

Building a Resilient Church Culture: Part 4 – Accurate Histories

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[0:00] Take your copy of God's Word and join me in Psalm 111. We are now halfway through a series of sermons, which is a phrase I don't even like saying, series of sermons.

But all the same, halfway through a series of sermons expressing our need to build a resilient church culture. We live in days of growing soft totalitarianism, particularly concerning anthropology, how we came to be, why we exist.

And we believe that we're going to find ourselves increasingly uncomfortable holding to biblical standards of sexuality, gender, gender roles, etc. Now to hear me, soft totalitarianism should be held up and compared to hard totalitarianism, which would be things like communist Russia, the USSR.

We are not suggesting this morning that we are going to find ourselves in the gulags of Canada. Although I wouldn't want to be sent there right now.

But rather that socially it will get more and more difficult to hold to biblical standards. If you're new to this study, I believe you'll be well served by going to our website, finding the recordings of the three previous sermons, and taking some time to consider that.

[1:29] We did an overview sermon to begin with where I try to flesh this out a bit more. But each week I've begun with three prerequisite statements, and I think that they bear repeating each week that we do this.

So, once again, before we proceed any further, as a general practice, we preach expositional sermons. And even beyond that, our favorite type of preaching is verse-by-verse exposition. I look forward in the fall to beginning the book of Romans with you once again. So, that means that we typically, right, we open up to a text, and the point or points of the text is the point or points of the sermon.

We exegete it. We let it speak to us out of the text. The opposite of that is eisegesis, reading into a text what you think that it means, and we run a risk of doing that as we preach topically.

The labor is to not do that, but we run a risk of doing it. And so, I just want to say, great concern for this, even as I'm the one preaching, be discerning as people preach topically to you.

[2:36] Secondly, we're not trying to be alarmists. But we believe, your elders believe, that it's proper for us to be thinking about and to preparing ourselves for greater challenges that we think are coming for the church.

We care about this because we love you very much, and because we care about the glory of our God. And thirdly, six total weeks is not nearly enough time to be talking about this.

And I know that I swim in different waters than you, where my brain is all week long. It's different than where your brain is. You'll leave here and begin thinking about tomorrow having to teach or sell insurance or build houses or whatever that may be.

But I think it's going to be important for us to continue to talk about these types of things together. So, I want to encourage you to ask questions. Push at me. I'd love to hear your thoughts about anything that I say.

That we might be better together as a church for the glory of our God. So, how do we build a resilient church culture? One that's going to stand against the rising tide of self-totitarianism.

[3:46] It's going to have to be built. It's not just going to happen. We're going to have to put practices in place and be deliberate about it. It's going to have to be a strong thing that we do together, right? This tide is going to be a destructive tide.

We're going to have to stand. We're going to have to link arms together. I think of the SEAL training where they all lay down in the ocean with their arms linked together and just get washed over by waves.

But we're going to stand and we're going to take those waves on together. It's going to have to be cultural, right? It's going to have to seep into everything we are as a church.

And this morning, we're going to consider the third of the five things that we believe that we need to be working on. We've already talked of our need to define and hold to the clear mission.

of the church. That was number one, clear mission. And we've also talked about our need to do robust theology, right? Knowing what God has commanded and what he has promised and carefully doing the work of theological triage in order to maintain unity in the church for the sake of standing firm on matters of first importance.

[4:54] Today, we are going to consider the church's need to work on knowing accurate histories. This is the one, honestly, that I've most trembled at and with my level of preparation still tremble at.

That's the one I think most difficult to make a direct argument from the scripture on. So as I talk about being discerning, I'm just repeating it again. Please be discerning as we consider the need we believe to work on accurate histories.

So, Psalm 111, verses 2 through 4. Before I read it, beloved, let me remind you that this is God's word to us written for his glory and our good.

And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Verse 2. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered.

[6:05] The Lord, the Lord, is gracious and merciful. So you see in just these few verses, Psalm 111, right?

An exhortation, right? That if we are those who delight in God, we will delight in his works. And therefore, we're being told here that we ought to study them and remember them.

Because it's in them that our God displays himself as gracious and as merciful. There are many in our age who want us to just forget the past.

They say that everything valuable is found in everything new. Newness equals rightness. We are to always be progressing, always casting off the old ways for the sake of better ways.

Others would have us fixate on the particularly positive or particularly negative aspects of history.

They either always want us acting in response to some evil committed as if we committed the evil ourselves, or working to preserve some good as if it was never mixed up with any error.

[7:15] Others still would have us altogether ignore the past because who has time to do the careful work of really knowing our history and learning anything from it?

I suggest to you that none of these are the way forward. None of them will help us to build a resilient church culture, but rather, we should actively pursue knowing, interpreting, understanding, and teaching accurate histories.

The word that we use for history comes from a Greek word which means to know. The Greek word for a historian means wise man or knowledgeable man.

So if we are to navigate a troubled age, perhaps there is something to be learned from those who have navigated troubled times before us.

The preacher of the book of Ecclesiastes states in chapter 1 and verse 9, What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

[8:25] Just because we might experience something to be new doesn't mean that it's new. Patterns repeat themselves over and over and over again.

And so history will serve us. It will help us to see how we have arrived where we are. Help us to value what we should value and discard that which needs discarding.

Proverbs 19 and verse 2 says, Desire without knowledge is not good, And whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.

So we need to know who has gone before and how we got here. It's going to help us to see more clearly the way to go forward. A quotation accredited to a number of men, including the Irish statesman Edmund Burke, Spanish philosopher George Santayana, and my favorite in this lineup, Winston Churchill, goes something like this, quote, Those that fail to learn from history are, you all know it, right?

Doomed to repeat it, end quote. That's right. I believe that a careful study of history will all at once embolden us to stand for the truth, as many before us have, and humble us, as our troubled days are minor compared to the troubles of those preceding us.

[9:51] We feel a bit uncomfortable. Those who have gone before us experienced much more. Now, I say we will need to be actively pursuing, knowing, interpreting, understanding, and teaching accurate histories, because I want to emphasize that I'm not merely contending for the careful reading of a good world history textbook.

Histories, multiple avenues of history. I am contending for the careful reading of a good world history textbook. So to be clear, that is good.

But not just that. We will need to know, interpret, understand, and teach world history, and national histories, and state histories, and local histories, and, most importantly, church histories.

We're going to really know who we are and the context in which we live and know how to stand in it. We're going to have to do all of these things. We will need to have knowledge of how we arrived here, right?

And especially at how God orchestrated the arrival. How is it that God is at work in the midst of all the affairs of mankind?

[11:11] I believe that the most important way that we can do this is through the study of church history placed in the context of broader history, right? To know the narrow in light of the broader history of the world.

Now, the Bible is not silent on this topic as it pertains to knowing God and His interactions with and for His people. I already read to you Psalm 111, right?

Great are the works of the Lord. Steady by all who delight in Him. Full of splendor and majesty is His work, and His righteousness endures forever. He has caused wondrous works to be remembered.

The Lord is gracious and merciful. That is the Jewish history, and it is ours if we're in Christ, grafted in to Israel.

Let's look together at a couple of other Old Testament examples. So we're going to Bible drill for just a moment here. A couple of texts, just three if I remember correctly. Firstly, Deuteronomy chapter 4.

[12:15] So if you can turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 4. We find in Deuteronomy a restatement of the law just before the people go into the promised land.

Chapter 4, beginning in verse 9 and following. God instructs, Only take care and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.

Make them known to your children and your children's children, how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.

And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. They're called to remember the thing that had happened, the thing they had witnessed when the Lord came down and met with Moses on the mountain, gave to him his law.

They're to remember it for the sake of their souls, for the sake of the souls of their children, and for their children's children, their grandbabies as well.

[13:52] Another text, so turn with me to Psalm 78. Beginning in verse 1. The psalmist writes, Give ear, O my people, to my teaching.

Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings from old, things that we have heard and known that our fathers have told us. Right? There's the history. Things that we have been told. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded to our fathers to teach, to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

And they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God. Right?

[15:05] So we see again an instruction being given here. Right? I'm going to tell you things that you need to turn and tell to others. Right? That there would be a generational faithfulness to God, that they would know how it is that God has acted on their behalf.

And at the end of that text, so that they would learn how not to act. Right? They would learn to keep the law, and they would also learn that they should not be like their fathers, stubborn and rebellious, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, and they were not faithful to God.

Right? So we see these Old Testament texts, this commendation to learning and knowing the history of the people of God, particularly how God had acted on their behalf.

Let me give you a New Testament example of the same. 1 Corinthians chapter 10. Let me ask you to join me there. You're not used to this.

You're used to just camping in a text, aren't you? Beginning in verse 1, Paul writes, For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea.

[16:24] Right? Here he is talking about the Exodus. And all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased. For they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and 23,000 fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example. But they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come.

[17:28] So again, you see here, an encouragement to remember the past, that we might learn something from it. And so, we ought to know our Bibles. And this is no surprise to you, especially if you're accustomed to the teaching in this church.

But I just want to carefully emphasize that we are to pay attention to the histories of the Bible to learn how our God has dealt righteous judgment to those who do not walk in His ways and mercy and grace to those who do.

This book is full of history, which is helpful and instructive to us. Now, I think at that point the case is simple.

It's easy. I could say to you, we ought to know Bible history. And y'all would go, absolutely. We're on board with you. I just read to you four texts that make that very point. But then I want to say, we ought to also go further out and beyond the canon.

And we have to be careful as we do such a thing. But we ought to see how it is that God has worked since the canon was closed. How it is He's working amongst His people beyond the record of the Bible.

[18:40] This is an important thing. It's an important work for us to do. And how do we know as we look at history where God has moved and where God hasn't been moving, particularly as it concerns the history of the

church?

And we do so as it accords with the Bible. Right? We see movements of people who go out and do things biblically. We can praise God for the way that God has worked amongst those people. It's a thing we ought to be about doing together. If you don't take up this endeavor yourself with your very limited amount of time, at very least notice how important we believe it is as our church gathers.

So I'm not giving to you a new thing. So we're going to begin doing some history together. We already do this quite a bit. You were handed a bulletin this morning. I hope. Maybe you weren't. But there's a bulletin. And there's a quotation on that bulletin. And it is very rare that there's a contemporary quotation on the bulletin. It's not typical.

[19:45] But that's the case. Usually, I'm seeking to draw you back to history. Right? To commend to you somebody that's worth reading and worth paying attention to.

Right? Not perfect people, but people who walked faithfully with our God. We are not alone in this faith. Praise God. It's not just us in this room.

But we stand on the shoulders of giants. I mourned the loss of R.C. Sproul. It was a very sad day when the world lost Dr. Sproul.

But it opened up a ton of quotes for me for the bulletin, which is also a very nice thing to be able to do. It's also why we use quotations in sermons. I want you to know that I'm never quoting somebody old because I want to prove to you that I read old things.

That's not what I'm doing. I'm not trying to flex and say that I'm somehow smarter than you at all. I'm trying to connect you to a greater faith than just the faith that we can observe.

[20:47] It is a faith that goes out and beyond us. So even if you never read a church history book, you can at least participate in that and learn some things and know some things and chase a couple rabbit trails from time to time.

But I would commend to you the study of church history. And there's some really wonderful resources out there as you look at this and you hold it up to the Scripture. You think about how God has worked through the history of the church.

This could be a very important thing for you to do. We must not think that every aspect of church history is commendable, but much of it is.

Much of it is. God's people walking faithfully with their Lord. If we find ourselves holding a position not held by those who have walked before us, then there's a very good chance that we need to rethink our position.

How have faithful brothers and sisters walked through similar times before us? I'll commend to you a few things.

[21:55] First, a book called Pages from Church History by Stephen Nichols. It's a short one. It's 300-something pages. It gives you a quick introduction to church history.

In addition to that, he does a podcast called Five Minutes in Church History. So if you have any inclination in yourself to learn anything about church history, I can guarantee you have five minutes somewhere in your day where you're doing nothing.

You might be moving from one place to another or brushing your teeth for some portion of that five minutes. Let him be your timer. Brush your teeth for five minutes. You can listen to five minutes in church history and have your soul encouraged by those who have gone before you.

Another good book to commend to you, The Unquenchable Flame by Michael Reeves. Which is about the Reformation. Why are we Protestants?

That's an important question you ought to be able to answer. We are Protestants. We are still protesting against the Roman Catholic Church. Why? What's the issue at hand in this case?

[23:03] It's the gospel itself. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. To understand that we don't add anything to the equation of our salvation, but that God saves us by his power and keeps us by his power.

It's expressed in faith, but we are saved by God. God. I was shocked just a number of years ago at the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, of the day that Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of

the Wittenberg Church.

How much ecumenicalism started going on in those days. Like we needed to restore the relationship between the Protestant Church and the Roman Catholic Church. And I say no. It's a day to double down, right? To say no, no, no. Justification by faith alone. Do you know why you're a Protestant? Is it just because you were born into a house of a Protestant?

Or because you believe what the Scripture teaches about our salvation? If you want to read something more thick, more dense, 2,000 Years of Christ's Power by Nick Needham.

[24:16] It's a four-volume set. It's a wonderful, wonderful, helpful read. We need to be studying church history. We need to tap into the past. We need to know that we are not new at this.

We need to be encouraged to not be innovators, right? But to see how faithful people have walked in obedience to the text throughout the centuries. We also need to know the errors of the past. It is helpful if you study the old confessions to know why those were issues at all to begin with. It'll help you recognize error in our day.

Let me just give you a couple of quick examples. If you were familiar with Arianism and the great error and heresy that that was, perhaps you wouldn't be so drawn in to read or watch a book or movie like The Shack.

You would have heard about it and heard what was being said about it and we'd go, hmm, this sounds a lot like Arianism. I maybe need to be careful about this type of media. Or, Marcionism may prevent us from suggesting that we need to unhitch our faith from the Old Testament.

[25:27] Or, Pelagianism might help us give a more careful articulation concerning the nature of free will.

These matters have been debated biblically in history and can be helpful to us. I'll say just as a side note, I think that all of us are arrogant beyond belief if we think that we're more intelligent than the people who have gone before us.

Just about everybody I pick up and read who has gone before me is much, much smarter than me and I have much to learn from them.

Maybe we'd all be a little bit smarter if we'd get off Twitter. Also, read biography. The Lord has shaped me, I think, through the reading of biography than any other book I've read apart from the Scripture.

So, hold that up, hold that primary, but if beyond the Bible you're going to read something, I would really commend to you the reading of biography. A wonderful biography to commend to you.

[26:36] It's actually an autobiography. It's put out by the Banner of Truth Trust, John G. Payton, the frontier missionary to the New Hebrides. I read this biography in preparation for a men's retreat that we started doing.

This is, we're entering into our 14th year, I think, of doing it, and we always do a biographical sketch. So, I led the charge in that, and I knew nothing about John G. Payton. I thought he sounded kind of cool.

He went to some islands, an island chain of cannibals as a frontier missionary. And so, I picked it up, and I thought, this will embolden the men of our church to contend for the faith.

And God did that very thing in me. He worked in my heart a greater firmness to stand for the truth. We'll read to you a brief quote out of that.

This is Payton himself writing about how resistant the church was to send him to such a place. So, he wrote, quote, John Payton replied to this man, quote, Mr. Dixon, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave.

[27:59] I just love that fullness. There to be eaten by worms. I confess to you that I can live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus. It will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms.

And in the great day, my resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer. Right? How good. Right?

He encouraged the man who was telling him not to go do missions. Right? If we could just be faithful to our Lord, our bodies will be raised fair in the likeness of our risen Redeemer, whether eaten by worms or by cannibals.

Another wonderful biography I commend to you is the biography of George Mueller called George Mueller of Bristol by A.T. Pearson. It's put out by Kregel Publications.

It's the best one. It's the definitive one, I will say. And God used this biography in a lot of ways. My father handed it to me. I don't remember what we were talking about at the time, but something in the Bible.

[29:08] And my dad said, I think you're ready to read Mueller. And I went, what? And he handed it to me. And praise God, at least in some measure, I was ready to read Mueller.

And I said, Mueller, many of you have heard me talk about my belief in the sufficiency of the Bible and saying how that doctrine has got concreted in my heart.

It's not going anywhere. I believe that the Bible is sufficient for life and godliness, that we don't need to look outside of it for direction. And I will say it after that, I don't really know how that happened, like what was going on exactly.

In thinking this week, I can remember at least this biography was part of that working in two ways. I'm going to read you one quote and then tell you something else that happened in George Mueller's life.

He says this. So he goes to a place named Tainmouth, I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, in England, because he's sick. And he says this, a quote, Before this period, I had been much opposed to the doctrines of election, particular redemption, and final persevering grace so much so that, a few days after my arrival to Tainmouth, I called election a devilish doctrine.

[30:26] I knew nothing about the choice of God's people and did not believe that the child of God, when once made so, was safe forever. But now I was brought to examine these precious truths by the word of God.

End quote. He made a practice of going through the entirety of the Bible when there was an issue that vexed him. When he wasn't sure what to think about a particular issue, he would read the entirety of the scripture with that issue in mind.

Another example of this, again, if you're a guest, we are Credo Baptists here. He spoke boldly in a Bible study about his belief in paedo-baptism, the baptism of infants, and afterwards an old woman said, Mr. Mueller, have you ever searched the scripture on this matter?

And he responded to her honestly, no, I've not. And she said, well, then I don't think you should speak again on it until you have. And so he did.

And he read the entirety of the Bible with a particular doctrine of baptism in mind. And I'm grateful to say that he became a Credo Baptist.

[31:43] Let me also commend to you a broader book. I think that you'll be served by 21 Servants of Sovereign Joy by John Piper. It's put out by Crossway. Short, condensed, very Piperian biographies.

21 of them will serve your soul. So it's good for us, right? It's good for us to think about the past, to be informed by the past, both to learn from its mistakes, right?

And then to stand on the shoulders of its successes, to see the ways in which God has been at work. I have wrongly said in the past that the church always thrives in persecution.

But if we're better students of history, we'll know that that's not true. The church has not always thrived in the middle of persecution. It often does.

The church, capital C, global, will always go forward, right? Nothing will prevail against it. But locally, it has not always.

[32:50] You read the history of the Christian church in Japan, altogether stamped out. We need to learn, what were those people not doing or doing well to preserve their ability to stand in the face of such opposition.

So we're going to have to have a clear mission, we're going to have to do robust theology, and we're going to have to pick up accurate histories to run this over, to do it again and again, to think about it carefully, and apply it with wisdom in our day.

So let me read in closing once again, Psalm 111, just verse 2. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

Let's pray together.