The Problems of Preaching through History

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The Problems of Preaching through History

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a Christian scholarship essay
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for consideration for promotion to the rank of Full Professor
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History has both its fans and detractors, but a particular type of history tends to draw frequent criticism. It's the type viewed as dry, completely focused on the past, and thus, irrelevant. Henry Ford famously dismissed this form of history when he described it as "one damned thing after another," just a list of events that had nothing to do with the present or with anything significant.

Ford is not alone in this opinion. Many would say that the kind of history they prefer to read and hear about is history that's relevant and that teaches us lessons. There's good reasons for this preference. One of the most important and profound realizations History teachers hope their students come to understand is that they and all other human beings are ultimately linked and connected through history. We are all products of history. Ernst Breisach captures this idea eloquently. "Human life," he notes, "is never simply lived in the present alone but rather in three worlds: one that is, one that was, and one that will be. History deals with human life as it 'flows' through time." Therefore, we are profoundly and intimately connected with those who came before us; indeed, it's a central aspect of our very humanity. So there's all the reason in the world for us to learn from our forebears.

This has led some to use history to "preach" about human behavior, vice and virtue, sin and redemption. One prominent recent example of this practice can be found in the now-famous sermons of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, one-time pastor of Barack Obama at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Wright's comments about racism, violence, and terrorism--both today and in American history--produced widespread debate. Initially, much of the discussion revolved around politics and how this might affect Obama's presidential bid. But the incident also raised issues about how we view and interpret the past and about the relationship between preaching and historical understanding.

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For those of us who are Christians, preaching through history can be deeply satisfying. It allows us to combine our deepest moral and ethical convictions with our academic study. It also allows us to present a distinctively Christian form of history. Indeed, at first glance, this seems to be an obvious way to do history as a Christian--full-throated and unapologetic. Although there are many attractive reasons to “preach” in this way while doing history, I will suggest in this essay that conflating historical understanding and preaching poses significant problems and has the potential to limit our understanding of the past. Ultimately, I’ll argue that despite the personal and emotional satisfaction gained from preaching through history, it’s an unsatisfactory model of Christian history.

The Appeal of Preaching through History

Before critiquing this practice, though, let me first try to be fair toward it by discussing its appeal. I’ve frequently noticed the appeal it has for many fellow Christians, especially since I started teaching at a Christian college eleven years ago. Over this span of time, I’ve had many opportunities to speak with colleagues and students from other disciplines about their interests in history. I always enjoy these conversations and am continually heartened at the persistent popularity of history among the public. Yet there’s sometimes a bit of cognitive dissonance during these encounters that stems from our differing uses of the past.

Many of those outside the historical profession view history as a means to an end. For Christians, it’s often the appealing end of spiritual or moral revival. Over the years, I’ve heard many chapel speakers take this approach. If only we had the right moral exemplar (found someplace in the past), it’s said, we could shake up people today to live their lives differently. This tendency also leads to the inclination to judge and to look for moral heroes and villains
while studying history. This “instrumentalist” use of history, while popular, is not generally accepted by historians (for reasons that will be explored below).

A second appeal to preaching through history, noted by some fellow Christian historians, is that it allows us to try to imitate Christ in our historical scholarship and professional lives, not only in our personal lives. For those troubled by a dichotomy between personal and professional, this idea can be quite enticing. Given Christ’s frequent engagement with the outcasts and marginal people of his time, perhaps those historians who also strive to follow Christ when it comes time to choose research subjects might turn their attention to those on the margins—far from political, economic, and social power.

A third appeal to the preaching discourse is that it allows Christians to acknowledge God’s role in history. This understanding is central in the Christian faith. We worship a God who acts in history—not a capricious divinity who toys with people from time to time, not an absentee landlord or watchmaker god—but a God who acts. Scripture is full of actions attributed to God—from sparrows falling from heaven to mighty kings being overthrown. Psalm 136 is one of many psalms that gives a list of some of God’s actions. God made the heavens and the earth, divided the Red Sea in two, made Israel pass through the midst of it but overthrew Pharaoh and his host, remembered us in our low estate, and rescued us from our foes. More than this, in the fullness of time, God was made incarnate and entered human history. History is indeed profoundly important in the Christian faith.

A fourth and final appeal to preaching in history is that it allows us to identify and confront sin. When we look at the past (or the present) we’re often overwhelmed at the actions contrary to God’s will and destructive of the shalom God intended for his world: racism, greed, slavery, the lust for power and other idols, and on and on. The list of sins in history is truly
endless. What should we do about it? Traditionally, historians have not made this their central concern (for reasons that will be explored below). But some Christians, both historians and others interested in history, are frustrated at this seemingly passive and cowardly response. Following in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets who delivered messages of divine judgment to Israel for her sin and idolatry, some Christians (including Rev. Wright) have focused on sin in the nation’s past in a similar “prophetic” style.

The Problems of Preaching—Rooted in History

After briefly listing some of the appeals of preaching through history, let me now turn to my primary focus: the problems of this practice. I’ll look at two types of problems in turn: first, problems rooted in the nature of history itself, and second, problems rooted in Christian theology. Finally, I’ll conclude with a case study of this practice.

The debate about preaching in history raises issues that take us back to the very origins of western historiography. Before the 5th century B.C., there was not yet anything that we today would consider History. Rather, there were epics, works of “heroic history,” such as the Iliad and Odyssey. The differences between these epics and History are striking. In epics, the gods were the leading figures and most ordinary human beings were absent. Both time and space were shrunk with no attempt to connect past, present, and future. The purpose of the epics was to teach timeless virtues, not to view human beings within time. But this started to change in the 5th century B.C. when Herodotus helped establish History as we now know it, thereby earning himself the name “the Father of History.” History’s characteristics now included a view of time as continuous or linked, a commitment to examining human activity in a human and not a timeless context, and a focus on causation (what future History students would come to describe
as the notorious “why” question to be found on many of their exams). Following Herodotus, History became the story of the human and contingent world, far from the eternal, changeless essences of philosophers.²

Another important period in the development of the discipline of History came in the 19th century. At the time, positivism was dominating the natural and social sciences. Many great minds were focused on discovering the general laws that were thought to govern all natural and human phenomena. Some historians were swayed by this, believing that History could and should be a science. They thought that History, like other disciplines, could follow the scientific method down the pathway to timeless truth. These “scientific historians” started with the timeless and totalizing theories created by social scientists and then used “history” to prove the theory. Most historians did not follow the positivist scientific path, however. They found “social laws” like those of Auguste Comte or “economic laws” such as Karl Marx’s about the means of production to be wooden, over-stated, and ultimately unconvincing when examined next to what we know about human history with all its complexity and ambiguity.³

Also in the 19th century came the spread of historicism, an intellectual movement that argued that the autonomy of the past should be respected and that the task of understanding the past should precede any attempts to apply its insights to the present. The problem with some efforts to immediately apply history, historicists argued, is that our understanding of the past might become skewed and warped in the process. One long-popular example of the kind of instrumentalist history historicists have warned against is the use of history to try to prove either uniform progress or decline over time. What I’m calling preaching through history in this essay is another example. Here, the primary purpose of history becomes confronting guilt or repenting

² Breisach, Historiography, 5-26.
³ Breisach, Historiography, 272-302.
for sins, rather than trying to understand the past. These and other instrumentalist uses of history can do violence to our understanding of the past. The historicists continue to be helpful in reminding us of the frequent differences between present and past, differences that should not be blurred or obscured solely to meet some present-day need.⁴

This is not to say that historians, even those in part shaped by historicism, care nothing for morality or moral improvement. Indeed, a historian might argue that in addressing morality through a historical lens, the conclusions reached become all the more valuable and more relevant. Peter Stearns makes just this point in a short essay written for the American Historical Association on why students (and others) should study History. Among the six reasons he gives is that History contributes to moral understanding. He writes, “History... provides a terrain for moral contemplation. Studying the stories of individuals and situations in the past allows a student of history to test his or her own moral sense, to hone it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings. People who have weathered adversity not just in some work of fiction, but in real, historical circumstances can provide inspiration.”⁵ The problem with preaching in history, then, is that it literally takes us outside of time and human history, outside of human life as it’s been lived. In so doing, its results can produce a fleeting good feeling, but they’re so disconnected to human history that they remain in an abstract limbo state. The messages themselves that drive efforts to preach through history (for example, spiritual or behavioral improvement) are often admirable. But their timeless, ahistorical context render them somewhat irrelevant.

I’ve observed this gravitation toward instrumentalist uses of the past over the course of my teaching career. When I published a book recently on American Indians in mid-20th-century

Chicago, I had the opportunity to speak about my project to a wide range of audiences. All were polite and attentive, but there were sometimes those who were a bit disappointed when they discovered that the book didn’t tell a more powerful and guilt-inducing story of Indian victimization. Some people suggested that’s what my book should have done—in the light of such 19th-century atrocities as the Sand Creek and Wounded Knee massacres. I played the role of the historian in responding. I tried to explain that much changed for Indian people from the time of Wounded Knee to the upsurge of Indian urbanization half a century later. I tried to support my argument for a picture of at least partial success for Indian people in cities using a wide range of evidence. But this approach didn’t always convince and certainly didn’t emotionally satisfy some. For it deflated the preaching-oriented, instrumentalist use of the past that some of my readers hoped my book would provide. On another occasion, a former colleague from another department working on an academic paper approached me looking for evidence of widespread germ warfare waged by soldiers and pioneers in the American West against American Indians. He was disappointed when I could give him at best one possible and much-disputed case of this. This wouldn’t help his sermon against American depravity he hoped to deliver in the midst of his academic paper. In his mind, instrumentalist trumped history.

At times, traditionalist historians who subscribe to some degree of historicism are misunderstood as being political motivated, cheerleaders for a particular cause, or front-runners. These charges are unfair. In my experiences talking about American Indian with others, it’s not that I wanted to let America “off the hook” for what are clearly legions of sins and injustices committed against American Indian people over centuries. Rather, my role as a historian led me to try to understand the past first before applying its insights to the present.

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*James B. LaGrand, Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-75 (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2002).*
More recently, I’ve had cause to think about varying uses of history while beginning a new project on American nationalism and the uses to which social reformers have put the symbol of the nation. I’m entering into a field of study where many have preceded me, including political philosophers and theologians. Many of these scholars using their disciplinary toolkits have condemned nationalism for understandable reasons. As an abstract, timeless idea, nationalism certainly seems a dangerous force, and for Christians in particular, it can become an alluring idol. But in bringing my disciplinary tools to bear on this subject and examining it historically in the American experience, I’ve begun to see a markedly different picture. Nationalism and the image of the nation, I’m becoming convinced, have served as a tool of reform in the hands of figures such as the labor leader Eugene V. Debs and the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. My initial work leads me to believe that from a historical approach, American nationalism turns out to be a more malleable, plural, and useable resource than many of its critics have argued.

Those of us who are historians hope that others remain interested in our discipline and we don’t wish to be killjoys about this matter of preaching. But because we’re keenly aware of the steps that needed to be taken over centuries to produce our discipline, we’re sometimes wary about this practice. We appreciate the human (and so timebound), rather than the timeless nature of history. We value its explanatory power, its ability to help us understand others and ourselves. The chart below serves to sum up the differences between some other disciplines (described in the left-hand column) and history (described in the right-hand column).

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<thead>
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<th>ontological approach</th>
<th>historical approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>focus on what subjects are</td>
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<td>goal of preaching</td>
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These options aren’t entirely mutually exclusive. There certainly can be some combining of categories or blurring of lines. But for the most part, I’d argue that one must make a choice between these options. Historians tend to believe their choices are made for good and sound reasons.

The Problems of Preaching--Rooted in Christian Theology

For many historians, then, the problems of using history to preach that are rooted in the discipline of History itself will be convincing by themselves. But there’s another dimension to this issue for Christians. Although there seem to be compelling reasons to preach through history (as noted above), there are also problems with this particularly related to the Christian faith. As a result, I’ll suggest that it’s not only professional historians who should be wary of preaching through history.

One of these issues relates to exactly how we think about God acting in history. It’s clear that God acts, but what are his purposes in acting? Can we know what these are? Through much of the Old Testament, Scripture seems clear about God’s purposes in acting, with his chosen people Israel often receiving blessings in response to obedience and curses following disobedience and idolatry. But Scripture also speaks of God sending rain on both the just and unjust, it criticizes Job’s friends who thought they knew why Job was suffering, and it reminds us that we generally see through a glass darkly when it comes to discerning God’s purposes here on earth.

Perhaps the most helpful figure in the Christian tradition on the matter of thinking about God’s purposes in history is St. Augustine of Hippo. He remains highly instructive yet today. This church father faced the question of what God was doing in history under the most trying of
circumstances. After Rome was captured and sacked by Visigoth invaders in AD 410, there was widespread shock and outrage. It was thought that Rome would stand forever and now it had been overrun. Many pagan Romans looked to the Christians living there as the culprit. They charged them with angering the gods and causing the sack of Rome because of their efforts to curtail pagan worship practices. Added to Roman Christians’ anxieties was the fact that many had become influenced themselves by the idea of Roma Aeterna (Eternal Rome), and had come to associate the Roman Empire with the sacred story of the world taught by the Christian religion, which they understood as stable and orderly. Now this stability and order lay in ruins. In this context, Augustine began writing The City of God, which he completed in AD 426.

Augustine rejected the way in which the Roman Empire (or any earthly empire) had been associated with the divine. Countering this popular notion, he described two different fields or cities, the City of God and the Earthly City. These differed in their origin, their motivations, and their historical progression. Augustine writes, "Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self. . . . In the Earthly City, princes are as much mastered by the lust for mastery as the nations which they subdue are by them; in the Heavenly, all serve one another in charity."7

The strikingly different natures of these two cities and the way in which they both overlapped and remained distinct made it difficult to figure out God’s purposes in human, post-biblical history, Augustine suggested. He noted that by human standards, God appears inconsistent in his actions and judgments: "There are good men who suffer evils and evil men who enjoy good things, which seems unjust; and there are bad men who come to a bad end, and good men who arrive at a good one. Thus, the judgments of God are all the more inscrutable,

and His ways past finding out.” In the Earthly City or post-biblical human history, no overarching meaning or stability could be expected or discerned by human beings.⁸

Although Augustine has become enormously influential for many Christian historians, this was not his primary vocation. As a bishop of the church, Augustine was intent on instructing and preaching. Given our focus here on preaching in history, the exact nature of Augustine’s preaching bears noting. On some issues he expressed certainty, but on others acknowledged uncertainty.

While Augustine acknowledged that the judgment of God was difficult to figure out in his time and in human history generally, it didn’t follow that we should question or downplay the idea of God’s judgment in the human experience altogether. Rather, Augustine pointed his readers past the chaotic and confusing events which understandably had consumed their recent attention to a time when God’s purposes would be made clear, the final “day of Judgment” or “day of the Lord.” God’s judgment is real, Augustine argued, but our understanding of its purposes now and in the hereafter is markedly different.

I’d suggest that centuries after his death, Augustine should continue to serve as a model for Christians both in his conviction to preach about the things of God and in his decision not to surpass the limited knowledge human beings have about God’s purposes in this world in order to do so. We know that God acts and see examples of God’s providence around us. But in looking at the sweep of human history wearing the lenses we have on this side of the final day of Judgment, we should not try to do “providential history.”

Indeed, many have been influenced by Augustinian thinking. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr often addressed the limits of human understanding and vision in his writings. He applied this inexorable human characteristic also to attempts to read God in history. As a result,

⁸ Augustine, The City of God against the Pagans, 967-968; Breisach, Historiography, 84-97.
he particularly admired Abraham Lincoln’s speeches given during the Civil War. Niebuhr believed these speeches were both pious in their acknowledgement of the Almighty’s purposes in history and appropriately skeptical in admitting our limited ability to discern these purposes. Reflecting on Lincoln’s legendary words, Niebuhr notes, “While the drama of history is shot through with moral meaning, the meaning is never exact. Sin and punishment, virtue and reward are never precisely proportioned.”

By the time Christians teaching history in the academy organized a professional organization named the Conference on Faith and History in 1967, providential history was a distinctly minority position among Christian academics. Frank Roberts and George Marsden, two early members, helped guide Christian historians between the two poles of “overassurance,” meaning providential history, and “overdiffidence,” or a complete rejection of the idea of relating history and Christianity. Neither of these was an appropriate Christian response, they believed. Echoing Augustine, Niebuhr, and others, Roberts gently critiqued those overly-assured historians who viewed a “Christian approach to history as essentially the unveiling of the divine plan within specific events of the past, and the pointing out of the good and evil forces within history.”

Roberts looked dimly at this type of preaching within history and also at the type inspired by Herman Dooyeweerd, a philosopher popular among some Reformed Christians. Dooyeweerd had established a whole new set of timeless laws and reductionist models which he said explained all of human history. Because his work was distinctly and boldly Christian, some Christian historians were drawn to it. But Roberts warned his fellow historians about the cost of adopting this. After Dooyeweerdianism’s totalizing interpretative tools were trotted out to explain every aspect of the past, Roberts observed that “there remains very little ambiguity in

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history.”  

George Marsden, too, has weighed in on the topic of providential history. Few have done more to explore the relationship between Christianity and historical scholarship than Marsden. He has long argued for the legitimacy of Christian scholars in the academy against those who believe it should be a strictly secular domain for value-neutral knowledge. He furthermore has argued that Christians should be allowed to enter the academy as Christians with their identity intact—just as Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, and others do. There should be no double-standard targeting Christians. But he’s also quick to point out that there’s a common set of “rules” that both Christian and non-Christian historians are obliged to observe. Both groups should do their evidence-based research or “detective work” in the same way. Both should subscribe to the norms and standards of history. These rules clearly place providential history or a special claim to knowledge of God’s purposes in human history out of bounds. Arguments inspired by religious faith, what Marsden calls “background beliefs,” can be put forward, but they should be argued on grounds that are accessible to all historians, not based on special private revelation.  

Thus far, I’ve suggested that a preaching-style of history faces the problem—specifically related to Christianity—of exaggerating our knowledge of God’s purposes in human history. It also faces a problem with sin; namely, the preaching approach seems surprised by sin in history. One wouldn’t think that those with a Christian anthropology or worldview would be surprised by sin. But once again, our various purposes in studying the past—some instrumentalist and others

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historicist--explain this phenomenon. For those of us focused on trying to understand the past by examining history within a human context, sin comes as no surprise. It’s all too evident in the historical record--in addition to being taught by Christian theology. But for those focused on confronting guilt, either individual or collective, and on bringing repentance using the Kingdom of God as the context, then sin becomes a more jarring presence--even sin in history.

The British historian and Christian Herbert Butterfield was certainly among those historians in the former historicist group committed to doing history in a human, rather than a divine, context. This led him to warn historians against making moral judgments about such things as sin in his legendary 1931 book *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Though this practice might be tempting, Butterfield said making moral judgments was not in the historian’s purview and would lead to a dead-end. Here is Butterfield’s description of what historians do:

“Historical explaining does not condemn; neither does it excuse; it does not even touch the realm in which words like these have meaning or relevance . . . . It is neither more nor less than the process of seeing things in their context. True, it is not for the historian to exonerate; but neither is it for him to condemn. It greatly clears his mind if he can forgive all sins without denying that there are sins to forgive; but remembering the problem of their sinfulness is not really a historical problem at all.” Few have expressed this idea more clearly: sin might well be a personal or moral or pastoral problem, but it is not a historical problem.

Butterfield went so far as to state that if historians began to focus excessively on making moral judgments, they’d lose their function as historians. They’d no longer have any place to stand from which to say anything useful, only able to deliver empty, abstract statements. “Moral judgments are useless they can be taken to imply a comparison of one man with another,” he wrote. “Otherwise, the historian would have to fall flat with the commonplace that all men are
sinners sometimes." For a historian shaped by historicism like Butterfield, sin within history is no surprise; it hardly bears noting.

Another struck by the ubiquity of human sin is Reinhold Niebuhr, whose exploration of this theme shook the intellectual world of mid-20th-century America. As a young man, Niebuhr was active in socialist and pacifist circles. But over time, his growing conviction about the stubbornness and "egoism" of human nature caused him to doubt the wisdom of philosophies or programs based on idealism. He started the process of eventually becoming the foremost spokesman for "Christian realism" with *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932. Niebuhr shocked many of his colleagues with this book, arguing that morality is impossible to achieve for collectives like the United States or any other nation. While individuals clearly exhibited self-interest, Niebuhr argued that collectives' "unrestrained egoism" was exponentially greater. Failing to realize this, Niebuhr said, would only result in "unrealistic and confused political thought." Historians shaped by Niebuhr's thinking about human nature would argue that a failure to see human nature accurately also leads to confused history.

Since the time of Butterfield and Niebuhr, historians, like any other group, have been varied in their assessment of human nature and the potential of human endeavor. But there continue to be significant Christian voices reminding of the pervasiveness of sin. One is Kenneth Scott Latourette, the historian of Christian missions at Yale University during the middle of the 20th century. Elected president of the American Historical Association in 1948, he decided to give his end-of-term presidential address on the topic "The Christian Understanding of History." Before a large group of his fellow historians listening in a Washington, D.C. hotel

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ballroom, Latourette talked among other things about how the Christian tradition he held to did
not expect perfection within history, did not expect “the full conformation of mankind to the
measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” until the Second Coming.\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, Wilfred
McClay recently has written about the important task given to historians with a Christian
worldview. They are particularly well-equipped, he suggested, to navigate our way forward.
“By relentlessly placing on display the pervasive crookedness of humanity’s timber,” McClay
has written, “history brings us back to earth, equips us to resist the powerful lures of radical
expectations, and reminds us of the grimmer possibilities of human nature--possibilities that, for
most people living in most times, have not been the least bit imaginary. With such realizations
firmly in hand, we are far better equipped to move forward in the right way.”\textsuperscript{15}

Although many Christian historians continue to be convinced by the Augustinian case
against providential history, the “Christian realists” case against preaching about sin through
history, and the long-standing norms and practices of the discipline of History, it would be an
exaggeration to depict this as a completely settled matter. In fact, in recent years a group of
Christian historians has expressed some dissatisfaction about this state of affairs. Critiquing
what seems to them a timid and bland consensus among Christian historians, they’ve called for
something new. It’s not yet clear how much influence this group might have to reshape
Christian history or what exact form this might take. In general, though, this group has
encouraged Christians to pursue a bolder type of history which more distinctively bears the
influences of Christian belief, practice, and experience. Christopher Shannon has suggested that
some of the secular standards of the academy should not be adopted by Christian academics as
general rules of the academic game. Rather, they should try to make use of traditions and

\textsuperscript{14} Kenneth Scott Latourette, “The Christian Understanding of History,” \textit{American Historical Review} 54 (1949), 166.
\textsuperscript{15} Wilfred M. McClay, “Clio’s Makeshift Laboratory,” \textit{First Things} (March 2001), 25.
discourses distinct to Christianity. Others influenced by theologians John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas have advocated a Christian instrumentalist history that could be used to preach against what Paul in Ephesians 6 refers to as the “powers” over our present dark world. There’s been recent attempts, too, to reframe history as done by Christians to allow it be fused with Christian discipleship. Finally, Steven Keillor recently has advocated a God’s-eye providential history as a boldly Christian type of history. Some of these practices promise spiritual and devotional benefits, but the problems and dangers for history in this group of proposals are more striking. It would be helpful if these critics engaged the ideas of figures like Augustine and Butterfield more fully, and if they were more explicit about the ramifications of their proposals on the discipline of History. Their calls for Christian instrumentalist history don’t engage the many critiques made of this practice. Most important, they don’t help us with one of history’s central purposes: to try to understand the past. By advocating we see “the powers” (including such things as nationalism and patriotism) ontologically rather than historically, they predict what these phenomena have done using static

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20 Yerxa’s “Meaningful Past” and “That Embarrassing Dream” are admirably forthright and thoughtful about disciplinary issues, but the other pieces of criticism discussed above are largely silent.
ready-made models, rather than studying it using evidence and historical detective work. This
type of approach, whether taken by Christians or others, can't deal with the "messiness" of
history, its unexpected twists and turns, the surprise of finding evil people doing good things and
virtuous, moral people revealing a fatal flaw in some of their actions. Preaching in history
unfortunately has no room for this.

A Case Study of the Problems of Preaching through History

Finally, let me provide a case study of the broad theme of preaching through history I've
been exploring in this essay. It comes from the history of American race relations, specifically
the part of it that saw the rise and fall of de jure segregation (or "Jim Crow"). If any topic would
seem to fit the preaching model, it's this one. The history of sit-ins and massive resistance, of
Martin Luther King and Bull Connor, seems to cry out for preaching and some type of moralistic
approach. Yet even here the preaching approach has its limits and the traditional historians'
focus on understanding the past has yielded significant and valuable results.

Two of the more significant books in this field of study are C. Vann Woodward's The
Strange Career of Jim Crow (1955) and David L. Chappell's A Stone of Hope: Prophetic
Religion and the Death of Jim Crow (2004). Woodward's book is so influential that it was
recognized by the Modern Library as one of the one hundred most important books in all of 20th-
century nonfiction. And Chappell's recent monograph was hailed by one reviewer as "one of the
three or four most important books on the civil-rights movement."

commemorative ed); David L. Chappell, A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow (Chapel
Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Benjamin Schwartz, review of Stone of Hope, by David L.
These two much-praised books are united in their deceptively simple focus. Both start by asking the question: “Why?” In Woodward’s book, the question is why de jure segregation arrived in the South at the turn of the 20th century, and in Chappell’s it’s why the participants in the civil rights movement were successful in overthrowing this segregation in the middle of the 20th century. These are among the most central questions asked by historians of American race relations or by all historians of modern America, for that matter. These questions are addressed not only in scholarly research but in countless History lectures. These two books are among those rare offerings that force History teachers to completely rewrite our lecture notes. The results would be different, though, had the authors followed another approach. I suggest that much of the explanatory power and usefulness of these books would be lost if the authors had decided primarily to preach rather than to first explain.

Woodward’s book is very much the work of a son of the South. Born and raised in Arkansas, he took his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina, and then taught southern history as a young professor at Johns Hopkins University in the 1940s. Between teaching and doing his own research there, he found time to do research to support the cases that NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall was bringing before the Supreme Court. Eventually, these cases would culminate in Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka (1954), in which the Supreme Court declared de jure segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional.

To reach this point, NAACP lawyers and Woodward had to confront the idea held by most white southerners that desegregation could never work because their region had always had segregation and was marked by a strong continuity and resistance to change. Woodward shattered this idea by demonstrating abrupt changes in southern history. Woodward’s Strange Career began as a series of lectures he was invited to give to students at the University of
Virginia in 1954. UVA was still a segregated institution when Woodward visited, and the all-white student body was comprised of students who had known only segregation their entire lives. Like many other white southerners, they thought there was something timeless, natural, and inevitable about Jim Crow. Woodward told them they were wrong; more specifically, they were wrong historically. Over the course of his lecture series, he showed how *de jure* segregation only had the “illusion of permanency.” Woodward showed a period of fluidity in race relations in the South between about 1870 and 1900 when “alternatives were still open and real choices had to be made.” Only around the turn of the 20th century did segregation take root. Before this time, southern society was far from perfect or equal. But remarkably, it was not rigidly segregated by race.  

Woodward then went on to tackle the complicated “why” question. Why had the social and racial structure of the South changed so quickly from the 1870s to the 1910s? The answer, known ever since as the legendary “Woodward thesis,” has to do with many factors: race and class, compromise and conflict. The heart of Woodward’s argument is that for a time in the late 19th century, two groups of white southerners who might have been expected to support segregation instead resisted it. Their reasons had to do with economics and social class. The wealthy patrician class committed primarily to a stable and conservative social order feared the potential influence that some poor whites might have on politics. Woodward’s historical research even discovered examples of southern whites who in their upper-class paternalism claimed to prefer a “proper” black man to a poor and angry white man. To capitulate to a purely race-driven social order wouldn’t be good for them as a class or for the South as a whole, they thought. Similarly, many poor white farmers angry about the continued clout of the old planter class in the post-war South also decided for a time that class should trump race, in this case to

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unite poor whites and blacks trapped in sharecropping or tenant farming. This lasted for a couple of decades, but around the turn of the century, political, economic, and international developments all helped to bring this phenomenon to an end. At this time, the checks against racialism faded and white supremacy grew in power and prominence. But it’s the period of inter-racial contact and fluidity in the late 19th century that struck Woodward as remarkable and important. This had nothing to do with the goodness or moral virtue of the people Woodward studied. Rather, this chapter in the South’s past was explained by very human (and so historical) reasons, displaying the often surprising and messy, complex nature of history.23

When I taught Woodward’s Strange Career in class, students don’t always catch this right away. These Christian young people, many of whom are involved in urban outreach and ministries, are sometimes inclined first to try to preach in some way. When I ask them about the profound and beneficial development at the heart of Woodward’s book, the opening up of racial relations at the end of the 19th century, some want to spiritualize it rather than dealing with Woodward’s framework of human history. On one occasion, a student grasped Woodward’s complicated argument full well, but ended up being frustrated by it. When he started to discern some of Woodward’s historical subjects doing a good thing in resisting racial separation, he grew excited. He thought he’d found some heroes in this history. But he soon grew disappointed, for there were no morally spotless upright heroes standing up on soapboxes to rail against the injustices of segregation to be found. This would have made for a moving story, but it’s not the history that Woodward uncovered in his book. His subjects weren’t heroes at all. They had base and selfish reasons for their political actions. Some were even quoted by Woodward making racist statements—even as their actions resisted racial segregation. These

people were no moral exemplars, not even heroes with feet of clay. My student’s initial hopes for a particular kind of “relevance” were dashed, leaving him frustrated with Woodward’s book.

In class, this was followed by a discussion about some of the aspects of history explored in this essay, how it’s ordinarily examined by human and not divine standards, resulting in a lot of moral nuance and shades of gray and few spotless heroes. I tried to explain the difference between preachers and historians. Preachers tend to focus on righteousness—whether peoples’ lives correspond to God’s purposes and standards. Historians have different focuses. They often start with the kind of goal Woodward put before himself in Strange Career: to “try to understand what happened.”

But this isn’t to say that history like Woodward’s focused on understanding is somehow irrelevant or “ivory tower” history. Indeed, Woodward’s Strange Career is the furthest thing from this. He very much wants to be relevant and even functions as a kind of preacher. But his preaching and his relevance is of a subtle nature and always responsive to his duties and purpose as a historian. For Woodward, the explaining and understanding came first, before the preaching. Only then would his message be convincing and truly relevant in human life as it’s experienced in time. But his message was certainly relevant. Woodward was particularly struck by the implications of discontinuity in history. It suggested that history was open, that there were times when there were choices to be made that might have profound effect on the turn of events. Involved in civil rights causes his entire life, Woodward hoped that his account of alternatives before the emergence of de jure segregation would inspire southerners in the 1950s to imagine alternatives to it in their time. For this reason, Martin Luther King referred to Woodward’s Strange Career as the “historical Bible of the civil rights movement.” History, particularly the history of race relations, had the ability to change. There was nothing natural or

inevitable about racial segregation. King found this historical idea enormously powerful and relevant, even coming from someone like Woodward who did not focus on preaching in his history-writing.

Moving forward in the history of American race relations to the civil rights movement, hundreds of books by now have focused on the movement and its success in eventually toppling legal segregation in the mid-1960s. David L. Chappell’s recent *Stone of Hope* has won prominence for tackling the question of why the movement was successful and for adding to new aspect to the answer. Chappell explains his thesis: “The civil rights movement succeeded for many reasons. This book isolates and magnifies one reason that has received insufficient attention: black southern activists got strength from old-time religion, and white supremacists failed, at the same moment, to muster the cultural strength that conservatives traditionally get from religion.”

In Chappell’s historical account, white segregationists appear surprisingly weak. They were repeatedly unsuccessful in trying to draw strength from Christianity or church leaders to bolster their cause. They perhaps expected more in light of how pro-slavery advocates in the South had been so successful in using Christianity a century earlier. As they grew more worried about the influence of the NAACP and other groups calling for the end of the color line through the 1950s and 1960s, pro-segregation activists continued to push their cause, writing angry letters to white church leaders accusing them of passivity and cowardice for not strongly and publicly supporting segregation. But it was for naught, Chappell argues. They were unsuccessful in swaying opinion.

On the other hand, African Americans active in the movement in the South were energized by Christianity. Indeed, Chappell argues that the common description of the

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movement should be inverted. It wasn’t a political movement with religious overtones (such as some gospel music in the background). Rather, Chappell argues that participants saw it primarily as a religious movement—a “holy crusade,” in John Lewis’ words. And they saw God working within the movement. Many believed God had brought the young Martin Luther King, Jr. to the pulpit at Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist church in 1954 at just the right time to help the movement. To think otherwise they thought naïve. Fannie Lou Hamer was one who had no time for such skeptical talk. “Don’t talk to me about atheism,” she once told a group of white secular college students coming down south to help the movement. “If God wants to start a movement, then hooray for God.”26 After examining both white and Black Christians in the South, Chappell’s central contribution in answering the “why” question about the success of the civil rights movement focuses on religion. In a deeply Christian region such as the South of the 1950s and 1960s, black activists were able to productively use this resource; white segregationists were not.

Chappell’s explanatory approach is not the only model available, though. In this case, the counter-approach is found in the work of another scholar, Charles Marsh. Marsh, who teaches Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, has sparred back-and-forth with Chappell specifically on how religion in the movement should be viewed. Marsh’s fullest exploration of this is found in God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights, originally published in 1997 with a revised edition in 2008.27 It might be surprising at first that that two prominent contemporary writers who both have chosen to focus so extensively on religion in the movement would be so critical of each other’s work. But it’s no surprise when we note the markedly different way in which they use religion. Chappell uses it as an explanatory tool in order to try to

26 Hamer quoted in Chappell, Stone of Hope, 71.
understand the civil rights movement, while Marsh does so in an instrumentalist fashion to
preach to his readers while writing about the movement. Marsh’s approach has earned his books
rave reviews from Christian publications like Christianity Today, but it also makes his book
being less useful for historians, I’d suggest.

Marsh is especially perturbed at Chappell’s conclusions about white segregationists and
their influence in southern churches. Chappell is struck (rightly, it seems to me) by the lack of
impact they had. Although the views they expressed were certainly noxious and revolting, they
didn’t carry the day; they weren’t able to mobilize others. But this doesn’t sit well with Marsh.
For him, Chappell’s minimizing of the segregationists’ impact seems akin to minimizing their
hatred and sin.

Likewise, Marsh’s view of southern white evangelicals differs from Chappell’s. Marsh is
struck by their moral blindness, at their choosing comfort and privilege over working for justice.
He’s quite right here as far as it goes. They were indeed hypocrites. They claimed the whole of
the Bible to be true, but ignored the parts that dealt with the unity of the body of Christ and the
power of reconciling love. This is an entirely valid moral or religious or pastoral point. It might
even have the salutary effect of bringing readers of Marsh’s book today to repentance for their
own sins of omission. But this point’s relationship to the history of the civil rights movement is
unclear. It does little to help us better understand this part of the past.

Chappell sees these southern white evangelicals differently. He’s not struck by their
sinful hearts (perhaps because he doesn’t write as a Christian or perhaps because he shares the
same belief about human nature as people like Butterfield and Niebuhr). Instead, he’s struck by
what they did or were unable to do. “The historically significant thing about white religion in the
1950s-60s is not its failure to join the civil rights movement,” he writes. “The significant thing,
given that the church was probably as racist as the rest of the white South, is that it failed in any meaningful way to join the anti-civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{28}

Marsh also frequently addresses God’s role in the events of the movement. He’s not content with Chappell quoting Fannie Lou Hamer and other movement activists about how they believed God was at work—because he doesn’t follow up with an personal about affirmation about his own view of God’s actions. Marsh does practice this kind of providential history in affirming what the civil rights members said about what God was doing. He explains that in \textit{The Long Summer} he “ask(s) questions about God” while exploring the history of the movement. Elsewhere in telling the story of the movement, he proposes moving past history “into a new way of seeing, into the world of God.”\textsuperscript{29}

Marsh is very much an instrumentalist in his use of history. As someone who grew up in the South within the white church, he feels compelled to tackle his personal and family history and to call the church to repentance in the course of writing about the history of the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{30} These are understandable and admirable goals, but they don’t directly confront the arguments about why the civil rights movement was or was not successful.\textsuperscript{31} The approaches taken by Woodward and Chappell, characterized by a reluctance to preaching and focused on explanation, will continue to be of great value to historians and to our understanding of the past.

\textsuperscript{28} Chappell, \textit{Stone of Hope}, 107. Peter Murray notes Chappell’s reluctance to view the civil right movement solely “as a struggle between good people and bad people” in his review of \textit{Stone of Hope} in \textit{Georgia Historical Quarterly} 88 (Winter 2004), 556-569. Lewis Baldwin responds angrily to this reluctance to preach in his review in \textit{The Alabama Review} (January 2005), 72-74.


The conclusion reached here, that preaching through history is an unsatisfactory model for doing history (whether for Christians or others), still may not sit well. For the messages transmitted through this practice are often admirable and appealing. And it at least appears to allow us to be relevant, to "make a difference." But I've tried to demonstrate here that relevance can be bought at too high a cost, that in some cases trying to make a difference can interfere with our understanding of the past and weaken history's explanatory power.

For Christians in particular, the impulse to preach through history often proceeds from the experience of an identity problem. It appears to some that history by itself is somehow inadequate or worldly. A divide emerges with a professional and academic identity on one side and a private Christian identity on the other. For those operating under these assumptions, preaching through history seems to unify these two identities. Supplementing history with preaching seems to make it a sacred calling.

There needn't be such a divide for Christian historians, however. I'll close with the suggestion that instead of trying to do history-as-discipleship, we look to the tradition of Christian humanism as a way to support and defend the idea that Christians can confidently and faithfully do history as history. Christian humanism rejects the idea that human history—or any other sphere of human culture—is inherently and strictly worldly. This conviction stems from the implications of human beings made in the image of God. As a result, Virgil Nemoianu has written that "the fundamental gesture of Christian humanism [is] to respond to the world by taking it over, by embracing it, by showing that no beauty, intelligence, or goodness is alien to Christianity or incompatible with it." Thus, carefully-crafted history (or literature or music or

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32 Virgil Nemoianu, "Teaching Christian Humanism," First Things (May 1996), 16-22. Similarly, the Reformed tradition's idea of the cultural mandate teaches the inherent importance of intellectual and cultural work. See Brian
art) is a faithful Christian response to the world around us. Inquiry and understanding are valuable tasks for Christian historians just as they are for others. Herbert Butterfield suggests that “by merely inquiring and explaining, [the historian] is increasing human understanding, extending it to all the ages, and binding the world into one.”33 Finally, Christian humanism helps us reflect on history’s signal contribution to the understanding of the human experience: the context of time. Ernst Breisach captures this well, noting, “No other endeavor fits as well as history does with the peculiar needs of human beings, to whom the temporality of life allots the roles of emigrants from the past, inhabitants of the present, and immigrants into the future.”34 This experience of time is indeed a profound one for all human beings as well as for Christians. Understanding time and our experiences within time is of great meaning and fully consonant with biblical themes. We’re instructed as Christians to live keenly aware of our place in the flow of time. We’re to look back on what God has done for us and for all his children and we’re to look ahead, like faithful Simeon, to the time when God’s promises will be fulfilled. In all of these ways, then, the study of history is seen to be an important and faithful vocation for Christians.

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