

Fall 2015

# Biblical Integration in History: The Grand Debate

Thomas S. Mach

*Cedarville University*, [macht@cedarville.edu](mailto:macht@cedarville.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/history\\_and\\_government\\_publications](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/history_and_government_publications)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Mach, Thomas S., "Biblical Integration in History: The Grand Debate" (2015). *History and Government Faculty Publications*. 165.  
[http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/history\\_and\\_government\\_publications/165](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/history_and_government_publications/165)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in History and Government Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

# Chapter 5: Biblical Integration in History: The Grand Debate

Thomas S. Mach

Have you noticed how popular Ancestry.com has become? People everywhere are signing up and trying to learn about where their families came from, when they came to this country, what they did, and why they did it. As human beings, we seem to be innately interested in these questions. Now, I realize that quality is not found in everyone. School-age children tend to find history either very interesting or very boring. There does not seem to be much in between those two extremes and, unfortunately, I fear that most fall into the latter category. A scan of late-night television or cable news shows will evidence that most Americans have very little knowledge of the world's or their nation's past. We should find it distressing when a randomly selected individual cannot identify what nation we fought against in the War for Independence, who the president of the United States was during the American Civil War, or what brought the country out of the Great Depression. I could go on a diatribe about how historically illiterate Americans are, how the educational system has relegated history courses to second place behind science and math requirements, and how colleges have dropped history courses from general education programs, but that is not the purpose of this essay. What is interesting, however, is that in spite of the evidence that many of us do not know our nation's history very well, most of us are intrigued by our own personal history. We could simply chalk this up to our narcissistic society, but I would like to think it goes deeper than that.

When we meet people for the first time, one of the first questions asked revolves around what we do for a living. When I tell people that I teach history, I often receive the comment that they did not appreciate history as a student but as they grew older, they came to appreciate it. I think this growing sense of the importance of history has to do with the realization that ourselves, our families, our culture, our nation, and our faith are grounded in the past. Knowing the past gives us a better sense of who we are. More than 26,000 people have traced their lineage back to individuals who sailed across the ocean on the Mayflower and have joined the Mayflower Society. A conflict over who was and was not actually a descendent of Thomas Jefferson led to a major investigation regarding whether or not Jefferson had lived with a slave named Sally Hemings as

common-law husband and wife. The findings of renewed investigation and DNA testing suggest that he did and the resulting descendants should be considered in Jefferson's lineage. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which runs Monticello, has accepted the new research while the Monticello Association, the Jefferson lineage society, has been reluctant to do so. Why do these things matter? The relationship between Jefferson and Hemings takes on significance historically for many reasons due to their respective races and economic relationship, but beyond that, the relationship of people descended from them matters for very personal reasons of identity. The fact that my grandfather left school after eighth grade to provide for his mother and sister, yet lived out the American dream, of which I am a benefactor, means a great deal to me. It tells me something both about the stock I come from and the nation in which I live. For many like me, history takes on meaning because in an often impersonal world, it provides meaning and identity for us.

For those of us who follow Christ, we recognize that history has eternal value. The Christian faith is predicated on actual historical events that provide the foundation for the faith itself. As the Apostle Paul wrote, if Christ was not raised from the dead, our "faith is empty" (1 Cor. 15:14). The Christian religion is based on the historical story of Christ coming to earth as a baby; ministering, teaching, and healing broken lives for approximately three years; dying a grisly death on a cross because the Jewish leaders would not accept Him as the Messiah; and raising from the dead after three days just as the prophecy foretold. If Christ did not do the things recorded in Scripture, then He was not the Messiah and there is no reason to believe. For Christians, then, history takes on an eternal significance because it verifies what we believe, and it is the truth upon which we base our lives and our eternity.

Yet there is a broader, less personal question, that must be addressed when we consider history. Is there meaning in the study of the past? If so, where is it found? Philosophers of history have grappled with these and similar questions for generations — really since the beginning of recorded history. The earliest historians — it is generally accepted that the Jewish historians were the first true historians because those of civilizations before them tended simply to chronicle events — noted that events happened for reasons and that the events themselves meant something. The Jewish historians, in particular, recognized that history had meaning because of the existence of God. Since He had created the universe and created man to live in it, the events of man must have some meaning.

Meaning in history, then, comes from the fact that God created man in His image and in the process endowed him with meaning. For secular philosophers of history, the question is much more difficult to answer. Some suggest that history has no meaning. In general, for those that are willing to suggest that there is any meaning at all, the answer given is that in studying the past, we find we have comradery with those who came before us in our suffering. In essence, we learn that life is painful and it always has been. At least we know we are not alone in our pain.<sup>1</sup> From my perspective, that is not enough. I would become something other than a historian if that was the only explanation of meaning in history. Thankfully, as Christians, we recognize that there is meaning and that God is working out His plan for humanity through history.

Notice the distinction between the two evaluations of meaning in history. Why do Christians and secularists arrive at such different answers to the question of meaning in the past? The answer lies in our respective starting places. As my friend and colleague Dr. Richard Tison has ably communicated in his essay titled “History and the Biblical Worldview,” our presuppositions direct our thinking in these matters. If we believe that God does not exist, then man is purely material, a complex set of chemical interactions, and the product of chance. A chance development has no intrinsic meaning. If this were in fact true, then human beings would live and die and in the long-term perspective would have little meaning other than on a temporal level. If we believe that God does exist, then human beings have meaning as a part of His divine creation. Like the artist who can explain what motivated and provides the meaning behind her most abstract piece, God imbued man with meaning when He crafted him out of the dust and breathed life into him. God had a plan for man before He created him, and human history records the unfolding of that plan. As a result, history, the study of the record of man’s events through time, has meaning because of the creative involvement of the God of the universe.

At Cedarville University’s Department of History and Government, we have chosen Romans 12:2 as our department verse. It reads, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Popper, “Has History Any Meaning?” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, edited by Hans Meyerhoff. Doubleday Anchor Books, 1937, 305–21; Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *The Heritage and Challenge of History*. Dodd and Mead, 1971, 240–44; Page Smith, *The Historian and History*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 229, 236.

good and acceptable and perfect.” Renewing the mind is a critical element of what it means to be a Christian intellectual. In the field of history, we start with the presupposition that God exists. Some might critique us and say that our system of thought is weak because it is based on a circular system of reasoning. The reality is that all systems of thought start with presuppositions. As such, any of them could be critiqued as being circular. Our system of thought must have some grounding. Either we start with God, or we start with man. If we start with God, then mankind has meaning and the highest source of knowledge is God’s revelation. If we start with man, then mankind is the product of chance and the highest source of knowledge is reason. The atheist can deride, demanding that the Christian prove that God exists. The Christian can respond in kind, demanding that the atheist prove that He does not. The reality is that neither can “prove” the existence or lack of existence of God. There is plenty of evidence for the existence of God found in His creation, His revelation, and the experience of His church, but His existence is not predicated on that evidence. We know He exists by faith. We know who He is through His Word, which we embrace by faith. The atheist uses a similar faith basis for rejecting His existence and His Word. In his case, the faith is placed in the lack of any truth beyond what the human mind can rationalize. Does that mean that the two systems of thought are equal since they are both circular in their reasoning (one harkens back to a self-authenticating God and the other to a self-authenticating man)? No! Unlike our politically correct society, Cedarville University stands on the authority of the Word as the highest source of knowledge. Surely if God exists, then His Word should be the highest authority. The Christian worldview, grounded in biblical principle, is the only true worldview. It is true because its foundation is true. Our faith is in the true and living God. The atheist’s is in fallible man. As Tison also noted, the irony is that fallen man, whether he recognizes it or not, can only think because of the existence of God. So, he must adopt the assumptions of Christianity implicitly to make his system work at all. God provided the necessary framework for man to think. As Abraham Kuyper emphasized, there is no element of creation over which Christ does not claim ownership.

Once we embrace the notion of God’s existence, something taught by creation and the innate desire of man for meaning, we have to accept the idea that He communicated with mankind through His Word. His creation gave us the idea that He was there. His Word allowed us to know who He is, recognize our lost state, come to right relationship with Him, and understand why human beings have any meaning at all. God used

history in Scripture as a tool to teach us many things about Himself and about ourselves. We can understand from God's use of history why it is an important endeavor for us today. As a result, it is incumbent upon Christian historians to use the principles of Scripture as a guide for understanding and evaluating the study of history. A number of important figures have spent a lifetime plumbing the depths of what Scripture teaches about the study of the past. I will present a few examples of them and explore the contributions they made in helping us understand better how to arrive at a truly integrated understanding of the past.

### Key Christian Historians and Their Contributions

One of the great church fathers in western Christianity is Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. He lived from 354–430 A.D. and authored a number of works that continue to influence us today such as *City of God* and *Confessions*. Augustine believed in a teleological approach to history, meaning that he believed that God had a plan that He was working out within human history. God is the Creator and He has a design for the unfolding of history. Augustine held to a linear approach to history because he recognized in Scripture that God began human history with the creation of man and that He would one day bring human history to a close, at least on this earth. As a result, there was a clear beginning to history and there would be a clear end to it in the providence of God's timing. Augustine believed that God was active and involved in His creation. The historian, then, should seek to recognize the hand of God in historical events. Augustine realized that ultimate meaning in history was not found in the events of history themselves, but rather was found in the person and character of the Creator God. The creation story underscored the significance and meaning of man. For Christians, the recognition that man fell is important as well. With this understanding, the Christian historian can have sympathy for the man of the past. While he or she may be sympathetic due to an understanding of man's limitations, the Christian historian must still be willing to judge past events. The Scriptures provide the basis for those judgments and evaluations and they can help mankind make wise decisions in the present.

Augustine underscored what became the foundational elements of a Christian understanding of history. Virtually all Christians who studied history after his time embraced the basic principles he emphasized. Jumping ahead to the 20th century, Herbert Butterfield, a professor at the University of Cambridge, agreed with Augustine regarding his recognition of the uniqueness of man as a creation of God. Historians

see the meaning in human history because mankind was created and given the ability to glorify God. In being given the ability to do so, men were also given the ability to denigrate God. In essence, what Butterfield argued for was the recognition that human beings had free will and could make choices regarding the unfolding of their lives. As a result, Butterfield suggested that Christian historians should reject deterministic understandings of the past, where human players are directed about by unseen powers, such as economic or environmental forces, that cause humans to act in ways that are outside of their control. A Marxist interpretation of history that suggests a cyclical process of class conflict, revolution, and utopian progress for example, is ruled out by a proper biblical understanding of mankind. Butterfield's examination of what influence a proper, biblical understanding of man has on the historian's examination of the past is quite consistent with the position Augustine held.

In other areas, however, Butterfield did not quite see eye to eye with Augustine. Butterfield made a distinction between what he called "technical history" and "interpretive" or "providential history."<sup>2</sup> In researching and writing the former, he argued, the Christian historian does his or her work no differently than a secular historian. The Christian has a distinctive foundation from which to work, however, when working in the realm of "providential history." Here, Butterfield argued, the Christian historian explores interpretations of the past based on biblical principles and arrives at conclusions that may be radically different from those of the secular historian. Augustine would probably not have driven such a wedge between the two types of history. Others have examined this dichotomy as well, and the question of this divide continues to be a source of debate among Christian historians to this day as will be discussed later. In fact, it is in that debate that Cedarville's distinctiveness will be most clearly seen.

Gordon Clark, a philosopher and theologian in the Reformed tradition, supported the concept of a presuppositional approach to knowledge as outlined earlier.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, he argued that there was an objective reality to the past and that it can be discovered. While this seems innocuous enough, it is a position that has become rather controversial in recent years. Postmodern thinking has undermined the notion that the past can be discovered at all. While postmodernism is difficult to categorize and define, various strains of it have chipped away at the concept of

---

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951.

knowable truth. Some lines of thinking attack our ability to know truth by emphasizing the various filters in our lives that impair our vision of knowledge. For example, our cultural upbringing and the resulting personal prejudices that it engenders in us make it impossible for us to be objective observers of the present, let alone researchers of the past. Other postmoderns undermine the field by embracing various linguistic theories that see language as nothing more than symbols given assigned meanings by people at specific moments in time. Since the words (symbols) are separate from the historical events themselves (or concepts thereof), and those symbols can only be understood at that given time and place, it is pure hubris on the part of the historian to presume that he could understand the words/symbols used in historical documents. Those documents, of course, are the main sources used by historians in reconstructing and interpreting the past. As a result of analyses like these, postmoderns tend to question the ability of the field to enlighten us about what really happened in the past at all. Instead, all “historians” can do, they argue, is provide narrow, individualistic presentations of the past that may or may not have any resemblance to the past as it actually happened. We will never know, because we have no way of accessing the past. These postmodern theories are interesting for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is their use of modern understandings of what constitutes proven knowledge. Be that as it may, the field of history has tended to reject this postmodern assault. Keith Windschuttle’s book, *The Killing of History*, is just one among many fine responses to the postmodern critique and rightly argues for the veracity and value of the field. If the postmoderns are right, after all, then history as a field disappears and we are left with only literature. While there is nothing wrong with literature (i.e., fiction), the field of history has always purported to be providing a truthful presentation of past events (i.e., nonfiction). So, in today’s world, Clark’s seemingly obvious positions are no longer so obvious and bear emphasis. For Christians in particular, the importance of language and its ability to communicate are vitally important. If God chose to communicate to us through language, for example, then surely it is an adequate means for conveying truth. If we believe that it is not, we are in essence saying that the God of the universe cannot communicate to His creation — a creation, by the way, that He spoke into existence. In addition, as we have already discussed, our knowledge of historical events, accessed through language, is particularly important as an undergirding foundation of our faith.

George Marsden, a historian of the latter 20th century who taught at Calvin, Duke, and Notre Dame, has written extensively on the concept of the integration of Christianity and history. Like Augustine, Marsden embraced the notion of a linear approach to history and the concept that history has meaning because of the existence of the Creator God. Like Clark, Marsden believes that history is knowable, at least to some helpful extent, and it is worth studying. Finally, like Butterfield, he found deterministic approaches to history inconsistent with a biblical understanding of man's volition. Also like Butterfield, Marsden found little difference in how Christian and secular historians operated, except in the areas of topics chosen for examination and, in some cases, sources that might be used in research. Marsden posed an important question — can a reader recognize a Christian historian from a secular historian just by reading what he or she has written? Marsden seems to long for it in his writings on integrating Christianity and history, but he is unsure. He argued that the Christian historian has a unique set of “control beliefs” — a term borrowed from Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>4</sup> Control beliefs influence a Christian's perspective of the past. For example, the recognition that while man may be influenced by various forces, his path is not determined by any of them because he was created as a volitional being, is a control belief that causes Christian historians to reject deterministic interpretations of the past. In this case, as in others, Marsden argues, when historical conclusions conflict with biblical principle, the historical conclusions should — in most cases — be changed. Control beliefs, then, guide interpretation of the past.

These various elements of how biblical principle impacts the view of history by a Christian are helpful, but the question remains whether or not there is a clear, distinctively Christian interpretation of history. Marsden, in a work titled *A Christian View of History?*, shied away from asserting such a thing.<sup>5</sup> In fact, as was noted earlier, he was not even sure that a history written by a Christian would be identifiable from that written by a non-Christian. Wolterstorff, too, suggested that such identifiable distinctiveness was not necessarily required for Christian fidelity.<sup>6</sup> So, perhaps then, it appears that Marsden, and Wolterstorff too

---

<sup>4</sup> George M. Marsden, “The Spiritual Vision of History,” *Fides et Historia* 14 (Fall-Winter 1981), 59; Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard J. Mouw, eds. *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*. University Press of America, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> George M. Marsden and Frank Roberts, *A Christian View of History?* Eerdmans Publishing. Co., 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “On Christian Learning,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, edited by Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard J. Mouw. University Press of America, 1989, 70.

for that matter, agree with Butterfield's dichotomy between providential and technical history. Let us examine this conundrum a bit closer by examining two different approaches to historical writing found among Christian historians. Not everyone agrees with Marsden regarding his understanding of the Christian interpretation of history.

## The Grand Debate

The first Christian approach to history that we will examine I will call "providential history." There is a similarity to what Butterfield was suggesting in using the term, but there should not be too close an association made between the usage here and what Butterfield described as providential. As an example of the "providential" approach, I will use the well-known book by Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, published in 1977. It is particularly important to recognize that Marshall and Manuel were reacting, at least in part, to the concerted effort by some in American society to secularize the education of the nation. Religious values and even religious history were being systematically scrubbed from American textbooks as secular humanism gradually became the dominant worldview in the American classroom. Various Supreme Court decisions in the previous two decades hastened these changes as the American understanding of the wall of separation between church and state gradually leaned further and further away from Christianity. Marshall and Manuel wrote American history by overtly seeking to uncover God's hand in the nation's past. Since God had a plan for each individual's life, they surmised, He must have a plan for each nation as well. For example, they argued, Columbus' voyage of discovery could be portrayed by historians as an accident or it could be seen as part of God's plan to bring Christianity to the pagan inhabitants of the New World. Another example of this Providential approach can be seen in Marshall and Manuel's examination of the Pilgrims. When they were attacked by Native Americans, they reported back to England that God had protected them from the arrows of the Indians in battle. The Pilgrims, and the Puritans as well, were convinced that God had called them to the New World to set up model communities based on the teachings of God's Word. Puritan writers noted that they were about God's business of establishing a "City on a Hill" that would be an example to English society of how a Christian society should function. Marshall and Manuel find the thoughts of these early English settlers compelling. They are willing to look at these events in a fashion that is open to the possibility that God was in fact doing something in particular in the creation of America. Given that the United States has done much good in the world and that

it has been a primary source of missionary endeavors for the last two centuries, it is not completely out of the realm of possibility to consider what God might have been doing here.

To stay with Butterfield's terminology, I will call the counter-argument to the providential approach "technical history." As an example of this oppositional approach, George Marsden and Mark Noll will be examined. Marsden was introduced earlier. Noll is an evangelical historian who has taught at Wheaton College and the University of Notre Dame. Like Marshall and Manuel, these men are committed followers of Christ. They represent an important disagreement among believers, however, about how we should approach the study of history. Marsden and Noll are very concerned that the providential approach to history presumes too much about the purposes of God. Could God have been working through the Puritans to obtain a particular goal? Marsden and Noll would consent that He could have been, but we are not able to ascertain what He might have been doing in our evaluation of the past. While Scripture is replete with explanations for why God perpetrated or allowed various events to happen, Scripture is unique because it is divinely inspired. Unless Christian historians believe they are divinely inspired as well, Marsden and Noll maintain, they had better be circumspect about what God is intending in the past.

As an example, Marsden and Noll have written extensively about the founding of America as well. While Marshall and Manuel see it as a nation blessed by God and founded on His principles for His purposes, Marsden and Noll tend to find the founding of America strangely devoid of scriptural rationale. They find the American Revolution to be contrary to biblical teaching regarding obedience to governing authorities. In addition, they argue that while the founding of America presented the first Americans with the potential to create a nation that would embody Christian principle, they fumbled that opportunity and instead created a society that was far more beholden to Enlightenment thinking than biblical teaching. In other words, the Revolution was not as revolutionary as it could have been.<sup>7</sup>

Marsden and Noll tend to attribute the providential approach to history to a particular theological position based on a belief in an inerrant Word of God. Mark Noll wrote a fairly sharp critique of this theological position and its interpretive impact titled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*. Crossway Books, 1983; George Marsden, *The American Revolution*, Christian Perspectives on History, edited by Henry Ippel and Gordon Oosterman. National Union of Christian Schools, 1973.

In it, he chastised schools like Cedarville for being what he called “anti-intellectual” by holding to a literal Creation account. This position, Noll argued, fails to take into account the scientific evidence for evolution, makes the Christian community look foolish in academic circles, and epitomizes a propensity to ascribe anything to God that cannot be easily explained. Both Noll and Marsden have written extensively about the Creation/Theistic Evolution debate and even testified on behalf of groups seeking to keep Creationism from being taught in public schools. Marsden and Noll believe that God played a role in Creation, but that life evolved over time as argued by most secular scientists of the 20th century. Young earth Creationists, they argue, represent a hermeneutical error of taking Scripture too literally. Tison argues that the variance between these positions is found in both epistemological as well as hermeneutical differences. First, those who hold to a literal Creationist position tend to give “epistemic priority to Scripture rather than to natural revelation”; whereas, Marsden and Noll tend to have “a higher estimate of man’s ability to reason autonomously.”<sup>8</sup> It could be argued, at least to some degree, that they have succumbed to rational autonomy in their methodology. Second, the hermeneutical difference stems from a method that tends to take Scripture literally when possible based on an examination of how literary and grammatical elements are used throughout Scripture. In essence, this method allows Scripture to interpret Scripture. Tison has asserted that the distinction is not unlike the difference between traditional evangelicals and German biblical critics in the 19th century. These higher critics eschewed the supernatural element in inspiration, choosing instead to focus on the human aspect and seeking rational support for biblical assertions. Tison is correct in concluding that those who “pursued this course in biblical criticism not only failed to attain credibility [in the academy], they also failed to maintain their theological integrity.”<sup>9</sup> While Marsden and Noll have not given up on the supernatural in Scripture, they do emphasize the human element in the inspiration process. To borrow a critique from John Leith regarding contemporary theologians, they have “been subject to the temptation to understand the Christian faith in light of the dogmas of the Enlightenment, rather than the Enlightenment in the light of the dogmas of the Christian faith.”<sup>10</sup> This approach is much more in line with the rationalism of the secular university. Noll seems very concerned

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard Tison, “Intellectual Sanctification: A Biblical View of History and Knowledge,” unpublished integration essay, 2014, 67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> John H. Leith, *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 36.

about respectability and tends to criticize those who hold to inerrancy as guilty of bibliolatry. Their “keen preoccupation with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy,” he argued, will have to be left behind so that “the life of the mind may have a chance.”<sup>11</sup> The end result, according to Noll and Marsden, is that Christians find it hard to gain acceptance in the academy because they are seen as being anti-intellectual.

Neither Marsden nor Noll deny the legitimacy of the Christian faith or its grounding in the Word of God, but their arguments result in a dichotomy between faith and the academic enterprise. This is particularly ironic given that both are considered leaders in the field in the area of the integration of faith and history. Marsden suggests that in order to gain a seat at the academic table, Christian historians ought to argue for their “interpretations on the same sorts of publicly accessible grounds that are widely accepted in the academy.”<sup>12</sup> An example of this “publicly accessible” or technical history is found in Harry Stout’s book on George Whitfield titled *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Stout’s research led him to the conclusion that Whitfield’s success as an evangelist was largely due to his dramatic flair and his ability to appeal to an increasingly consumer-driven economy. His charisma as a speaker resulted in many people responding to his preaching. This interpretation is one that could have been espoused by a non-Christian historian as easily as it was by the Christian author who wrote it. For someone who does know the Lord Jesus Christ, however, and understands the conversion process, it seems as though room needs to be left for the possibility that the Holy Spirit actually did work in the First Great Awakening, convicted the hearts of people of their sin, and provided the faith for them to come to Christ. Now, it would be unfair to suggest that Stout leaves no room for the supernatural, but his presentation of Whitefield as a self-serving dramatist did elicit quite a bit of concern from Christian readers that he had given a very natural or secular explanation of the Great Awakening. In fact, it would not be too much of a stretch to read his thesis as suggesting that the so-called “conversions” of the First Great Awakening were little more than emotional responses to a charismatic speaker.

So, the works of Marshall and Manuel and of Stout represent two examples of “Christian” approaches to history. Both examples represent

---

<sup>11</sup> Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994, 243–44.

<sup>12</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. Oxford University Press, 1997, 52.

legitimate concerns of Christian historians regarding the interpretive process. The providential historians represent well the concern that Christian historians be distinctive and follow the model provided in Scripture that suggests that God is at work in history. The technical historians represent well the concern that Christian historians not presume too much in their interpretation of the past and see God's hand in every unexplained event. This latter group knows how challenging academia is, and they want to gain enough respectability within its ranks to gain a seat at the table. Without it, they argue, there will be no Christian voice there at all.

In Cedarville's Department of History and Government, we believe in an inspired and inerrant Word of God. We unapologetically place revelation atop our epistemological hierarchy. When rational argumentation runs counter to clear teaching of Scripture, we will reject that which is gained empirically for that which is revealed by God. Our hermeneutic does lead us to a young earth Creationist position. As a result, these two distinctives set us apart from the vast majority of institutions within the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities. As a result of these theological foundations, we tend to hold a distinctive position that recognizes the best elements of both of the integrative approaches discussed so far. We are very sympathetic to the providential approach that recognizes that God has a plan for us as Christians. It seems appropriate that God should have some purpose for America and it would be foolish to suggest that God has not blessed this country immensely. In studying the Puritans, for example, we recognize that they believed they were on a mission from God. In studying our nation's founding fathers, we recognize that while they were not all Christians, they were generally committed to Christian principles that were either implicitly or explicitly implemented in the founding of the nation. This should not be a controversial statement given the influence of Judeo-Christian thought in all of Western civilization. So, for us today, we need to examine what all of this means. How did those Christian values impact the development of the nation? What has our nation done in this world that was in concert with God's Word? Where are we failing in living by His principles today? It seems reasonable to believe that if the nation acts in a fashion that is glorifying to God and His principles, He might bless it. This is consistent with Old Testament principle. In addition, we should be willing to pursue judicial evaluation of the past based on scriptural principle without assuming God's intentions behind the events that transpired.

At the same time, we at Cedarville recognize some potential problems with the providential approach to history. The most disconcerting issue revolves around the realization that while Scripture reveals what God was doing in a particular historical event, those words were inspired by God. They are reliable because God breathed them through the writers of biblical books. When we ascribe to God actions that we see in historical events subsequent to the biblical revelation, we are presuming upon Him. We simply do not have divine inspiration to speak for Him and quite frankly, Scripture is clear that we are on very dangerous ground if we attempt to do so. If we presume that we know what God is doing in various historical events and write about it, we may be ascribing actions to God that are not appropriate. Another problem associated with this type of historical writing is that it tends to uphold individuals as perfect Christian models. We always need to be careful of doing this as all humans are fallen and their flaws will be seen. If we seek to uplift someone as a positive Christian model, another historian may find some flaw or inconsistency in that person that may harm the Christian witness. Finally, while we may have sympathy with attempts at painting our nation's founders as Christians, we recognize that the evidence suggests that they cannot be portrayed uniformly. Perhaps what matters more anyway, is what influence biblical thought had on the founding of the nation. Regardless, we should recognize that we do not need to twist the historical truth to make God look good. Think about the Scriptures. They are replete with the good, the bad, and the ugly. God is glorified even in human frailty. He does not need our bolstering, and His kingdom is not furthered if we are not fastidious about the truth.

While these criticisms may sound like we at Cedarville default to the Marsden and Noll approach to history, that would not be accurate. As noted earlier, Marsden, in his book titled *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, argues that Christians need to produce acceptable work and seek a seat at the table in academia. In the field of history, they can do this by eschewing the providential approach, distancing themselves from anti-intellectualism like Creationism, and arguing that the academy ought to be open to all views. Marsden asserted that the university was once a place where all views were welcome in the discourse of ideas. If universities are willing to have Marxists, feminists, progressives, and a host of others at the table of interpretive dialogue, then there ought to be room for Christians. While this approach seems reasonable, look at what is implicitly accepted. Murray Murphey contended that Marsden is conceding that Christianity is just one among many equals in his

argument; when in reality, Marsden and all true Christians argue that Christianity is exclusively true.<sup>13</sup> Now granted, that does not mean that only Christian historians can uncover historical truth, but some Christians have wondered if using this argument gives up too much. Certainly in our examination of the Stout book, we can see where messages that are clearly anti-Christian can be communicated in works written by well-intentioned Christians. As Tom Nettles noted, “A theist who tries to write history as if there were no God, performs as, and presents the world as, an atheist.”<sup>14</sup> Even more compelling is the critique of Herbert Schlossberg of those who seek respectability within academia. He wonders if gaining the respect of academic colleagues should even be our goal.<sup>15</sup> How do we balance the concept of respectability and having a seat at the table with the biblical imperative for distinctiveness? Where is the line? Romans 12:2 encourages us to think about the importance of distinctiveness. We are to let God’s Word renew our minds so that we can ascertain what the will of God is. The world will seldom respect God’s Word. Christ was reviled as He testified before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. How often were the apostles thrown out of towns, beaten, and killed because of what they had to say? They did not seem to be pursuing a seat at the table. They seemed to be displaying distinctiveness, even when it was not popular. Most compelling of all is the comment of Bruce Kuklick, a secular historian who is interested in how worldviews impact approaches to history. He noted that if Christians do not have something distinctive to add to the historical conversation, then “they are worthless.”<sup>16</sup> Why should he bother reading us? His comment cuts to heart of the matter. It is both compelling and convicting.

As a result, at Cedarville we tend to believe there is much to learn from both approaches. We do need to do high-quality work that meets the demands of the field in the areas of proper research methodology and engaging, effective writing style. At times, the quality of the work produced will entice recognition from the broader academic field. That will give us a seat at the table and allow us to be salt and light there.

---

<sup>13</sup> Murray G. Murphey, “Advocacy and Academe,” in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, edited by Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997, 67.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Justin Taylor, “Should Christian Historians Appeal to Providence in Their Interpretations,” *Between Two Worlds Blog*, December 4, 2014, accessed December 12, 2014, [thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2014/12/04/should-christian-historians-appealto-providence-in-their-interpretations/](http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2014/12/04/should-christian-historians-appealto-providence-in-their-interpretations/).

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, “Scientific History in Christian Perspective: A Comment on Mark Noll’s Article,” *Fides et Historia* 14, (Fall-Winter 1981), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Kuklick, “On Critical History,” in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, edited by Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997, 59.

Without the seat, it is hard to be a light. Nonetheless, it does matter what we are willing to give up to gain that seat. God's purposes are not furthered when His principles are compromised. They are not furthered when Christians focus their criticisms on other Christians who are sincerely seeking to honor God in their academic work. Just as Marsden has suggested academia should be open to Christian historians, Marsden and Noll should be open to Christian academics who come from differing theological positions. Those differences result in differing control beliefs and explain in part why there is no one Christian view of history. The acerbic critique of those, like myself, who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture by Marsden and Noll, does not uplift the body of Christ and the conflict tends to diminish the perspective that non-Christians have of the church. Perhaps Christian historians, and Christian academics in general, should demonstrate the love of Christ in their interaction with one another. Recognizing that the application of scriptural principle in a field like history will take on many different forms and variations, it is quite likely that Christians of many stripes would gain from listening to, engaging, and critiquing one another's work in a godly fashion. That process of "iron sharpening iron" may result in truly integrative work of a quality that might gain the recognition of the broader academy.

When the quest for a seat demands that we compromise, we need to be willing to allow distinctiveness to drive us, not the quest for respectability. At the end of our lives, what will we have gained if we have the respect of the field of history, but have not presented ourselves as distinctively Christian? That distinctiveness may cost us career advancement, but we should be willing to pay the price. It is a small one in comparison to that paid by the disciples of Christ in the New Testament. Perhaps Iain Murray sums it up best,

Certainly the gospel can penetrate academia. It has done so in the past. But it has never done so by a quiet coalescence within systems with which it is basically incompatible. ... The Christian faith is rather at its strongest when its antagonism to unbelief is most definite, when its spirit is other-worldly, and when its whole trust is not 'in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:5).<sup>17</sup>

Even in our distinctiveness, we need to be careful not to presume upon God's plans or intentions in the unfolding of history. While He is

---

<sup>17</sup> Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950–2000*. Banner of Truth Trust, 2000, 212.

sovereign over it, He has not revealed all of His plans to us and we need to be circumspect when it comes to speaking for Him. Nonetheless, Christians, of all people, should have the greatest appreciation for the past. Ours is a historical faith, predicated upon actual events that demonstrate God's love for us. In return for all that He has done for us, we ought to live distinctively Christian lives — lives that manifest biblical principle our in individual, family, church, and professional roles.

---

**Thomas Mach** *is the Chair of the Department of History and Government and a Professor of History at Cedarville. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Akron.*