

## The Difference Between Living IN the Past and Living OUT of the Past

Does your church have a past?

Of course it does. Your church had a beginning, and the movement that birthed your church has a history also.

But does your church's past have any meaning or significance in the life of your congregation?

The answer to that question does not come as easily.

### ***LIVING IN THE PAST VS. LIVING OUT OF THE PAST***

In [a previous post](#), I wrote about the need for churches to live in 3-fold time, with proper attention devoted to the past events that constitute identity, the present tasks before us today, and the future hope that strengthens our witness.

Today, I want to focus on the first aspect — how a church can be rooted in the saving actions God has performed in the past and the sustaining grace He has shown to His people throughout history.

Whenever we hear about looking “backwards,” we feel a twinge of resistance. To look backward must mean we are turning back the clock, giving into unhealthy and nostalgic tendencies that hinder our mission, right? So the solution should be to free ourselves from the shackles of history and tradition in order to better adapt to our times.

This way of thinking makes good sense to many today, but it needs strong qualification. There is a difference between living *in* the past (with a nostalgic yearning for a golden age of yesteryear) and living *out* of the past, which means we see ourselves in continuity with our forefathers and mothers in the faith.

### ***A COMMUNITY OF MEMORY***

In [Habits of the Heart](#), sociologists from the University of California claim that a real community must be “a community of memory;” that is, “one that does not forget its past.” They write:

“In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community....” (153)

Lest you think the authors believe a community should look at the past through rosy glasses, they go on to mention how “painful stories of shared suffering” are just as important as recounting their community's successes. Likewise, an honest community will maintain its “dangerous memories” of when it inflicted suffering on others, thus calling the community in the

present “to alter ancient evils.” (153)

## **A COMMUNITY’S COMMON STORY**

The history of your church is a vital component of the health of your church.

Psychologists have discovered that children who know more about their families (where they are from, who are their relatives, what are the milestones in the family’s journey, the story of their birth, etc.) are better equipped to deal with life’s challenges. Writing in *The New York Times*, [Bruce Feiler describes](#) a healthy narrative as “oscillating:” it includes the family’s ups and downs, victories and setbacks. The family’s identity is forged through trial.

What is a church if not the family of God? The common story of our heritage, our roots, our failures and successes – all of these elements have an identify-forging effect on God’s people. Our frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper reinforce our identity as followers of Jesus. A common story enables us to thrive in the midst of cultural challenges.

So how do we fight against the “tyranny of the now” that leads us to focus on the present that we forget our past and why it is important?

I see three strands in your church’s history, and each can help the church be a community of memory.

## **3 STRANDS OF YOUR CHURCH’S HISTORY**

The first strand is the most important.

### **1. We are part of the people of God, who bear witness to the great story of our world.**

As believers, we are children of Abraham; we have been grafted into Israel. So when we read biblical accounts, we are not merely reading about people as examples for us today; we are reading about Grandma and Grandpa. These are our fathers and mothers in the faith. When we read about the people of “the Way” in the New Testament, we are encountering the origin of the movement to which we belong.

Bearing witness to the great story of our world means we believe in God the good Creator, our rebellious descent into sin, God’s commitment to bring salvation, His choice of a holy people to be the vehicle for His good purposes in the world, His sending of the Messiah to die for our sin and launch new creation, and His commissioning of the Church to carry His gospel of love to the ends of the earth. Unless we are telling that story over and over again, our Church experience will shrivel up until it merely incorporates a religious aspect into an essentially secular life.

The second strand follows from the first.

### **2. We stand in a long line of saints who have sought to be faithful to Jesus.**

American Christianity leans toward innovation and originality, which is why some of us try to leap over 2000 years of church history in an attempt to reach the pristine faithfulness of the New Testament church. But the New Testament churches were not exactly pristine, and neither is all of church history worthy of being discarded. Rooting our churches in 2000 years of church history (through biographical studies, quotes from important theologians, readings from the church fathers) reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

It's true that the Church has gotten things wrong, and the Church's heroes are, like the main characters in the Bible, flawed. For these reasons, we must not glorify the past or seek [to conjure up a "golden age;"](#) we should instead give people hope that just as God has used broken vessels and sinful people in the past, He can continue to do so with us in the present.

We are bound to repeat the mistakes of our spiritual ancestors if we are unfamiliar with the temptations they succumbed to. Likewise, we are likely to fall into cultural captivity without the witness of ancient Christianity alerting us to our own cultural blinders.

The first two strands are important for all Christians. The third is important for a local church.

### ***3. We belong to this particular people for this particular time.***

Here are the questions that arise from this strand of church history:

- How did your church begin?
- What movement was it a part of?
- What is your church's purpose?
- What are your denomination's distinctive beliefs?

I know of a church that recently went through a revitalization process. The church's style today is contemporary, and yet the congregation lauds the founder of the church and the leaders demonstrate how the present state of the church maintains the original mission in its DNA. The shared story that emphasizes the original purpose is what pushes the church forward, as part of a movement that has continuity with the past.

### ***KINGDOM OUTPOSTS, NOT LIFESTYLE ENCLAVES***

The authors of [Habits of the Heart](#) warn against the dissolution of communities of memory. "Where history and hope are forgotten and the community means only the gathering of the similar, community degenerates into lifestyle enclave," they write.

Too many of our churches tend to be "gatherings of the similar" rather than, as in Scot McKnight's terminology, "a fellowship of different." The Church should be refreshed in remembering our identity is rooted in the Scriptural story of our world, in line with the faithful saints of God through the ages, and embodied in particular congregations that serve as outposts of God's kingdom.

> [Read more from Trevin.](#)

Would you like to know more about the importance of your past history and its connection to your present health? [Connect with an Auxano Navigator and start a conversation with our team.](#)