

“What Can I Learn from History?”

Lessons from the Gospel of Luke

by Richard A. Koffarnus

Many people talk about the subject of history in negative terms. “History is more or less bunk,” said Henry Ford (1863–1947). “History is little else than a picture of human crimes and misfortunes,” complained the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778).

Those who study and preserve history are also frequent targets of condemnation. “Historians,” one anonymous critic wrote, “fall into one of three categories: those who lie, those who are mistaken, and those who do not know.”

Yet without history and the historians who record it, we would be ignorant of the roots of our culture. Without that knowledge, society would have to rediscover its foundations and core principles constantly. For that reason, even the most primitive peoples, often without a written language, employ tribal historians to pass on their oral traditions.

The New Testament gives us some historical perspective in the Gospels and the book of Acts. Through a study of one or more of the Gospels and the book of Acts, you can challenge your learners to broaden their historical knowledge of the New Testament era. The following examples will come from the Gospel of Luke—though the principles will work with any historical book of the Bible. Luke was author both of the third Gospel and the book of Acts, the inspired historical account of the first 30 years of the church. A physician by trade, Luke was a traveling companion and coworker of Paul.

Understanding Historical Context

One way to make history relevant to your learners is to put your lesson material into a historical context. When did the events recorded in the text actually take place?

Many chronologies of the life of Christ exist. For example, the *Standard Bible Atlas* contains such a chronology, as does *A Harmony of the Gospels* by

Robert Thomas and Stanley Gundry. J.W. McGarvey's *Fourfold Gospel* is also a helpful blending of the four Gospels into one chronological story. A much shorter and very colorful tool that does much the same thing is Standard Publishing's *Discovering God's Story*. You can use reference tools such as these to prepare a time line to display each week. That way your class will always know where they are in their study of the life of Christ.

You can also help your learners understand historical context by answering the question, "What was going on in the world at the time of these events?" Each week have a different student report on some notable historical event that took place between 6 BC and AD 30, the time period covered in Luke's Gospel. Besides describing the events, each report should answer the question, "What relationship, if any, did this event have to life in first-century Israel?" Check your local library and the Internet for historical information on this time period.

Another way to make history relevant to your learners is to let them "witness" it happening. There are several good video portrayals of the Gospel of Luke available, including *The Jesus Film*. Most have narration taken directly from Luke. They strive to recreate the authentic look and feel of first-century Israel as Jesus experienced it. You can show a relevant clip from the video to introduce each lesson so your learners can form accurate mental pictures of the people, places, and events described by Luke. (Make sure not to violate copyrights. NEST Entertainment has a variety of animated Bible stories, and permission to show to a group is automatic with purchase.)

Studying History's Superstars

An approach once commonly used by historians, including Luke, is the so-called "great-man theory" of history. According to this approach, we can discover the causes of the great events of the past by studying the important people of history. Of course, Luke focuses his work on the greatest historical figure of them all, the Lord Jesus.

Still, there are other notables worth learning about who appear in the third Gospel. The Roman Emperor Augustus is mentioned by Luke as part of the background to the birth of Christ in chapter 2. How much do your learners actually know about this powerful ruler and his impact on the Mediterranean world? One way to enlighten them would be to have a class member portray him by delivering a monologue about his life. Another possibility is to have two learners pretend to be angels in conversation about the shocking contrast between the luxurious lifestyle of Augustus and the humble birth of the King of kings.

Later in Luke's gospel we encounter the familiar figure of Pontius Pilate. Nearly everyone knows the role Pilate played in the crucifixion of Christ, but few know anything else about his life and work in first-century Israel. How did he come to power? What kind of governor was he? What became of him after the resurrection of Jesus?

To enhance a report on Pilate, you can post several pictures of this Roman that are based on his theorized likeness as taken from coins and artwork (easy to find on the Internet). Include the caption, "Have you seen this man?" Pretend that you (or one of your learners) are a TV news reporter presenting a missing-person case to your viewers. Discuss the rise and fall of Pilate in history and legend. Explain what we know and don't know about the fate of the man who executed Jesus.

Learning About the Less-than-Greats

In recent years, the "great-man theory" of history has been replaced among historians by other approaches. One of the newer approaches deals with social history. Instead of focusing only on the big shot "movers and shakers" of society, many historians now want to know what the less-than-great people were thinking and doing.

The theory here is that more often than not history's great leaders respond to changes among the masses rather than the other way around. The social historian is interested in why such developments happened when they did and what effects they later had.

Although Luke was not a social historian, he gives us numerous glimpses of first-century Palestinian culture in his story of Jesus. Properly highlighted, these "snapshots" can help your class to understand better the significance of what Jesus was teaching and doing.

For example, in chapter 1 we meet John the Baptist's father, a priest named Zechariah. We learn from an appearance of the angel Gabriel that John is to be raised as a Nazarite, never tasting wine or strong drink. Your learners will gain a clearer perspective of this if they understand something of the work of a temple priest and the lifestyle and practices of a Nazarite. During class, you can "interview" two learners—one portraying a priest and the other a Nazarite—to explain what each one does and why he does it. Some of your learners may enjoy doing the advance research required for such a role play.

In Luke 14 Jesus attends a Sabbath day banquet in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Jesus used the seating customs associated with such a banquet to teach on the nature of true humility. To illustrate this setting, arrange your classroom like a first-century banquet room, with the chairs arranged in the

shape of a “U” or a semi-circle. Reserve one chair in the middle for yourself and two chairs on either side of it for “honored guests.” After your learners have seated themselves, move some to places of greater honor and some to lesser places.

Before class, explain the exercise to the learners being demoted so they can pretend to be humiliated. For the most realism, you can use floor cushions (instead of chairs) arranged around a very low table, although this may not be practical for various reasons.

Other customs mentioned by Luke include the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:21-40) and the celebration of Passover (Luke 2:41-52; 22:1-20). To research these topics, you can consult Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias or books devoted to Bible customs. Of course, the Internet is a great research tool as well.

Twenty-Twenty Hindsight

Modern Christians have the advantage of being able to look back at completed events of salvation-history that the Old Testament prophets could only imagine (1 Peter 1:10-12). History is far from being “bunk”! Most Christians would agree that history is, in reality, “his story”—the workings of God in human affairs.

That being the case, we can only benefit from a greater understanding of the historical context of the New Testament, since that knowledge will help us to interpret and apply God’s Word correctly. History thus becomes a window on the present and future work of God. As the French poet and politician Alphonse De Lamartine (1790 –1869) observed, “Providence conceals itself in the details of human affairs, but becomes unveiled in the generalities of history.”