

History: An Apologetic Tool

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Abstract

An often-overlooked part of apologetics is the field of history. The Bible declares history is from the Lord (Colossians 1:16). Correlated to history is the dark past of many nations. However, using the Scriptures, the history professor can teach students the role of the Lord even when darkness is present. The educator should not ignore dark history; it serves as a key apologetic tool for history students. The Lord's sovereignty and wisdom are seen through history's lens, from Israel to modern-day nations.

Key words: history; apologetics

Introduction

I have been teaching undergraduate and graduate history courses for close to ten years. My career in academia began at secular colleges, then I transitioned full-time to Christian universities in 2018. While teaching a variety of world and United States history courses, one prominent theme has appeared: history can be very dark. In fact, many students have come to dislike and almost despise the United States due to past historical events. Christians must challenge this rhetoric. Believers of Christ must not place their faith in mankind. Studying history is studying God's will. Most importantly, when a study of history includes the past troubling events and blemishes of humanity, it leads to a thoughtful conversation on the problem of evil. In short, history in itself is an apologetic tool.

Dark History

First, when discussing dark history, admit that it exists. The Christian should not shy away from this conversation as it provides an opportunity to discuss Christian theology, the Bible, and most importantly, salvation in Christ. Apologetics, derived from the Greek word *apologia*, means to give an answer. To understand dark history, one must understand the Scriptures. Philosophers have long contemplated the problem of evil. Secular teachings attempt to resolve this dilemma, as do Christian apologetics. Outside of theology, perhaps no other academic field reveals the reality of evil as does the study of history. In discussing the problem of evil, Augustine taught, "God allowed evil in order to achieve a greater good justifying the evil's occurrence" (Martin, 2008, p. 211).

The U.S. alone has a troubling past connected to slavery, inequality, and immorality. Take, for example, the institution of slavery. No excuse or Biblical argument existed to support enslaving millions of Africans into a vicious system of slavery. Founding Father Patrick Henry (a slave owner himself) remarkably admitted, "Would anyone believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them; I will not, I cannot justify it" (Hayes, 2008, p. 66). Henry knew slavery was wrong and never sought to condone his behavior. He even remained adamant that his home state of Virginia was under God's judgment for practicing slavery. Thankfully, many years later, the Civil War ended slavery, yet equality still did not occur. Even after the war, segregation still existed until the Civil Rights Era. Equal opportunities in voting, the workforce, and housing were simply non-existent, and sadly, African Americans were not the only group to encounter brutal treatment. Native Americans were forced from their homeland, killed, enslaved, and eventually forgotten. Sadly, much of this was done in the name of Christianity. Both Catholics and Protestants sought to evangelize and assimilate Native Americans into European culture. Battles and massacres continuously occurred until the U.S. gained the territory they initially sought. The U.S. has a dark history. C.S. Lewis (1952) commented about the world in which he lived, "And I think if you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistakes. We are on the wrong road" (p. 29).

To answer America's original sin of invasion, History professors must be honest in their teachings and

acknowledge the United States derives from an expanding empire. While perhaps unsettling to accept such rhetoric, it is necessary, nonetheless. The late Francis Jennings (1975) shocked the academic world when he stated America was conquered and not settled (p. v). His book *The Invasion of America* continues to interest historians today.

However, we must never forget that the U.S. is not the only nation to suffer a dark history. I have often urged my students to find a nation without a blemish or an evil past, but I have never had a student provide the name of such a nation. Governments have always fought and sought power and land. The Bible is clear on the reality of war: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matthew 24:7).¹

Over thousands of years of history in Asia, the Chinese empire has experienced fighting, killing, and taking land. The same occurred with Japan in more recent years (WWII). In Europe, the Roman Empire was a massive enemy that showed no mercy to any opposition. In more recent times, the United Kingdom conquered lands throughout the globe. Students must realize the United States is a close relative to the United Kingdom's Empire. The point is simple: humanity is greedy and evil. If one accepts this and relies on the Lord to give wisdom and understanding, history is viewed differently.

Dark History Answered from a Biblical Perspective

If we accept the sovereignty of God, we will come to realize history is merely studying the Lord Himself. The Bible explains this: "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). Further, in Romans 13, we learn that God has instituted every "governing body." This is often hard for Christians to accept. How can God appoint leaders in an Islamic state or a Communist nation? The answer is quite simple: The Lord will glorify Himself from all appointments. We believe in an omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnipresent (all-present) God. Further, the Lord never changes. Are we so naïve to assume that the God who judged Israel time and time again in the Old Testament does not play the same role in our current world? The answer is that "The Lord will use each nation for His own glory" (Proverbs 16:4).

The Bible is clear that wickedness covers the world. David explained that all mankind was born into sin (Psalm 51:5). Paul echoes Ecclesiastes 7:20 in the Book of Romans: "None is righteous, no, not one no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Romans 3:10–11). Furthermore, moral law is in every human soul:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. (Romans 2:14–15)

These verses, of course, are supplemental proof that our world is indeed fallen (Genesis 3). Therefore, Christians must embrace history through the lens of a Biblical context:

- 1) This is a fallen world.
- 2) Mankind is lost in sin and destined to make horrible, sinful decisions, especially without Christ.
- 3) The Lord Jesus Christ will play a hand in history, through both judgment and reconciliation.

Lewis (1952) shared this way of thinking. God "taught the nature of right from wrong was present in every soul on earth" (p. 20). For Lewis, this was a "law of human nature that was not influenced by humanity yet existed in every created being across the world" (1952, p. 20). Moral law demanded repentance and "forgiveness" because sin had broken the moral compass of God's law and standards. (Lewis, 1952, p. 20). For Lewis, Christianity brought "forth ultimate comfort to souls if they were to review its teachings and laws" (1952, p. 20). However, he was adamant that comfort "is not experienced initially, yet dismay is as the human realized they were guilty of breaking God's moral laws" (Lewis, 1952, p. 32). First, the individual needed to realize they were a sinner and broke the law. Second, the new believer placed their faith in God (Jesus Christ), who promised to save them from eternal hell. Lastly, repentance and a new life would go hand in hand and change the human forever. However, one must emphasize that it was not the human who was at work, but God Himself in the form of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Christians have the answer to the problem of evil. It revolves around acknowledging the existence of sin and realizing sin can be defeated only through Jesus. When led by the Spirit (God), behavior tends to change. 2 Chronicles makes this clear:

The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." (2 Chronicles 15:1–2)

If you follow man, you will inevitably find darkness. Likewise, when you remove the Lord from history, you approach the concept of deism and even humanism. Deism

is the concept of a "God who made everything yet does not play an active role in his creation." Sadly, it is known that many of the Founding Fathers of the U.S. were deists. Closely tied to deism is humanism, which teaches "the goodness of humanity outside of a supernatural power (deity)." As Christians know, a "good person" does not exist. Everyone must examine themselves in light of the Ten Commandments to realize they are broken, then run to Christ for forgiveness, love, and most importantly, salvation. Professor of Apologetics Edward N. Martin (2008) states the following, "God uses evil, suffering, and disorder to drive us to Himself. If He gave only good, we would be self-satisfied. If He had given immediate death when we sinned, He would be just (Ezekiel 18:4)" (p. 214).

Throughout history, secular philosophers and psychologists have claimed to have the answer to the problem of evil. What always follows is another massive war or another terrible event. Their worldview cannot answer why evil exists in the first place and, most importantly, why it cannot be eradicated. Christians should not trust man for morality.

The Bible is clear: darkness (sin) is rampant upon the earth and will continue to exist until the Lord Jesus Christ returns to conquer sin and death. A discussion of dark history should not be avoided, but rather embraced; then allow the conversation to point to Christ for the answers. In the Old Testament, when Israel repented, blessings followed. Likewise, if individuals repent and become regenerated today (John 3:3, 2 Corinthians 5:17), heavenly wisdom follows. Without God, evil will run rampant. One can only imagine this world when all creation is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and living for the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Christians know this is not the current situation, but we can rest assured that the time is coming when this will be a reality.

However, today we must still face sin. The Lord plays His hand in history in mysterious ways. Evil is present and will continue to exist. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is during World War II when Nazi Germany slaughtered millions of Jews for no reason other than their ethnic ancestry. Yet, as believers, we must have faith that God will intervene when He sees fit, just as He did in World War II. Ultimately, the Allies conquered Germany and Japan, facing darkness head-on.

Can we avoid the dark history of our time on earth? Not entirely, as we are in a fallen world. Though, if people and nations would repent of their wickedness and trust in the Lord, His blessings could follow. Lewis (1952) acknowledged the importance of repentance, writing, "It is after you have realized that there is a Moral Law, and a Power behind the law and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk" (Lewis, 1952, p. 21).

Never forget Israel sinning against God yet returning to Him in their times of despair. Why do we think we are any different? "For a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest and without law, but when in their distress they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found by them" (2 Chronicles 15:3–4). We must live out our Christian worldview and love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul (Matthew 22:37).

Christian history professors must acknowledge the reality of evil. This includes accepting the sins of their nation (slavery, inequality, among many others). However, the educator has the opportunity to share the true Gospel of Christ with their students, to explain that without Christ, hope does not exist. History often connects to other academic fields such as psychology, sociology, and religion. When discussing the evil events of history, correlate such times to our current days. Explain to your students a nation neglecting to follow God is living in darkness and should expect judgment. Emphasize when darkness occurs, good comes to light. When an earthquake hit Haiti, Christian missionaries arrived in record numbers. Today, as Ukraine continues to fight off an invasion of Russia, people continue to support and assist those in need. Justice is served according to God's will.

Most importantly, utilize the Word of God in your teachings. Perhaps one of my favorite classes in my graduate history program was the History of Warfare. My professor emphasized the Bible should serve as a primary source for such studies. The Bible must be part of your curriculum as the main history book in your class. Erwin Lutzer (1998) writes, "When we let the Word reign in our lives, we are letting God reign in our lives" (p. 203). He adds, "God is light, and the Bible is light too" (Lutzer, 1998, p. 203). Explain to your students they have in possession the infallible Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), and to understand the world in which we live and the Lord's expectations, the Bible must be used in every study of history. God is never changing, as is His Word.

Conclusion

History is an apologetic tool because it reveals God's will on Earth (Matthew 6:10). When confronted with questions or complaints on evil or the dark history of your nation, point to the Bible. Are we expected to condone slavery, murder, or injustice? Absolutely not. One would be in error to claim Christ was with the United States during such dark times. Knowing the history of your nation will strengthen your argument for Christ. While Christianity may have influenced the U.S., the country has never walked with Christ.

Compare your nation to the nation of Israel. Realize that governments who openly dishonor God should expect destruction. God will use each government for His own will. The same applies to individual people. Despite all the dark

history of mankind, point skeptics to the Lord ending slavery or ending WWII. Speak of the abolitionists who fought and lost their own lives to end slavery. Share the stories of the genuine missionaries who gave up all of their treasures to reach Native tribes. The point is simple, God's goodness overcomes darkness.

Approaching history with a Christian worldview makes sense of all that has taken place in the past. Embrace the good moments and never deny or ignore the troubling times. A study of history is simply reviewing the hand of God ensuring that His will is done. History draws us to apologetics. While forced to address the concept of evil, we have the opportunity to share the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

References

¹ All references are taken from the ESV.

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