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**SEEKING WISDOM FROM THE PAST
IN CHURCH HISTORY**

by

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I. Introduction

This essay seeks to explore learning from the past. One of my premises is that we can learn from the past. Another is that there will be much from the past that we will not find particularly useful.¹ In regard to prophecy, Paul told the Thessalonians: “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). It is in this spirit that we desire to conduct this historical-theological inquiry. What good things, what wisdom, can we learn from the past?²

It goes without saying that looking for wisdom from the past is no easy matter. In fact Wilfred M. McClay in his recent essay, “Tradition, History, and Sequoias”, has stated frankly: “Looking for wisdom in the past is a very complicated matter”.³ Nonetheless McClay believes that the enterprise is possible and worthwhile. I concur.

¹ This means that inevitably the teacher of history will often deal with things that he or she doesn't like very much. Nonetheless, as Gary Land has stated in his recent article, “Teaching History Truthfully” *Adventist Education* February-March 2003: p 20: “Telling the truth about history is a moral obligation that requires effort.” I am also assuming that, in essence, “ancient” and “modern” human beings are no different.

² In his recent book, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), Gary Thomas has done an admirable job of showing what the Christian tradition can teach us about the potential that marriage has for making us more Christ-like. Thomas founded and directs a ministry called the Center for Evangelical Spirituality. He states the mission of this ministry on p 267 of *Sacred Marriage*: “My mission has been, and continues to be, to integrate Scripture, church history, and the Christian classics, and then to apply that wisdom to today. I am not as interested in breaking new ground as I am in recapturing the contemporary relevance of old ground that has been forgotten .” Thomas's book is a good example of how, why, and what we can learn from the past.

Another example comes from a book by Alister E. McGrath, *Le radici della spiritualità protestante* [the original title in English is *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*] (Turin/Italy: Claudiana, 1996). McGrath believes it is necessary for Evangelicals to re-appropriate the spirituality of the Reformation. He guides his readers to understand Reformation spirituality by illustrating it from the lives and writings of the major reformers.

³ First Things March 2003: p 42.

Anglican historian Tony Lane reports the attitude Karl Barth had regarding the past. Barth said that we should apply the Fifth Commandment--Honor your father and your mother--to our theological predecessors. Of course, this won't entail a slavish obedience. After all, when children leave home they have to find their own way in the world. Nevertheless, they continue to 'revere' and find a point of reference in their parents. It is in this same way, says Barth, that we must regard the History of Christian Thought.⁴

In the body of this essay I will survey three main issues: (1) Why we should learn from the past: Some Principles; (2) How we can learn from the past: Some Criteria; and (3) What we can learn from the past: Two Examples.

II. Why we should learn from the past: Some principles

Some people have no patience with the past. After all the past is past. But such a perspective is unfortunate. An understanding of the past is vitally relevant to our present and future. In this regard Arthur W. Holmes argues that a “[c]ritical appreciation of the past ... will free us from the present to see creative possibilities for the future.”⁵ The past will help us ‘get past’ our sectarian vision and enable us to get a truer perspective on things.⁶ In

⁴ A brief note on sources is in order at this point. I often take dates as well as historical and biographical data from the following two sources: Tony Lane, *Compendio del pensiero cristiano nei secoli* [the original title in English is *The Lion Book of Christian Thought*] (Formigine/Italy: Voce della Bibbia, 1994); and F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1983). Since 1983 the Oxford source has come out in its 1997 third edition. I often cite historical sources from Italian editions. Where possible I've tried to indicate both the page number of the Italian edition I cite as well as the specific reference of the work in question. This will not always be possible, however, such as when I take quotations from Lane.

Lane discusses Barth's view of history on pp 11-12.

⁵ Arthur F. Holmes *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p 33.

⁶ Perhaps this is the spirit of what Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p 203 is saying when he writes the following in regard to three 'Christian' traditions: “Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic believers can give their own distinct twists to the tradition they wish to pass along, but all benefit when they admit joyfully that the whole is far richer than its parts.” Such a perspective, of course, can be

this regard perhaps we might coin an historical corollary to Holmes's oft-repeated adage, "All Truth is God's Truth": *All Christian History Belongs to All of the Church*.

Here are three additional principles as to why we should seek wisdom from the past.

1. *The past is like a booster-seat. It helps us see farther than we could on our own.* In this regard our approach to the past should be that of Bernard of Chartes (died c. 1130):

We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more than they do, indeed even farther, but not because our sight is better than theirs or because we are taller than they. Our sight is enhanced because they raise us up and increase our stature by their enormous height.⁷

In every human undertaking we learn from others. Mentors, internships, apprenticeships, and similar all exist so we can learn from those who have more experience than we do. It certainly may happen that some day in the future we will disagree with our mentors. But at least in the early phases of our inquiry we rely on others to help us see more clearly. History can have such a function in the acquisition of wisdom.

2. *We need not re-invent the wheel.* It goes without saying that every generation must evaluate what it inherits from those who have gone before them. But adhering to *sola scriptura* doesn't necessitate that we approach every issue from scratch. Others have done spadework which we can benefit from. Others have developed doctrinal formulations which may very well be useful to us.

Inquiring into the work done by those who have gone before us will help us ration our energy wisely. In this regard, a knowledge of Church History will help us to 'redeem the time'. Appropriating wisdom from the past *in a discerning manner* will enable us to expend our scholarly efforts on those things which most urgently merit our attention.

In fact the past has much guidance to give us regarding present challenges. As we begin to read Church History, we have the pleasant—and for some people unexpected—realization that the past is replete with the same types of things we face in the present. But

affirmed, provided that it does not promote a corollary, such as that 'truth is arrived at by addition'. The biblical perspective on truth is that truth is absolute, even though our human capacity to understand and assimilate it is limited. D. A. Carson's *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester/England: Apollos, 1996) is very instructive on the whole issue of post-modernism's relativization of the truth.

⁷ Lane pp 129-30 cites Bernard's famous statement as found in John of Salisbury (Metalogicon 3:4).

should this surprise us? Did not Solomon state plainly that “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

3. *We can use the past as a filter or grid for present reflection and theologizing.*

Suppose, for example, we are interested in understanding the relationship between faith and ‘pagan’ learning. The issue is no doubt important. But it is not a new issue for the Church. Many of our predecessors have struggled with this same issue and, as one can imagine, they have come up with a wide range of proposed solutions. Be this as it may, Justin Martyr’s (c. 110-165) *affirmation* of pagan learning and Tertullian’s (c. 160-240) *rejection* of pagan learning set the two poles within which our reflection can fruitfully take place.

We also know that the Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the deity of our Lord Jesus. But this problem did not first originate in a late nineteenth century American sectarian movement. The Church has already seen and dealt with such an approach to the person of Christ. This being so, wouldn’t it be wise to look into the arguments, Scriptural and related, that our ‘Fathers’ used in combating Arianism in the fourth century? Perhaps we might be able to glean wisdom from them. The wisdom we find in the past, in these and other cases, can act as a grid for our present theologizing.

In this section we’ve seen that there are many reasons for paying attention to the past. The past helps us see better, enables us to direct efficiently our limited energies, and provides a filter for our present reflection. Far from being outdated, the past can be a valid guide to helping us keep up to date in our present task of truth-seeking. This being so, I don’t consider the following to be an overstatement: *Should we choose to turn a deaf ear to the past, we would do so at our own risk.*

III. How we can learn from the past: Some criteria

Having discussed *why* we should learn from the past, we now turn to consider *how* we can learn from the past. In this section we will briefly present the following items: (1) a basic procedural guideline; (2) an essential doctrinal criterion; (3) a valuative principle which will guide us to concentrate on the useful elements of the past; and (4) a common sense dictum.

1. A Basic Procedural Guideline: Read sympathetically.

Earlier we mentioned that there are many things in the past we don't agree with and we don't like. This fact could cause us to be biased, unless we adopt a guideline for our first encounter with all historical theology. Such a guideline might be formulated as an answer to the question, What is our first task in reading history? *Our first task in reading history is to understand whom or what it is we are dealing with.* This means we must read history 'sympathetically'.

In other words, in this phase we want to give the benefit of the doubt to the ancient authors in question. Before proceeding, we must understand *their* thought. This means we must suspend judgment, at least for now. In addition, we must also be sure to contextualize the document we are reading. The questions: "What called this document forth?" "Was it written as a reaction to something?" "How was it seen at the time of writing?" "Are there things we need to understand from the document's original language?" and related questions will be useful during this phase.

This all means that even when studying Arius's (c. 250-336) reprehensible Christology or Pelagius's tragically deficient anthropology and doctrine of grace, we must listen 'sympathetically.' Only in this way can we have an accurate picture of the person or movement under examination.

Once we've understood the historical personages or questions on their own terms, we are able to begin our task of critique and/or appropriation.

2. An Essential Doctrinal Criterion: Sola Scriptura

This is the point where the study of Church History intersects most closely with the discipline of Systematic Theology. The Christian historian is not a clinical, dispassionate observer.⁸ Certainly the Christian historian's task entails no less than accurate description of historical-theological phenomena. We've already stated above that the first task of the historian is to get the facts straight. But the Christian historian's task, while including this, goes beyond it as well. Following the initial stage of understanding, the Christian historian will proceed to the stage of critique and/or appropriation.

⁸ See I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989) for a presentation of the blending of accurate history and inspired theology in Luke's literary production. Luke was a committed theologian, but for this he was no less an able historian.

At this point the question is no longer, What happened? Now the question becomes, Of the things that happened, which ones are true *according to Holy Scripture*. We are referring, of course, to the need of applying at this point the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The Christian historian cannot shirk his or her duty of examining the *writings* of the past on the basis of The *Writing* par excellence.

Here the historian will set the findings of the past next to the Bible to see how they stand up. Some things, such as Arius's Christology, will be found to constitute error. Others will be held to be accurate, that is, in accord with Scripture. While yet others will be found to be a mixture of truth and error. The critique effected at this point by the principle of *sola scriptura* will determine what from the past is truly wisdom and, thus, can be appropriated by Christians today.

3. A Valuative Principle: *Philippians 4:8*

Here I propose a principle which can be employed in regard to the multifaceted 'non-doctrinal' material found in the writings of the past. At times, in their reflections on Christian truth, writers employ creative metaphors, suggestive images, and other such devices. In these cases it may not be so easy to assess their production on the basis of the essential (evaluative) Scripture-principle which we just now discussed. The things that some writers say certainly aren't found in Scripture, but neither do they seem to go against Scripture. We might say that these things are extra-Scriptural though not anti-Scriptural. What do we do with such material? Should it be appropriated or discarded?

My suggestion is that material such as this be seen and subsequently *appropriated* for what it is: useful reflection from the past which may contain edifying insights for the present.⁹ In this regard I propose we apply the principle found in *Philippians 4:8*. Here Paul writes:

⁹ This may be the place to state a basic difference of approach between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals as to the role of the Church Fathers and other ancient 'authorities'. For an Evangelical, in principle, only Scripture is fully authoritative. For Roman Catholics certain Fathers and Councils may have, and Papal encyclicals do have, equal authority with Scripture. Thus one could say that, in this sense, there are cases in which Roman Catholic doctrine is not merely shaped by, but even *bound* by, the past (i.e., select elements of Church History). Few of us, however, would want to deny that Protestants are influenced by the past. The point in question, however, is that in one case aspects of history are binding (e.g., Papal encyclicals for Roman Catholics), in the other aspects of history are

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

This principle will aide us in appropriating edifying material from the past—material which may not lend itself to ready examination by the Scripture-principle.

Two examples should help clarify what I mean. In the Western Church Ephraem Syrus (c. 306-373) is not a well known personage on par with figures such as Augustine of Hippo (354-430) or Martin Luther (1483-1546). Nonetheless this fourth century Syrian Christian was a Biblical exegete and ecclesiastical writer whose influence was felt on both Syrian and Greek Hymnology. So gifted was Ephraem Syrus, in fact, that he earned the epithet *the Lyre of the Holy Spirit*. Below I quote a beautiful passage from one of his homilies. I feel that his reflections can be appropriated, even though they are not--strictly speaking--entirely Scriptural. Some (I believe) are extra-Scriptural without being, however, anti-Scriptural.

This is the Son of the carpenter, Who skillfully made His cross a bridge over Sheol that swallows up all, and brought over mankind into the dwelling of life. And because it was through the tree that mankind had fallen into Sheol, so upon the tree they passed over into the dwelling of life. Through the tree then in which bitterness was tasted, through it also sweetness was tasted; that we might learn of Him that among the creatures nothing resists Him. Glory be to You, Who did lay Your cross as a bridge over death, that souls might pass over upon it from the dwelling of the dead to the dwelling of life!¹⁰

Here Ephraem Syrus strings together things associated with wood: Jesus was the son of a carpenter, he died on a cross, the Fall came about through a tree. And in so doing, he and creates a pleasing meditation on the beauty and excellency of Christ. The

considered of paramount importance (e.g., many of the Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the Ecumenical Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries). Thus we can summarize by saying that for Protestants history can be *formative* but not *normative*.

¹⁰ *Homily on our Lord 4*. Cited from *The Master Christian Library*, version 5 (compact disc) (Albany, Oregon: Ages Software, 1997); I have modernized the language and added the underlining. Lane p 49 also cites this text for the purposes of illustrating the thought of Ephraem Syrus. How many of us have used, or seen used, the image of the ‘bridge’ in evangelism: Christ’s death bridges the gap between our sinfulness and God’s holiness? Perhaps this idea isn’t as recent as we may have thought. Ephraem Syrus was already using it in the fourth century!

concatenation is not found in Scripture; it is Ephraem Syrus's creation. Nonetheless it doesn't strike me as going against Scripture. The Philippians 4:8 Principle enables us to appropriate this passage as past reflection useful for our present edification.

A second example might be taken from texts that center on topics about which Scripture does not abound. Fasting is one such topic. As we search the Scripture, we don't find as many practical guidelines on fasting as we might desire. But is it wrong to inquire into what other Christians have said on this important topic? What tips and practical insights might we glean from them?

My assumption is that we have much to learn from them--things that will be extra-Scriptural, though not necessarily anti-Scriptural. Thus, it isn't surprising that in a recent book on fasting, written by rigorous Biblical theologian John Piper,¹¹ we find an appendix which includes material on fasting taken from various figures of Church History (e.g., Ignatius, late first century Bishop of Antioch; Augustine of Hippo [354-430]; Cyril of Jerusalem [315-386]; Martin Luther [1483-1546]; and John Calvin [1509-1564]). By applying the Philippians 4:8 Principle to these texts, we will be able to benefit from the insights of other Christians in regard to non-essential matters.

4. A Common Sense Dictum.

But what are we to do when we find ridiculous, objectionable, or even heretical material in our reading of history, as we certainly will? If it is wrong for us to ignore the past, and thus prove to be arrogant and overly self-reliant, God certainly doesn't want us to be gullible and believe everything we read. Here we should surely apply to the historical-theological task John's admonition to 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 John 4:1). We are certainly not obligated to appropriate everything we find in the past. Nor do we want to sugarcoat the past and present it as something other than what it is. Gary Land writes:

We need to demonstrate to our classes that history is not a cut-and-dried collection of facts, but a multi-faceted story whose meaning is much contested and therefore open to continued discovery and critical scrutiny. (Land, p 20.)

¹¹ *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997). The appendix is entitled "Quotes and Experiences" and is found on pp 183-210. Piper relates the experiences of modern Christians as well.

History is multi-faceted and its protagonists are not lacking skeletons in their closets (are any of our closets empty?). If we were to seek wisdom from the past only in perfect persons, my estimate is that we'd end up with very little wisdom indeed. The pool from which to draw would be miserly, not to say non-existent.

But we need not despair. A common sense dictum can get us past this impasse. The dictum is this: *We need not throw out the baby with the bathwater*. Church History is filled to overflowing with people who have said marvelous things who have also said ridiculous¹² or tragic things.¹³ We can appropriate the good and discard the rest. We need not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

In this section we have considered *how* we can learn from the past. Our discussion has been guided by the following elements.

- First, we must suspend judgment in our initial approach to the reading of history. By giving our sources 'the benefit of the doubt' in this way, our initial contact with the sources of the past can be a 'sympathetic' reading.
- From here, however, we must move to the evaluative stage. Here the principle of *sola scriptura* enables us to discern truth from error. It is in this stage that the task of the Christian historian and Systematic theologian meet.
- In the third place we considered the application of Philippians 4:8 to help find useful non-doctrinal material from Church History. This Pauline text will

¹² Anselm of Aosta, Italy (c. 1033-1109) is arguably one of the greatest theologians of the Christian Church. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* calls his *Cur Deus homo?*, *Why Did God Become Man?* "the most considerable contribution to the theology of the Atonement in the Middle Ages." Yet such a rigorous thinker as Anselm is also capable of some outlandish allegorizing, one example of which is found in his sermon "Omelia IX—Assunzione di Maria Ss.a" (*Anselmo D'Aosta, S. Il Proslogio ed altri opuscoli*, introduzione, traduzione e note a cura di Paolo Calliari e Luigi Ajme [Alba/Italy: Istituto Missionario Pia Società S. Paolo, 1944], pp 115-30). At the beginning of this homily Anselm takes off from the Latin text of Luke 10:38 and doesn't land before doing much that would cause any modern exegesis instructor much discomfort.

¹³ Martin Luther has been a help to countless Christians. We don't ignore the wisdom we can glean from him, even though he unfortunately said some reprehensible things against the Jews. For discussion see Lucie Kaennel, *Lutero era Antisemita?* [Was Luther Anti-semitic?], with an Introduction by Daniele Garrone (Turin/Italy: Claudiana, 1999). The French original is from 1997.

guide us in gleaning edifying *extra*-Scriptural material, which is not, however, *anti*-Scriptural.¹⁴

- Lastly, we discussed how to implement a common sense dictum to our task. In the History of the Church, as in modern life, our criterion for usefulness can't be perfection. Thus we do well not to throw out the baby with the bathwater in our appropriation of wisdom from the past.¹⁵

It might be useful to recap before moving in to our third section. Our first two sections discussed, respectively, *why* we should learn from the past, and *how* do go about doing this. In this final section we want to give concrete examples of some of the gems of wisdom (the *what*) that can be ours from the past.¹⁶ We'll limit ourselves to two examples. These examples will be taken from influential sources which we, however, may not be used to frequenting.

IV. What we can learn from the past: Two examples

1. *Learning Humility from the Benedictine Rule*

Can Protestants learn something from Benedict of Nursia (Italy; c. 480 – c. 550), ‘The Patriarch of Western Monasticism’? Didn't Luther teach us to throw off the yoke of the Medieval division between clergy and laity? Don't we know that one can live a life consecrated to God without taking a vow of celibacy? Isn't marriage a gift from God? The

¹⁴ The application of these first three principles will also help us develop a sense of discernment. We will get better and better not only at hearing and appreciating ancient writers. We will also improve our ability to discern when they're on track and when they're not.

¹⁵ Thus while Adventists will not choose to endorse Augustine of Hippo's views, e.g., on predestination, they can gladly appropriate his views on moral meaning. Steven Garber performs this operation of positive appropriation of Augustine in regard to the notion of moral meaning on p 16 of his book *Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1996).

¹⁶ In as much as twenty centuries of history have transpired since the Ascension of Christ, it goes without saying that the following examples are highly selective and could be multiplied. Indeed, I encourage the reading to develop his or her own examples from the annals of Church History.

Apostle Paul identifies it exactly in this way: “But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that” (I Corinthians 7.7b).¹⁷

Benedict was a Christian who was disgusted by the immorality he found when studying at Rome. He desired to live a solitary life of consecration to God. Others were attracted to his spirituality and in time he founded several monasteries, the most famous of which at Montecassino.

The Rule that Benedict composed for his followers is not only the most famous Monastic Rule; it is also considered ‘one of the most influential documents in the history of Europe’. The Rule’s good points include (1) its brevity, yet completeness; (2) its clarity and (3) its lack of undue harshness and rigidity (Lane p 112).

It goes without saying that from a Protestant point of view the Benedictine Rule has not a few problems. One example is in regard to the issues of personal freedom and authority in the monastery. The monk is allowed no personal possessions, not even books or writing materials, unless the Abott has given his approval (chapter 33). In fact, one has the distinct impression that in this Rule, as in the larger monastic movement, the Abott has come dangerously close to requiring the full obedience that is due only to Christ. In addition the document itself comes dangerously close to taking Scripture’s authoritative place.¹⁸

Thus here we are certainly not advocating a return to the anti-Scriptural principles found in this Rule. Nevertheless, I am convinced that there is wisdom in this document that we can appropriate for our spiritual edification. Several emphases found in the Twelve

¹⁷ In the Greek text the word translated ‘gift’ is *charisma*. The two ‘gifts’ in question are the married and celibate state. If Catholics have glorified celibacy, Protestants can be guilty of degrading it. Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) exhorts us to regain the Biblical balance. His practical counsel for guiding young people to pursue service to God in either of the legitimate gift-states is admirable (p 323): “[T]he Christian parent needs to start teaching about singleness at an early age, because from our earliest years we are taught to think that happiness can only be found in marriage.”

¹⁸ See the third stage of humility (chapter 7): “The third stage of humility consists in submission, for the love of God, to one’s own superior in complete obedience”; and the eighth stage of humility (chapter 7): “The eighth stage of humility for a monk is that he do nothing that is not authorized by this communal ‘Rule’ nor by the example of his superiors” (cited from Lane 114).

Stages of Humility (a sub-section of the larger Rule) are an example of this. (From this point on, please keep your eye on what I enclose or do not enclose in parentheses.)

The first stage of humility reminds us of the importance of the 'fear of the Lord'. The second stage exhorts us not to love our own will nor to seek to satisfy our own desires. (The third stage requires obedience to one's superior.) The fourth stage encourages us not to give up our discipleship when we encounter difficulties or opposition from others. (The fifth stage requires confession to the Abott.)

The sixth stage is practically an application of Jesus' words in Luke 17:10 ("So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"). The seventh stages deals with inward humility; the twelfth stage addresses the necessary outward manifestations of such inward humility. (The eighth stage requires obedience to the 'Rule'.)

The ninth stage wisely exhorts us to hold our tongue (yet goes too far when it encourages speech which is only in response to being spoken). The tenth stage has produced anything but its desired effect when I've read it with my seminary students. A monk is not to laugh easily or quickly. One is certainly curious as to what historical circumstances elicited this specific prohibition. Whatever they may be, in and of itself this counsel isn't all wrong.

Aside from another reference to refrain from laughter, the eleventh stage of humility contains much wisdom. Indeed, if we applied it, it could greatly benefit both our interpersonal relationships within the Christian community as well as our Evangelistic witness without. In addition, it could probably also shorter and cause to be more productive our committee meetings.

The eleventh stage of humility for a monk is this: that, when he speaks, he does so with kindness, without laughing, in a humble and serious manner. His words should be few and reasonable and he should avoid raising his voice ... (cited in Lane 114).

I have put in parentheses, based on the principle of *sola scriptura*, what I consider to be negative aspects of the Twelve Stages of Humility of the Benedictine Rule. The other items--those not found in parentheses--strike me as containing much wisdom for us. And, in fact, one would have little trouble finding Biblical references to support these *strong points*, found--we must not forget--in the Rule of 'The Patriarch of Western Monasticism'. Thus we certainly have things to learn from this highly influential document, even though we find much in it we do not agree with. Nevertheless, there is no reason to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

2. *Learning What Really Matters from Thomas à Kempis*

I love learning and I don't agree with those who think research is detrimental to the spiritual life. If pursued correctly, learning can facilitate our walk with Christ. If it becomes an idol or a source of pride, however, it certainly can cause us to stumble. Perhaps we can find wisdom from the past to help us keep learning in its rightful place.

In the century prior to the Protestant Reformation Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471) studied in Holland in a school run by the 'Brothers of the Common Life'.¹⁹ À Kempis would later write the classic which epitomized the spirituality of that movement. The name of his work is *The Imitation of Christ*.²⁰

The Imitation of Christ is one of Christianity's all time bestsellers. By the end of the fifteenth century it had already gone through ninety-nine editions and by now it has been reprinted more than two thousand times.²¹ This work is composed of four books. The first three will be more useful to Protestants. They will be less attracted, however, to Book Four which speaks of the 'Sacrament of Holy Communion' in a specifically Roman Catholic manner.

I feel *The Imitation of Christ* is particularly useful in helping us 'major on the majors' in the spiritual life. For example, it tells us how to live out our Christian spirituality in practical ways. We must (1) be more interested in a sincere love for God and not get excessively caught up in proper definition of terms (which certainly has its rightful place!). And we must (2) correct our own faults and not be overly interested in those of other people. The two quotations which follow illustrate respectively these two gems of wisdom.

[1] What good can come from a discussion of God as a Trinity in learned terms, if you lack humility and thus grieve God? Learning arguments doesn't cause a person to be holy and righteous, while a good life causes one to be dear to God. I would rather feel conviction in my heart than be able to define it. If you know the whole Bible by heart and all of the opinions of the various scholars, what good would it do you without the love and grace of God? (*Imitation* 1:1; cited in Lane p 161).

[2] Try to be patient in putting up with the shortcomings and weaknesses of other people, whatever they may be. You too have shortcomings that other people have to put up with. If you aren't able to

¹⁹ Geert de Groote (1340-1384) was a pioneer in the Brothers of the Common Life. Thomas à Kempis was born in *Kempen* (near Cologne).

²⁰ Some contest that à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*. Nonetheless, scholarly consensus is agreed in attributing this spiritual classic to him. The document's intrinsic value would remain, however, whether or not the actual author was à Kempis.

²¹ Lane 161. See this same page for a summary of the contents of *The Imitation of Christ*.

make yourself the person you would like to be, how can you expect others to be as you would want? We want perfection in other people, yet we don't correct our own defects.... It is clear how rarely we apply to our neighbor the same standards which we use for ourselves.

I think these quotations resonate with all of us. *The Imitation of Christ* has the rare ability of causing us to see the dangers of pride and arid learning. It also guides us to pursue true spirituality and give learning its proper place of usefulness (and no more than that).

Other examples of wisdom that we can have from the past might be the following: (a) Doing theology with an attitude of worship: Anselm of Aosta's Theological Method [1033-1109]; (b) Training children in the ways of the Lord: Martin Luther's Smaller Catechism; (c) Effective Church Leadership: Gregory the Great's (c. 540-604) *Pastoral Rule*; (d) Essential parameters for Orthodox reflection on the Trinity and the Person of Christ: Wisdom from the Great Church Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries (Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, and Chalcedon 451); and (e) 'What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all': Using the Canon of Vincent of Lérins (died before 450) as an aide in discerning the useful from what may be merely passing spiritual fads.

V. Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay we quoted Wilfred M. McClay: "Looking for wisdom in the past is a very complicated matter".²² We also added that McClay, nonetheless, believes that seeking wisdom from the past is possible and worthwhile.

- In the first section of this essay we argued *why* we should learn from the past. We might summarize this first section with the truism, the past has a lot to teach us. The past helps us see farther and will perhaps enable us both to avoid making some mistakes in the present as well as to plan better for the future.
- In the second section we sought aide as to the 'complicated matter' of seeking wisdom from the past (the *how*). The four principles we presented are designed to give us some guidance as we navigate in the past. These principles should help us discern, in the lives of those who have gone before us, what is true as opposed to false and useful as opposed to less useful.
- In the third section we offered two examples of *what* we can learn from the past.

²² *First Things* March 2003: p 42.

- Thomas à Kempis’s classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, can guide us in majoring on the majors in the spiritual life and keeping learning within its proper bounds. We saw that Book Four of this classic, the section dealing with the Eucharist, will be less useful to us.
- We also looked briefly at a document which goes back nearly a millennium before à Kempis’s classic. In the Benedictine Rule’s Twelve Stages of Humility we found much that we did *not* want to appropriate. But we also saw that this Monastic Rule contains wisdom even for those of us who are not Catholics. If we cannot subscribe to giving full obedience to a spiritual leader, we can certainly be enriched by regaining the Biblical emphases on obedience and humility. They too have their rightful places alongside the great doctrines of grace and the love of God, which we perhaps know better.

My hope is that those who read this essay will continue to read Christian History and begin to mine for themselves jewels from a past, which belongs to all of the church (see above). Indeed by learning from the past, as sketched above, I suggest that we will be able to ‘test’ the past and ‘hold on to’ the much good wisdom found in it (1 Thessalonians 5:21). While this task won’t necessarily be easy, our efforts will be richly rewarded.

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