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“Every Christian ought to be a good historian”:  
Ten reasons for studying church history<sup>1</sup>

1. God takes history seriously. Consider how much of the Old and New Testament is historical narrative. In its very being Christianity is deeply rooted in historical events, like the call of Abraham, the ministry of the Prophets, and the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.
2. God is undoubtedly active in history. And it is right and proper to study history for that reason alone. Though it is impossible to trace out his footsteps across the sands of time in detail, it is blasphemous to deny that he is at work. His work may often be hidden, but it is biblical to confess that he is providentially guiding history for the glory of his Name and the good of his people. To quote the seventeenth-century Puritan Richard Baxter: “The writing of Church-history is the duty of all ages, because God’s works are to be known, as well as his Word.”
3. Men and women are historical beings, immersed in the flow of time. Without the past our lives have no meaning. So we must study history, and as Christians, this means Church history.
4. We are to study church history so as to learn from the mistakes of the past. To cite the words of a famous proverb: “He who does not remember the past is doomed to repeat it.”
5. Studying church history builds a sense of humility. The study of church history informs us about our predecessors in the faith, those who have helped shape our Christian communities and thus make us what we are. Such study builds humility and modesty into our lives, and so can exercise a sanctifying influence upon us.
6. The study of Church history also liberates us from the tyranny of present-day ideas, what C. S. Lewis calls “the idols of our marketplace.” As Christian historian George Marsden

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is from Caleb Evans (1737–1791), principal of Bristol Baptist Academy.



has noted: “[Church] History is of major importance in alerting us to the transitory character of many of the values of our own age and culture. Rather than unknowingly allowing our values to be conformed to passing contemporary standards, we can strive to evaluate our current cultural norms intelligently and to apply to them the transforming values of Christ.”

7. The study of Church history, especially that of Christian thought, can provide us with guidance for the Christian life. It is exhilarating to stand on the East Coast and watch the Atlantic surf, feel the tang of salt-water in the air and hear the pound of the waves. But this experience will be of absolutely no benefit in sailing across the Atlantic to England. For that, a map is needed. A map based upon the accumulated experience of thousands of voyagers. Similarly, we need such a map for the Christian life. Experiences are fine and good, but they will never serve as a substantial foundation for our lives in Christ. Of course, the Bible provides the basic map of the Christian life. But the thought of other Christians down through the ages can help illumine and illustrate what is contained in the Bible.
8. Church history can also provide us with models for imitation. For instance, in Hebrews 11–12:2, the writer uses the history of God’s faithful people in the old covenant to encourage his readers to run the “foot-race” of faith. He wants them to draw encouragement from the lives of past believers to press on in faith and obedience towards the final goal.
9. The reading of Church history is a great means of enjoyment and personal relaxation from the challenges of the present-day. Such study equips us to labour for God in the present, but it also is a means of relaxation.
10. Finally, the study of Church history should lead us therefore to the praise of God and his adoration. To study the history of God’s people should lead us so praise him for his mighty acts.