

Reaction to *The Pastor as Church Historian*

On behalf of all us gathered here, I'd like to thank our brother, Pastor Bart Brauer, for his excellent work written for our encouragement. Most of us here are or have been busy parish pastors and know the incessant demands that calling makes. For him to present us with an edifying twenty-page essay with multiple quotes translated from the original German – this is not merely a commitment he fulfilled ; it is a labor of love, and we do well to receive it as such. Thank you, Brother Bart.

In reacting to this essay, there are three specific concepts, present in the paper, that I would like to reflect upon a bit further.

The first of these is this: "History is about people (p.1)." Where I serve, at this time of the year I and my colleagues have been scheduling meetings in our offices with our new advisees. I know that many of us make it our practice just to listen – listen to their personal history of how God, in one way or another, led them to study at MLC. The stories they tell are more than "revealing"; they are marvelous testaments to the grace of God in each young man's life. The same, of course, holds true in the parish setting. Each of the sheep that the Shepherd leads into his fold and entrusts to his earthly shepherds has a story, a history of God's grace in their lives. As you know, some of these personal histories are more dramatic than others. But taking time to listen to them is a good practice for pastors, and a poignant reminder that also from God's perspective, history is about people. Pastor Brauer said as much in his encouragement that we all strive to be *Menschenkenner* for the sake of the gospel (p.17). As noted in a couple of places, to know history is to know mankind, and knowing mankind subsequently results in evangelical, charitable judgments "toward people and societies with whom we do not agree (p.18)." Furthermore, who of us at the opening of this essay did not find our individual thoughts drifting back to our short time on the Seminary stage, and the people whom God led into our lives as part of their history and ours? Personally, I couldn't help but think of many of the professors I was privileged to learn from, occasionally experiencing church history along the way, such as sitting in the very last class *periods* that President Toppe and Prof. Fredrich ever taught, all the while having a feeling that a chapter of history was closing right

before my eyes. The fact that God, in his grace, has now translated them to the Church Triumphant only heightens that feeling with the passing of years.

Secondly, this sentence on page 2 also caught my attention: "Given pressing realities, church history may seem like more of a niche for the interested." Yet should it be so? Lutherans, in a very real sense, come by the study of church history quite naturally. Melancthon, among his other duties and achievements, almost single-handedly over-hauled church historiography. He rejected previous historians and their methodology, Catholic all, who had by and large viewed church history as the history of the Roman church (as we would expect). Melancthon's historiography instead turned the focus to Christ's work and rule in this world through the gospel. Consequently, it was through his efforts that the Lutherans were the first to offer the academic world of Europe a formal program for the study of church history.¹ Thus the study of church history is every bit part of the legacy our Wittenberg forefathers left us as the other Seminary disciplines are. Pastor Brauer sounds a gentle note of concern (if I hear him correctly) that courses in church history at the Seminary have been somewhat truncated of late to make more room for practical disciplines. This is a concern that we, who work with pre-seminary students in New Ulm, also share; a number of our history courses have similarly been truncated for any number of reasons that affect the overall curriculum of MLC. I don't mean to pass judgment on my colleagues charged with arranging such things; anyone who has served on a faculty knows that ordering curricula for multiple tracks of study to meet various requirements of both synod and state can be a nightmarish task. Yet gems remain at MLC among the limited offerings in history. I think of Prof. Joel Fredrich's *First Century Roman World* elective, as well as Prof. Paul Koelpin's *The Ancient Near East*. These two provide valuable historical context for large sections of the Bible. There is also the general education requirement for all MLC students, *The U.S. Since 1945*. It is important to know our own historical context as well, since the majority of WELS called workers will serve right here in America. In addition to these, as I consider how the MLC and WLS curricula are designed to dovetail, one small tweak I dream of at MLC is that someday we might be able to develop an elective on intertestamental history. More generally, though – apart from specific names – courses that provide a good grasp of

¹ The story of Melancthon's multiple revisions of Carion's Chronicle is wonderfully told by Mark Andrew Lotito, "Wittenberg Historiography: Philipp Melancthon and the Reformation of Historical Thought" (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 2011), <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtft/docview/897912559/abstract/13BEC8D72117FF624B4/1?accountid=10920>.

history, be it Biblical, ecclesiastical, or secular, foster the ability for preachers to honestly pursue the exegetical method our forefathers left us, the historical-grammatical method, without greatly subordinating the former to the latter. Indeed, each text we preach on is, in addition to being the very Word of God, also a historical text, written by real people who lived in a specific time and place – in short, a historical context.

Finally, I thank Pastor Brauer for sharing with us the working definition of history that was given to him here, at Seminary, by Prof. Siggelkow: "History is the record of God administering his world for the purpose of gathering his elect by means of the gospel (p.7)." I, too, was a parish pastor on 9.11.2001 and I, too, was asked many questions about what God was doing. Pastor Brauer's essay reflects the proper spirit toward such things – the spirit of humility that Paul demonstrated in his majestic and all-encompassing evaluation of history at the end of Romans 11: "Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? ... For from him and through him and to him are all things." We don't -- we can't – know the mind of our God as he orders his world in the interest of the gospel, whether that be in the face of personal tragedy (Job), or in gathering the elect (Paul), or in the shaking of the nations (Haggai), or when a simple parish pastor is asked by his members to decipher the meaning of a national tragedy. God in his wisdom has only permitted us – at best – to *partially* understand the higher ways of his divine governance, and most of the time our analysis of history is done looking through glass darkly. But, most importantly, he has enabled us by his Holy Spirit to see and understand the pivotal event in all human history – the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.² For the ancient Greeks and Romans, history was all about *exempla* – the lives of "good" men recorded for everyone to ponder and emulate. The history that God has written and is currently writing is so very much more. It is the infallible record of his inexplicable love for a world wrecked by sin. It is the history of his grace – of how his Son entered his world, united himself to our race, and redeemed us from sin, death and hell. It is the history of his faithfulness, as he even now continues to gather his elect, not one of whom will be missing on the Last Day. We are now waiting for the final chapter of this present age to be finished. But as God is faithful and his promises sure, he will take us who cling to him in faith to that bright shining city we have only read about. In that place history will begin again... but have no final chapter.

² Further, see Arnold J. Koelpin, "The Cross: God's Mask in Human History." *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, XXXIX.1, pp. 33-59.

Until then, we mark days, months, seasons, and years, as we are doing now in this 150th anniversary year. And in doing so we are blessed to learn anew what God's gift of time to Adam was really all about – a divine tool given to man to help us try to measure, in some small way, a gracious Lord's immense goodness to us all.

--KCW