

Should the Friends and Workers Maintain a Record of their History?

By Henry Slofstra

The early church certainly kept a history. If they had not, we wouldn't have the Gospels today. Now someone might reason along this line, *"that was the Word of God, inspired and directed by His hand, and that work was completed with the epistles written by Paul, Timothy and the early apostles"*.

While that statement is correct in terms of the authority of the Bible, the written history of the church did not end with the New Testament. The early church fathers continued to write, and today we still have on record the history of the first centuries of the church. These are the epistles of men like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna and others, some of whom knew the disciples.

There is also no direct Biblical or Scriptural objection to keeping a historical record, although some caveats will be mentioned further on. In fact we find the very opposite in Scripture, a clear direction toward keeping an accurate historical record, as I have already remarked, the apostles did, and the early church fathers did.

I believe that the grounds for doing this can be found in the gospel of John 3:20-21, *"For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God."*

Two distinct events are referred to in these verses: an examination so that God's light can be brought to bear in this life, and God's final judgement in the after-life. Both events are part of an overall process. We want to do everything we can to bring our lives into the light in this life, so that God's final judgement won't be a shock to us. God works toward openness and disclosure in this lifetime, and those who love truth will not shirk from that light.

Any activity that helps toward *"making deeds manifest"* helps God to do His work with us. And I believe this is also true when it comes to the question of William Irvine and the history of the worker movement. God's light isn't a nebulous, mystical, blurry thing. Regarding heavenly things, all might not be clear because of our limitations. But regarding our *"deeds,"*

we need a cold, hard, accurate light; we need to see clearly. When we're part of a family, we also want to do everything that can be done to help other family members see clearly. And for a church family as a whole, I believe that record-keeping and the process of recording history help in

"making deeds manifest"

and assist with maintaining God's Light while we are on Earth. For whatever reason, this has not been the practice within the friends and workers, and the result is that a wide range of speculation about the origins of the movement has misled many and weakened the faith of some.

In the absence of actual information, some fables have crept in, and when proved false, weakened the faith of some. Even worse, in the absence of actual information, a variety of negative claims is now being made about the origins of the friends and worker's fellowship, with little to counter or thwart them.

Truth is simply what is true. The effort to create a written historical record helps to preserve 'what is true'. It provides a reality check. When a worker or a friend would say, *"we go back to the shores of Galilee"*

do they not need a reality check, a common base of facts from which those claims can be made? There is a sense in which that statement is true, and a sense in which it is not true. Workers owe it to the listener to be as clear as possible when making that kind of claim. I believe the claim was originally intended in one sense, but has now grown into something that has taken on more of the sense of a fable.

When someone states *"we go back to the shores of Galilee"* we might ask, *"what goes back"*? The form of the ministry, the hymn books, the present day hair styles, the love of Jesus, the leading of the Spirit? Clearly some of these things do, and some do not. I would suggest that some have come to think of certain things *"going back to Galilee"* that do not go back to Galilee.

And in support of what is really just a fable, some will say, *"We just have faith that these things are true"*. We do need to exercise our faith every day in order to believe what Jesus taught. But surely, our faith needs to be tempered by our experiences and earthly knowledge. Our faith is made stronger when we discard fables and rely on Christ's true teaching. And we need to always face the facts of our experience as we go along.

History provides a reality check on our faith and our beliefs. The historical record allows the light of God to be shed on the events of the past. True, it does so erratically. History can also feed vanity, elevate the false hero, and support false ideology. The Bible warns against this kind of glorification of the past, and also against *"endless genealogies"*. But the antidote to these perils is not to throw out the historical record entirely, but to work diligently toward finding and maintaining a true record of events. If this is done in submission to God's guidance, then a record that is true and honest is possible.

The Old Testament itself is an example of a faithful and true historical record. There we see all the blemishes and stains of God's people, but we also see affirmations of God's faithfulness to His people. Have events not shown that such a record would be useful today?

A true history should record the blemishes. Once understood, repented and forgiven, those blemishes will serve only to edify others in the future. It's not something to be afraid of. The requirement is only that the record be true, accurate and complete.

The function of the record of history is to make deeds manifest and to bring them to the light. It does not do so perfectly; the historical record can show the biases and imperfections of the

writer. For the perfect record, mankind awaits the final judgement. But God also brings the hidden to light in lifetime, as He chooses. Wouldn't we be working against God's purpose, if no records were kept? How can wrongs ever be righted, if they are not brought to the light? If they are not, they will simply fester.

For example, there have been a number of events in our Canadian history that were a blemish on what our country stood for. One in particular was the internment of Canadian citizens of Asian extraction during World War II. It's only recently that this was made right. But it would never have been made right, if record keepers had not maintained a full and accurate record of what occurred.

Were there such occurrences in the friend and workers history? Let me ask it this way; are the friends and workers, sinful people? Then no doubt there were, and keeping a historical record would be useful in redressing the wrongs that do arise.

What is meant by a history? History is built on source material. Photographs, notes, and especially the letters of the workers. Perhaps these should not be made available in lifetime but could be released after some suitable passage of time, and possibly only released after a worker has died. If this is done, then it is important to realize that such an archive must be complete, unedited and fully disclosed. Otherwise, the history is made false. If some aspects cannot be disclosed for legal reasons or the privacy of persons still living, then a time limit should be imposed on the non-disclosure. I don't mean to digress into technicalities here, but the making and keeping of history is a well established practice, so there are rules to understand, and to follow.

The main purpose of a history is to give all glory to God and to show His work among His people, even in our present time. Psalm 105:1 sums this up nicely, *"O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people."*

I have read a great deal of the worker's history and I'm convinced that a proper airing of the friends and workers history will give testimony to God's work among His people and make His deeds known. The alternative is to rely on fables and hearsay.

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A Worker's caution about tape recording meetings:

Brother Worker, Everett Swanson, Olympia Convention:

“I would rather that you did not record what is said in meeting. If you want to remember what is said in this meeting, the Holy Spirit will bring it to your remembrance. There are people who are trying to collect information about what we believe. We shun all publicity, for any written material could get into the wrong hands. We must protect ourselves. We must keep ourselves hidden and apart from this corrupt world. Don't write anything that you don't want someone to see.”