



Sunday, May 30, 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 23rd bulletin article)

Eighth, don't allow an ancient heresy to find new life. One of the things I've seen in some deconversion stories corresponds to a trend I've seen unfolding on social media lately. People love conspiracy theories, supposed truths that have been suppressed but have now come to light. Christians are not immune to this trend; in fact, in my experience, they've been some of the chief participants. So for example, when you find something from the third century that you feel has been suppressed by the church of the twentieth century, it would be better to examine how the twentieth century church dealt with that subject and whether or not that dealing is in keeping with the Bible than it would be to assume that they have willingly suppressed the truth.

Ninth, historical personalities should be viewed as dynamic figures unless proven otherwise. Sometimes people quote historical figures who wrote about a given subject across a lifetime. I'd hate it if someone characterized me only by what I said when I first started preaching and teaching. Historical figures are too often treated as static and still, when the fact is that people are typically dynamic and changing. Finding where an historical figure has said something at some point in his life proves nothing in and of itself about where he/she finally stood on the subject.

Tenth, avoid cherry-picking and taking quotes out of context. Just as Bible verses ought to be examined in context, the writings and works of historical authors ought to be examined in context. Just because a certain thing might mean something to us today, does not mean it meant that at the time it was written. Further, as we described above, just because someone did or said something once does not mean it was characteristic of his/her life or work. It is intellectually dishonest to lift an author's statements out of context for the sole purpose of adding a name to a list of those who agree with our conclusions.

Eleventh, avoid saying that individuals or collectives at any given period are monolithic unless you have done the work to prove it. Monolithic in this warning refers to the idea that all of the people from the past or even a given period in the past agree/disagree with a certain belief or practice. People give the impression that history is monolithic when they say things like, "The rabbis said...", "The Scribes did...", or "Early Christians taught...". Outside of the book of Acts (where early Christians were occasionally described as being "with one accord"), you rarely see total agreement amongst any group in history, even amongst people of faith. Sometimes, there is only apparent agreement owing to a lack of evidence. It is safer to avoid sweeping statements and to qualify our claims by specifying a period, identifying when there is a small body of evidence, etc. And again, you should only make a large claim when you have done a large amount of research; even then, you might be wrong.

Having written all that I have, I've really only scratched the surface. My hope is that you'll take this list, expand upon it, and become a dynamic student of history, gleaming truths while avoiding pitfalls. I especially hope that you'll be more equipped to respond to the plethora of deconversion stories out there. Those who write these stories believe they have found "a better way" in the pages of history. Perhaps they have; it is possible for truths to have been suppressed or forgotten, as Nehemiah 8 and other texts prove. However, it's also possible that they've been guilty of ignoring the principles I've mentioned above and in so doing have become guilty of creating a false authority. "Test all things" – what I've said, what deconversionists have said, and what historical figures have said – in light of the Word of God, and "hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

