

Chapter 1

The Responsibility to Remember: An Introduction to the Historiography of Christianity

In a memorable epigram, the historian Richard Hofstadter stated: “Memory is the thread of personal identity, history of public identity.” Memory and historical identity are inseparable. Most of us have experienced the embarrassment of momentarily forgetting a name in the midst of an introduction. Think what life would be like without any memory at all. Life is terribly difficult for an amnesiac, and it is tragic for the person – and his or her family and friends – with Alzheimer’s disease. The loss of memory is not just the absence of “facts”; it is the loss of personal identity, family, friends, indeed the whole complex of life’s meaning. It is very difficult if not impossible to function in society if we do not know who we are. Our memory is the thread of our personal identity.

What about our religious identities? Are we amnesiacs when someone asks how the Methodist or the Roman Catholic Church came to be? Beyond referring to our parents or a move to a new neighborhood, could we explain why we belong to St. Mary’s by the gas station or the Lutheran church by the grocery store?

A French friend once began to explain contemporary French-German relations to me by referring to the significance of the

ninth-century division of Charlemagne's empire! Most of us do not go back that far to understand the present, but his perspective illustrates the tenacity of historical memory, all too painfully evident in the eruption of historical ethnic conflicts. On the other hand, if we do not know our personal and communal histories, we are like children easily manipulated by those who would revise the past for their own purposes. Historical perspective is important for counteracting the tyranny of current opinions.

The biblical community has always known that its identity is rooted in history. Isaiah calls Israel to "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isaiah 51:1–2). The genealogies scattered through the Bible remind the people of God of their roots in creation and their destiny in God's plan (Matthew 1:1–25). Christian identity is clearly stated in the historical shorthand of the Christian creeds that confess faith in the historical person of Jesus who was born, suffered, and died. Christians put a unique spin on this history when they confess that this historical Jesus is also the historic Christ who was raised from the dead and who will return to complete history. Thus, from an insider's perspective, the identity of the Christian community is formed by both the historical past and the historical future. In brief, then, Christian identity is rooted in history, not in nature, philosophy, or ethics.

Sociologists suggest that our family identity is passed on to us through our conversations with the mothers and fathers who have gone on before us. We know, of course, from even limited family experience that when we no longer talk to our parents and children we begin to forget who we are. This is not to say that conversations between generations are always pleasant, but to say that they are important for learning "how we got this way." To paraphrase the old saw about watching the making of sausage and political decisions, the study of our personal and communal histories, including the history of Christianity, may

be disturbing. But without such conversations we are condemned to presentism, which is a more elegant way of describing a continuous “me generation.”

Historical memory provides perspective, a horizon, for judging what is or is not important. Without a horizon it is too easy to overvalue what is before your nose. A horizon enables the valuation of the relative significance of everything within this horizon, as near or far, great or small. The idea of horizon or historical distance bears further reflection.

Historical distance can be a surprising element for understanding the present. Fernand Braudel, the renowned French historian, spoke of this by analogy to living in a foreign city. If you live in a foreign city for a year you may not learn a great deal about that city, but when you return home you will be surprised by your increasing comprehension as well as questions of your homeland. You did not previously understand or perhaps even perceive these characteristics because you were too close to them. Likewise, a visit to the past provides distance and a vantage point for comprehending and questioning the present. In other words, distance – in history as in navigation – is necessary for finding true bearings. Sailors, at least those with some longevity, do not navigate by watching the prow of the boat. Hence the old adage about people who can’t see beyond their own noses applies equally to historical myopia.

I have belabored the importance of memory and history for our personal and communal identities because we live in a culture that regards as wisdom Henry Ford’s dictum that “history is bunk.” I hope the image of the amnesiac will jar loose easy acquiescence to forgetfulness of the past and warn us of the dangers posed by lack of identity. Without a sense of our communal and personal history we are prey for whatever fads and fancies appeal to us. If we do not recognize the role of history in shaping our identities then we unreflectively allow the past to control us. This may not have bad results but it puts us in the position of being misled by those who wish to manipulate us.

Tradition and Confession

Lack of historical consciousness promotes a conversational deficit in the communion of saints, the church. The irony is that this is occurring even as we are acquiring more and more information. We now have a wealth of archeological and textual materials, including texts from the early Christian community not included in the Bible, far beyond the wildest imagination of medieval scribes, but without an interpretive tradition it is difficult to know what to do with this wealth of material.

“Tradition” is not merely a mass of information, but in its root sense means the action of handing on an understanding of that information, not just its rote repetition. The prolific historian of doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan sharpens this point with his clever distinction between tradition and traditionalism: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” In the Bible and the church fathers, “tradition” means primarily God’s self-revelation; God’s handing himself over in Jesus. Thus the fundamental structure of the Christian faith and community depends upon tradition, upon passing on significant conversations with prior generations concerning God’s activity in history.

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of handing on what he has received. The first place he speaks this way is in connection with the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:23–26); the second place is where he cites the confession of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3–11). The concept of the tradition as the passing on of the news that God has handed over his Son at a particular moment in world history for the salvation of human-kind is bound up in the New Testament with the concept of remembering (Greek: *anamnesis*, i.e., the exact opposite of forgetting, amnesia). It is no accident that these terms are both present in connection with the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. The tradition that Paul cites presents an exhortation to *anamnesis*. The meal that Jesus held with his disciples the night before his

death will continue to be held “in remembrance of me.” This is not just a conceptual remembrance, an idea; rather, it is a carrying out of the remembrance that offers, passes on, his presence itself. This “doing in remembrance” has its model in the Hebrew Bible, namely in the Passover as the remembrance of the flight from Egypt. Here too the past event is made present as every co-celebrant becomes a contemporary of the event through remembrance of what is passed on. The essential yet paradoxical point in the biblical understanding of tradition is that it is not fixed upon the past, but that in presenting the past (i.e., making the past present) it has significance for a new future.