

2015 SUMMER

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History of Christian Thought
New Testament Theology
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September 21–25, 2015

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December 14–18, 2015

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Current Issues in Adult Ed. Ministries
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Worldview: God among the gods

Andy Stearns

**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.

Notes

1. “Church history” is the common way to refer to this area of study. I prefer, however, the term “history of Christianity.” While both options have weaknesses, using “church history” frequently compels the teacher/writer to acknowledge that the “church” was not often demonstrating true Christian or Biblical concerns in a given time period. Likewise, I am hesitant to concede that the recognized “Christian” institutions that had so much interest in secular, civil, and worldly pursuits were “churches” in the proper sense at all. However, since “church history” is the more familiar term, I will use it in this article.

2. This model is found in several sources. The one I have is T. William Hall, et. al., *Religion: An Introduction* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985).

3. Note Richard A. Muller's claim concerning those in the Reformed tradition who laid its theological foundation before Calvin: “All of these writers held to the Reformation assumption of the priority of scripture over tradition as the sole, absolute norm for theology,” in “John Calvin and Later Calvinism: The Identity of the Reformed Tradition,” ch. 11 in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, David Bagchi and David Steinmetz, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 131. I am not refuting Muller's basic claim. He is unquestionably an outstanding historian. However in every tradition cracks in the foundation can appear. In the reference I made to infant baptism in the Reformation previously, all of the Reformers of whatever persuasion (including all in the Reformed tradition) prioritized the tradition of infant baptism without an explicit example from the New Testament or a direct command, which also violated their own regulative principle for how they (the Reformed) would make decisions in regard to worship based on tradition.

4. This understanding became the official understanding of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, though the term “transubstantiation” was not used.

5. This would not necessarily be true of some later scholastics.

6. Diarmaid MacCullough, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003): 26. See discussion from pages 24–26.

7. An ongoing debate among many Christians is whether Constantine ever fully embraced Christianity himself, judging by his actions as a fairly ruthless Roman emperor.

8. Note the statement, “The conversion of the world seemed near,” in Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013): 102.

9. The Constantine ideal lasted long. It would continue to dominate Western civilization until the Enlightenment era. Some religious groups around the world still hold to it today.

10. The fact is that the New Testament contains no mandate for the government to control church functions (or vice versa). A contrast throughout history is clear between those who supported one belief system in a geographical area and those who promoted freedom of conscience (a principle dear to Baptists called “soul liberty”).

The Christian and Church History

Ken Rathbun

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

As I study church history, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 is a comforting passage. When one studies the discipline of church history, many unsettling episodes present themselves. We often wonder how people could make the decisions they did, and even more, how they justified those decisions with the authorities they used.

We as Bible-believers have the benefit of going back to the divine source—the Word of God—as our authority. Whether we realize it or not, we are affected in the way we think by the events of the past. And it is true that no person or group can be completely isolated and not use their own personal understandings to interpret the Bible. Further, try as we might, we often struggle to understand the context of the Old Testament and even first-century Christianity.

Nonetheless, God inspired a Bible that allows us (or any Christian group) to go back to the original source to renew our minds with His principles of living a Christian life, practicing a Christian walk, and administering a Christian church. We can go back to our source to make corrections in our understandings and actions that perhaps have been more influenced by our history than by His Word.

Going back to one of the examples of the previous article, it is true that the Old Testament kings can teach lessons to us today. I love preaching from the Old Testament historical books. Nevertheless, to project their situation as monarchs of the national people of Israel and Judah directly onto a multinational New Testament entity called the church is bad interpretation. History shows such an approach is also dangerous to the cause of Christ.

We must carefully evaluate the decisions we make, and especially the decisions of others whom we are called upon to follow. Perhaps the RAMHI model suggested in the first article can help us better analyze and evaluate the motivations and authorities people use in the “Christian” world to call us to action. Perhaps we can even use it to reveal the authorities we follow in the personal decisions we make.

We encounter many competing philosophies of ministry (reasons for conducting ministry in a certain way). We can use the RAMHI model to analyze, evaluate, and assess the value of what we read, hear, and see. This model can help us weigh the value of current trends and passing fads. Those who advocate various philosophies of ministry are often very clear in their perspectives, values, and assumptions. Their philosophies can be unabashed pragmatism (whatever produces results), postmodernism, or business-style models of running their churches. Not all of these philosophies may be especially right- or wrong-headed. However, examining the authorities a person, movement, or organization uses

to justify change or inactivity is worthwhile and goes a long way to determine its value.

I recently had a conversation with a person who has been in ministry for some twenty years who brought an authority situation to my attention. This person remarked that people going through a certain circumstance of life may suffer from self-esteem issues, a viewpoint widely advocated in evangelical publishing.¹ Many Christians assume a person’s low self-esteem is a genuine spiritual problem, a devastating condition that merits professional attention.

Let us apply the RAMHI model. **First**, who is in charge? In this case, we hear this philosophy from some influential Christian psychologists and counselors who often have advanced psychology degrees and a great amount of counseling experience. They have been strongly influenced, wittingly or unwittingly, by the humanistic perspectives of psychology developed in the 1960’s. **Second**, what do they want to change or keep the same? Since this belief was not heard much until a generation or two ago in Christian circles, it seems an innovation.

Third, what authorities do advocates of this view use to justify their actions or ideas? It may be true that I (perhaps you as well) have not studied the backgrounds of every major philosophy, but I have studied the Bible. And the Bible does not contain exhortations for believers to love themselves more (despite the best efforts of some to find such passages). Nor does the Bible say that spiritual difficulties are a result of our not thinking of ourselves highly enough or of having unmet psychological needs (2 Pet. 1:3, 4). Rather, it seems clear the opposite is true. We are challenged to live lives of sacrifice to God, not esteeming ourselves (Rom. 12:1–3) but being others-focused (Rom. 12:10, 13, 16, 18). We are to love God and then others (Rom. 5:1–5; 13:8, 9), not selfishly love ourselves (Rom. 15:1, 2; Phil. 2:1–4; 1 John 4:7–11, 20).²

Fourth, why are these authorities convincing to those who follow and advocate it? Some people adopt this philosophy because it appeals to our flesh and the self-centered orientation the world encourages us to cultivate. Some people desire to help others, but without a solid foundation in the Scriptures they have been influenced by those who advocate these ideas. Notably the educational, counseling, and publishing accomplishments, as well as the fame of those who promote this viewpoint, are convincing to many.

In addition, some who adopt this philosophy have sought counseling from Christian friends and pastors but found it to be lacking. Others simply have rejected wise, compassionate Biblical counsel. This philosophy of life, while not Biblically correct, seems to resonate more clearly with them and offers hope that seems to be absent elsewhere.

Baptists declare that their sole authority for faith and practice is the Bible. We should realize that often we can discover other authorities than the Bible to justify our actions and positions. We need to ask if they are legitimate. The history of Christianity can be a help to us in finding examples of the results of foolish authorities we would all do well to avoid. The model suggested above will also help us discern the value of ministries, movements, and philosophies we see in ministry every day.

End Notes

1. For the following information and editing help throughout this section, I am indebted to the expertise of Dr. Jeff Newman, professor of Biblical Counseling at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. Several examples of this perspective include Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *God Will Make a Way: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do* (Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003); Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992); and Willard F. Harley, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*, revised and expanded (Grand Rapids: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 1986, 2011).

2. Dr. Newman recommends Ed Welsh's *When People Are Big and God Is Small* (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R Publishing Company, 1997).



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