

ONE

Living with Our History

One of the most important lessons that the church can learn from *After Virtue* is implicit in the structure and approach of the book. In that book, MacIntyre narrates the history of two ethical theories, one springing from the Enlightenment, the other from Aristotle. For MacIntyre, telling these stories constitutes an argument about morality. Note that the story is not just an illustration of an argument or an example to aid understanding. The story *is* the argument.

In later chapters, we will consider the force of MacIntyre's argument for some form of the Aristotelian tradition. What concerns us here is not which tradition MacIntyre commends or whether he is right to commend it; rather, what concerns us is the form of MacIntyre's argument. For him, the confrontation between these two traditions can only be adjudicated by attending to their histories. These traditions are not two disembodied arguments whose strengths and weaknesses can be captured in a list and then compared. The very identification of them as "traditions" means that they have a history. MacIntyre teaches us that attending to that history—telling the stories of these traditions—itself constitutes an argument that may or may not commend a particular tradition.

Like these traditions, the church also has a history. Often, we study this history and tell it for seemingly trivial reasons—just to "know more" or to "add to our knowledge." So, we may memorize dates and names to impress our friends. Sometimes, we will study the history in order to understand Christian doctrine better. We may, for example, give considerable attention to the early church councils, where we worked out the

central convictions of the church on the two natures of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. At times, we may give a lot of attention to periods when the church's history overlaps significantly with other historical concerns, such as the impact of revivalism on American culture. But, with a few notable exceptions, we have done very little to tell the history of the church as an argument for Christian faith.¹

When I wrote the first edition of *Living Faithfully*, the church's history was already a problem in Western culture—the Crusades, witchcraft trials, support for slavery, and more were perceived by the culture as arguments against the truth of Christianity and the “good news of Jesus Christ.” Since that first edition, the situation has gotten worse. The larger cultural mood may be well-captured by Dan Kimball's *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*.²

Today, the history of the church is perceived by many as one of the strongest arguments against belief in the good news of Jesus Christ. Even among those who “like Jesus” the approach to him is to pick what you like from his teaching and way of life and leave behind everything you don't like. A part of this practice includes choosing as your friends on this journey those with whom you are in general agreement. Even those who seek some new form of “church” often presume that it will exclude those who have been loyal to older forms of church.

In this context, new monastic communities are important in two ways. First, new monastic communities can offer a witness to the truth of the gospel by embracing the history of the church in confession and repentance. To engage in these practices, a community needs a life disciplined by the gospel and a deeply shared communal life. This does not mean that new monastic communities are closer to perfection than other “forms” of church. Indeed, the life of older and newer monastic communities is marked by conflict, sometimes very deep conflict. But what monastic communities have is a shared life, an intentionality, and a process that enables them to bear witness to the gospel in the ways that they engage in reconciliation with the history of the church, those alienated by its history, and their own community.

Second, new monastic communities embrace the history of the church in their “humble submission to Christ's body, the church,” (Mark 5) and in their “hospitality to the stranger” (Mark 3). These marks of new

1. See, for example, Marsden, *Soul*, and van Braght, *Bloody Theater*.

2. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*.

monasticism commit its communities to the history of the church and to other forms of church that may be as likely to be strangers as anyone from outside the church.

Therefore, for these reasons, and others that we will encounter along the way, new monastic communities are crucial to the lesson that the church must learn to live with our history as an argument.

HISTORY-AS-ARGUMENT

There are many reasons for our neglect of history-as-argument. Two are particularly important. First, we have tended to think of arguments on a model that was given to us by philosophy. On this model—there are others, but this one has predominated—arguments are constructed syllogistically; they are disembodied, ahistorical arguments for disembodied, ahistorical people. People have no history that influences their reason; positions likewise have no history that enters into an argument. One of MacIntyre's primary aims is to expose the failure of this presupposition, what in ethical theory he calls "the failure of the Enlightenment project." MacIntyre exposes this failure, not through a syllogistic argument, but by telling the history of the Enlightenment project so that we see its regrettable results. By narrating the failure of this project in moral terms, MacIntyre exposes the failure of the presupposition underlying ahistorical, disembodied arguments. From MacIntyre, the church should start learning how to tell its story as an argument for its witness to the Gospel.

The second reason that the church has neglected the notion of history-as-argument is a fear that our history would be an argument against rather than for the Gospel. Certainly there are grounds for this fear. The church has often sinned, and sinned greatly, against God and humanity in the name of the Gospel. But our fear is misplaced for several reasons. First, it mistakenly confuses the church and the Gospel. The Gospel is not just a message; it is the reality of God's redeeming activity through Jesus Christ.³ The church is a human community called into existence by God and sustained by God as a witness to the Gospel, but the church is not the Gospel. The history of the church is the story of how far the church is from the Gospel, but it is also the history of how God uses the church to witness to God's redemption of creation. When the church is

3. I will occasionally use "the kingdom" as a shorthand image for this ever-present reality of the Gospel. For further development and defense of this notion, see Wilson, *Theology*, chapter 3.

unfaithful, God still makes the church a witness to the kingdom by God's judgment: "Judgment begins with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Moreover, the history of the church's failures is the history of the church's recognition of its distance from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, even the failures of the church may witness to the Gospel when those failures are recognized and properly confessed. Of course, we must be careful not to turn this into an argument for more sin in the church, as Paul imagines his interlocutors doing in Romans 6. Nevertheless, the point remains: the church is not the Gospel, so we must become more adept at telling the story of the church and the Gospel so that we witness to the Gospel.

Second, our fear of our history disembodies our faith. At the same time that we avoid the church's history we also avoid the history of the Gospel at work in this world. This double neglect disembodies the Gospel of Jesus Christ and renders it unreal in the world. One of the reasons that there is such a gap between most formal theology and the life of the church is that formal theology disembodies the Gospel. Real people and real lives have a history. We are not merely intellects processing logical arguments; we are human beings seeking a way of life. Week after week, preachers and other believers labor mightily to overcome this neglect and to embody the faith without significant help from theology. Now, there is certainly a place for formal theology. Indeed, this book is mostly an example of what I am criticizing. My plea is that we recognize the limitations of this approach and give more attention to history-as-argument.

If we do not attend to our history, in addition to confusing the Gospel and the church and disembodimenting the Gospel, we will become victims of our past. If we do not attend to our history, then the forces that have shaped us and brought us to this point will determine our fate. They become so familiar and comfortable that they become the very air that we breathe. As a consequence, we do not recognize the betrayals of the Gospel that have taken place, and we do not identify the distance between the Gospel and the church. In God's love for this world, God has never allowed the church to be completely faithless. God's judgment purifies and a remnant always remains as faithful witnesses. In these instances, the church's fear of its history results in a failure to recognize and confess our sin, and leads us into God's judgment so that we might be purified.

If we do not attend to our history, others also become victims of our past. The church has continually mistaken its judgment for God's will. History is replete with peoples who have been victimized by the church's

mistaken judgments. As we continually deny these mistakes or suppress our memory of them, the church is bound to move on to other oppressive mistakes. We need continually to tell our story as confession of our unfaithfulness, so that the world may see beyond the church to the Gospel and so that we may all maintain a healthy suspicion of the church's confident pronouncements of God's will. In such a way, the church will be less likely to victimize others.

Often, the church denies its history in order to protect its existence. If we admit our past and its mistakes, that seems very much like an admission that the church has no necessary claim on existence. But that reasoning is contrary to the Gospel. In the Gospel, the church knows that we have been *given* everything necessary to life and salvation in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has claimed this world for redemption: the church witnesses to that redemption, it has no need to claim this world for itself. The church's only reason for existence is as a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church is free to tell its story as confession, and in so doing free itself to witness to the kingdom.

In addition to denying our past, another mistake we can make is glorifying our past. In other words, rather than coping with the failures of the past by denying that we have a history, we may cope with the failures of the past by glorifying our successes and ignoring our failures.⁴ Instead of a blanket denial of the past, we indulge in a selective denial. This is a serious temptation in Western culture, most especially in the United States, where the church can claim considerable influence on our culture. Looking back, we can glorify the past and lament the loss of the good old days when Christians were the majority or society at least accepted Christian values. Having made this step, we may then conclude that the mission of the church is to reassert this dominance in society.

This approach is easily identifiable today in much of the political action pursued in the name of Christianity. The church in the U.S., more than in any other nation marked by Western culture, looks to the past as a glorious time of Christian rule to which we must return if we are to turn away God's wrath. Two arguments stand against this approach. First, it

4. I do not have in mind here a similar-appearing approach that seeks to identify a thin thread of faithfulness in the history of the church. That approach is commendable as long as it does not confuse this "faithful remnant" with the kingdom or with the "only true believers." I will return to this later in the chapter.

represents the error of “Constantinianism.”⁵ Where denying our past may be a result of confusing the kingdom and the church, glorifying our past is often the result of confusing the kingdom and society. Since the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity and the subsequent rise of Christianity as the dominant religion of the empire in the early decades of the fourth century, the church has continually fallen into the error of thinking that the mission of the church was not to make disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations, but to rule the world by exercising power through political structures. According to this way of thinking, the mission of the church in the modern world is, first, to gain control of the political processes so that the laws of the land reflect Christian values and, second, to form church members into good citizens who will sustain the political life of the nation. In this way, our glorious Christian past will be revived for today.

This Constantinian understanding of the mission of the church may be born of a very commendable conviction that the church and the kingdom are embodied, visible realities today, but it ends up mistaking a human creation—the empire, the nation—for God’s kingdom. When this happens, the existence of the kingdom and the church are thought to depend upon a particular state of affairs, such as a political system, a growing economy, a particular social structure, or the rule of a particular person. If we have confused the kingdom and a particular state of affairs, when that state of affairs changes, we become anxious about the existence of the kingdom and the church. We then mistakenly think that the mission of the church is to bring about, or help bring about, a return to the state of affairs upon which the kingdom depends.

Much of what passes for Christian mission today is motivated by precisely this way of thinking: the church actively promotes a return to some past state of affairs so that the kingdom may once again be present—so that God may once again “bless America.” At this point, however, we have badly muddled the work of the Gospel and the relationship between the church, the world, and the kingdom. Certainly, the good news of Jesus Christ reveals God’s work in this world. That work is not just a hoped-for future, it is a present reality. That reality is not just an interior state of being in the believer, it is a way of living out our social relationships. But that reality is not captive to some particular culture. The Gospel has been

5. For a fuller critique of “Constantinianism,” see Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*; and Hauerwas, *After Christendom*.

powerfully at work throughout many cultures, in all kinds of political systems, economic circumstances, encompassing many different rulers, nations, and languages. Nor is the reality of the Gospel captive to the past. It is presently at work in powerful ways that, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may discern throughout our world.

The temptation to glorify our past because of a “Constantinian” confusion of the kingdom and society disables that discernment and leads to a betrayal of the mission of the church. In such a situation, our task is to learn from the past how to disentangle our vision of church, world, and Gospel so that we can see the Gospel at work today.

In addition to confusing the kingdom and society, when the church glorifies our history we also mistake the character of the kingdom. The Gospel does reveal the glory of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, but it is the same glory that Jesus Christ revealed, the glory of servanthood: “Whoever would be great among you must become the least and the servant of all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). This kind of glory is not the glory that is sought by those who confuse the kingdom and society. Just as Jesus Christ came as a servant, so also the church fulfills its mission to witness to this Gospel by serving. Those who glorify the past seek a return to the past by imposing the rule of the church on society. But the mission of the church is not to impose the Gospel or some state of affairs on the world in order to bring the kingdom. Rather, the church is called to witness to the Gospel. The Gospel is a gift, not an imposition, and the church’s faithfulness to it is measured in part by its unwillingness to impose its rule upon society.

Of course, to some this may sound like a recommendation for a weak church that can be manipulated by society. In fact, however, the opposite is the case. As I will later argue in detail in chapters 5 and 6, for the church to live and witness faithfully in our world, the church must be a highly disciplined, courageous community. It is the church that willingly adopts the power of the world that does not need discipline or courage—until it is brought face to face with God’s judgment.

Finally, we must note that when the church succumbs to the temptation to glorify the past, it usually does so by narrowing its view of the kingdom to one particular state of affairs. When this happens, the work of the Gospel becomes restricted—often to one class, one race, sometimes even one sex, as the primary participants in the Gospel. That is, the

glorification of the past usually identifies one particular tradition, time or place as *the* moment of faithfulness. This has the effect of excluding other people, times, and places from the possibility of faithfulness. This narrowing of the kingdom, then, betrays the commission to make disciples of *all peoples*.

THE CHURCH'S HISTORY IN WESTERN CULTURE

MacIntyre teaches us that living faithfully in this world means that the church must live with its history, neither denying that history nor glorifying it. For the purposes of this book, the history that will concern us is the history of the church in Western culture, that is, in European civilizations, particularly since the Enlightenment.⁶ Indeed, "living with our history" means that the church must live with the effects of its influence on our culture. After Constantine, that is, after Christianity became the favored religion of the Empire, the church became the most powerful force in Western society. Political structures, educational institutions, social forms, and the theories that sustained them may all be traced to the influence of the church. That these institutions, forms, and theories took different and often conflicting shape does not change the fact that the power and language of the church was claimed by all of them. When rebellion and revolution were preached, they too came to us determined by the forms and languages of the church.

In European civilization, intellectual, political, and cultural history and practices can only be understood in relation to the history of the church. Given this, the history of the church becomes a terribly tangled web and a fearful burden. The church can be implicated in the worst events of our past: the medieval church and the Crusades, the German Church Movement and National Socialism, the American church and slavery, the Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid, and the list could go on. No matter how controversial and complex the church's involvement is, or how powerfully some in the church resisted these movements, it is still true that the church has been a dominant force in Western culture.

The dominance of the church in the history of our culture becomes particularly problematic as we move into a time when that dominance is

6. Although it is not the focus of this book, I should note that due to missionary activity and cultural expansion of the West, the history of the Western church includes the history of its impact on other cultures.

only a memory. Although we live in a culture that has been largely shaped by the influence of the church and by reactions to the church, other forces now dominate our culture. In the following two chapters we will look more closely at this situation. For now, I want to explore some ways in which this situation provides some unique threats and opportunities for the church to live faithfully and witness the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the church increasingly recognizes its minority status in Western culture, one obvious response will be to attempt to regain dominance in our culture. Tied into this strategy is the Constantinian presumption criticized above. It is in error both theologically and historically.⁷ The better response is to ask ourselves this question:

What must the church do in order to live and witness faithfully as a minority in a culture where we were once the majority?

This is the question that brings into focus the history of the church in Western culture and how we today are to live with our history.

There are two sources of instruction that are of limited help to us. They are helpful because they point us to other times and places when the church has been in a minority situation. They are limited because in neither instance did the minority church have to come to terms with a history of dominance. One source of guidance is the early church. Certainly, for the first three hundred years of its life, the church was a persecuted minority. Although sometimes admired, Christians had little or no social and political status *as Christians*. As Christians, they were also vulnerable legally and economically. Some who became Christians had already achieved some social, economic, and political power, but by becoming Christians they risked losing what they had gained. So, in the early history of the church, the church existed as a minority in a larger culture that was frequently hostile. Moreover, the early church witnessed to the Gospel in the midst of many competing claims to truth. The Mediterranean world of the early centuries was filled with a plethora of religions and gods to believe in.

These two characteristics of the early church—its the minority status and the diversity of beliefs in the culture around it—reflect the conditions faced by the church in Western culture today. We may learn from the

7. I do not make an argument for this assertion here. One of the main purposes of this book is to make an extended argument for this assertion and for a more appropriate response to our situation that will enable the church to live faithfully.

early church some lessons for how to live faithfully today, but we will also discover some limits to what we can learn from them. John Howard Yoder points out a number of lessons to learn from the early church about sustaining belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ even though his followers are not mighty or numerous by the world's standards; about using language from the culture to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ; about how to witness to those in power; and other lessons.⁸ But in this essay what Yoder does not clearly identify are the effects of the church's past on our present culture.

The early church did not have to live with the history of its having shaped the Mediterranean culture. So, for example, where the early church knew that it was encountering an alien, resistant, even hostile culture, the contemporary church in the West tends to think of the culture as benign, if not friendly, toward the Gospel. Where the early church knew that its message was new and strange, the contemporary church presents its message as familiar and comfortable. Where the early church sought to make its message understood, the contemporary church assumes that it is understood and seeks to persuade its hearers to accept what they understand. In each of these instances—and in many others—we have something to learn from the early church.

The contemporary church, however, faces some challenges not faced by the early church, because, as already noted, the early church did not have a history with which it had to live. For example, the early church did not have to answer for the way that its life had been intertwined with injustice, such as the church's support for slavery and segregation in the American South and apartheid in South Africa. Nor did the early church have a legacy of anti-Semitism to confess. Nor did the early church have a history of visible support for unjust and immoral rulers. All of this history has an effect on how we are to live faithfully today, and the practices of the early church gives us limited guidance here.

Moreover, as we will see in the next chapter, the contemporary church encounters a lot of apparently "Christian" words, concepts, and practices in our culture that are left over from the church's impact on that culture. These words, concepts, and practices may seem to convey the Gospel, but in the end they betray it because they have lost their rooting in the Gospel.

8. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, chapter 1.

The early church did not face this danger, because they knew that the culture they were encountering was not Christian. We can learn from the early church what it means to take language captive for the Gospel, but we face a special danger, due to the lingering effects of the church on our culture.

In addition to the early church, we may also find some limited guidance from the experience of Western missionaries and churches in countries outside European civilization. Of course, due to missionary activity and the expansion of Western political and economic power aided by technology, European civilization has had a global impact. For these reasons the Western church has much to learn from churches in these other countries.⁹ “Third World” churches are producing a number of theologians and church leaders who are addressing the Western church with challenging questions. These observers often see us more clearly than we see ourselves. They challenge our complicity with Western political and economic powers, and expose our cultural blindness.

Likewise, missiologists and other Westerners who have been shaped by non-Western churches have some profound lessons to teach us. Two of those missiologists are William Dyrness and Lesslie Newbigin. In *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* Dyrness, who taught in the Philippines for many years, teaches us what many other missionaries have been saying, that we in the West need to look at our culture from a missionary perspective.¹⁰ For many decades we have been critically attentive to other cultures as we have sought to present the Gospel, but we have not been critically attentive to our own culture. It has been as natural to us as the air we breathe, and, as a result, we have not thought of our own culture as a threat to our faithfulness or as an object of careful analysis. Now, through the kind of work that Dyrness represents, we are learning to approach our own culture as missionaries. Newbigin, who served several decades in South India, including nearly twenty years as a bishop of the Church of South India, “retired” to England in 1974. In retirement, he has turned his attention to the spiritual plight of the West. He has written a series of

9. I despair of finding a suitable term for what I am trying to describe. By “Western church” I mean those churches located in countries dominated by Western culture, mainly in Europe and North America, though New Zealand and Australia may be included. Additionally, many churches outside of these geographical boundaries may be so “Western” as to be indistinguishable from the churches to which I refer.

10. Dyrness, *How Does America*.

books that analyze Western culture from a missionary perspective.¹¹ As a Westerner who has spent much of his life ministering in India, Newbigin offers some powerful analyses and insights. He is particularly sensitive to the effects of the Enlightenment on Western culture and to the challenge it represents for communicating the Gospel.

Although Dyrness and Newbigin bring missionary insights from the Third World that we will draw on in the following chapters, they do not attend to the life of the church in the history of Western culture as closely as we will. They concentrate instead on the interaction of the Gospel and culture, rather than the church and culture. As a result, neither one develops a full and clear account of the church's relationship to Western culture or of the changing status of the church and its significance for the church's mission.

THE FIRST LESSON

How are we to live faithfully as the church in our culture? The first lesson that MacIntyre teaches us is that in order to live faithfully, the church must learn to live with its history. Learning to live with our history means learning to distinguish among the church, the kingdom, and the world as we tell our story. If we learn to make these distinctions, then we will neither deny nor glorify the history of the church. Instead we will be able to bear witness to the Gospel in the midst of the church's faithfulness and unfaithfulness. By attending to our history, we will also learn to think like missionaries about our own culture. If we learn to think about our own history and culture in this way, then we will be able to discern the threats to and possibilities for living faithfully in the midst of our fragmented world.

New monastic communities live out this lesson by sharing their lives—their embodied lives—with one another in community. They live in close proximity to one another and share meals together as a community and as a practice of hospitality with those who are not members. They share their possessions with one another in ways discerned and agreed to by the community. They make their life visible to one another and to the world, so they do not appeal to some “invisible church” as an explanation for unfaithfulness. Rather, they have the courage, humility, and discipline to confess their sin and receive God's discipline and forgiveness.

11. Newbigin, *Foolishness; Pluralist Society; Truth to Tell*.