

Advice or Reflection on How a Very Useful Church History Should Be Written (1554)

Abstract

This source is a translation of a Latin text entitled *Consultationes inter M. Flacium Illyricum et amicos de conscribenda accurata et erudita historia ecclesia* (sixteenth century), which was probably written by the theologian and reformer Matthias Flacius (1520–75) or by one of his followers. The anonymous author of the translation demands that a new Protestant church history be written and describes what such a “church history” should look like. The author is primarily concerned with (re)establishing the pure teachings of Christianity, which, in his view, needed to be “liberated” from the customs, traditions, and ceremonies of the Old Church. He thereby orients himself against the Roman Catholic Church. First, a useful church history, according to the author, needed to chart the history of the Church since its very outset, i.e. the birth of Christ; second, it needed to show that both false apostles and their followers, as well as “heathen” popular customs had contributed to the distortion of the true teachings of Christ. Third, it needed to report on individual teachers and councils that tried to rid Christ’s teachings of its “stain,” such as the veneration of saints and images, celibacy, or the papacy. Additionally, it had to include information about the different forms of Christianity as well as the various teachers and their writings. The project of a Protestant church history was finally realized with the Magdeburg Centuries, which were initiated by Flacius and published between 1559 and 1574.

Source

God the Almighty, out of inexpressible grace and mercy, renewed and purified the true religion, which had been horribly distorted and corrupted by human rules and numerous other defilements. For this we cannot thank God enough in eternity, and now, God be praised, a certain form of teaching and ceremonies has been established and recognized in our church; we only lack two things, which are not small and which will affect the entire Christian Church a very great deal.

First of all, we lack a sensible, skillfully done, and suitable gloss, or a short, all-around, and easy interpretation of the text of the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments; this task will perhaps be discussed another time.

Secondly, [we should] begin a learned history of the Church of Christ up to our times, pulled together with great diligence and skill; in preparation for this task, I will now undertake, with God’s help, a short report and recommendation on how this history should be written, what use can be hoped for from it, and how such a greatly necessary, Christian work could be achieved.

And in the first place, the affairs, dealings, and history that occurred in the church should be related, according to order and sequence, from the time of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ up to our present time, plainly and clearly, and most of all, [it should describe] the form and manner of teaching, ceremonies, church practices, principles or rules, in summary, the entire religion, at any time and everywhere in the Christian Church. The true and beneficial teachings of God are the tool and means through which He grants us rebirth to eternal life, wherein our entire new spiritual life and being lies; without those teachings, we must remain with death and our old condemned life. At the same time, of all the affairs and dealings of the Church, the teachings are the most difficult and the most important part, and they are attacked most quickly and most frequently without cease by the devil

and his henchmen.

For that reason, the teachings especially must be shown in the chronicles or Church histories and the greatest work must be devoted almost to them alone, so that they can be disentangled and spread out, so that anyone can see them right before his eyes, or so to speak, grasp them easily, as they were at any time, everywhere, and in all churches.

But above all, necessity dictates that it be shown and presented what a straight-forward, simple, pure, clear, and healthy form of teachings, ceremonies, and overall religion was originally effected by Christ and his dear Apostles for the people of God, and what principles of the Church they established and left behind.

Thereafter, the two false Apostles, through twisted hearts and evil spirits, also did great damage to the true religion and godliness with falsification, and the Apostles, disciples, and students, as well as other descendants, deviated from the old purity and simplicity of the teachings the longer and further away they were. This occurred in part from ignorance, because they did not thoroughly understand the teachings and true godliness like the Apostles, and also in part from excessive desire for and dedication to ceremonies, discipline, and good works. In addition, foolish devotions and Jewish, yes, even heathen superstition of the common people gave rise to many wicked, false things.

Thirdly, although God has often sought to counteract many terrible errors, heresies, superstitions, and abuses by individual teachers with oral testimony, sermons, and writings, or also by councils and large gatherings, and has cleansed and saved the godly truth from many stains and taints, it almost always happened that a number of things just like the previous errors, which were not few, remain and are tainted. A short time later, they arose again and broke out further, and although many good-hearted people immediately rejected them, it was to almost no avail in the end. When many first objected to the celibacy of priests, among others, Micoena Sanguensis and the sechste Siquadus [i.e., Sixth Synod], they guarded against and prevented the same shameful error for a time, but it nevertheless gained the upper hand in the end and laid the way for decline, especially in the Roman Church.

The same could also be said of honoring the deceased saints, their shrines or bones, the images or idols, also of the Pope's primacy and majesty, and many other things.

In addition, it would have to be shown most clearly when at any time a teacher was endowed and provided with more intelligence and purity than the others, or a when a church had teachings and ceremonies more genuine than the others, or likewise that numerous places in Christendom are somewhat purer in many aspects of religion than others, but many places are more tainted, such as the Greek church (which is so extensive and is spreading still further than the Latin church); and not least [it would need to be shown] that still up to today the Pope maintains primacy or tyranny over all other churches in the entire world, not to mention his worldly sword or the clerical celibate life, the invented purgatory, indulgences, horrible idolatry with images, masses for the dead or something else according to another tune that produces a form of the sacrament and suchlike similar to the Latin form, but in contrast it errs in the matter of the Holy Spirit's departure.

It would also be necessary to speak of particular teachers and their writings, if in those pieces or articles a certain teacher conveyed the teachings accurately and well, or not; also, what ghosts or sophistry certain teachers mixed in; where they retained many errors and pulled in and seduced others with them, or how they worked their way out and freed others from error.

Fourth, it would also have to be shown, and in addition proven with much genuine evidence of truth, that in all

times and always, there were many seven thousands of believers or God-fearing people who had a more high-minded and purer understanding of religion than the common rabble otherwise, and for a time gave witness to God's truth more freely and bravely with public knowledge than the others.

These and similar constant, numerous, and difficult struggles between truth and errors or lies, between light and darkness in all the central elements of Christian teachings, in all countries from the birth of Christ up to the present day, must in any case be described in the church histories or chronicles and in time be explained properly and very deliberately.

Source: Ein Radtschlag oder Bedencken wie man eyne sehr nutzliche Kirchen Historien schreiben solte (1554), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cgm 4110b, Bl. 131r–149r. Available online at: http://daten.digital-e-sammlungen.de/bsb00047856/image_265. Transcription by the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel: <http://diglib.hab.de/edoc/ed000086/start.htm>

Source of the original Latin text:

<http://diglib.hab.de/?db=mss&list=ms&id=11-20-aug-2f&catalog=Heinemann&image=00009>

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