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HISTORICAL THEOLOGY AND THE HISTORICAL POSITION OF THE CHINESE CHURCH

Introduction

The scene is all too familiar to professors in colleges and universities: An excited young graduate student develops a paper proposal that in their estimation, will significantly move a discipline-related discussion. The problem: this fresh new insight is not all that new. Moreover, *this “brilliant new insight” was largely discredited years ago by the academy. The lesson is painfully clear: the well-meaning graduate student had failed to do their homework which of course, entails research into the topic’s history.* As anyone in any professional field knows, a person earns the right to be heard if they demonstrate a working knowledge of what brought the discussion to its present level. To do less is to risk embarrassment as a person who is very naïve or perhaps worse, very arrogant.

The recent dramatic expansion of the Chinese Church—both in its mainland and diaspora forms—has put it in a historic position to significantly impact global Christianity in this new millennium. Like the aforementioned graduate student, however, Chinese believers will not be able to truly take advantage of their Esther-like “time” (Esth. 4:12) unless they have a basic understanding of how this *kairos*¹ moment came about. Like every manifestation of the Body of Christ—past and present, the Chinese Church is part of a common Christian story that began in the *East* but inarguably had its biggest impact on Western culture. However, with the demise of the Faith in the West, Christianity is now experiencing an Eastern revival, giving Asian (and African) theologians a unique opportunity to help the Church realign herself to more biblical foundations, including the purging of “pagan” Western accretions that have corrupted the Faith. In other words, believers from the East have now been invested with a *responsibility* to exegete and promote a genuinely biblical worldview that is free from cultural captivity while relevant to every human culture. But this divine call can only be answered if the Chinese Church recognizes that she is a participant in an ecclesiastical narrative bigger than herself. This, then, brings us to the premise of this paper: **If the Chinese Church is to “seize the day,” or better steward it, it must know its shared Christian story.** This in turn, will enable it to own and apply the best of an authentic Christian Faith as well as avoid its worst moments. To know the “Tradition” will also protect the Chinese Church from absorbing heretical beliefs or dividing over “minor” areas of doctrinal dispute that have helped render the Western Church ineffective. And finally, understanding the Christian past, will make it possible for Asian believers to make a

¹ *Kairos* is a Greek word generally referring to a special, quality or opportune moment in history. This characteristic sets it apart from “ordinary,” chronological time (*chronos*).

significant contribution to the *global* Christian community's grasp and practice of our common Lord, faith, and baptism (Eph. 4:5).

Defining a Historical Approach to Theology

Among theologians, "Church History" and "Historical Theology" are often seen as somewhat distinct academic disciplines. *Church history* is generally understood to refer primarily to a study of major events, people, and circumstances that have contributed to Christianity's development since Pentecost.² In a rather unsophisticated way, many would consider this endeavor to be concerned with the *facts* that tell the story of the Church. On the other hand, *historical theology* is thought to be more concerned with understanding the development of major doctrines and practices of Christianity, tracing their importance and articulation through the Faith's two millennia existence.³ Not surprisingly, many Protestant scholars see their historical task more in terms of narrators of the past ("church historians"), whereas Catholics, given their view of the Holy Spirit's on-going inspiration in the Church's Tradition, are more comfortable with "historical theology."⁴ However, I am not convinced that we have to choose one over the other. It seems to me that these two disciplines are really two sides of the same coin, with the former (CH) focusing upon the *life* of the Church, and the latter (HT) focusing upon the *thought* of the Church.⁵ In fact, I have a hard time trying to envision a study of the Church's past without identifying key events, people, *and* theological beliefs; they are so intimately intertwined. Since Christianity is identified by a particular core of beliefs and practices, studying persons and events without reference to the development of these definitional items is merely a collection of minutiae. Conversely, the study of Christian doctrine and practice is not simply a matter of reading and following the Bible (as pious as that seems) because our understanding of the Bible has been shaped by the names, and occurrences that make-up our Faith family tree. Even the notion that we can simply do a "pure, biblical Christianity" unfettered by tradition is itself a historically-conditioned perspective. Furthermore,

² See for example the CH definition of Earle E. Cairn: "Church history, then, is the interpreted *record* of the origin, process, and impact of Christianity on human society, based on organized data gathered by the scientific method from archaeological documentary, or living sources" (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3rd ed.[Grand Rapids: Zondervan,1996], 18).

³ See for example the HT definition offered by Grena, Guretzki, and Nordling: "The division of the theological discipline that seeks to understand and delineate how the church interpreted Scripture and developed doctrine throughout its history, from the time of the apostles to the present day" (Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999], 59).

⁴ The eminent Catholic theologian, Richard McBrien, does little to alleviate Protestant suspicions about historical theology when he defines historical theology as an endeavor "to understand and interpret the faith ...articulated in some principal historical source, such as the Bible, the writings of the Fathers and doctors of the church, the ecumenical councils, or the great theological controversies of past centuries" (*Catholicism: Study Edition*, San Francisco: Harper, 1981), 57. In good Catholic fashion, McBrien articulates a continuity of Christian Faith that *includes* among its many elements, the Bible. In fact, Biblical theology (study of the Scriptures) "is a subdivision of historical theology" (57).

⁵ Such is the integrative approach taken by Robert Rea as he judges church, historical theology, Christian history, and Christian tradition to be "synonymous phrases referring to a single discipline" (*Why Church History Matters: An Invitation to Love and Learn from Our Past* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014], 19).

our practices of interpreting Scripture, importance of tradition, attitudes toward philosophy and culture, and concepts of the church and its ministry are undoubtedly shaped by *post-apostolic* persons and events, perhaps even more than the New Testament, itself. In short, *life* and *thought* seem inseparable and complimentary aspects of a Christian approach to history. It is with this holistic framework in mind, that I will choose the less-limiting term for the remainder of this essay: *historical theology*.

Reaping the Benefits of Historical Theology

Far easier and arguably more important than providing commentary on the nuances of a term, is a discussion of what good historical theology does for its practitioners. Among other things, it enables the student to uncover the multiple sources that contribute to their Christian Faith. Certainly, every evangelical would list Scripture as the “norming norm,” but historical theology also reveals that Christian theology—including our own—is a mixture of Scripture, tradition, human reason, and religious experience, not necessarily in that order or in equal amounts. John Wesley famously identified these four elements in his analysis of Christian truth (albeit in a very specific order), but a survey of the past two thousand years of theology aptly demonstrates what occurs when this “quadrilateral” is inverted or has some elements withdrawn altogether.⁶ Taking a somewhat different approach, Richard Niebuhr saw historical theology as a fascinating commentary on how the Church viewed its relationship to its culture, ranging from antagonism to uncritical embrace.⁷ These are but two of the many lenses that one can take to the history of the church. But let’s get deeply practical. Why should the Chinese Church be concerned about historical theology?

My Lincoln colleague and historical theologian (*his* term), Bob Rea offers the following three reasons to study what he calls the “Tradition”:

- 1) *Orthodoxy*—From the very beginning of the Church, believers have looked to history to understand God’s truth
- 2) *Identity*—We discover who we are and better appreciate the identity we share with other believers....”as we include believer of other cultures and other centuries, our circles become transcultural, global and trans-temporal...”
- 3) *Ministry*—We partner with historic Christians who provide models, methods, and resources to make us better at what we do⁸

Alongside of Rea’s excellent observations are the four salient reasons given by noted evangelical scholar, Mark Noll. In his widely-used volume, *Turning Points*, We should study Christian history because:

⁶ See Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). While Wesley, himself did not use the term (Outler coined it), he none the less advocated a theological method comprised of these four elements. Theological Liberalism was the result of a “quadrilateral” that placed human reason at the top.

⁷ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951). Today, any theologians question whether one can really differentiate between the Gospel and culture in the atomistic way of Niebuhr.

⁸ Rea, *Why Church History Matters*, 191-93.

- 1) It provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the historical character of the Christian Faith
- 2) It provides perspective on the interpretation of Scripture
- 3) It provides a useful laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture
 - a. Almost all of our current issues have been faced in some manner in the past
 - b. Believers have often acted wisely in these situations
 - c. Even when believers have erred, the LORD has been faithful to and sustained His People
- 4) It provides a reminder that we have not “arrived” but continually need to have our Christian attitudes reshaped⁹

Alongside these compelling reasons, I would like to add one more of my own. I have already alluded to this reason in the introduction as it really identifies my purpose in writing this essay. Simply put, I want the Chinese Church to know its history—a history it shares with the global Christian community—so that it may claim its rightful and timely place at the ecclesiastical table. This is because of its own unique insights and contributions to make to the Church’s Faith and her on-going story of participation in the redemptive mission of God.

Applying a Historical Theological Approach: The Identification of Key Church “Turning Points”

There are numerous ways that one can approach theology from an historical point of view. Typically, church historians (like many historians) proceed from a *chronological* perspective; i.e. beginning with the post-apostolic period, they study the key person, events, doctrinal developments, etc. as they unfold in historical sequence.¹⁰ This approach certainly has the advantage of being comprehensive, but too often it overwhelms the student with mounds of data. It also tends to lose the proverbial forest in the trees with the result that the most significant events get swallowed up and even obscured in the whole. Moreover, we miss what is really the genius of ecclesiastical history; i.e. it narrates the story of the *Great Commission*.

In Prof. Noll’s afore-mentioned volume, *Turning Points*, the author turns to the final words that Jesus spoke to his disciple (Matt. 28; Acts 1), and proposes that the commission to “disciple the nations” offers a useful framework for comprehending the history of Christianity.¹¹ The familiar words, “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go make disciples of all nations...” lays out as purposeful, practical, and globally-inclusive outline for all Christians, and especially today’s Chinese Church, to understand both how we got to the

⁹ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 5-9.

¹⁰ See the many fine, standard histories of Christianity, which include recent Western “classics” like Jaroslav Pelikan’ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* , 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Majority World –produced scholarship such as Justo Gonzalez’s *The Story of Christianity*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: Harper One, 2010).

¹¹ Noll, *Turning Points*, 1-2.

present and why our particular cultural expression of the Faith is of value to the People of God. Noll calls attention to four truths that the Great Commission offers to a study of the Church's history:

- 1) Christ is completely sovereign and no matter what experiences the Church undergoes, nothing lays outside his rule.
- 2) History of Christianity involves two related actions: "going" to places the Gospel heretofore is unknown and then "teaching" converts to be more like Christ.
- 3) Divine Promise that no matter how far the Church wanders from her Lord, *he* would sustain his body and assure her mission's success.
- 4) Christian Faith would take root in particular cultures and "profoundly shape individual peoples, regions, and nations. *But Christianity itself would belong to none of them.*"¹² In other words, the Gospel would be transportable and *translatable* in every human society, a phenomenon poignantly suggested in the Pentecost account (Acts 2).

According to Noll, this Great Commission-driven approach to historical study is best undertaken in a manner that notes and examines "critical turning points" that stand out in the Christian story.¹³ Admittedly, the selection of these key moments is a bit subjective, and other historians would (and have) taken exception to Noll's list. However, it would be hard to dispute that any of the fourteen turning points he has identified have significantly impacted the Church and brought us to the present "Chinese *kairos*."

There are a couple other important features that commend the Noll approach. First, it presents Christianity as a worldwide faith, whose story encompasses the globe's community of believers, not simply those in Europe and North America. In contrast to recent efforts that seek to write a Christian history tailored to the stories of indigenous peoples, *Turning Points* offers a narrative which is as Asian as it is African or Latin American; it is the history of *all of us*. And it follows an interesting geographic route: from its origins in the Middle East, Christianity travels West, North, South, and now curves in an Eastern direction again. A second thing that makes this approach so compelling and particularly relevant to the Chinese Church is that it was formulated in the context of the persecuted and underground church. As Prof. Noll was faced with the daunting task of teaching a necessarily brief and expedited course on church history to Romanian church leaders during the despotic Ceausescu regime. Since he could not bring books and notes across the border, he (Noll) scratched down a few key dates—AD 70, 325, 381, 451, etc. to serve as an outline for key dates in church history. Not only did these key "turning points" serve him well in this Romanian crash course, but Noll soon attempted this approach in a

¹² Ibid., 1.

¹³ Noll contends that his approach offers several advantages to the student of historical theology: 1) It brings a sense of order and coherence to the history of Christianity; 2) It enables one to "linger over" specific historical moments in order to see the complexities of the church's history; paradigm-setting occurrences which often get absorbed in typical historical sweeps; and 3) It facilitates an ability to both interpret and identify key "forks in the road" and/or the beginning of a new Christian movement (2).

semester-long class at Wheaton College.¹⁴ In short, this approach served the students well on both continents and contexts. Hence, the book, *Turning Points* came into being. Thus, an oppressed Christian people (not to mention historically ignorant American college students) was quickly brought up to speed about their past so that the Romanian church could seize its *kairos* moment in the final days of communism. One cannot help but see the parallel to China, albeit the latter on a far larger scale.

So what “turning points” should the Chinese church be cognizant of as it steps into its lead role in the ecclesiastical drama? Noll offers the following:¹⁵

- 1) AD 70: The Fall of Jerusalem. Amidst this tragic event, Christianity becomes identified as a distinctive religion and worldview. While its origins are in Judaism (particularly the Old Testament), Christianity possesses its own canon, and unique form of monotheism centered in Jesus Christ. During the two-hundred year period following the “death” of the Jewish nation, the Christian Faith successfully expands into the Gentile world in culturally diverse ways, yet united by early versions of ecumenical creeds.
- 2) 325: Council of Nicaea. Church confronts heresy with a definition of orthodox, Trinitarian belief that also articulates the basic doctrines of a “Mere Christianity.” Clearly, the Faith can be successfully translated into the more philosophic categories of the Greco-Roman world. Like the seminal creeds before it, Nicaea calls attention to an ecclesiastical “consensus” on the essentials of Christianity, something that later generations would do well to observe given the many fragmentations that have ensued over “minor points” of Christian belief.
- 3) 451: Council of Chalcedon. Church defines an orthodox view of Jesus—“fully God and fully human” (i.e. two natures, one person). This turning point is of particular significance to the Chinese church in that one of the “losing parties” at Chalcedon (the *Nestorians* who emphasized that Christ had two distinctive natures—especially a human one—over the unity of persons) was instrumental in the early evangelization of China.
- 4) 530: Monastic Rescue of the Church (especially by Benedict). Protestants may question whether the rise of monasteries was the best response to a “worldly church,” but the monks restored a sense of holiness to a Christianity that had become societally acceptable rather than persecuted. This is of course, a salient issue for today’s Chinese Church as it (thankfully) becomes less of a persecuted community, yet in so doing, runs the risk of positive cultural reception—and corruption.
- 5) 800: Coronation of Charlemagne and the Establishment of Christendom. This turning point represents the culmination of the harmonious church-state relationship that was the concern of the Benedictines; i.e. a “Christian Empire” in which the *ecclesia* rules over the politics, socio-economic well-being, education, etc. of society—*Christendom*.

¹⁴ See the discussion of *Turning Point’s* origins in Prof Noll’s recent autobiographical volume, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian’s Discovery of the Global Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 80-81.

¹⁵ My summary of the contents of *Turning Points*, 13-306, along with a few personal interpretive observations pertaining to the Chinese church.

While a Christian *worldview* is concerned with bringing every dimension of life under Christ's lordship (2 Cor. 10:5), Christendom, on the other hand, reduces this dynamic Faith to a secular world order, almost as totalitarian in many respects, to governments driven by atheism. Chinese believers (and American evangelicals, for that matter) who long for some kind of "Christian nation" should consider the lessons of "Christian Europe" before they place their hope in a political entity.

- 6) 1054: Great Schism. The dramatic separation of the Eastern Church from the West is a sobering reminder of the nearly-irreparable damage that can come to the Body of Christ when theological, cultural, and ecclesiastical differences are allowed to fester due to power plays, suspicion, and detachment. As the Church fragmented into these two vast uncommunicative *bodies*, Islam grew and eventually overwhelmed the part of the world that had been the cradle of Christianity. The unhappy consequences of the Great Schism, then, should serve to warn the Chinese Church that fragmentation carries a big price.
- 7) 1521: Martin Luther and the Diet of Worms. Luther's courageous refusal to recant of his condemnations of Rome's "unbiblical teachings" can be considered the true birth of Protestant Christianity. While we are appreciative heirs of this tradition, we also recognize the negative impact that this second, major division has had upon the Church, not only between Protestants and Catholics but sowing the seeds for the fragmentation of Christianity into thousands of denominations. Yet Luther gave the entire People of God a very precious truth that can never be negotiated; i.e. the Gospel is about God's Grace not human effort. That message must never become obscured in the Church's witness to her world.
- 8) 1534: English Act of Supremacy. Arising in some less than virtuous circumstances, the establishment of an *English* church demonstrates that Protestantism has the capacity to bring church renewal at a fairly rapid pace. On the other hand, these renewal movements can negatively contribute to an already-fractured Christianity. Furthermore, the English refusal to recognize Roman Catholic authority also helped contribute to a culture where *no ecclesiastical authority* would be allowed to have sway over independent human thought; in short, secularism.
- 9) 1540: Founding of the Jesuits. Once again, the Church is rescued by monastic orders, only this time it is specifically the Roman Catholic Church that due to the Protestant Reformation, has "lost" Europe. While the Jesuits are often negatively associated with their hyper-zealous efforts to restore papal authority, they made a lasting contribution to Christianity by taking the Gospel to places like North and South America, India and China.¹⁶ Arguably the most significant accomplishment of these 15th-16th century missionaries is seen in their ability to "re-position" the Christian Faith in terms and ways relevant to the culture; e.g. Matteo Ricci accommodation of Catholicism to Chinese

¹⁶ Ibid., 210-11. Noll notes that in 1659, that Rome wisely instructed three new French Jesuit missionaries against attempting "to persuade the Chinese to change their rites, their customs, their ways, as long as they are not openly opposed to religion and good morals...The faith does not reject or crush the rites and customs of any race, as long as these are not evil. Rather, it wants to preserve them" (211).

moral teaching and social practices. One cautionary note: the Catholic Church's heavy "sacramentalism" can and did lead to a *syncretized* Christianity; i.e., one that is an admixture of pagan and Christian elements.

- 10) 1738: Conversion of the Wesleys. This turning point recalibrates a Protestantism that has gone heavy on the intellectual side of the faith with little to no emphasis upon the *experience* of Christianity. The spiritual awakening of the Wesleys revitalized the individual lives of believers, resulting in an activist faith that brought dramatic change to a decaying British culture. The Wesleyan revival ignited efforts to abolish slavery and protect women and children as well as call some of the most degenerate to salvation in Christ. This turning point also helps identify and define *evangelicalism* ("experiential Biblicism") which is such a major part of the global Christian story of the past 100 years.
- 11) 1789: French Revolution. The French Revolution is more than the overthrow of the French aristocracy, it represents the symbolic end of Christianity's dominance over European thought and life. The storming of the Bastille demonstrates that the Church's authority has been replaced by "secular" human reason. Deism and Naturalism reconfigure or even replace the Christian worldview, resulting in a Christianity that is now defined by prevalent philosophies or science. Theological Liberalism – a by-product of this movement—attempts to "rescue" a form of Christianity but by the end of the twentieth century, Europe is decidedly "post-Christian." The United States is slower to appropriate the effects of "de-Christianization," but by the early part of the next century, is rapidly replacing biblical and ecclesiastical authority with human ones. (It should be noted that Marxism is originated in the midst of this anti-Christian environment—a *Western* phenomenon—that was imported with near disastrous results into China; i.e. Cultural Revolution).
- 12) 1910: Edinburgh Missionary Conference. This conference in Scotland signals the West's recognition that Christianity is expanding globally. Its delegates are forced to think about the realities of encountering non-Christian religions, as well as constructive ways that a fragmented Western Church can work together for world evangelization. Demonstrating a degree of naivete as well as a somewhat colonial perspective, Edinburgh participants generally expected that this coming age of world Christianity would produce churches that would look just like theirs.
- 13) 1962-65: Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council represents the Roman Catholic Church's recognition that it had become detached and irrelevant from the modern world. This council launched an effort, and more importantly created an *ethos*, in which Catholics and Protestants (and Orthodox) have charitably engaged each other in theological dialogue and worked together for common Christian worldview concerns; e.g., sanctity of life, traditional marriage and morality, etc. Vatican II also ushered in a new Roman Catholic Church willingness to find truth in other world religions instead of her previous centuries of ignorance or condemnation.

13b) 1974: Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. In some ways, this *Evangelical* event (and its subsequent incarnations in Manila and Cape Town) signals that biblically-committed, Protestant Christians recognize a truly global Christian community and are increasingly seeking the insights from non-European and American voices. Lausanne documents demonstrate that evangelicals have come to recognize the social, economic and political implications of the Gospel, insights that have come in large part from emerging churches like China. This turning point poignantly documents that the time is ripe for Asian Christians to step to the front of the line.

Before we conclude this brief discussion of historical turning points that have brought the Chinese Church to this historic moment, it would do us well to note some of Prof. Noll's closing observations. Noll concedes that his thirteenth and fourteenth turning points might actually undergo some amendment as the Christian story unfolds in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Among the "candidates" for more recent turning points are the following developments:

- 1) 1906: Rise and Spread of Pentecostalism throughout the globe. Certainly, this phenomenon has been a prominent part of the Chinese Christian narrative.
- 2) 1980's--: Emergence of Women into Greater Public Visibility. Contra some historic, Chinese cultural prohibitions against women's leadership, Chinese Christian women are exercising their spiritual gifts in preaching, teaching, worship and prayer.
- 3) 1934: Founding of Wycliffe Bible Translators and the growth of Bible translation. Not only is the Bible available in Mandarin, but this occurrence has brought aggressive efforts to translate God's Word in the tribal languages and dialects spoken by China's teeming millions.
- 4) 1917-89: Survival and growth of the Eastern European church under oppressive Communist regimes. Chinese Christians could tell a very similar story, although 1949 would be a more accurate initial time marker, and the 1989 can be best understood through the events at Tiananmen Square.
- 5) **1980's--: Christian Renewal in China.** In my mind, if the present-day Chinese Church is able to mature into the world Christian leader that this essay envisions, *this* event will most certainly emerge as Noll's fifteenth turning point, if in fact, it doesn't replace Vatican II and Lausanne.

So what are we to make out of Noll's "decisive moments in the history of Christianity"? Obviously, each turning point (including the additional five, above) carry with them a complex set of "by-products": some good, some bad, some that are mixed. For instance, while we might easily argue the construction of strong, clear ecumenical creeds during the first three turning points has been of great value to the Church, the accompanying development of a hierarchical form of ecclesiastical leadership (bishops)—while understandable—has not been as helpful, if even biblical at all. We can celebrate the theological brilliance of the Chalcedon Formula—and

¹⁷ Ibid., 287-304.

utilize it in our own Christological constructions-- yet rue the imperialism of Leo of Rome who sowed the seeds of what eventually became the Great Schism. Or consider the circumstances involving the eighth turning point (English Act of Supremacy); one can hardly defend the motivations and actions of Henry VIII that led to the establishment of a national church, albeit that subsequent Anglican tradition has blessed the evangelical movement with such stalwarts as C.S. Lewis, John Stott, and N.T. Wright. Turning points both move the Church ahead in its missions and create new barriers which challenge biblical authority and Christian unity. However, I believe there are at least five critical lessons that can be drawn from a composite analysis of these fourteen events:

- 1) We learn the shape of *essential orthodox belief*; i.e., what doctrines fundamentally define us as Christians, and by implication, what doctrines are not as critical to our Christian identity (although these latter commitments may be a significant part of our denominational heritage). As Luther so aptly reminds us, God's *Grace* in Christ is at the heart of the Gospel message and that emphasis cannot be obscured by the saved or unsaved (cf. turning points 1, 2, 3, 7).
- 2) We learn that the Christian Faith is indebted to Judaism but is clearly identifiable from it by the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our canon is composed of both the Old and New Testaments, and the latter, in particular calls attention to the Faith's *translatibility* into the world's many cultures (including Chinese). It connects with every people group but is never to be the sole possession of any of them. Christianity is a missionary religion with continually unfolding "new nations" that need the Good News (cf. turning points 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 12, 13a, 13b).
- 3) We learn that the Christian Faith is a *worldview*—a way of thinking and living that encompasses every aspect of human life from piety (worship, Bible study, prayer, etc.) to politics, economics, education, justice, etc. However, Christianity is not a political kingdom and must always be wary of large-scale cultural acceptance. When the Faith becomes a political entity, it inevitably assumes the character of a "secular" society, and establishes a kingdom that can be as tyrannical as any other godless rule. Christians must be vigilant about holiness, but our "separateness" should preferably be lived in the world rather than apart from it (John 14:15-15) (cf. turning points 4, 5, 10, 13b).
- 4) We learn that the Christian Faith promotes the value of *human reason* but it cannot be *subordinated* to finite and fallible human understanding. An authentic Christianity encourages the best expressions of the human intellect and imagination to the glory and honor of God. Disengaged from its divine source, such knowledge can become an instrument of arrogance and autonomy, attempting to reconstruct the Faith to fits its human parameters or dismiss it all together. On the other hand, we are also reminded that Christianity is not simply a matter of knowing and reciting the "right doctrines" (cf. turning points 2, 3, 10, 11).
- 5) We learn that the Christian story originated in the (Middle) East, and expanded in the West which in turn, spent considerable effort in evangelizing the Eastern world. In the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christianity has become a truly global phenomenon with a significant “majority” of its adherents in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Thus, the “Eastern Church” is now uniquely positioned to both evangelize and bring renewal to the “post-Christian” West, not to mention the remaining parts of the unreached world. Without an understanding of historical theology, however, the “Majority Church” (including the Chinese community) will lack the theological acumen and spiritual disposition necessary to steward this moment. Enthusiastic but ignorant Christian leaders will not be welcomed by the larger Christian world, much less respected by skeptical unbelievers. Likewise, the Chinese church cannot simply be another “knock off” version of a Western ecclesiology which is highly individualistic and consumerist.

Hopefully, my Chinese brothers and sisters will come up with some additional historical lessons that can improve their readiness as well as better educate the rest of the Christian family. After all, this is our *shared story*. Asian eyes (illuminated by the Holy Spirit, of course) will undoubtedly catch some important implications that are undetected by my Western set of glasses. But what happens if they don’t? What will happen to Christianity if Easterners fail to capitalize on their *kairos* moment? This unwelcome prospect suggests one additional, *sixth* lesson from our survey of historical theology:

- 6) Christ’s Great Commission will ultimately succeed, whether or not his People are prepared and obedient. As noted earlier by Mark Noll, the Lord will be faithful to his promise and sustain his Church, although particular Christian incarnations may deviate from their call. The final goal of history is the assembly that John so well describes in his Apocalypse:

After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Rev. 7:9 [NIV])

It is of course, my prayer that the Chinese Church will seize her present time in the fulfillment of this divine, global narrative. But let me add that John’s vision reinforces a secondary story-line that permeates the Church’s history from Pentecost to the *Parousia*: every “national moment” is only a moment as God builds his worldwide community. Like with the church in America, China’s time will probably be a chapter in a very long historical volume. Nonetheless, let that chapter be written.

Conclusion

Let us return to our opening illustration of the eager but historically-ignorant graduate student but alter this story a bit. Historical myopia is seen not only in naïve academics but in such popular expressions such as the worship of a local church. Let me explain.

In virtually every worship experience I have shared with my beloved Chinese brothers and sisters, I have sung the *same praise songs* that I sing in my white, Midwestern congregation. While my Asian friends may voice “Majesty” in Mandarin while I sing in Jack Hayford’s original English, a common ahistorical assumption is being expressed; i.e.; global (and in this case, Chinese) Christianity is largely a translation of Western Christianity. However, our brief survey of historical turning points has clearly indicated that since 1910, the Church has been increasingly “internationalized,” with the Lausanne Congress (especially in its most recent Cape Town incarnation). Let me propose that the time has come for Western Christians, such as myself, to be mentored in the theological insights of my Asian brothers and sisters in word and song. In this, I find myself in hearty agreement with Chinese-American theologian, Amos Yong, of Fuller Seminary, who forcibly argues that “Asian American experiences and perspectives have much to contribute to the broader evangelical theological discussion.”¹⁸ Yong (a Pentecostal) further comments:

In short, Asian American Evangelicals do not need to be apologetic about their lives, experiences, and perspectives. Rather, by following the path of the Son of God into the far country, by receiving the infilling of the Spirit of God poured out on all flesh, and by faithfully attempting to live out such a Christ-centered and Spirit-empowered faith in the footsteps of their evangelical forebears and ancestors, Asian Americans may then be able to bring their theological gifts to the conversation table, gifts that will challenge the discussion while simultaneously enriching the fare for all those concerned about the *euangelion* in the present time.¹⁹

Yong’s point is “spot on,” and a fitting postscript to Mark Noll’s thirteenth turning point. But this “historic position” for Chinese Christianity will not be realized if there is no awareness on how we got to this crucial moment, if we even recognize it at all. Succinctly stated, historical theology will cue us to twists in the narrative that providentially enable one church movement to take the ecclesiastical lead—within the parameters of orthodoxy, of course. And clearly, the two thousand-year story of the Christian Movement has brought us back to the East. The only question: Is the Chinese Church prepared to *steward* the moment? In order to do so, Chinese evangelical theology will need to mature in its biblical and systematic abilities. May God give us more Amos Yongs. But Chinese historical awareness is more than realizing that the Asian voice is now a major player. Historical theology also warns us about the danger of being thrust in that leadership; i.e. it becomes too easy to absolutize one’s culture as Christianity’s prime expositor (e.g. North-American Church in the past century). Even without the globalizing turning points of Edinburgh, Vatican II, and Lausanne, one historical lesson is continually repeated: The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not belong to any one culture but to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. Thus, it is incumbent upon the Chinese Church must not become the latest installment in *evangel ethnocentrism*. If we understand our pivotal role as Christian conversation facilitator rather than dominator, Mark Noll, indeed, will have his next decisive moment.

¹⁸ Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.