

# Can a Christian Be an Objective Professional Historian? An Unorthodox Autobiographical Review Article of Ian Hugh Clary on Arnold Dallimore's Historiography

By Ryan M. McGraw

## INTRODUCTION

Historiography is inescapably personal for me. This may sound strange to some readers, partly because, for most of us, historiography is not an everyday word. Historiography is the study of history, or the theory of how we should do history. Ian Clary's book on Arnold Dallimore's work and method as a historian draws out of this author a personal history of struggling with the study of history. Historiography, or the theory and methodology undergirding historical research and writing, is his primary target.<sup>1</sup> While historiography may sound abstract and irrelevant to some people, for me the topic has marked a spiritual exercise in how to understand and explain God's relationship to the world in human history. I trained as a professional historian (twice) and, early in this process, Dallimore's popular biography of George Whitefield altered my life permanently and positively, both as a Christian and as a minister of the gospel. Yet I have since changed my mind over whether Dallimore did the "right thing" in trying to interpret Whitefield's life *primarily* in terms of the meaning of God's providence and the work of the Holy Spirit. This personal and gradual shift in my thinking explains my style in this essay as well. While academic writing in a theological journal should be objective, interpreting facts in contexts and shying away from first person pronouns, my choice in using them here actually illustrates the substance of my answer to a key question raised in Clary's work, "Can a Reformed Christian be faithful to Christ as a professional historian?"

Stated differently, the question is whether Bible-believing Christians can serve faithfully as academic historians, who rely more on objective historical evidence for their work than on divine providence as an interpretive guide. Can a Christian historian present objective history, based on social, political, and ideological

contexts alone, or does it betray one's loyalty to Christ to fail to explain events such as the First Great Awakening without appealing to the direct divine intervention of the Holy Spirit? My preliminary answer is that being objective about studying historical facts in historical contexts is a better way of honoring Christ as a historian than attempting to explain evidence in terms of what we think God's intentions are behind historical events. Doing so does not make us neutral in laying aside our loyalty to Christ, but humbly recognizes the limitations of our knowledge of how God works in the world.

Clary's conclusion in this penetrating book serves as a launchpad for what I want to say here. His bottom line assessment is that Dallimore went a long way towards writing objective history (234, 244) while aiming simultaneously to use Whitefield as a model for pastoral ministry today (139). I am using this conclusion as an occasion to ask how Christian scholars should study history itself. Restated, my primary contention in this essay is that Clary's work gives readers significant insight into how conservative Christians can use objective historical methods without betraying their theological commitments. To do this, I first provide a proper academic review of the book, then I illustrate my stubbornly reluctant journey toward prioritizing the value of objective history through personal narrative, and lastly I offer some reflections on historical method and

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1. All subsequent parenthetical references are to Ian Hugh Clary, *Reformed Evangelicalism and the Search for a Usable Past: The Historiography of Arnold Dallimore, Pastor-Historian*, vol. 61, Reformed Historical Theology (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

theological evaluations of historical ideas. My hope is to promote the value of professional history, seeking to give a suggested path forward for Christian historians.

#### WHAT CLARY SAYS ABOUT DALLIMORE'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ian Clary provides readers with a well-researched and careful evaluation of Arnold Dallimore's approach to history. He acts as a model historian while examining and evaluating the work of another historian. Having "a significant impact on evangelicalism" (98), Dallimore's two-volume biography on George Whitefield shaped a generation of conservative Christians, purposefully advancing a model of Christian ministry and the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching through an account of Whitefield's life (139). Dallimore's significance makes his historiography an ideal entry point into recurrent debates over the nature of historical writing among evangelical scholars.

Clary's research question is one of historiographical classification: does Dallimore's monumental achievement fit more in the genre of carefully researched objective history, hagiography (searching for Christian heroes), or some hybrid of the two? After briefly introducing his own approach and historical method (ch. 1), Clary states the question, couching it in terms of evangelical debates over the nature of Christian historical writing (ch. 2). Generally speaking, the two sides of this debate reflect the goal of pursuing objective history based on historical evidence, versus those who also ascribe explanatory power purely to supernatural intervention, emphasizing theological evaluation of historical events. Appealing to works like Ian Murray and George Marsden's biographies of Jonathan Edwards, Clary shows that these approaches to history are not hermetically sealed off from each other, with historians on both sides appreciating elements of each other's work.<sup>2</sup>

He then presents a careful biography of Dallimore with an eye to his writing ministry (ch. 3). Writing Dallimore's biography was the author's initial intent, which morphed into reducing this endeavor to a relatively large chapter on Dallimore's life. Acting the faithful historian himself, Clary constructed a targeted life of Dallimore, drawing evidence from personal correspondence, interviews with people who knew Dallimore, and

other sources in order to explain his ideas objectively. This material is targeted in that it aims to explain how and why Dallimore wrote his biography of Whitefield, exemplifying an objective historical method with a clear research question in view. Rather than biography for its own sake, Clary's biographical material aims persistently towards evaluating Dallimore's historiography. Though some readers may not realize the fact, Clary's practice here reflects the fact that good history is always more consumed with asking why something happened than it is with simply telling people what happened. Chapter four turns towards Dallimore's work on Whitefield, explaining Dallimore's historiography in light of the questions of celebrity history, and of his treatments of Whitefield's views of slavery and revival. Clary's consistent conclusion is that Dallimore's work was not mere hagiography, though it often fell short of relating fully relevant evidence to present a full picture of Whitefield's life and character. Scholars judge a research method by an author's stated aims, and Clary's point is that Dallimore both achieved and fell short of his aim through incomplete investigation of the objective evidence available. Chapter 5 broadens the context of Dallimore's work by investigating his subsequent biographies of figures like Edward Irving, Susanna Wesley, and Charles Spurgeon. Excepting the biography of Irving—which was based too heavily on secondary sources and blunted historical accuracy by an anti-charismatic bias—Clary concludes that these other works were generally reliable, though not measuring up to the thoroughness and rigor of the author's work on Whitefield (204). Illustrating the effects of Dallimore's commitment to Whitefield as his subject, chapter six shows the effects of Dallimore's polemic tone in relation to John Wesley, dividing the Wesleys into the "good" (Charles and Susanna) and the "bad" (John). The seventh and final chapter concludes the book with reflections on history as a discipline in light of the preceding study as a whole.

Clary's fourfold summary of the contributions of his research illustrate the strengths of his historical method, two of which particularly stand out. He notes that this research first sheds light on debates over evangelical historical method (237), second provides a biography of Dallimore himself, third highlights the influences of Dallimore's theological convictions on his biographies (238), and finally argues that Dallimore was properly an historian (239). The first thing that stands out in relation to these points is how Clary illustrates appropriate objective historiography. His critiques of Dallimore's work show the need for basing historical arguments on facts and evidence to create as accurate a picture of the

2. In my view, the final chapter of Marsden's academic biography of Edwards is one of the finest treatments of the central question of this essay. See George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

past as possible. For example, regarding Dallimore's contention that Whitefield was the greatest preacher since the time of the apostles, Clary asks how a historian should (or can) evaluate such a statement. Does one measure this by number of converts, for instance (119)? This observation illustrates how theological evaluation sometimes reaches beyond the bounds of available objective evidence. To illustrate, making an evidence-based case that Whitefield reached more hearers than anyone else we are aware of in Christian history differs widely from a subjective statement about the greatness of his preaching. Likewise, Dallimore asserted that the true measure of a man is his "inner self" (162). Yet this is not a proper object of historical research. Who other than God can know the heart of man (1 Sam. 16:7)? Additionally, Dallimore's theological agenda often led him to "tamper" with or omit relevant evidence, altering quotations without telling readers (208), bypassing Charles Wesley as hymn writer and poet (211), and treating John Wesley as "the bad" Wesley to bolster his apologetic for Whitefield (217). Historians are never unbiased, and they have the right to think whether Wesley was good or bad. Yet making historical evaluations as to whether they like what they find in history clouds their judgment in seeking to present people as they really were, so far as is possible from available sources. Clary illustrates that reserving theological judgments in writing history is a necessary component of responsibly writing history.<sup>3</sup> Suspending judgment until we can hear people out on their own terms does not mean that we cannot make such judgments. It means simply that our judgments are not immediately relevant to striving for an accurate history.

The second outstanding virtue that emerges from Clary's conclusions is his reflections on the question of evangelical historical research and writing. Effectively, he provides a path forward for evangelical and Reformed historians by teaching them how to separate objective historical investigation from theological evaluation without entirely sidelining the latter. For example, he contends that while Dallimore's theological biases clouded his judgment and use of sources at times, he nevertheless expressed appropriate reserve at points, not wanting to "read the Spirit too much into history" (237). Historians can thus simultaneously take warning from Dallimore's theological biases, while learning from what he did well. Dallimore was properly a historian using sound historiographical practices in the main, even though "the principal tools of his trade were pastoral" (240). Clary's summary evaluation is that we cannot forsake objectivity for usability (or drawing

lessons applicable for the present day), yet the past may still be useable. Citing Carl Trueman on the difference between objectivity and neutrality (241), he affirms that we do not need to be neutral, either respecting God or historical events, when we limit historical evaluations to the (limited) available evidence. Moreover, Clary adds that divine providence reminds believing historians that history is teleological (or has a goal), and that Hebrews 11 shows the legitimacy of learning from past successes and failures (242–243). The real issue is how such ideas factor into writing history itself. Despite Dallimore's defects as an historian in some cases, he wrote history "to praise his God" (243), and "his work as an untrained historian is impressive" (244). While providence may have limited use as an explanatory force of particular historical events, theological evaluation remains appropriate *after* the historian has made his tentative case from tangible evidence. Theological evaluation should not crowd out objective history, yet objective history does not negate the uses of assessing what one finds once he or she finds it. In other words, Christian historians honor Christ best by learning to listen to people on their own terms and by exercising ideological self-restraint and even self-denial.

Clary models for readers the value of careful objective historical writing. His research is well-documented and rooted in primary sources. Drawing from personal letters, interviews, and published works, he expertly reconstructs Dallimore's thought and approach to history. The author's use of secondary literature is equally impressive, including academic studies on Canadian thought (where Dallimore lived) in relation to heroes and celebrities in the twentieth century, as well as sketching debates about historiography, both preceding and following Dallimore's work. Writing history about modern figures is harder than older ones in many cases, since the historian is much closer culturally and ideologically to the subject. Yet Clary exemplifies well how to do this, teaching readers both the method and value of objective historical writing. The bottom line is that "for

3. Yet Clary engages in some moral evaluation as well, especially in denouncing Whitefield's view of slavery, and critiquing Dallimore for not being more critical of Whitefield's views of slavery (127). Undeniably, this is a moral judgment rather than a historical one. Slavery is certainly reprehensible, but the historian's task is to explain how people regarded slavery at the time (and why they did so) in the context of a variety of viewpoints on the subject. As repulsive as slavery may (and should) be in the eyes of modern readers, historians need to understand their subjects of investigation in ways that they would have recognized themselves at the time in which they lived. Historians can make judgments, but they need first to explain how and why people thought the way that they did.

historians the useable past should not mean sacrificing objectivity for the sake of pragmatism” (196). In other words, historians need to give historical figures their own voices in light of their own times before they can decide what to do with what they learn. Such features make Clary’s research useful for suggesting a path forward for believing historians. A long personal journey had led the present author to walk the same path with Clary in this area.

#### A PERSONAL HISTORIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

My own personal journey as a professionally trained and practicing historian reflects key points of Clary’s evaluation of Dallimore’s historiography. This is where my article becomes a bit “unorthodox” in terms of academic writing, since personal experience is ordinarily irrelevant to an academic review. However, it is not stretching matters too far to say that it is as though this book was custom-made for someone like me. Sketching my personal history as a growing historian and my experience with Dallimore’s biography on George Whitefield provides a vantage point from which to further illustrate the value of objective history and to preface my answer to the questions of how and why a Reformed Christian can be a professional historian in the third section below.

Reading about Dallimore’s historiography touches a deep nerve for me. Around 1999, I read Dallimore’s work voraciously and with great interest. Introduced to the work by a youth pastor shortly after my conversion to Christ, I was captivated by Dallimore’s historical examples of the Holy Spirit’s power at work through Whitefield’s preaching, which exemplifies Clary’s statement of the impact of Dallimore’s work on the church (244). So great was the influence of this book on me, that the Lord used it to develop in me a sense of call to the Christian ministry, which led me first to minister in a Baptist church, then to seminary, then to pastor two Presbyterian churches, and, finally, to become a professor in a conservative Presbyterian seminary. Along the way, I earned a history degree at California State University at Fullerton (CSUF). I vividly remember taking a historiography course from the most difficult professor in the department, only to find him challenging my defense of reading history in light of God’s providence. I argued that the purpose of studying history was to see God’s hand at work in historical events. With a kind

and sympathetic demeanor towards me, the professor asked how I could study and interpret providence as a specific rather than a general historical cause. In other words, even if everything happens through God’s providence, how can particular acts of providence answer clearly how and why people thought and acted? Biblical explanations of Biblical history might be divinely inspired, but how could a Bachelor level student’s reading of history presume to know God’s mind in extra-biblical historical events without God telling him what he did and why?

Admittedly, to no fault in the professor, I found this challenge both antagonistic and offensive at the time. Did not failing to interpret history in light of providential causes and intentions dishonor Christ? Meanwhile, on breaks between classes, I would disappear to the top floor of the library to read Ian Murray’s *Evangelicalism Divided*,<sup>4</sup> which, “providentially,” was hot off the presses at the time. I loved this book almost as much as Dallimore’s biography, and I still do. Yet my historiography professor’s comments got under my skin. He was not hostile to Christianity, serving as an elder in a Presbyterian church, and he was not rude in challenging my appeals to providence. He simply asked honest questions that deserved honest answers. How can a Christian appeal to providential intentions behind history in order to write history without God telling him or her what he intended? I had the nagging suspicion that while God certainly grabs our attention through special acts of providence, how we read such events is always provisional and even sketchy sometimes.

A certain reservation in making providential judgments was already woven intuitively into my preaching at the time. For instance, just before transferring to CSUF from a “junior college” for my upper division courses, in God’s providence, I was scheduled to preach the Sunday after 9/11. I chose Genesis 3 as my text, pressing the idea home that God uses the evidences of the Fall and the resultant miseries of sin in this world to drive us to Christ. However, I did not feel comfortable arguing, for instance, that thousands of people died in New York because God was judging America for the sin of abortion or something equally specific. I knew intuitively that faith in God’s control over everything that happens has limited interpretive power in relation to details. Scripture tends to give general counsel under such circumstances, such as telling us that unless we repent we will likewise perish (Lk. 13:3), versus asserting that sinners dying in a tragedy are worse than others, or even whether some such disasters are specific “messages” from God to us at all. Maybe such events

4. Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001).

are merely general “calls” to repentance to people suffering in a sinful world. Maybe the Bible better teaches us how to respond to providence than how to explain it. Maybe my professor was on to something after all.

The hermeneutics of history also overlapped with biblical hermeneutics. As my professor taught us how to read and evaluate texts in their contexts, learning to ask historical questions rather than contemporary ones, it struck me how similar this process was to interpreting the Bible. Though I read the Bible primarily to know God, bathing Bible reading with prayer, I wanted to know what the Bible said without imposing my opinions on God’s Word. This resulted in an “objective” interpretation of Scripture, albeit with a “subjective” end in view.<sup>5</sup> I needed to understand God’s Word before I could use it. My practice in learning to seek objective meanings of texts based on evidence in history, mimicking careful Bible reading, made me a better and more careful history student in the end. My first published essay was even an analysis of the historiography of Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, which I based on careful exegesis and implications drawn from a close reading of Herodotus’s work. I began to realize that the appreciation of objective history that my professor sought to instill in his students was something I needed and cherished in other pursuits.

However, I was still undaunted in my own search for a “useable past,” studying history trying to give explanatory power to providence. Though I understood how to write objective history, doing so proved to be much harder than interpreting the Bible, both due to the absence of God-given evaluations of events and because of the inherent uncertainty over whether the historian has adequate evidence. I was burnt out on historical research by the time I finished my BA, dropping a potential path towards professional history to devote myself to full-time ministry. Over a decade later, with some irony, I pursued a PhD in historical theology on John’s Owen’s Trinitarian theology.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, it was not so much providential history that drew me toward resuming historical research, but neither was it objective history.

Choosing Owen because I wanted a “mentor” to help me know the Triune God better, I pursued an academic degree in a discipline that I thought I had permanently seen the back of to dig deep into a topic (the Trinity) that I hoped would be useful. The Lord seemed to be funneling events towards my teaching systematic theology at the seminary level, which required a PhD. Historical theology seemed to be a safer choice than academic work in systematic theology because it was far easier to write something “new” in history than theology. The

history of ideas is a vast field, always offering fresh research topics. I did not want the pressure of “solving a theological problem” that the church had never successfully resolved, while trying not to fall into heresy or produce unintended consequences by accident. Yet when I turned in my first chapter on Owen, one of my supervisors said something like, “I think you need to start over, and stop being such a pastor as you write history.” From page one, I was focusing on theological uses of what I was studying, with an aim towards serving the church, rather than asking historical questions and understanding Owen in his context(s). The reviewer’s comments were both distasteful and offensive to me at the time. I likely only started over using the methods I knew already because of a supportive wife who told me that I was not allowed to quit.

I underwent a major historiographical shift through my PhD work. I began to apply what I knew already about objective history, asking historical questions about Owen rather than the contemporary ones that led me to study him to begin with. Unexpectedly, this process became as life-altering as reading Dallimore on Whitefield in the late 1990s, if not more so. Dallimore helped me long for the Spirit’s continued work in the world through preaching. Writing objective history on John Owen taught me many more and equally far-reaching things.

First, asking objective historical questions of a subject rather than contemporary ones is a good life skill. Too often we are more ready to debate an opponent with whom we disagree than we are to understand them, especially in evangelistic conversations. We are also too ready to justify the ideas and actions of our friends and heroes. Understanding where people are coming from is a vital life skill and doing so involves learning to show them respect and connecting with them before seeking to answer them. Being more ready to speak than we are to listen (Jas. 1:19), whether with living or dead people, almost always results in missing our targets. Far too many Christians do not learn how to take interest in people as people, hearing them out and representing them well before we speak to them. Respecting historical people as image bearers of God by listening to them was a better way to honor Christ than risking taking them out of context simply to say what I wanted to say.

Second, I began to realize that my theological

5. Which sounds very much like what Clary advocates in the conclusion to his work on Dallimore.

6. Ryan M. McGraw, *“A Heavenly Directory:” Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology*, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

“heroes” were just normal people. Yes, the Lord greatly used people like John Owen in the church, but Owen also seemed difficult to get along with, overly private, possibly unstable in his political views, and redefined church membership to fit his Congregational principles in ways that may have had unintended consequences for practices such as infant baptism.<sup>7</sup> Historians should not be out to find “dirt” on historical figures, acting like a group of highly-educated tabloid reporters. Yet, as a friend of mine likes to say, not every theological question in history has a theological cause. We are people of our times in ways we can scarcely understand; so were people in the past. Stories of normal people who did extraordinary things can be just as inspiring as stories of extraordinary people to whom we cannot ultimately relate because they are either too saintly or too sinister. Rather than resembling novels revolving around heroes, historical research is more like being a crime scene investigator. When historians arrive on the scene, they should not jump to conclusions but start collecting evidence to find out what happened. After ruling out possibilities, the investigator might arrive at a suspect.

7. For example, Crawford Gribben argues along these lines in a way that took me some time to warm up to in Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Ohio University Press, 2016). The last question regarding Owen’s assertion that church members are only those who covenant voluntarily with God and the church is addressed in my introduction to volume 15 of the forthcoming *Works of John Owen* with Crossway.

8. Case in point, my most recent academic book seeks to trace Reformed ideas before and after the Enlightenment, asking how large scale contextual shifts affected Charles Hodge in nineteenth century America. Ryan M. McGraw, ed., *Charles Hodge: American Reformed Orthodox Theologian*, vol. 76, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023). Though many readers will not likely see things this way, my team of authors sought to take honest looks at persistence and change without judging who the good guys and bad guys were.

9. The final chapter of my book on Reformed scholasticism illustrates some areas in which historical options can add fresh voices to contemporary discussions. Ryan M. McGraw, *Reformed Scholasticism: Recovering the Tools of Reformed Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2019).

10. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory*; Ryan M. McGraw, *John Owen: Trajectories in Reformed Orthodox Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); McGraw, *Reformed Scholasticism*. McGraw, ed., *Charles Hodge: American Reformed Orthodox Theologian* (V&R/Brill, 2023).

11. An important book that was required reading for my undergraduate degree in this connection is Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994). While the authors do not present, in my view, a sufficient philosophical foundation for truth, they illustrate well why historical investigation hinges on the quest for truth based on appropriate evidence. Denying the concept of truth is the death of the discipline of history.

The CSI agent may find a villain and the Christian historian may find a hero, but both should be skeptical about coming to hasty conclusions. I am tempted to say that in history, the only real “hero” is Jesus Christ. We can appreciate and learn from dead people just like we can from living people, but we should not burden the dead or the living with heroic expectations that only Christ can meet. If Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Owen, Whitefield, or Hodge prove to be flawed, or even outright wrong sometimes, then that is okay. We can still love them and learn from them, but first we need to understand them.<sup>8</sup>

Third, it dawned on me that gaining perspectives from people in times, cultures, and contexts differing from my own was precisely what I needed to break up the monotony of hearing familiar voices in contemporary discussions. I discovered that I did not really need another modern Reformed (American even!) inspiring interpretation of historical events and people. I am still prayerfully grappling with plenty of those in the Bible. I needed to understand people on their own terms in their own times so that my own social and cultural assumptions would not pass unchallenged.<sup>9</sup> The fact that an Aquinas or Owen lived literally in a different world than we do is actually helpful. While some of the questions they faced seem foreign to us, and occasionally the questions they asked appear bizarre (especially in Aquinas’ case!), historical figures often bring fresh ideas into contemporary conversations that prevent both tunnel-vision and a whiggish sense that all of history seems to have been leading towards us. Though this list of three lessons could be much longer, it showcases some fruits of my “conversion” to objective (though clearly not neutral) academic history.

This personal narrative, which is still unfolding, partially illustrates the value of Clary’s book. Can a Christian pursue the standards of modern objective historical writing and remain faithful to Christ by not appealing to providence as an interpretive factor? Do such efforts inherently compromise Christian principles, betraying an aim to be accepted by the academy? Is there a place for using history for the glory of God and the benefit of the church? At least in my case, the answers to these questions are yes, no, and yes. I have published four academic history books, and several articles, all of which self-consciously make no significant appeal to divine providence.<sup>10</sup> Yet I believe that I honored Christ in writing them, with the Spirit’s help, by seeking to honor truth and to “hear people out” in their own times.<sup>11</sup> I do not believe I have compromised Christian principles, though I have published with academic publishers such

as Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Palgrave, T&T Clark, Brill, Lexham Academic Press, and others. Despite common Christian insinuations against “objective” historians, I have never really cared much about my academic reputation, and never sought an academic post at a major university. Without intending any disrespect to those who take this path, I believe that the Lord simply called me to do something else. With some irony, I believe that by seeking first God’s kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33) by praying to be a righteous and faithful historian, the Lord added all these other things to me. Often the best way to honor Christ is simply doing our jobs as well as we can to His glory (Eccl. 9:10). Working hard and doing our jobs well, whatever they may be, pleases the Lord. Yet what is the point of Christians doing rigorous academic historical research if few people will have any interest in reading it? My answer is that professional peer-reviewed work in historical theology forces one to dig deeper, work harder, learn more, and accumulate a wealth of material to use for other purposes.<sup>12</sup> Personally at least, I do not need heroes from history as much as I need ideas with which to interact, without the burden of needing to find historical ideas to justify my own.

Can a Christian be a professional historian? Should Christians write history meant to inspire the church and pass on ideas? Is Clary right to say that we can do both on some level? I have come to believe that both are possible, though it took me a long time to get here. I love Iain Murray’s biography of Jonathan Edwards, and I love George Marsden’s. I still recommend Dallimore on George Whitefield and I praise the Lord for directing me to read it at the right time. Yet I now devour more history books from Oxford than I do from Banner of Truth. Both have their place, but I am in a different situation in life than I was twenty years ago. I am more convinced than ever that overly specific providential readings of history often have very little value. There is no “thus says the Lord” evaluating the life histories of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, or George Washington. Even if there was, then we would still need to understand the people and events in question by piecing together the evidence we have.<sup>13</sup> I am more convinced than ever that there is a wide difference between providential explanations of historical events and contemporary uses of historical ideas. There would be no history without providence, but maybe providential history is not the category we are looking for. I thank God for Augustine’s teaching on the Trinity, while others vilify him as promoting modalism.<sup>14</sup> But is not understanding his ideas in context more important than

understanding God’s (hidden) intent behind events in Augustine’s life? It turns out that objective history can be “inspiring” precisely because the ideas we discover and the people we get to know are so different from what we expected them to be. By refusing to see our own reflections when gazing into the well of history, we can begin to see history’s true value.<sup>15</sup>

#### SOME REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIANS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

In light of the preceding two sections, four particular observations about Christian historiography follow. Clary’s work exemplifies each of these in a number of ways, and these four areas of reflection both harmonize with and expand his conclusions.

First, we should separate historical evaluations from theological evaluations before bringing them together. Though we can do both, even in the same book or essay, distinguishing historical theology from contemporary uses is important. The beauty of writing historical theology is that the historian does not have to like what he or she finds, even if he or she likes the people he or she is studying. For example, if I want to know the real Jonathan Edwards, then I am not very interested in how John Piper uses Edwards’ ideas, though I find Piper edifying and even exciting at times. Getting to know Edwards in a way that Edwards and his contemporaries would have recognized is a vital first step. Blending or blurring historical investigation and theological evaluation runs the risk of never “meeting” the real Edwards. Is it not better to slog through the hard work, and often halting efforts, of trying to “see things their way” before telling people whether “their way” is good or bad, or both?<sup>16</sup>

12. I have published about six times as many books for the average person in the church as I have for the academic world. Yet I could not write so many “popular” level books on theology and Christian living unless the Lord had used my academic work to push me beyond what I already thought I knew.

13. By saying this, I am not implying in the least that histories by publishers like Banner of Truth are mere hagiography, or that we should not write history meant to inspire readers. Banner books are not usually guilty of the problems I have in mind, and my academic path is not likely to appeal to the average Christian. However, becoming aware of objective historical questions may help even lay readers realize that their heroes are not necessarily such unreachable (often disheartening) models of sainthood as they can appear to be.

14. For example, Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

15. I have heard this expression from Carl Trueman, who claimed to get it from Richard Muller, who picked it up from somewhere unknown to me.

16. This is an allusion to Cambridge historian Quentin Skinner’s

Withholding judgment for a time gives us a clearer picture of the ideas that we want to evaluate in the end.

Clary's illustration of Whitefield on slavery (125-138) is, once again, a good example. I find American slavery revolting, as do Clary and many others. Yet the historian's question is not whether slavery is reprehensible and that, by implication, so was Whitefield for his participation in the institution. The real issue is how Whitefield's approval of slavery fits into his broader context and what it says about eighteenth century American culture and ideas. Leaving out moral judgments and theological evaluations is the only way to make them accurately later. As a professor of systematic theology, I freely and frequently evaluate historical ideas, since I want to teach my students what to believe and how to minister to people. Yet what good is it to use or reject past ideas if we do not first adequately understand where these ideas came from and why people promoted them? Second, objective history writing is an important life skill. We saw this point above, but I cannot overstate its value. Understanding how and why significant historical figures thought the way that they did affects how we deal with our contemporaries. How many times, for instance, do we get into arguments about things like "free will" with people in schools or church lobbies without taking the time to ask them how they understand their terms and what their concerns are? We might find that someone is more concerned about human responsibility and free choice than they are with denying God's sovereignty. Perhaps the disagreement stems more from an incomplete account of the Bible's teaching, or misunderstanding and misuses of terms, than it does from entrenched opposition to our perception of the truth. Maybe through asking more questions we might discover that we have not presented the truth in a balanced or clear way and that we need correction ourselves. Some people may even react emotionally to a bad experience with someone who opposed their view in the past.

The skill of writing objective history fosters learning to ask good questions, and being hesitant to presume what people mean or to prejudge conclusions. Put bluntly, we become too narcissistic in pressing our views and talking about what matters to us instead of

listening to others. Pontificating on matters before we hear them out is prideful in personal communication (Prov. 18:13), even as it clouds historical judgment. Pursuing objective history is a humbling—and at times humiliating—affair, often teaching us more about what we do not know than what we think we do know. Why cannot learning such humility, being more ready to hear than to speak (Jas. 1:19), transfer into areas of life beyond historical inquiry?

Third, divine providence necessarily has a limited role in interpreting historical events. Objective history asks why events happen and why ideas developed. Yet we can answer "why" questions in some cases better than others. Asking "why questions" of divine providence can be a risky business. We know that all things work together for the good of the church, marching towards the glorification of believers in Christ through suffering (Rom. 8:28–29). Yet why God does what He does in particular instances leads us more towards trusting God's wisdom in general than towards explaining what precisely God is doing in particular life circumstances. When God has not revealed His mind to us in His Word, prying into his "thoughts" seems inappropriate, if not irreverent. God's speech is our blessing; God's silence is none of our business (Deut. 29:29).

Pressing historians to explain why God did what He did in the lives of particular individuals places an intolerable burden on historians. On the one hand, one can conclude that the fact that God spared George Washington from death numerous times is a remarkable set of providences that shaped recent world history. On the other hand, one can say the same thing about sparing Adolf Hitler from assassination. We should have radically different evaluations of the character of both men, but who other than God can say why He chose both to establish America as a nation and allow Nazi Germany to flourish for a time?

Historians can explain historical causes and effects as far as they are available to them through tangible evidence. Theologians can defend the goodness of God and His ultimate purposes in every act of providence without forcing historians to transcend their creaturely limitations.<sup>17</sup> We can have a better idea of why people did what they did in history than we can of God's specific intentions in individual human lives. The Triune God is the greatest historical cause, but who can know the mind of God except the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11)? Unless God provides more details than the general facts that He is protecting the church, spreading the gospel, and glorifying the saints, who are we to put words in God's mouth? Job serves as a model, whom God simply

approach to history as outlined in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Alistair Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, eds., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

17. As does, for example, Scott Christensen, *What About Evil?: A Defense of God's Sovereign Glory* (P & R Publishing, 2020).

pressed to faith by reminding him of His character instead of explaining His actions. This underscores why theological evaluation is a better category than providential readings of history. Historians should not mimic the proverbial practice of trying to see the Book of Revelation unfolding definitively in the morning news. Providence is a vehicle for directing believers to faith in Christ under hardship. Conjecturing about God's secret counsel cannot become the measure of whether an historian is a faithful Christian any more than it marks faithful Christian living. Doing so undercuts historical method just as much as it cripples people who try to live by interpreting events rather than interpreting the Bible.

My favorite example of the detrimental effects of giving explanatory power to particular acts of providence relates to early modern standards of theological education. It is almost cliché for theologians to point to the fact that John Calvin wrote the first edition of the *Institutes* in his twenties as evidencing his astonishing providential gifting by the Holy Spirit. Even if this is true, such an evaluation is a hasty conclusion, failing to ask good historical questions. The picture changes when one realizes that Thomas Goodwin began his studies at Oxford around age twelve, that Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus were in their early twenties when they contributed to the Heidelberg Catechism as University professors, that George Gillespie exercised great influence at the Westminster Assembly though he died before reaching age 36 years, that Jonathan Edwards studied at Yale as an early teenager, and so on. Historians looking for patterns may start to wonder whether more was at work there than extraordinary spiritual gifts. The fact is that educational standards were very different in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries than they are today.<sup>18</sup> While this observation does not deny that some of these people were indeed young and exceptional, even for the times, yet we must be cautious in drawing too many conclusions simply from the fact that they were young. The Spirit alone knows how gifted Calvin was, while the historian can say that other more objective explanations have a vital role to play. In His providence, did not God put people like Calvin in the right time, place, culture, family, and university to suggest some objective reasons for why and how they did what they did? The lesson we walk away with may speak more objectively to how different the world was at the time than to fuel our subjective interpretations of divine agency.

Expanding this example, while we think of teenagers as playing video games and sports and trying to figure out what to do with their lives, in the past the select

few who pursued a track of higher education followed very different paths. Students learned Latin and Greek very early before pursuing bachelor's degrees, often between ages twelve to sixteen. Men pursuing ministry usually added a one-to-three-year MA degree, followed by a seven-year divinity program, marked by daunting cross-confessional multi-disciplinary reading lists and regular academic disputations. If they made it through this course, then it was normal to enter ministry in one's early twenties. All such students committed large blocks of classical literature and theology to memory, which tells us more about educational culture at the time than about individual gifting by the Spirit. In this light, the amount of material such men could recall during debates, and the early ages at which they began their ministries and writing careers, seems far less remarkable. We may thank God for what many of them did, and attribute every good thing they did to the Holy Spirit. Yet giving credit where credit is due yields very different results than simply attributing everything we cannot account for to the Holy Spirit. Maybe the special act of providence that we are looking for is the fact that such people were born in such times. The Lord uses means to accomplish His ends. Historians are more concerned with investigating the means than they are in speculating as to the intent of divine agency in such circumstances. Appealing to providence as a primary explanation of such things is painting with too narrow a brush. It is both ok and helpful to realize that our "heroes" were ordinary people who lived in a world that is foreign to us.

Fourth, objective historiography should promote self-awareness and humility. This point makes explicit a purposeful implication pervading the above material. As Carl Trueman has said often, as cited above in Clary, there is a difference between objectivity and neutrality.<sup>19</sup> Being humbly self-aware of one's limitations restricts historians to objects that they can reasonably examine. Objectivity entails inductively evaluating evidence and drawing tentative conclusions. Historical conclusions are always provisional because they flow from inductive investigation. History is vast, and the motives of now-deceased people are lost to us (if ever such motives were available!). Even approaching evidence as objectively as

18. For a host of examples along these lines, see Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, eds., *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, vol. 170, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

19. See at length Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010).

possible, someone out there always knows something that we do not, and fresh evidence may shed new light on or even correct our own research. By contrast, neutrality implies indifference to the subjects we are studying. Yet whether a historian is a believer in Christ or not, personal factors always contribute to something even as basic as what one chooses to study and why. Why would any historian write on something that he or she does not find interesting? Regardless of the reasons behind such decisions, personal interest is always a factor for historians. We are attached to our subjects even in objective history in some manner, maybe for reasons known only to ourselves. Yet history demands the hard work and self-discipline of looking beyond personal reasons leading to research, remaining open to finding some things that are familiar and other things that are totally foreign. Again, it is liberating for historians to realize that they are not constrained in the least by discovering things that they like in history. There is something refreshing in hearing someone out in their own times and terms with no strings attached. This humbling quest for objectivity makes no naïve claims to neutrality, though self-consciousness of our biases prompts a healthy reserve and willingness to be corrected.

In summary, objective history reflects rather than betrays evangelical and Reformed Christian convictions. Loyalty to the Triune God both leaves to Him the business of understanding His designs in every historical detail, and leaves to us the task of learning from the objects He has actually placed in our grasp. Either way, Johannes Cocceius' seventeenth century exhortation to theologians to test their theology by Paul's doxology in Romans 11:33–36 is an equally good test for the work of historians.<sup>20</sup> Does our work lead us to exclaim humbly, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?' 'Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?' For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things, to whom *be* glory forever. Amen?"

#### CONCLUSION

Clary's book on Arnold Dallimore, as well as this essay, will likely continue rather than conclude debates over Christian historiography. At the very least, both should give believers food for thought in approaching

history as an academic discipline. We should always bear in mind that history, like theology, is a quest for truth, each in their own ways with their own methods. Contemporary denials of objective truth are simultaneously direct attacks against history as a discipline and assaults against biblical Christianity. With some irony in light of debates over whether Christians can be professional historians, objective history is not ultimately possible without the True and Living God as the foundation of the idea that there are facts to discover through evidence. If the Triune God departs from our thinking, then the idea of truth departs with Him. This does not mean, however, that Christians are unfaithful if they fail to identify providence as a specific cause of historical events having key explanatory power. Neither does it mean that non-believing historians cannot be good at their trade. What it does mean, and what Clary illustrates well, is that whatever one does with history, history as a discipline must always prioritize objective investigative methods and goals. Christians can honor Christ as professional historians, or lay historians, by learning to be good historians. ■

20. Johannes Cocceius, *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, trans. Casey Carmichael, vol. 3, *Classic Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), p. 166.