

Even in the antediluvian era several basic principles of historical action are highlighted in the text. The historical period following the Flood is more continuous with us (some of the nations from the Table of Nations in Genesis 11 are still around). But there is greater and increasing complexity in this period and the historical flow must be interpreted with greater subtlety. It is well, therefore, to begin at the beginning.

The fall of man into sin brought guilt and corruption on all mankind and a curse on the earth. The effect of the fall and the curse was universal. Nevertheless there is a division introduced into mankind, not by sin, but by grace. "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor." This division became a historical division. Genesis traces out a development of the society founded by Cain and portrays its character. After Cain killed his brother he went *east*. Cain founded a community by building a city. Thus he bequeathed a legacy to his descendants. After a genealogy of religious sounding names we reach Lamech, the seventh from Adam. Because the seventh generation completes, that is, epitomizes the line of Cain, we get here a portrait of this community. This includes the only women named between Eve, in Genesis 4:1, and Sarai the wife of Abram, in Genesis 11:29. Lamech, not satisfied with one wife, marries two, Adah and Zillah. His daughter Naamah is also named. Gordon Wenham suggests that these names may mean Pretty, Tinkle and Pleasant, and correlate with the remark in Genesis 6:2 that the daughters of men were fair, i.e. they sounded nice, looked nice, and were nice to be around (he also points to the parallel in Song of Songs 2:14).⁴ In this context this might suggest that Lamech wanted to have the varied attractions of the three women for himself, and was not willing to forgo something that appealed to him. Lamech also killed a man and announced or demanded to be avenged 77 times as opposed to Cain's seven times. Thus the violence of this family also is accented in the seventh generation.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) p. 112.

At the same time the line of Cain develops culture. Lamech's son Jabal was the father of all cattlemen, and his brother Jubal the father of all who play the harp and flute. Notice that they are not just said to invent these things. Rather they are “fathers”. Those who came after are indebted to them for their breakthroughs. Thus we have historical development among the ungodly. They are part of history for they contribute to universal history. Jabal is the “father” of Abraham who also lived in a tent and raised cattle.

We should also notice Tubal-Cain and his sister Naamah. Tubal-Cain was a metal worker. There is another passage in biblical history which surely bears on this. In I Kings 14:21-31 there is the story of Rehoboam's rule in Judah. This account opens and closes with the curious remark that “His mother's name was Naamah”. Judah fell into idolatrous worship and Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and took away all the treasures of the temple and the royal palace which Solomon had had made. The very odd feature of this story is that almost nothing is said about this remarkable attack. The emphasis falls on the sequel where Rehoboam replaced the gold shields with bronze ones. Besides decay from gold to bronze, symbolizing the difference between Solomon and Rehoboam (recall Nebuchadnezzar's image), there is an implicit backwards reference to Tubal-Cain, that other worker in bronze who was the son of another notorious polygamist and related to a Naamah. The royal line of Judah through Rehoboam is taking on the characteristics of the Cainite line: apostasy, tyranny, and violence. An historical character is shared by two widely separated developments, an historical analogy.

Finally, though the Cainite line is wiped out in the flood, what they accomplished is not wholly lost, for the arts and crafts it developed are transmitted by the godly who inherit the new world. This is the second major element after grace. Judgement cuts short certain lines of development, but without necessarily nullifying everything that was accomplished within that historical sequence.

Turning to Adam's line through Seth we find much more detail of development. This is the more important history, the major theme (and it comes second, a frequent pattern in Genesis). Not everything in history deserves the same emphasis. Here we also find another major historical principle: providence. These antediluvian patriarchs seem much like the Cainites. Both lines have a Lamech and an Enoch. In fact, as Wenham shows, the names generally are very much alike.

Line of Seth	Line of Cain
Quenan	Cain
Mahalalel	Enoch
Yared	Irada
Enoch	Mehuya'el
Methuselah	Methusha'el
Lamek	Lamek
Noah & sons	Jabal, Jubal, Tubal-Cain

If we were to exchange the places of Enoch and Mehuya'el in the second list, the two lists would correspond very closely.⁵

Beyond this surface similarity of the godly and the ungodly lie deeper workings of providence. The members of the line of Seth live for strange periods of time that match the periods of planets,⁶ and are thus distinguishable as God's heavenly people by the keen observer who takes the long term view of lives and events. In addition the seventh generation also epitomizes this genealogical line (cf. Jude 14). Enoch walks with God until God takes him away.

Thus we observe several broad principles of historical action:

- Grace which introduces a division into mankind by opening up a new line of development and a separate destiny for the distinct groups.
- Continuity of development within the each historical-cultural group.
- God's providence not only in the overall flow of history, but in subtle details of the lives of the godly, which mark them out as distinct.
- A significance and legacy for general history of a particular group within a period of history.

⁵ Wenham, p. 123.

⁶ Wenham, pp. 130-134.

The New World

The Flood story itself, when contrasted to pagan accounts, reveals a commentary on the historical process which is often overlooked. In the pagan Mesopotamian accounts men became a nuisance for the gods by multiplying too much and creating a great hubbub on earth. The gods, except for one, resolved to destroy humanity. The one intervened to rescue a single family and perpetuate humanity. After the flood there is a new arrangement in which the gods decree a limitation on human population. In the Bible's account it is the great violence in the world that leads to the flood, and following the flood there is a new decree and covenant to limit violence together with a command for man to multiply and fill the world. Thus the Bible places a unique emphasis on expansion and growth in its account of the mandate for post-flood history.

The Flood initiates a major transition in history, a new beginning. There are others. God calls Abram to make a special nation through which to channel his work, and the greatest transformation is the New Covenant which comes through Jesus Christ. Are the older transformations only prefigurations of the New Covenant leading up to Christ or do they also indicate a pattern which God's providential direction continues to produce, even in our time? Should we, for example, understand the patristic age, the mediæval period, and the time from the Reformation until now as among the distinct phases of God's work in history marked by revolutionary transitions from one to another?

These questions about continuity and change in history, and what patterns of divine action the Bible allows us to carry forward to our own time, are related to debates about the significance of God's covenants with Abraham and at Sinai. There is disagreement about how radical a divergence in God's dealings with the new covenant groups is implied by these covenants. As a result it is very controversial to extrapolate parallels from those covenant histories to our own times. Therefore, let us look closely at pre-Abrahamic history to see what can be learned.

Of course, this pre-Abrahamic history cannot really be separated from the Abrahamic covenant because from its beginning there is already an element in the historical development related to that covenant. In Genesis 9, in the story of the sin of Ham, there is a suggestion of an election of Shem in a way that was not made explicit for Seth, and there is a third brother, neither cursed like Ham nor blessed like Shem. We are told that Canaan the son of Ham is cursed, whereas the territory of Japheth is to be extended. God, however, is called the God of Shem, and Shem receives the blessing that God will dwell in his tents.

There follows what is commonly called the Table of Nations, seventy in all, but which the text calls the account, or history, of Shem, Ham and Japheth. The Japheth group is very surprising, once we have looked at Ham and Shem and noted the contrasts. Japheth's seven sons are Gomer (Cimmerians, southern Russia and later Asia Minor), Magog, Madia (Medes), Yavan (Ionians, i.e. Greeks), Tubal and Meshek (northern Anatolia), and

Tyras (Anatolian or Aegean region). They and their sons, so far as they can be confidently identified, are all Indo-European and lived west or north of the region of Ararat. Indo-Europeans are a linguistic and (though it is now politically correct to deny it) a cultural group. The various Indo-European languages became distinct generally through a process of divergence over time. Thus what we have here is a group which does not appear to have become involved in the confusion of languages at Babel, due to not having gone there in the first place, and who migrated away from the area that would be the center of main historical development for the next several millennia. Thus they largely fall out of the picture of Biblical history until the time of the exile of Judah in Babylon.

In the sections for Ham and Shem we find a much more confused situation. The names for two major language families were derived by early linguists from the Table of Nations. “Semitic” languages spoken by Jews, Arabs, and others, were thought to derive from Shem, and certain African languages were formerly called “hamitic”. This categorization is misleading. In the first place the Bible's Hamitic peoples mostly speak a “semitic” language or one, like Egyptian, which is related to, and seems partly derived from the semitic language family.⁷ One odd exception is the Hittites. Their language appears partly Indo-European but this is usually explained as a case analogous to India where a non-European people was ruled by an Indo-European upper cast. There is special emphasis in the text of this chapter on the Canaanite Hamite group because they and their land figure so prominently later on. It would have been better to name the “semitic” languages “hamitic”, especially in view of their two most prominent modern members, Canaanite (of which Hebrew is one dialect), and the languages of the Arabian peninsula and some adjacent areas of Africa. The Canaanite people are an historical parallel to the antediluvians, for the Canaanite culture (the alphabet, the “Hebrew” language, their poetry) survived their judgment and destruction, and was inherited by others, even entering the Bible to a significant degree in the poetical books. The historical “dead ends” are really not dead ends.

The Shem family section is the most complex and intriguing. It has been suggested that the Sumerians were Shemites.⁸ If so, they head a list of distinct language families.

7 The Egyptian language is one of six branch language groups—another is Semitic—that makes up the Afro-Asiatic language family. While Semitic has many branches and member languages, Egyptian stands alone in its branch. One theory is that a variety of tribes, some “semitic” and others “hamitic” or Libyan, migrated into the Nile valley as the Sahara dried up and there mixed to form a new people. In addition, the trend now is to include such language families in super-families, in this case Afro-Asiatic, which recognizes the old Hamitic group as simply three branches of the Afro-Asiatic. The invasion theory, that Egyptian was brought from the outside by an elite conquering group is now coming into favor. (See: Toby Wilkinson, *The Genesis of the Pharaohs*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). David Rohl proposes a theory that the Semitic-Egyptian-Cushitic people left Mesopotamia and worked their way around the Arabian peninsula and the horn of Africa, leaving settlements behind along the route. One group went from the Horn into Egypt and another crossed from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, to form the Canaanite-Phoenician ethnic group. *From Eden to Exile: The Epic History of The people of the Bible* (Arrow Books, 2002).

8 Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 298-299.

Sumerian is not known to be related to any other language.⁹ Elam, the eastern neighbor, is Elamo-Dravidian, related to languages of mostly southern India. Ashur and Aram, though, are “semitic”, but Lud, if father of the Lydians, is not (but it is Afro-Asiatic). Here the confusion of languages predominates even more than in the case of Ham's descendants.

Wenham helps us to see the Babel story as an episode in the dispute over covenant succession among the descendants of Shem. Already we noticed that a greater election and promise for one group over another is present in Noah's prophesy and blessing for his sons. There is a sense in which God is with Shem's descendants for a special purpose. We also see introduced a theme which receives tremendous stress in the accounts of the patriarchs—the dispute, especially between brothers, over the right to inherit this promise. A narrative pattern from the antediluvian genealogies is repeated here. The “false” line is given first, before the elect one. Thus we are told Cain's story before Seth's, and Ham's before Shem's (and in chapters 36 and 37 we will get the account of Esau before Jacob's).

Two sons were born to Shem's great-grandson Eber (the father of the Hebrews), Peleg and Joktan. We get Joktan's story first. He is the father of the Arabs. Wenham notes: “Tribes in southern Arabia claim that pure Arabs are descended from *Qahtān* [Yoqtan]. The connection of Yoqtan with South Arabia seems to be confirmed by the names of his sons.”¹⁰ They are said (in 10:30) to live in the *eastern* hill country. Here the list of descendants temporarily breaks off at this sideline. The next chapter takes up the historical narrative of the settling of the world. Men moving *east* (it nowhere says this was everybody) find a plain in Shinar. They propose to build a city and a tower to make a name (*shem* in Hebrew) for themselves, and avoid being scattered. Already in the preceding section on Ham we were told that his descendants, particularly Nimrod, were active in this area. But, as we all know, God stopped this project through the confusion of languages, and scattered the people.¹¹

The next sentence is “This is the account of Shem”. We backtrack to Shem, and get his genealogy once again, but it ignores Joktan entirely, proceeding from Eber, to Peleg, and on to his son Reu. After a few generations we reach Nahor, Terah, and Abram. It is to Abram that God next addresses a promise and a blessing. “I will make you into a great nation and I will make your name (*shem*) great, and you will be a blessing.”

Thus the story of the two lines, which first appeared with Cain and Seth, is repeated, this time with two branches of Shem. Certain people (Joktan) went *east* like Cain and in rebellion against God built cities. In fact we could say, founded great nation states and cultures from which a great cultural heritage comes down to us. Further, we see echoes of

9 Recently some have classified Sumerian as Dene-Caucasian along with Basque and Etruscan, Navajo, Apache, etc.

10 Wenham, p. 231.

11 David Rohl identifies Nimrod as Enmerkar, king of Uruk, who brought the goddess Inanna (Ishtar). *From Eden to Exile*, Chapter 4, “Nimrod and the Tower of Babel”.

this purpose and identity in the cultures of Shinar (Assyria and Babylon) through succeeding millennia as they tried to impose their rule on the whole world, through the methods of Nimrod. But their basic project of claiming to be God's true people, and controlling the access to heaven was frustrated by God. After a few more generations God chose someone (Abram) from another Shemite line of descent (Peleg) to carry out his purposes in a surprising way, as He had chosen Noah.

Clearly to be seen here once again are the principles of division introduced through God's gracious promise, continuity of historical development and great achievement by the ungodly, and God's providential control of history both in dramatic judgment and quietly in the lives of individuals. New elements are:

- An explicit election and blessing of a group as God's special instrument in history.
- Rivalry over who is the true inheritor of that promise.
- A presumptuous attempt to redefine God's election and program in the terms preferred by rebellious humanity.
- Besides those who are elected to the messianic line of promise, and those who are cursed, there is a third group of those who are far off, but not outside the ultimate scope of God's salvific plan.
- The inheritance by others of the cultural attainments of the wicked who are cut off.

Biblical History Lessons

To summarize our Biblical study let us relate it to the issues introduced at the start of this essay. Is there a center to historical action, and what is it? We have seen that there is a direction and promise generally in view through all of early history and it gets sharper as we approach the call of Abram. God is going to raise up a Seed, someone of special importance and blessing to all mankind. Throughout the early period this is fairly vague, but there are those who rebel against God's purposes and those whose rebellion takes the form of trying to hijack God's program, as at Babel. From our vantage point we know that the promise to Shem finally achieved its fulfillment in Christ. Thus he was at the center of pre-Abrahamic history as that history moved toward and engaged in a struggle related to the coming of Christ.

Was this history universal, or does a Biblical valuation of history only concern itself with the people who carry the promise? After the Flood rebellious groups who did not inherit the promise were sometimes concerned with it, as in the Joktan line of Shem, who tried to be the true Shem by building a single world center and gate to heaven. It is that very rebellion that produced a phenomenon highly important to history, the confusion of

languages. This would have happened anyway due to scattering and the passage of time leading to divergences among peoples out of touch with each other—just what the Babelites were trying to avoid—but not to as radical a degree. Second, great achievements are made even by, or especially by, those who are judged and cut off. The line of Cain extended the domestication of cattle, and developed metallurgy and musical instruments. The Canaanites left their literary instrument, the phonetic alphabet, and poetic culture to Israel, and through the Bible to us. The descendants of Shem and Ham who rebelled in Babylon left us urban culture, instruments of economic management, and the beginnings of science.

In this connection we should bear in mind, what is seldom noticed, that the judgment at Babel was itself an important new act of divine creation. The new languages were not degenerate fragments of the original language as gnostic and occult views would suggest, but marvelous new systems of ideation and expression. When we debate the value of Greek and Latin culture for Christian society we should not forget what was recovered for God's people from Jabal, Jubal, Tubal-Cain, Babylon, and the Canaanites. A study of the Psalms with this in view would be especially valuable.

New Covenant Times

So far avoided have been the problems raised by God's special calling and covenants with Abraham and Israel. Where they are concerned there are those who deny that parallels from these histories can properly be made to the general history of ancient times and to post-Advent history. The even greater problem of discontinuity in history is introduced by the New Covenant. Does the Church drop out of history to dedicate itself to its own new goals and destiny, while everything else just marks time until the whole number of the elect is gathered? If this is so, we should expect the discontinuity to be made clear in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, and especially in the Kingdom parables. I, however, will not drag the reader through a discussion of these matters. Instead, for the present discussion, I will assume that the general picture of history laid out in the early chapters of Genesis still holds, although with appropriate transformations.

What are these transformations? It is sometimes said that the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Christ, and rest of history looks back on it. In an important sense this is true. The forward direction of Biblical history as it moves towards the reception of God's promise is evident. It is also the case that the New Covenant Church looks back, in that it places tremendous emphasis in its worship, devotion, and teaching on what took place in Palestine in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But history does not thereby take on retrograde motion. It undergoes a transformation but still moves forward.

There was a narrowing in Genesis, first to the line of Seth, then to Noah, then to Shem, to the Peleg branch, to Abraham, to Isaac and not Ishmael (whose seed joined those other rebels, the Hamites and Joktanites), to Jacob and not Esau, etc. Sometimes the flow

widened out. Jacob's sons all became part of the promise as members of the nation of Israel, although only one tribe was chosen for special ministry, only one family for the priesthood, and only one person as high priest. The rest of the tribes depended on and supported the Levites and priests as other nations depended on the priestly function of Israel. At the destruction of the nation of Judah, other nations took on a more central historical role, and within decades the Japhethic nations reentered the forefront of history where they have remained to this day. At other times there was a narrowing again as when the northern tribes broke away and finally went into exile and political oblivion. In general, however, we see a narrowing of God's election for his special purpose until it is fulfilled in the single individual Jesus Christ.

Since Christ brought the New Covenant all nations are able in principle to participate on an equal basis in God's Kingdom, and in history this participation is made effective as the Kingdom grows. God's instrument is the Church, and the Church is open to all those who repent, make profession, and obey. The primary division in history is now between those who are within and without the Church. Once again the fundamental division in mankind is introduced by God's grace as he sets aside a people for himself.

Secondly, there is continuity of development. Few readers of this journal will deny theological progress from the early creeds up through the great Reformed confessions, progress earned through titanic struggles, divisions, controversies, and a great amount of cumulative thought generation following generation. In this the Church has stood against the world outside. The greatest challenge was the first confrontation with the culture of classical paganism. This pagan culture perished, yet we carry on a tremendous legacy from it in art, literature, formal and natural science, law, etc. To those Greek haters who want to remove all "Greek thinking" (abstract categories, logic, clarity, etc.) from theology, do away with metaphysics entirely from philosophy, and abolish all Roman administrative law, I would ask, "How do you justify this great innovation and discontinuity? Have God's people not always inherited, especially in culture, the achievements of the rebels?"

The problem, and it is an enormous one, is to separate the good from the bad, and to determine how far to use some elements which become dangerous or destructive if they become too dominant. This is not a new problem. The psalmists faced it when they confronted the Canaanite poetry with its imagery about the gods and nature which mixed the two in an idolatrous system. When can we speak of God riding on the clouds, etc. and still not fall into a pagan immanentizing of God? What Sunday School teacher does not struggle with this even now in teaching these Biblical pictures of God's activity to children, while still making clear God's transcendence?

Recasting this problem in historical terms, we find the Church entering new nations (or new nations entering the Church) as the Church struggles to transform them, all the while sifting the good and the bad of their cultures. Thus the history of the Germanic peoples undergoes a great revolution with the adoption of Christianity. It undergoes another great transformation in the Romantic movement when cultural leaders repudiate Christianity.

The Christian historian has to see these as key determinative events. Yet there was a great distance between the culture of Charlemagne's kingdom and that of the 13th century, a great change for the better.

The Church continues to have rivals. A movement such as Mohammedanism, which falsely claims to serve and speak for God, and which relentlessly opposes Christianity must be seen by the historian as basically evil. In addition there are those who seek to control history by controlling the churches, repeating the Babelite attempt to seize God's program and turn it to their own ends. Once the centrality of the Church in history is acknowledged this becomes more apparent to the historian.

In Europe in the late middle ages the state sought control of the churches. In those countries, such as France, where the state had large success the Reformation did not win. The Reformation itself was seen by state leaders elsewhere as a new opportunity to take control of the churches. England is a good example, with the Episcopalians seeking state dominance (and crafting a theology to make the Church subservient to the social establishment), and the Presbyterians opposing it. With the rise of strong central state power in Prussia, the state sought to subordinate the churches to its ends, mandating church union (Mobutu did the same in Zaire, as did many communist regimes), and making church functions such as education an instrument of state propaganda and administrative control of the population. The strength of the Church was to be absorbed into the power of the state.

Where church independence won, as in America, the strategy of its opponents then became to marginalize the churches. More and more functions—education is a prime example—were separated from church influence and subordinated ever more radically to the control and purposes of the state. In the view of the American enemies of God the power of the churches must ever give way in both force and extent to the power of the state.

Thus for the historian of modern western societies church-state relations serve as a major organizing theme for the last several centuries. When the emphasis within history shifts from this conflict to the transformation of culture by the Church once again, we will know that the tide has turned. How and when that will take place I do not know, but the providence of God, not some clever parachurch program, to be the determining factor.

In this perspective we see Jesus Christ as the center of history, not by making a new hidden history outside culture, outside the city, but by seeing him as the one who conquers and transforms. We see Christianity extended to new nations and their gradual internal transformation as their culture takes on more characteristics of Christian character. There are also important failures, or areas that resist this transformation, which call for moral assessments and judgments by the historian. Internal and external forces antithetical to Christianity attack Christian influences and attack the Church. All this gives a framework for interpretation and valuation by the Christian historian.

It also presupposes that the historian can bring to his analysis a definite idea of what Jesus Christ requires of a society. That is, the Bible must provide the necessary principles and patterns of cultural life. Whether it does, and the extent to which it does is, as the reader well knows, very much in debate today. Thus the work of the historian is bound up with the work of the theologian. If any historian agrees with my proposal he must also adopt a theology which informs his judgment on social matters. Those who reject this approach to history implicitly reject the theological premises to lead to it. In carrying out their work Christian historians are also doing theological battle with those of differing views. The Christian public, therefore, cannot leave them to their professional business undisturbed. Historians must be held accountable for their historical theologies.

Evangelical Evasions

In the preceding section I addressed the question of the theological meaning of history that is raised by self-professed Reformed thinkers who try to answer it after a fashion. The next set of issues requires a descent to a lower level where self-professed Reformed historians deny the possibility of a theological interpretation to history. What provoked the expression of these views was a book by a Lutheran theologian, John W. Montgomery. *Where is History Going?*, which appeared in 1969, distressed the evangelical historians who anticipated a career of comfortable secularism. About this time their professional organization, The Conference on Faith and History was getting underway, and the editor of the organization's journal asked Ronald J. VanderMolen to reply to Montgomery, initiating a lively exchange.

VanderMolen, a Calvin College graduate, did not like Montgomery's criticism of Barth's theology of history.

...while Calvin was willing to interpret biblical history, he avoided explaining God's reasons in historical events which occurred beyond biblical narratives. This is relevant to a discussion of Barth, because during his own lifetime it was the misuse of the idea of Providence which led many Christians to err; they supported Hitler as one responsible for German success after a long history of defeats. Though the validity of Barth's theology is debated in many circles, I would suggest that this view of history is plausible—even when one relies on Calvin's view of Providence. If Montgomery wants Christians to identify God's thinking by using a theory of Providence and thus create a Christian philosophy of history, he is looking in the wrong direction. The facts of history reveal success, failure, and change, but not God's disposition in these occurrences.¹²

Notice how academic secularism and antinomianism go together. Christians have no criterion with which to judge the program of someone like Hitler, VanderMolen assumes,

12 Ronald J. VanderMolen, "The Christian Historian: Apologist or Seeker?", *Fides et Historia*, Vol. III, No.1, Fall, 1970, p. 43.

so if they bring in some positive theological view of history it may as easily be used to baptize evil as not. Of course, *he* knows that what Hitler was pursuing was bad; although if he is consistent this knowledge cannot depend on the methods he uses as a professional historian.

VanderMolen argues that the historian must restrict himself to the understanding of history he can extract from his immediate sources. He must pretend that he himself has no values and no view of the purpose of history beyond his own private existence.

Montgomery ignores one of the major problem [sic] of doing universal history—the creation of a defensible axial scheme. McNeill [criticized by Montgomery, Ed.] needed an axiality to suit the entire “human community”, as the sub-title of his work indicates, and therefore he could not rely on traditional western interpretations. For example, though the birth of Christ is central in western dating schemes, though the historical Christ is central to Christianity, and though Christianity has had a great influence in Western Civilization, McNeill surely cannot be bound by these facts in writing universal history. Historians who write universal history are rather required to use an axial system which can be substantiated; and though the historicity of Christ is necessary for an evangelical confession, the influence of Christ and his Church hardly provide what the scholar who writes universal history needs.¹³

He goes on to say, “The Christian has solved the basic problems concerning the meaning of life in a personal commitment; thus, he does not have to rely on general history to fulfill that role.”¹⁴ The reader should review the preceding sentence a second time and ask himself what kind of religion it presupposes.

Even worse than VanderMolen is W. Stanford Reid. The fundamental question, he says, in the debate about Montgomery is: “what is the Christian interpretation of history?” By way of answer we must “recognize and take seriously first of all, the hiatus between time and eternity.” For Reid this takes the form of a fact/value dichotomy.

However much he may desire to reason from this space-time world to the eternity of God, the historian simply cannot do it. As a space-time conditioned creature who does not really understand time, man has even less ability to comprehend eternity and its relationship to the created material universe. Therefore he cannot reason his way from historical events back to the divine purpose in eternity. He knows God's purpose and view of particular events only in so far as God has revealed their meaning to him in the Scriptures...

13 VanderMolen, pp. 45, 46.

14 VanderMolen, p. 50.

For this reason the Christian historian cannot interpret the events of “secular” history explicitly in the light of eternity. Even his understanding of the events of “redemptive” history, although divinely interpreted and revealed sufficiently for salvation, is only very partial... He cannot say that this or that is the part which a certain event or individual plays in the plan and purpose of God. Christians have sometimes tried to do so in the past and frequently they have only revealed how foolish it is to attempt to deduce the secret purposes of God from historical happenings.¹⁵

As with VanderMolen what stands out is the foolishness of those who attempt to deny the possibility of a theological interpretation of history. He is confident that Christians in the past have failed in their attempts to identify the working of providence. How can he know this unless he himself has seen the working of providence in history clearly enough to see where others go wrong? His criticism of theological historical writing goes beyond VanderMolen's pragmatic objections, however, and finds a basis in philosophical principle. Reid adopts Kant's division between fact and value, the phenomenal and the numinal, history and religion. Whereas God may reveal the meaning of religious history, this revelation contains no principles which allow access to a religious meaning for general or “secular” history. The acceptance of this dichotomy is for Reid the precondition of practicing the historical profession. Put another way, Reid adopts as his working philosophy the modern pagan definition of science. Then he finds that it is impossible to interpret history theologically while remaining faithful to the scientific methodology!

It is one thing to claim that the extension of God's kingdom through the instrumentality of the Church is what makes history go, but that in practice the study of this process is beyond the competence of the historian, and another thing to argue that the historian must disregard the meaning of history to be faithful to his discipline. In general, these two claims are mixed together uncritically by Evangelical academic historians. As long as the professionals don't attempt theological history it seems plausible to them to argue that the great mass of events do not reveal a meaning beyond what the secular historian usually finds. Such events just don't advertise their significance the way a movement such as the Reformation does. Thus historical writing, the historian can argue, must follow the canons of the secular profession. These pose questions that the historian can answer from his evidence, and make possible the real work of the historian. This is a skeptical position, and historians are not comfortable with so low an evaluation of their achievement. Besides this, they really have not mounted the effort necessary to confirm that theological history cannot be done.

Consequently Evangelical historians pass on to arguments to show that theological interpretations are impossible in principle or fall outside the bounds of their profession. Such a defense is no defense because implicit in it is a theology of history and it involves

15 W. Stanford Reid, “The Problem of the Christian Interpretation of History”, *Fides et Historia*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1-2, pp. 98, 99.

them in a theological polemic against points of view such as the one I represent. Thus they do not escape theological issues after all, but more importantly they do not establish their theological case. So difficult is the theological problem these historians face that it is very hard to find any who will undertake a serious sustained defense of their method. They prefer not to discuss it.

But I do not care what the historian would prefer to do. The important issue is, what does the Church require of its historians? If they cannot undertake the difficult task of illuminating the Christian meaning of the events they study, why pay them money? Let them work for the pagans, or else find some honest way to earn a living. If a theological interpretation of history is too hard for them, then perhaps they can change their area of study, or sell shoes. The Christian should have an idea of the sort of history he is willing to pay for, and simply refuse to support those Christian colleges and seminaries whose history departments don't write and teach it.