

# Teaching History From A Christian Perspective

*by: Arnold J. Koelpin*

In the name of our LORD, the Lord of life and the Lord of all history, dear fellow teachers,

## Introduction

As a dutiful teacher cognizant of the latest educational fads and buzzwords, your speaker began his history class this semester by collecting a portfolio. Everyone today, it seems, needs a portfolio! Besides, a background check on past studies was vital information needed for assessment. Simple portfolio identity was established by asking for the student's name, home address, and high school attended. Then evaluative insights were gained by asking for the history courses taught the student in grade school and in high school, followed by a self-assessment of knowledge gained in these history courses.

Because most of the sincere young men and women in the class were new acquaintances, it was helpful to know where they were coming from, where were they going, and what they hoped to achieve in this history course. The results were an educational disaster. Their background in history was a wasteland of trivia. Many had little idea where they were going and what they hoped to achieve. A few even expressed their goals as being to get good grades and to have fun -- and this from 20 year olds whose vision of an eternal childhood prevented them from growing serious lest they get bored.

Given that scenario, we have our work cut out for us from grade school to graduate school. To raise the question of teaching history from a Christian perspective is one of the finest educational questions you might have raised.

In requesting an essay which combines the offices of Christian schoolteacher and historian, this audience deserves the high praise Martin Luther once gave to all who teach history from a Christian perspective. The Great Reformer and promoter of Christian education freely admitted the importance of both in training children in the fear of God. "If I could leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so," he frankly stated, "there is no other office I would rather have than that of teaching; for I know that next to that of preaching, this is the best, greatest, and most useful office there is" (LW 46:253).

And then with a Luther-like flourish of bold analysis, he took off his hat to the history teacher, stating with pointed praise: "Historians are the most useful people and most excellent teachers, whom we can never sufficiently honor, praise, and thanks" (WA 50, 384). The reason for such high honor lies in the nature of history itself. "History," Luther wrote, "is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture."

For Luther knew, as every child in your classroom should come to know, that history is life or the story of life. Its lessons come from the narrative of what happened. It is not make-believe, but the real life record of human beings marching down the corridor of time. The study of history, therefore, not only illustrates and reflects life as it is, but above all it is a picture of God's wonderful dealings with people and a leading source of human knowledge.

"When one thoroughly considers the matter, " Luther said in a moment of reflection, "it is from history, as from a living fountain, that have flowed all laws, sciences, counsel, warning, threatenings, comfort, strength, instruction, foresight, knowledge, wisdom, and all virtues; that is to say, history is nothing else than a ... monument of divine works and judgments, showing how

God maintains, governs, hinders, advances, punishes, and honors people, as each one has deserved good and evil. And although there are many who do not recognize and regard God, yet they must take warning from history” (WA 50:384). In short, each historical era presents a slice of life. In it God acts, often contrary to reason.

#### A. “History’s a mystery”

It is this contrariness of history that perplexes us and the students we teach. Mathematics come out with answers, and, practically speaking, we can use its figures to buy groceries and build houses. But history is not made up of answers; it is the narrative of life. It is, to use a cliché, descriptive not prescriptive. The moment we try to figure out what happens, the meaning eludes us. Try as we may we cannot put the teaching of history into a logical or biological bottle for us to predict its future course. Our own experience of life’s passing parade confirms that judgment. In frustration we must admit, we can neither make sense out of history nor can we control it. And what we cannot master remains a mystery to us.

The problem is that there is no fixed point to which to attach things. What is the meaning of history when there is no logic to what happens? Why study history if there is no way to know where it is headed, no goal or destination which we can ultimately identify? Like “old man river,” it just keeps rolling along -seemingly aimlessly. (A Greek observation: *panta rei*, everything is in flux) Why trouble our heads with that over which we have no control? So Hitler was an evil tyrant, we say from hindsight after the fact; yet at the time pious Lutheran Germans voted for him and viewed him as a savior. One person’s freedom fighter is another person’s enemy and devil. President Reagan called Russia an “evil empire” because of its totalitarian, expansionist communist system. The Russians retorted by calling the United States of America “imperialist dogs” because its capitalist system gobbled up the world’s material wealth to support the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Thus judgment strikes against judgment and it all depends on whose historical ox is being gored. With bold insight Dr. Peter Brunner of Heidelberg University, who lived through the Nazi era, reflects on our frustration and vexation with history in our times.

We hoped, with the help of reason and technology, to be able to eliminate, if not entirely, at least for the most part, the difficulties and perplexities of life. We hoped for a growth in freedom, in social security, in the blessings of culture, in happiness, and in the fullness of purpose. However we have had to realize that we cannot master the irrational forces in human life. Not infrequently, precisely the means by which we hoped to master these forces turn upon us and increase the menace. The forces of destruction slumber under cover. One small occasion—it could carry the name of Berlin or Cuba—may suffice to explode the powder keg upon which we are sitting. (Brunner, Peter, *Luther in the Twentieth Century*. Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1961, 13)

An illustration will help clarify our frustration with the historical. The ancient Greeks considered the basic building block of life and the universe to be the atom. *Atom* was the Greek word for the tiniest, infinitesimal thing that could no longer be divided or subdivided; it was the indivisible substance past which one cannot go. Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we did the impossible. We split the atom; we divided the indivisible. And in the atom we found a whole new universe, a microcosm of the big world out there—a universe made up of electrons and neutrons and more.

Barely had we opened one door when a thousand doors appear behind it. We never seem to be able to get to the bottom of things.

But what was scientifically bold became historically frustrating. No sooner did the atomic age dawn when the great discovery fumed on mankind—to its benefit and to its destruction. The atomic energy that heats homes destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And the dropping of the bomb is etched on our collective conscience.

Despite this historical insight, the real basis of the universe remains a mystery to us. How should we control the course of life which brings both good and evil? Are we cynically to throw up our hands in despair and, like Henry Ford, consign history to the ash can with the pathetic epithet, “History is bunk”? Is the final solution to the unanswerable for us to leave all to fate and chance and to fill in the time of our existence with the have-fun epicurean attitude: “Let us eat and drink and watch television for tomorrow we die”? Or do we find the history of life to be an endless chain of cause and effect, an evolutionary spiral in which the fittest survive and each generation seeks to improve life for the one to come?

### **1. History is a riddle for us**

Our approach to these questions is critical because it reveals our perspective on life. In our approach to these questions we teachers affect our students most deeply. Our attitudes toward life and the conduct of life do not merely pertain to Word of God studies. We are one person and we approach matters of life singlemindedly from a Christian perspective. “We have the mind of Christ,” the Apostle Paul says in humble gratitude (1 Corinthians 2:16) . For us that is an article of faith and, to repeat Luther’s insight, it means, “History is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture.” How we teach history reveals to our pupils our view of life, our *weltanschauung*, our perspective on history.

The question of teaching history from a certain viewpoint is not new. Today two identifiable views are vying with one another to put the key to understanding history in our students’ hands. The one is the evolutionary view; the other, the existential.

In the evolutionary view, history presents a constant struggle between opposing forces in which the stronger force wins and evolves into a higher form of civilization. According to this view of history we concentrate on events and people in history that changed life to produce a more modern civilization than was formerly the case. From this perspective history is the record of progress, and it aims to teach the student to contribute to the progress of mankind by making the world a better place in which to live.

The existential approach is not so idealistic. From the existential viewpoint, life is catastrophic, not positive and progressive. The truth of the matter is that life is tragic. We lead our life in fear and trembling as we rape nature and our environment until it unleashes its fury against us as happened in the atomic ash burial pits in Russia and elsewhere.

From the existential perspective history points out that the only way to live is to accept this one simple fact: our existence is totally personal. It is completely relative to our experience of it, and consequently nothing makes sense and life is absurd. The only way left, aside from suicide, is to accept what happens in life. We need to accept our fate, as did Sisyphus in the ancient myth. He rolled his burden, a stone, up the mountain only to have it roll back down again for another round of the same old thing. Accepting the fact that life is unkind and history is a bummer is the only way to achieve some semblance of meaning in a meaningless existence.

Each of these viewpoints have a kernel of truth in them when viewed from a totally secular attitude. But they fail miserably in penetrating the mystery of history. Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther biographer and church historian, says as much in an incisive passage on God and history. He writes:

With our physical eyes we cannot penetrate the mystery of historical happenings. There is no reasonable explanation for the riddle of history. Whatever explanations we have contrived, such as—history records progress to a higher type of civilization, it demonstrates how nations are made tough and hardened through battle, it reveals the victory of the just cause, etc.—all these solutions will be found to be “vanity,” an empty illusion in the face of reality., Not even the often-expressed thought borrowed from nature, that wars result in ‘the survival of the fittest,’ holds true.

Certainly there is a kernel of truth in this way of thinking. The stronger generally, though not always, proves victorious. But can that always be regarded as the survival of ‘the fittest’? Strength often consists only in a brutal superiority in numbers and material. The idea of the survival of the fittest becomes nonsensical in this age of technical warfare, in which the outcome of a war is decisively affected by the supply of raw material The struggle for survival of the fittest among animals of the same species is always determined with equal weapons, but with mankind it is usually with unequal ones. And into a war of physical force another factor enters, an unpredictable factor, which—when viewed with human eyes—can only be called ‘chance.’ This factor is the genius of a military officer who is given to one nation and withheld from another, or it is a revolutionizing invention which comes at just the right time to ward off disaster, or it is the unpredictable weather, rain, an unexpectedly early or severe winter, all of which upset strategic plans.

No, there is neither a logical nor a biological nor a moral formula to define adequately the meaning of history. Here human eyes are blind and see nothing. But do we see more with the eyes of faith? Yes—thank God!—faith does see more. Because of God’s revelation in Scripture, we can see soberly and clearly not only the great turmoil and discord in all aspects of life, but we know of God’s stormy presence in them. Yet, above all, we come to understand that God is acting in them. God not merely gives history its life. In and through Christ, he is also history’s Lord and Master. So God reveals that he is history’s beginning and will bring history also to its end in final judgment according to his word and promise. (Bornkamm, H. *Luther’s World of Thought*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958, 204f)

## **2. The Christian view of history**

From his study of Luther, Bornkamm puts into our hands the key to unveiling the secret of history. It is found, not in human philosophy or wisdom, but in the word and work of God. From a Christian perspective, all our teaching of history starts at this one fixed point: God holds all things that happen on earth in his hands. He is really and actively present in all things. God accomplishes all in all.

As simple as it may sound and as unreal as it may appear, the mystery of God’s work on earth is the key to all human history. History, as has often been repeated in our midst, is his-story

and he rules in it. As the One that does not change, he gives permanency to all life and action. God is the fixed point from which all began and toward which all things are headed. “I the Lord do not change” (Malachi 3:6)—that is God’s answer to us in the ebb and flow of history.

#### **a. God is in control**

What does this mean for our teaching? It means that God is in control. As Martin Luther once observed: “No kingdom or government stands and prospers because of human power or wisdom, but God alone is the One who establishes, holds, rules, protects, sustains, and also removes it” (WA Br. 5, 247). In contemporary idiom we would say, “He’s got the whole world in his hands; he’s got you and me, baby, in his hands.” It means that God controls all things by his omnipotence. It means that he is the only One in the universe that can say of himself, “I Am,” and *we are* only because *he is*. He alone is the creator and we are his creatures. He alone is without law and control, unless we place another God above him.

From a Christian perspective, therefore, we understand God to be the active doer in all human decisions and historical happenings. President Clinton may have decided to send our troops into Bosnia to keep the peace. A former student, Sharon Sting Trier, now stationed with her husband in Germany, may have written me a letter indicating, “We do have WELS members that have been deployed to Bosnia (please keep them in your prayers).” We may listen to the speeches of the presidential candidates and make history by deciding for whom to vote. But in every case God causes each of us to do what we do, to speak as we do, to hear as we do. In an incisive and graphic passage Peter Brunner explains the place of God in history in this way:

What an atom does, what an electron does, what a seed does when it germinates, what the body of a mother does when it bears a child, what the farmer accomplishes when he sows his field, what a merchant does when he closes a business transaction, what a young man does when he decides on a specific profession, when a man and a woman marry, when a nation establishes for itself a particular system of government, when men revolt, when armies fight--all of these activities are ... only a facade of an occurrence whose inner side is God himself present in this event with his effective power. (Brunner,16)

This rule and governance of God wars against our reason and all our senses. We normally deal with what we see and we judge all things according to our reason. Our everyday encounter with history pays no attention to God in the universe. Day by day we observe life and from the daily journal we read about things that happen, things that make history. People are the doers and decision makers, not God. People are the crafters of the future, the inventors of new technology, the creators of creature comforts. People are destroyers of buildings, the crafters of bombs, the detonators of destructive devices. Bill Gates is the billionaire by his genius for micro technology. Patriot missiles deployed by people in Israel during the Gulf War saved the country from disaster.

How does this mesh with God’s omnipotent control? Does not the closed system of cause and effect shut God out of the equation? What happens to the three and four causes we list for the American Civil War when God is the essential doer? Why bother about creaturely activity if all is determined, even predetermined, by God’s activity? Is not the Christian view of history only a convenient crutch to escape our responsibilities as citizens? Does not the Christian view of history make our children uninterested in what has happened in the past since it lies beyond

our control? More seriously, if God does what he does, does that not make robots of us all? What a repugnant view of history and of God that envisions!

### **b. His control is hidden from our eyes**

The questions are natural and normal for all who have no eyes for the governance of God. But they are faulty when measured against God's revelation of his power in history. Christian teachers are not Cyclops. In teaching the little ones under our care, we have two eyes. Our human eye is focused on the earth and from that view we can tell the story of history in all its interesting narrative. But thank God, the eye of faith sees all that is being said and done from a Christian viewpoint. Christian teachers are not determinists who vainly imagine we are puppets and God is pulling the strings, for better or for worse.

Then how are we to understand God's actions? From the Christian perspective of history, everything that happens is only a mask behind which God himself is concealed. The events of history, Luther liked to point out, "strike our eye. But the divine governance, by which empires are either established or overthrown, does not strike our eye" (WA 42, 507).

Our eyes deceive us because God and his activities lie beyond our comprehension. Our eyes are blinded to God's visible presence since the day we separated ourselves from God through sin. Now we can only observe God's acts, the facts of life and of his revelation. But the hows and whys of events remain concealed in his divine majesty. We can tell the story of history, and we know from his Word that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8: 28 ). But what God specifically intends by what happened in specific events that we are studying lies concealed from our eyes except what he tells us in his Word.

Let us use an example from everyday life. We can tell the story of England's Queen Elizabeth in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and about her troubles with her Spanish brother-in-law, Philip II of Spain. We can have the children research Elizabethan England's splendid victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588—how it happened, why it happened. From the events we can conclude that the British victory gave England a freedom on the high seas and eventually led them to America.

But we cannot read the mind of God in doing so. For all God's activities are wrapped up under a cover of history, like a butterfly is concealed in a cocoon. His stormy presence in the rise and fall of nations frightens us, even as a rustling leaf falling from a tree can give an army the jitters in the still of the night. It is as God said, "I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight" (Leviticus 26:36).

God hidden in history, therefore, is just another way of telling about his stormy presence in the events that make up our human history. We cannot see through the cracks, try as we may. We are never able to deduce God's intentions by the facts. And it would be especially presumptuous for us to single out historically only those historical events which are positive and in our favor. God is actively present in both good and evil. He told us as much through Isaiah the prophets who proclaimed this word from God: "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah, 45:3).

### **B. The Christian view poses three problems**

It is this terrible thought that leads us to be ready to answer questions that follow such a view of history. The objections that people raise to teaching history from a Christian perspective are basically three (see Brunner, p. 17). The first is a question of freedom. It goes like this: If

God works all in all by his almighty power, are we not then mere robots? If God is the active doer, does not this belief dehumanize us? What then remains of our human responsibility and our freedom to make decisions?

## 1. The problem of freedom

Those objections appear to be valid and we need to answer them. Our answer is as simple as it is profound. We are confronted with a paradox: God is the essential doer in all that happens, but his almighty power does not make us into puppets. History is not the story of people going through the motions while God pulls the strings. In dealing with us, God does not take away our freedom to act. Though it boggles our minds, we teach our children that God controls history, yet he allows us to be the actors on the stage of life. As William Shakespeare put it in his inimitable way: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, roughhew them how we will" (Hamlet V, ii, 10)

The scenario is this. Far from being robots, we can and do make decisions with regard to things below us. We exercise our will each day, even though our will is dead to God, enslaved by sin, and bears sin's consequences. In this way our deeds can be judged.

In a striking passage Martin Luther clarifies the issue of freedom. He discusses with the humanist Erasmus whether we have a free or enslaved will. Luther frankly acknowledges that we have a so-called free will and are responsible for what we do. In the multitude of decisions that face us each day we are free to choose. We decide whether to flee terror or fight it, whether to marry or not to marry, whether to cast a vote or to stay at home.

But Luther is careful to point out that free choice is limited to matters "below us" and does not pertain to our relationship with God. "A person should know," Luther states clearly, "that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice." God lets us be ourselves with all our foibles and frustrations, however limited our choices and actions may be in the light of the judgment of God (LW 33: 70).

That God does not rob us of such freedom and responsibility is clearly demonstrated in Jesus' temptation by Satan. It is interesting how subtly the devil raised the question of freedom. He simply asked Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple Mount to see whether Jesus believed in God's control. But Jesus knew better. God is not to be toyed with. Such an act, though divinely possible, would be humanly irresponsible. It would be a reckless decision, not done out of trust in God's providential care. Therefore Jesus put Satan in his place by fuming the question of freedom back to God: "It says in God's Word," Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4: 9-12).

So Jesus gives us the answer to the question of freedom in history. As nations, peoples, tribes, and individuals we act and make decisions. History is a record of such actions and decisions. But in all we do God expects us to act responsibly. In each situation we must act according to the measure of wisdom given us. He gave us the 10 commandments as our guide.

When we view history from this divine perspective, it opens up a whole new world. It is not a world of compulsion, nor is it a world of impotence. It is world in which God allows us the freedom to act, but lets us live with the consequences of our actions and holds us accountable for them. At bottom, it is a world of faith and trust in God, or a world of unbelief.

Teaching history from a Christian perspective, therefore, means we teach the lessons of human responsibility under the judgment of God. From a Christian perspective we understand our freedom. And in our classrooms we teach our children a civic-mindedness which highlights

our responsibilities. At the same time we teach the little ones in our charge to trust that God is in control and does all things according to his good pleasure. And even when the course of history goes contrary to our expectations—and especially then—we can rest assured that nothing happens in life without God’s attendant power and purpose. As St. Paul wrote, we can be comforted in knowing that “neither death, nor life, ... neither the present nor the future, nor any power ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” [Romans 8: 38f].

For, beyond his hidden ways, God gives us an understanding of history in his Word. Jesus is the key to understanding history. By sending Jesus, God broke through the time-warp of life’s passing parade and put us face to face with this basic fact: All history is the story of sin and grace—our sin and God’s grace, the consequences of our sin in God’s judgment on nations and peoples and individuals, the strength of God’s grace for all who cling to him and his Word in repentant faith.

The difficulty of deciding how to act faces Christians with special intensity at a time of wartime emergency. During the American Revolution, Lutheran pastors did not know how to handle the war. Judgment hit upon judgment. At stake for some colonists were the legal rights of English citizen’s guaranteed by the British constitution. Other colonists, on the other hand, were filled with freedom fever and they acted on it. In a quandary Pastor Runze of the Ev. Lutheran church in Philadelphia wrote to his mentor in Germany: “I am glad to leave political judgments to others . ... My own judgment on the matter is theological. There is no land known to me which in the course of history has not been celebrated because of certain great afflictions visited upon it by way of punishment” (Pettengill (ed). *Letters from America 1776-1779*, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikut Press, 1924, 238-240)

Pastor Helmuth, his colleague in Lancaster, agreed. “The All-knowing alone knows what the end of these sad times will be,” he wrote cautiously. “England has merited it, to be sure, by its sins if God should permit a break. But, on the other hand, this land has probably merited it as much if God should visit it with tribulation . ... I at least for my humble part cannot determine whether America is doing right or wrong” (Pettengill, bid). To Pastors Helmuth and Runze the war was a judgment of God and a call to repentance.

So Luther’s words ring true. “History is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture.” We can tell the story and learn God’s ways from it. The Roman Empire falls from its heights, the German Empire collapses in war, the United States of America rises to the top of the superpowers while rotting from the inside -- all these are judgments in which God is at work among peoples and nations and tribes. Each nation and people acts freely and makes decisions either rashly or by weighing the consequences. But what happens masks God’s specific intent in letting things happen. The events alone strike our eye and we can tell the story in all its detail. But the divine governance, by which empires are either established or overthrown, escapes our view. It is God’s way to call us to repentance.

## **2. The problem of evil**

The second problem that people have with teaching history from a Christian perspective is the question of evil. This problem relates directly to God himself and is the age-old question which philosophers and poets have asked: If God is at work in whatever happens, doesn’t that make him responsible for evil? It’s no secret that history records evil in abundance—bloodshed and tyranny, persecution and slavery, the holocaust and Hitler, ethnic cleansing and brutal



savagery. If God works all in all, does he not work these evils also? What a repugnant and horrendous vision of God!

On the surface the question seems to defy explanation. But human eyes are blinded to God and his ways. Try as we may, we cannot lay the problem of evil to God's charge. What makes God to be God is that he is good and righteous and holy. And even though God controls all things, he does not contrive to do us evil. Evil comes only because God permits it to happen. The source of evil is Satan, not God, as all the Scriptures testify. In mocking and mimicking God, Satan makes history by trying to upset God's good order. For God did not create a chaotic world. He created an orderly universe for our pleasure—and he pronounced it good.

But Satan works to undo God's good order by attacking those very orders God instituted for our welfare, namely, marriage and family, vocation and government, and the church. Human history records how these orders are constantly under attack. The breakup of the marriage and family is not unique to America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Free love was promoted in the pagan society of Greece and Rome and defended as totally natural. The tyrants of our era differ only in degree and circumstance from Nero, Ghengis Khan, Ivan the Terrible, and the men of renown in Noah's day.

It is important for Christian teachers to tell the story of the blessings and breakdowns of God's order in our history lessons. God gives nations and peoples and individuals stability and civic accord through the preservation of family and vocation and government and church. But he also allows civil discord through the destruction of these orders.

In telling the story, however, Christian teachers must never fall into the trap of suggesting that God's orders in themselves take away the disorder of sin or bring any sort of forgiveness before God. We can not christianize history or society in that way. It would be presumptuous to do so. God gave marriage and family, our vocation and government, as places of action and service, as communal orders in which we are able to live and love. In and through them Christians are able to promote civic righteousness from the attitude of faith and to carry out our service to mankind in manifold ways.

But to gain insights into God's ways, he gave us his Word. Through the Word, God gives us the message of divine anger over sin and divine forgiveness through Christ. The Gospel and the sacraments are the only means through which God delivers people from sin and Satan. Therefore Satan, the Evil one, reserves his fiercest and most subtle attack for the church. Here he seeks to get at God by subtly or blatantly undermining God's Word.

As you teachers follow the history of the Christian church in your classroom, children will learn to know that where God's Word is preached, there is a battle going on. God and Satan are in contest for people's souls. The forces of evil often collaborate to bring God down, first of all, by perverting God's Word, and then by undermining order in the community of people and of nations contrary to God's will and ways. Satan seeks to sweep away the protecting forces of God's orders so that the Word of God does not have free course. Ask the missionaries in foreign lands if this is not so.

But have we not forgotten God's omnipotence as we discuss the issue of evil? Have we lost sight of the fact that God is in control and works all in all? Yes, we have if we imagine God and Satan are two equal forces, in the world. From this faulty perspective we are envisioning two gods, one good and one evil. Such a presentation would confuse the children and leave the impression that Satan, the other force in life, is on equal plain with God himself. Wrong! We Christians are not dualists. As powerful as the Devil is on earth, we are not in a "star wars"

contest. As much as Darth Vader seems to reflect the contest of good and evil in this world, Satan is not independent of God's omnipotent rule.

The truth of the matter is that Satan is also subject to God's control and he works only by God's permission. As Luther once pointedly remarked, "God remains God even in hell." (LW 38:225) We don't know how all that can be. The hows and whys of evil touch the secrets of God's majesty. How Satan as part of God's good creation could become evil remains a mystery to us. Why the omnipotent God allows evil to exist and even grow worse defies our comprehension. St. Paul says it for us: "How unsearchable [are God's] judgments, and his paths past tracing out!" (Romans 1 t:33).

But this we know that God corrected the course of human history when he sent his Son into the world. Through the cross God turned our history on its head, upside down, outside in. In and through the cross, God solved the mystery of history. He "reconciled the world to himself in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19). And thus we are faced with another mystery, a mystery which God revealed to us in the person of Jesus, a mystery which solves the mystery of history.

### **3. The problem of the meaning of history**

What does this mean? It means that the cross is God's answer to teaching history from a Christian perspective. The cross is the fixed point that gives history its meaning. In the cross God comes out of secrecy in a most peculiar way. God reveals himself to us by hiding himself.

That is exactly how the Apostle Paul explains the work of God on earth to the church at Corinth. He writes: "We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been *hidden* and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

Did you catch the key words, hidden and revealed? They simply mean that when God reveals himself in our world, he goes into hiding. Now that seems mighty strange to us. Revelation normally occurs when, like a butterfly in a cocoon, something comes out of hiding, when something once hidden from sight is now openly revealed. But when God comes out of secrecy, he hides himself. When God shows us his love on earth, he covers himself in flesh and blood. We have said it and sung it, often thoughtlessly, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity" [CW 61].

Miracle of miracles, God reveals himself by hiding himself. There he is at Bethlehem, the baby of whom the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest." There he is standing in the waters of the Jordan, of whom the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." There he is on the mount, who for a fleeting moment unveiled his glory and stood transfigured before his disciples. And they stood transfixed as Jesus face shown like the sun and a voice from heaven confirmed, "This is my Son whom I love." And then they saw nothing but Jesus only.

In our history God reveals himself by hiding himself for a reason. He knew that persons whom he once created in the image of God wanted in vainglory to be just "like God" (Genesis 3:5). Eyes which once looked God in the face were now veiled by sin and no longer able to see God as he is. The great "I Am," Javeh is too great for us. Pious Israelites did not even dare to pronounce that holy name. But God wants us to know that the Lord of history is the LORD who cares. The Lord of life is willing to go into action on our behalf, even if it meant death on a cross.

That is why God's secret plan was to reveal himself by hiding himself. From eternity he planned the coming of Christ under the veil of flesh to suffer and die on a cross to redeem the

times. God remains hidden in the cross. For the cross is not glorious. It is an instrument of torture and death. It is condemnation. And as we look at Jesus with our natural historical eyes, what we see is a person stricken and smitten by God. And we cannot stand the sight and hide, as it were, our eyes from him. (Isaiah 53)

Why? Because in the cross, God took our pants down and we stand before him naked and exposed. What happened there to this righteous and innocent Son of Man reflects with graphic vividness what is to happen to us. The cross is the ultimate preachment of God's anger over sin. In it God exposes the root sin out of which all the fruit sins, like disobedience, sexual impurity, pride and selfishness grow. The root sin is our total separation from God from birth. Devoid of all true fear and faith in him, we are turned back upon ourselves and, try as we may, cannot keep the royal law of love.

But what our natural historical eye cannot see in Jesus' cross because of sin, the eye of faith does see. By the Spirit of the living God, we can see that Jesus' cross is our salvation -- that his death is our life, that his obedience is our rescue. The wisdom of the cross is simply this: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." The work of Christ on the cross would have meant nothing to us if it were not for the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The Holy Spirit is the one who lifts up the cover for us to see, and there he lets us see with the eyes of faith the One hidden underneath the veil. Now for the first time we learn the meaning of life and of history from God's perspective.

But that mask behind which God operates in the cross will not be fully revealed until we see God face to face. Only at the end of time will the full meaning of history become clear to us. The Christian view of history is truly eschatological. World history is not to be its own judge. Nor does the goal of history lie within history itself. The goal of history toward which all life is headed lies outside the boundaries of time and space. The goal of history is to be found in God.

The Apostle Paul points to this goal in clear and unmistakable terms when he writes to the Ephesians: "And [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Only on judgment day will we be able to comprehend the course of life. Only on the last day of this world will the meaning of history itself come clear in all its detail. Because sin has cast a shroud over life, the full understanding of world history will have to wait until God once and for all time lifts the veil off life and we can see clearly how the events that we study in our classroom are related to God's plans.

Right now as we tell the story of civilization to our children, we see only the evident. We see the marvelous inventions and unmerited blessings and awful tragedies. We learn about wars and plagues, about ordinary people who remained unnamed and the super-skilled who make their mark. We talk about unrest among nations like Ireland and England, Bosnians and Serbs, Arabs and Jews, and trace the reasons for their conflict through the historical sources. We tell the story of technological change that revolutionizes life, like the printing press and the computer chip. All these are interesting and real. They form the tapestry of history.

But on closer examination we are still at loose ends. We are fascinated by appearances. Appearances are the measure by which the world measures things. Power, wealth, social standing, wisdom, or the lack of these qualities, consume our time and energies. But the meaning of history still escapes us as each generation of people dies without answering the mystery of

history. Appearances deceive because, like that tapestry, we are able to observe only the reverse side. And there we see the strings and loose ends and no pattern.

When God finally gathers all things to himself in Christ, he will turn the tapestry of time around and we will see his pattern. Then we will understand that God judgments are just and right. Then we will know that we were not foolish to teach the history of nations and peoples and tribes from the perspective of the cross. Then we will fully understand that already in the cross God's eternal judgment bent back upon us in time with the assurance that the Lord of history is our LORD [Philippians 2: to-t 1]. Then the meaning of history is finally solved. It is not bunk; it is not a riddle. History is his-story from beginning to end.

### **An afterthought**

Let me end with an afterthought. You have been listening patiently to an essay on teaching history from a Christian perspective. You have not expected of me, as you will not expect of yourselves, to drag God's Word into your history lessons by the hair—as if we could write the specifically Christian textbook on life. It is enough that our attitudes toward history are shaped by God's Word. We do well to see God's hand in everything that happens in life, be it good or bad. We do well also to avoid trying to determine God's intent in specific events. At the same time we are prepared to meet the critics who raise faulty question about the Christian view of history because they do not understand. In answering them we are prepared to testify and to explain our convictions. [For additional discussion, see H.R. Klatt, *History: An Outline from the Christian Point of View*, Northwestern Publishing House, 1955]

But our teaching in the classroom will best follow the advice that Luther once gave to the city councilmen in Germany, as he encouraged education in schools and gave specific curricular advice. He wrote to them in words still pertinent to us today:

Children are to be instructed and trained in schools or wherever there are teamed and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses to teach the languages, the other arts, and history. If this were done, children would hear the happenings and sayings of the entire world and would team how various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women fared. In this way they could in a short time place before themselves, as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels and purposes, success and failures, of the whole world from the beginning.

As a result of this knowledge, they could form their own opinions and adapt themselves in the fear of God to life in this world. Moreover, from the study of these histories they would become judicious and wise in their judgment as to what should be sought and what avoided in the external relations of life. And they would be able to assist and direct others accordingly. (LW 45: 368f)

So ours is an awesome, but important task. Teaching history is nothing more than training the upcoming generation in the fear of God to take their place in the history of nations. We can help to do this by telling the real-life story of peoples and individuals, of civilizations and single biographies with all the verve and candor of graphic narrative. To teach history we need to cultivate the art of storytelling, as we do with the Bible stories.

If we have teamed anything from our study today, it should be this. Teaching history is not a trivial pursuit. History is the story of life, our life as human beings, the life of the peoples

who have gone before us and in whose footsteps we walk in our own time and our own place. But the story is not meaningless, nor nonsense, nor an unsolvable mystery. The sense of what you are telling the children in your classrooms comes from the Christian faith. History has a fixed point in God—and it has a goal, because the Lord of history revealed himself as history's LORD.