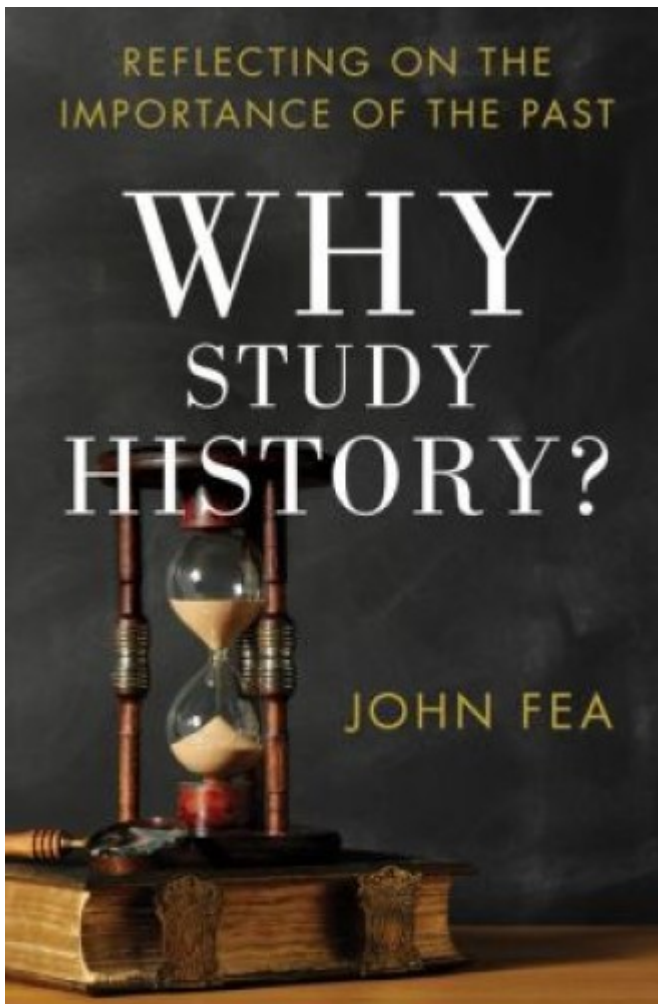


The past is now

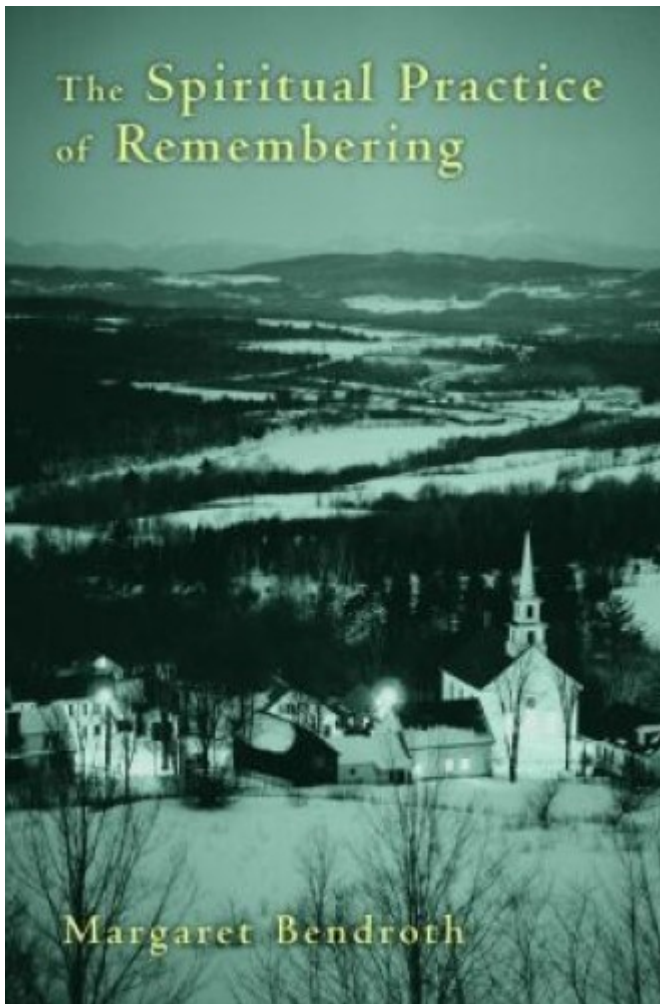
by [John G. Turner](#) in the [March 19, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Why Study History?

By John Fea
Baker



The Spiritual Practice of Remembering

By Margaret Bendroth
Eerdmans

Americans are ambivalent about the past. They watch the History Channel and episodes of a costume drama like *Downton Abbey*, and they flock to Civil War battlefields and compile their genealogies on ancestry.com. But they also tend to fall asleep in history class. Americans are enchanted with the past but suspicious of formal attempts to study it.

Christians should love history. Ours is a historical faith, oriented around the life of a man who lived 2,000 years ago. Our scriptures tell of the ancient interactions between God and a chosen people. Even as they point us to a future final consummation of God's kingdom, they encourage us to tell our children about the wondrous things God has done in the past.

In America, Christians have often discarded much of that past. The “restorationist” Christians of the early 19th century rejected denominationalism. They thought that Christians could dispense with centuries of history and return to the purity of the early church. And Americans have often been suspicious of inherited wisdom. In 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson told the graduates of Harvard Divinity School that “the need was never greater of new revelation than now.” Human beings should throw off the shackles of the past and find the divine within, he said. The experiences and ideas of Christians over the past two millennia mattered little.

Not so fast, say Margaret Bendroth and John Fea. Bendroth, director of the Congregational Library in Boston, nudges congregations to adopt spiritual practices of remembrance. Fea, professor of history at Messiah College, encourages students to explore the academic discipline of history. Both contend that Christians need to encounter the past in all its complexity and humanity.

Bendroth notes that in our era, secular time has replaced sacred, liturgical time. Secular time is linear, progressive. “If time is always moving forward,” she writes, “the past is always becoming more distant and more irrelevant.”

But it was not always so. In medieval Europe, for instance, individuals saw the lives of biblical figures as not fundamentally different from their own. In fact, as is evident in medieval and Reformation art, they could readily see themselves as part of biblical scenes, placing royalty and reformers within the fabric of sacred time and drama. They did not assume that the present was better than the past, that they were more enlightened and humane than their ancestors. Modern people, by contrast, in the words of Peter Fritzsche, are “stranded in the present.”

When modern people stop and take more than a superficial glance at the past, they probably don’t like what they find. After all, the past is a strange place filled with strange people. If we are honest explorers and interpreters of the past, it will not be easy to use it for our present-day purposes.

Fea reports on a visitor from the American Midwest to Plimouth Plantation who was shocked to learn that William Bradford, the governor of the colony, was “a believer in community to whom secular capitalist enterprise was blasphemous, selfish individualism anathema.” Likewise, many members of the New England parishes familiar to Bendroth would be repulsed by the Calvinist theology contained in their forebears’ musty books.

Peering further back into the recesses of history, we might also find ourselves disappointed by the ancient Israelites, a violent and polygamous people, or by some of the authors of the New Testament, who had derogatory things to say about certain groups.

Perhaps it is safer to just leave the past behind. But that is not Fea or Bendroth's recommendation. Fea even recommends the discipline of history to Christian undergraduates. He exaggerates somewhat the job prospects for history majors and how the study of history can help mend our fraying civil society. More compellingly, he argues that believing that humans are created in God's image should encourage us to see glimpses of the sacred in human history. And the belief that all people are created in God's image mandates taking seriously the breadth of human experience across time. Fea calls us to "see through God's eyes the people who have inhabited this world—people with inherent dignity and worth." At the same time, the painful recognition of human sinfulness should preclude triumphalism.

Both Fea and Bendroth think that encounters with the past inculcate the virtues of humility and empathy. If we see ourselves as part of a chronologically extended human race, we may understand ourselves and others differently. "We may want to listen to [other people's] ideas," writes Fea, "empathize with them, and try to understand why they see the world the way they do." Bendroth posits that humility should follow from a recognition that those who lived in the past "are no worse and no better than us."

We are all bound both by our historical context and by our fallenness. Despite their imperfections, those who have preceded us may have a few things to teach us, or they may at least help us to grasp that some of the minor things over which we fight are no more important than the minor things over which former generations argued.

Bendroth encourages congregations to recognize that they are part of deeply rooted traditions, of long conversations across the generations about how to live out the Christian gospel. "The living," she maintains, "do not own the conversation any more than those past or those yet to come." It would help, she suggests, for us to overcome our Protestant biases and take seriously the affirmation in the Apostles' Creed of the "communion of saints."

Prior to the Reformation, Christians lived surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses from the past. They venerated their relics. They paid for masses to be performed on

behalf of their ancestors. Protestant reformers dispensed with this ongoing work on behalf of the dead, and they reinterpreted the communion of the saints to mean the present church or congregation.

Bendroth does not suggest bringing back indulgences, but she encourages us to see ourselves as occupying only a small position within that great cloud of witnesses. Collectively, the communion of the saints points us to “the infinite array of personal experiences and convictions, talents and achievements, sins and failures that make up the human race across time and space.” The spiritual practice of remembering requires us to use our memories and our imaginations.

So what are Christians to do with the good advice from these two muses? They should follow Fea’s advice to examine aspects of the past that initially repel them. Fea tells of a student with progressive views who chose to write a thesis about Jerry Falwell and the rise of the Christian right. He also recounts the reactions of students who read the diaries and sermons of slaveholding American Christians. It is easier to devote ourselves to historical subjects that we like or imagine to be more like us. Fea reports that his students have cultivated their capacities for empathy and compassion and became “better Christians.” Such encounters, Fea maintains, remind us that we are “imperfect creatures in need of improvement and redemption.”

Bendroth’s book is perfect in size and scope for adult education classes. Participants might reflect on their religious heritage and how it has shaped their place in today’s church. As she notes, remembering involves more than organizing anniversary celebrations, publishing yearbooks, or hanging pictures of the church choirs on the walls. Churches need congregants who will tell stories about the life of the church, music directors who will provide the context for the composition of beloved hymns, and ministers who will incorporate the congregation’s messy and complex history into sermons.

On communion Sundays, worship leaders might find ways to reflect on some of the myriad individuals who compose the “great cloud of witnesses” surrounding the Lord’s Table. For Bendroth, remembering means reorienting one’s perspective so that the life of the congregation revolves as much around the past and the future as the present.

Bendroth recommends some creative practices of congregational remembrance. She recalls an urban neighborhood that created homemade historical markers. Residents tacked their homemade plaques on buildings or street corners, recalling everything from beloved ancestors to past crimes. A congregation, she suggests, could undertake a similar project, identifying the meaning behind musty paintings, pieces of furniture, and life-changing sermons and rituals. Honest and open efforts would revive both euphoric and agonizing memories.

At a church in southern Alabama, the pastor loved telling a story about a confrontation at the church between a former white supremacist (and anti-Semite) and a Jewish man he had bullied as a youth. When they met each other after many decades, the victim forgave his old tormenter. They both shed tears as they experienced God's grace. The congregation repeatedly told the story of this "miracle."

We all have moments in our past that we can celebrate. Fea cautions that congregations should not be too quick to identify God's providence in their own histories. Such claims should always come with a "perhaps." Perhaps so. But perhaps it is even more important for congregations to keep their pasts alive. Future congregants will have ample opportunity for revisionism.

All churches—and all groups—have painful memories. How many predominantly white congregations regularly recall their past exclusion of or hostility toward African Americans? How many congregations preach about the greed or lust that caused their former senior pastor to stumble (and then quickly disappear from view)? How many churches keep alive memories of the fight over the color of the choir robes that split the congregation in two?

We need a steady diet of historical celebration and repentance. We need to remember the great things—at least in our limited understanding of God's providence—that God has done in our midst. Such memories sustain us in the midst of our present struggles. We also need to remember the ways that we have violated God's standards of justice and holiness. We need memories that will cause us to celebrate and to mourn, to repent and to reform, and, most of all, to help us remember God's steadfast love for the great communion of the saints across time.