



Faith Pulpit

Making Church History Relevant for Pastors and Students

What is the value of church history to us today? Does it have any bearing on how we live and minister? In this issue of the Faith Pulpit, Dr. Ken Rathbun, graduate of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary and visiting faculty member of FBTS, explores why church history is important for believers today, using a model he has developed. In his second article he applies that model to a contemporary area of church life.

Most of us took our church history classes¹ in Bible college or seminary (or both) because we had to complete another requirement to graduate. Of course, there were some famous episodes within the last 2,000 years of Christian history that we wanted to know about. And we were told, as the common maxim goes: “Those who do not learn from the errors of [church] history are destined to repeat them.” Also, I remember one revered seminary professor at Faith telling us that the department of church history was always the last in a theological institution to turn liberal. If that is the case, surely there must be something important in those historical classes that will help us remain true to our Biblical heritage.

The challenge is how to discern what those lessons might be in the midst of all those religious figures, civil leaders, dates, locations (mostly European), and events. Sometimes students get lost in all the details of the (admittedly lengthy) narrative. A legitimate question to ask of church history is: How does knowledge of this material matter to my life and ministry? My response is that submitting a given event or period of church history to a prescribed model provides a helpful way to answer this question.

Models

I have found that models can help greatly in creating clarity. In my understanding, models are guides that ask the same series of pertinent questions of any number of historical situations, identifiable groups, or intellectual viewpoints. By way of example, I have used one model (not my own) when I have taught Comparative Religions classes. The Religious Model² I use for that class helps provide understanding, gives a basis of comparison, and illuminates similarities between widely differing traditions such as Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, and Christianity. Briefly, this Religious Model asks of each tradition:

- 1) What is the chief problem in the world or in human existence?
- 2) What is the ideal state or goal which would alleviate the problem?
- 3) What is the method by which a person can solve the problem or pass into the desired state?

Of course, in this subject we have to consider many factors (e.g., commitment level, diversity within one tradition). Models provide teachers and students a vantage point from which to view contrasting ideas and similar concerns.

Authorities

In regard to church history I have developed my own model to help make sense of the various events in church history and relate them to our contemporary situation. First, I centered on a theme or idea to focus upon throughout history. While many options exist, I chose the concept of authorities. This concept is important because it identifies those who made significant decisions and how they justified momentous actions. Various influential leaders tried to justify many questionable and outright wicked actions (e.g., the Crusades), and the authorities they used (“God wills it”) were compelling to great numbers of people.

The changes people made throughout church history were not always negative from our Baptist perspective. For instance, during the Reformation period some widely diverse groups of people existed who were neither part of the Catholics nor the Reformers. (I call this broad group the “Sectarians.”) Some of these sects came to the conclusion that infant baptism, the dominant practice for nearly 1,000 years prior to that time, was illegitimate. These believer baptism sects, called Anabaptists by their enemies, were a subset of the Sectarian movement. While their numbers were small compared to the Lutherans and the followers of Zwingli and Calvin, the authorities the Sectarians used to justify their change to believer baptism were compelling enough that many were willing to be persecuted, tortured, exiled, and/or martyred at the hands of both the Reformers and the Catholics.

The RAMHI

The construct I developed to feature the idea of authorities in church history, for lack of a better title, is the Rathbun Authority Model for Historical Inquiry (RAMHI). I believe it can be used in both secular as well as religious history. Taking a segment, event, or movement in history, it asks the following questions:

- 1) Who was in charge?
- 2) What did he/she/they want to change or keep the same?
- 3) What authorities did he/she/they use to justify their actions?
- 4) Why were those authorities convincing to those who followed?

A variation of this last question would be “Why were those authorities not convincing to those who resisted?”

With this model we have a basis on which to examine various events in church history. Principles emerge that relate to the modern day. Practices or patterns that religious leaders have used over the centuries are still being used today: power of tradition, power of personality, power of military might, power of compelling argument, power of intimidation, power of ultimate concerns, power of past precedent, promise of God’s endorsement/authorization, promise of material benefit and/or wealth, promise of eternal benefit, and so on it goes. Religious beliefs are a potent force. Some people today are still willing to commit heinous crimes justified by the religious authority they accept. The news on TV and the internet are full of such instances. Can we identify the authorities that leaders have used over the years? I think we can.

At this point, we should acknowledge that though the confessional statements of most Christian denominations place a great emphasis on the Bible as their authority, it is naïve to think that a Bible reference at the end of a statement settles the entire issue. Often other concerns weigh more heavily, such as tradition³ or power. In church history by the height of papal power in the eleventh century, “Christian” leaders (i.e., the popes) were far removed from the New Testament era theologically. Their decisions affected the fate of nations and kings, and often their motivations were anything but pure. The Bible was an afterthought. Often a leader used convincing authorities to justify to others an action he had already decided to do.

Examples

The Fourth Lateran Council of the Catholic Church in 1215 mentioned the term “transubstantiation” to describe what happened in the Mass. Transubstantiation taught that the bread and wine actually and literally became the body and blood of Christ. But how could this be, seeing how everyone still tasted bread when they partook? The doctrine had been building steadily for some three centuries prior, but

how could the scholastic intellectuals of that day explain and justify something which obviously went against the experience of everyone who participated?

As Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) would clarify, when the priest pronounced the words of consecration, the “essence” of bread and wine changed to become the essence of Christ’s body and blood. The “accidents” (the external characteristics of the bread—salty, sweet, crunchy, soft) remained the same. How can the RAMHI help us understand this monumental doctrine of the Catholic Church?⁴

First, who was in charge? The answer is the scholastics of that day, and Thomas Aquinas in particular. They sought to give a “scientific” or credible explanation for this unusual occurrence.

Second, what did they want to change or keep the same? The intellectual community of the Catholic Church wanted to codify and support with sound reason the teaching of the Catholic Church regarding this most important ritual.

Third, what authorities did they use to justify this teaching? Here is where our example gets interesting. The philosophical theory of substance and accidents did not come from Aquinas or even from the revered and ancient church authority of Augustine. It came from the pagan philosopher Aristotle, whose philosophy had been gaining enormous popularity with the scholastics of the Middle Ages.

Fourth, why was this authority convincing to those who followed it? Aristotle’s philosophical theory provided scholarly Catholics with an esteemed and persuasive account of how the bread and wine turned into the body and blood of Jesus Christ when they celebrated the Mass.⁵ The irony of using a non-Christian theory to explain a sacred Catholic ritual is not lost on modern scholars. One historian of the Reformation observed:

Those who remained in the Roman obedience generally did this [continued in or returned to Aquinas’ theory]; but in the sixteenth-century Europe, thousands of Protestants were burnt at the stake for denying an idea of Aristotle, who had never heard of Jesus Christ.⁶

This model does indeed identify for us the authorities behind the foremost rite of the Catholic Church. It also gives us a basis of comparison relevant to our present day. Do Christians ever “borrow” from non-Christian philosophies which command authority and respect today? I think the answer is all too clear that they do. My second article will deal with one of these situations.

Let us examine another fruitful incident from even earlier in church history. Many church history textbooks include glowing reports of the Roman Emperor Constantine’s decision to legalize Christianity in A.D. 313, after winning a decisive battle over his enemy the year before. Before this battle, he is said to have seen a vision to conquer under the banner of the Christian God. He did so, and history records his triumph.⁷ While it was certainly a welcome relief for Christian believers to be

liberated from the threat of brutal persecutions, not everything that came with that freedom was positive for Christianity.

Again, we will use the RAMHI. First, who was in charge? Constantine, the great Roman emperor, but he brought with him his pagan background which included the necessity of adhering to the state religion. Under previous pagan emperors, all peoples were to make a sacrifice to an image of Caesar. Second, what did he want to change or keep the same? Constantine wanted the same union of religion and state that functioned with pagan gods to continue in his newly-envisioned “Christian” empire.

Third, what authorities did he use to justify his actions? Constantine used the authority of past (pagan) precedent that had been common in the society of his day and his own authority as emperor. Church leaders under Constantine were now considered government workers who were expected to bow to the emperor’s will. Remember, it was Emperor Constantine who called for a council of church bishops to settle the Arian question of Christ’s divinity at Nicaea in A.D. 325. And he, as well as subsequent emperors (even those who opposed Constantine’s view), ensured the verdict went the way the emperor intended.

Fourth, why was this authority convincing to those who followed him? Besides the relief from persecution, Christians found many benefits to Constantine’s decision. Christianity could thrive with its new favored position in society. Many Christians of the day (notably the church historian Eusebius) viewed Constantine as bringing in a new era of salvation.⁸

However, resulting history has dampened much of that enthusiasm. Doctrine was affected by Constantine’s decision as every succeeding council would have to take the state’s views into consideration. Society was affected as Christianity became Christendom. Eventually, everyone born in Europe was considered “Christian” regardless of evidence of regeneration. Administration of church functions was impacted as well since only someone ordained by an official state-approved church could perform the sacramental rituals necessary to bring salvation to the masses. For centuries after, theologians (including those in the Reformation) looked to Constantine as the ideal Christian ruler.⁹ The examples of Old Testament Jewish kings were used by them as an additional authority to bolster Constantine’s precedent to control the belief systems of a given location.¹⁰

Therefore our model has relevance for us today because it highlights not only important truths for how we view society today (one capable of many belief systems) but also the origin of some Christian ideals for society that have lasted some 1,500 years. In my next article I will deal with some specific issues that arise in churches today and show how this model helps address these issues.

Dr. Ken Rathbun

VP for Academic Services; College Dean at Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary | rathbunk@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Ken Rathbun (PhD, University of the West Indies) was a Baptist Mid-Missions missionary in Jamaica from 2002–16. He has preached and taught in many areas of the world and has served as vice president for Academic Services and dean at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2016. He and his wife, Cléa, have two young children.