



Sunday, May 23, 2021

WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

Engaging Extra-Biblical History: Eleven Suggestions for Becoming a Better Student of History So That You Can Become a Better Student of the Bible
(continued from May 16th Bulletin article)

Fourth, be aware of biblical warnings and what they imply about extra-Biblical history. Paul warned Timothy, “In the latter times some will depart from the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1). The question is, how much later? Paul also warned the Ephesian elders that a departure would come from “among yourselves” (Acts 20:30), indicating something not far away, but close. In fact, one need only to turn to Revelation to see Ephesus along with another four of the seven congregations addressed dealing with doctrinal and/or practical departures. I find that Christians are often aware of these and the many other Biblical warnings regarding departure, but I still see them quoting from second, third, and even fourth century Christians as though their words carried as much weight as the Gospel. If departure was both warned about and recorded in the Bible, then one ought to examine Christian authors, even early ones, with scrutiny

Fifth, be aware of how culture may have influenced early authors. Significant portions of the New Testament were written to discuss the very real temptation of the church to accommodate a dominant cultural force. In the case of the New Testament, that force was Judaism. Are we to think that never happened again? In reality, even before the close of the New Testament, the philosophies and culture of the Gentile world were already creeping into the church. As one considers early Christian authors outside of the Bible, one ought to reflect on whether their words are more reflective of Plato than Paul.

Sixth, be aware of how culture may influence our own investigation into history. While God alone is the judge of the hearts of men and women, one of the things that I’ve noticed about many modern deconversion stories that claim to be the product of an historical investigation is that the author has typically moved from a less culturally appropriate belief or behavior to a more culturally appropriate belief or behavior. If cultural accommodation was a temptation for people in the Bible and for early Christians, might it also be a temptation for us? And might we, like they, make convincing arguments, even citing history, to prove our point?

Seventh, give weight where there is weight (and note when there’s none). Lest we throw out the baby with the bathwater as relates to studying history, I should point out once again that there is much to be gained by studying history and much to be lost by ignoring it. So, on the one hand, when we see something being repeated time and time again in history, we should definitely take note. On the other, when we find ourselves taking a position that has never been held in the history of Biblical interpretation by anyone but the most modern students, it is pretty safe to say that we are wrong. History might have preserved a lot of error, but it is the height of hubris to say that it is devoid of truth.

(continued next week)

