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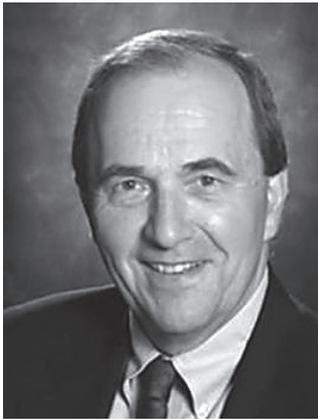
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The Conference of Faith and History at Fifty: Memoir and Challenge



by Ronald A. Wells

Let me quickly clarify that while I have indeed been a member of the Conference on Faith and History (CFH) since the beginning, I am in no real sense a “founder.” I was too young to be taken seriously by the actual founders, who were a generation older than I, and in a few cases, two generations older. I was twenty-five years old when I earned a Ph.D. ROTC had helped this working-class kid through college, so I had to fulfill a two-year military obligation after graduate school. When I returned to the USA from service overseas, started my job at Calvin, and joined the CFH, I was twenty-seven. The Founders were glad to have me sign up, but, in truth, I played no real role in the founding. I was just there. But within ten years the

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founders made me editor of *Fides et Historia*. I've been present for this half-century. Let's first look back and then look forward.

While the noble souls who started this Conference might have had hopes, I don't think they thought much beyond trying to survive, and surely not looking forward fifty years. In fact, we have survived, and look at us now: we are thriving. Also, most of the founders were men; again, look at us now, with the large number of women making great contributions. Because I believe in gender equity on Christian grounds, this is a very satisfying development.

But I'd be less than honest if I didn't say it is also sobering to recall times along the way when some of us in the leadership wondered if we were going to make it; there were occasions in the 1980s and 1990s when we thought it all might go under. Without going into detail, I'll just say that things got very bad in the early 1990s, when the leadership had to consider if the CFH could go on without its journal. They appealed to Calvin College—the only institution interested—to rescue a bad situation that had developed at the institution where the journal was then edited. It wasn't a good time for me to resume the editorship for a second time because I'd recently had open-heart surgery. But Frank Roberts and I, supported by our Provost, Joel Carpenter, accepted the challenge. Frank was co-editor with me for two years; then I went on as editor on my own for another seven years. I mention this only to say we can't take for granted that we'll always continue to do as well as we are do-

ing now. I am glad for the new leaders we have now: Beth Allison Barr, Kristin Kobes DuMez, John Fea, Jay Green, Eric Miller, Tracy McKenzie, Glenn Sanders, and Rick Kennedy. They need your support to continue with the work of connecting history and faith, hopefully for another fifty years.

In 1968, our founding year, there was a lot going on the world: it started with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which turned the tide in public opinion against the war. That year also showed the dark side of our society, with the murders of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in April, and Robert F. Kennedy in June.

The intellectual climate was also changing then, especially in the Evangelical community. Prior to 1968, next to no one was talking about how one might be an intellectual and a Christian, except perhaps Carl Henry and the founders of Fuller Seminary. What young people can now take for granted—that you can be a “thinking Christian”—was not much on anyone’s radar back then. Then Francis Schaeffer burst onto the scene. From his base in Switzerland, he brought out books that popularized a version of Reformed thinking that had been largely generated from the Free University of Amsterdam. What was compelling about Schaeffer was that we saw anew that the Gospel is not just about saving your soul (Evangelicalism) or about the Social Gospel (Liberal Protestantism). Rather, following Abraham Kuyper and popularizing him, Schaeffer presented a Gospel that was intellectually coherent, what Kuyper called “a world system.” Schaeffer’s two books, published in 1968—*Escape from Reason*, and *The God Who Is There*—were like electrical storms in the Evangelical community. Thus, the goals of the CFH founders were almost overtaken, at the outset, by the new immediacy of the altered social conditions in the USA and especially by the newer emphasis on Christian intellectual engagement.

Nowadays nearly everyone agrees that an interpretive frame plays a crucial role in teaching and writing history. That wasn’t always so, even in the CFH. It took a lot of wrestling and contention to get where we are now. I hope this paper will help to show how that happened.

The older founders of the CFH were great people. They have names, but for fear of leaving

out someone, I will not try to name them all. Yet, four *must be* mentioned—the *sine qua non* leaders who were there at the beginning and gave leadership for many years thereafter: Bob Linder, Bob Clouse, Dick Pierard, and Tom Askew. Two things mattered to the older founders: Christian fellowship at the American Historical Association (AHA) and a desire to recover a better historiography for Evangelicalism. As to the first, they felt isolated at the impersonal AHA and were glad to meet with fellow Christians and have breakfast. In those years, the AHA seemed to be in Chicago about every other year, and we’d meet for breakfast at the YMCA on Wabash Avenue. The essence of the organization was to emerge at the biennial meetings, mostly held on college campuses in the upper Midwest, that is, within driving distance of most members.

But what were we to do at those meetings? Well, a luminary scholar among the founders was Timothy L. Smith. He and other founders were keen to have us write better and more positively disposed religious history. Indeed, some of the best writing in the next generation among us came from Tim’s students: Margaret Bendroth, Rick Pointer, Joel Carpenter, Daryl Hart, and Gary Smith. In truth, Tim Smith’s goal of bringing religious history back into the mainstream of scholarship was largely fulfilled.

Can I at this point briefly mention Jay Green’s very important recent book on Christian historiography? Among other themes, Green is interested in vocation. As he points out, merely writing about Evangelical history does not yet say anything about the vocation of the scholar. Secular scholars can, and do, write good books about Evangelical history. For example, we were at an AHA session when a prominent scholar was saying snarky comments about religious leaders. One of our number asked about this attitude, saying that at some of our colleges there is a belief component. The scholar was perplexed, saying, “You mean you have to believe this [expletive deleted] in order to teach it?” Let it be noted that we engaged that scholar very vigorously!

Among the founding generation of the CFH, there was a younger group who did, in fact, write Evangelical history, some to a high, prize-winning standard. But their vocations transcended be-

ing merely good historians in their striving to be Christian scholars. To some of the founders, like our friend and mentor Tim Smith, it was perplexing to hear that some of us, while we might be interested in religious history, were more interested in what our vocation as Christian scholars might have to say about everything else, not just religion. At the same time, the younger group endorsed the older Founders' desire for Christian fellowship. I can attest, as I am sure many others here today also can, to the rich friendships that have developed through the work of the CFH. Without the CFH, I would not have the great friendships that I value deeply, like those with Shirley Mullen, Rick Pointer, Bill Trollinger, Russ Bishop, Mark Noll, Tom Askew, and Don Yerxa, among others.

Now, as to becoming Christian scholars, it was easier in some of our colleges than in others because in some, we had outstanding colleagues in philosophy who helped us recast our vocations as historians—as a sub-type to the larger undertaking of a vibrant Christian intellectual life. I am thinking of Grady Spiers (Gordon), Bob Wennberg (Westmont), Richard Mouw and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Calvin), and the incomparable Arthur Holmes (Wheaton).

As far as the Conference on Faith and History is concerned, this emphasis was led by people from the broader Reformed community. We need to return for a moment to Abraham Kuyper, whom I mentioned before, because he was important in launching Francis Schaeffer, who, in turn, was important in launching us. There is no time here to go deeply into Kuyper, but he's very important. His definitive biography was written by Calvin University's James Bratt (*Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, Eerdmans, 2013). For a shorter read, I heartily recommend a book by Richard Mouw, formerly of Fuller Seminary

and now back at Calvin again: *Abraham Kuyper, A Short and Personal Introduction*, Eerdmans, 2011.

There's one sentence always quoted from Kuyper; sorry for some of you who've heard this many times: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign, does not cry 'mine.'" In short, our world view asserts the lordship of Christ over all spheres of life. God's call to us is never private or merely personal but to a community of faith that must witness to all things—not a square inch is to be left out—and that means intellectual life too. You can imagine how strange all of this sounded to the Founders, who thought the CFH was mostly meant for Christian fellowship at the AHA.

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But, however compelling Kuyper's call to Christian scholarship might be, he left us with a problem that caused much controversy in the Christian academic world. It was his emphasis on two directions of thought that were hard to reconcile: the antithesis and common grace. First, *the antithesis*—what really

animated Francis Schaeffer—is the idea that God's intentions are *totally* opposite from the ways of the world. Only those who know and follow the author of truth can know the truth—as Schaeffer said, "true Truth." Several early members of the CFH who saw their vocation in an antithetical light pushed the rest of us to embrace a *distinctly* Christian historiography. When other CFH members, like me, didn't accept that, we were criticized as being compromisers.

The second, *common grace*, is the idea what while all truth comes from God, it doesn't seem to bother God that people other than Christians can know truth too. For those of us in the CFH on this side of Kuyper, we were content to have a *consistently* Christian historiography, that is, one consistent with a Christian world view. As one can image,

the antitheticals, who wanted a *distinctive* stance, thought this position was almost heresy. Moreover, as said above, the CFH founding generation of Evangelicals, and later members who thought like them, thought all this world-view talk was Greek to them, or worse, that it was nonsense that other historians in the AHA would never accept.

In our time I hope we can agree with Jay Green's point that there is no one way to do Christian historiography and that we should give thanks for the diversity of viewpoints in our midst.

The last section of this paper turns on this question: can a case be made for Christian scholarship in a way that a Christian historian can do it, not just theorize about it? Back in 1968, when we started, the revolution in thinking was just getting underway. Along the way in these fifty years, an epistemological cluster bomb has gone off over our heads, re-arranging how we would know "reality." The revolution has been known by several names; mostly it is called *post-modernism*, *post-structuralism* or *the social construction of reality*. These movements have had great impact on thought and scholarship in all the major academic disciplines. For most of us in the CFH, there was not much interest in the high reaches of post-modern theory (e.g., Foucault and Derrida), though the theorizing of Hayden White interested some. For most of us, that is, those interested at all, the most reliable and understandable course followed sociological theorists Karl Mannheim, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman.

For me and many others, this sociological approach was a way to connect with what we'd learned from Schaeffer and Kuyper—that presuppositions guide a scholar's vision, in terms of questions asked and answers sought. A good example of this approach was the book by George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, which has received many accolades. In the preface, Marsden forthrightly announces that the book was a work of Christian scholarship, informed by his presuppositions. That announcement caused a lot of reaction.

A quick digression: If any of you play or watch tennis, you may know the name John McEnroe, either from his playing days or now when he broadcasts major tennis events. Back in his playing days, before we had instant replay, the umpire's word was law. McEnroe often challenged the umpires, swag-

gering menacingly toward the umpire's chair and shouting, "You cannot be serious!"

When George's book gained a lot of attention, some scholars went after him, not for the book proper but for the assertion that it was based on Christian presuppositions. People like Bruck Kuklick, David Hollinger, Paul Boyer and Jon Butler seemed, to my ear, to be channeling their inner John McEnroe and shouting at George, as it were, "You cannot be serious," I mean about Christian worldview informing his work.

In 1992, there was a session at the AHA, chaired by Daniel Walker Howe. The panelists were Nathan Hatch, Catherine Albanese, and Paul Boyer. Boyer was going after Hatch, who, always the polite Southern gentleman, said something like this: "I see you're upset Paul, but what would you like me to stop doing?" Boyer replied, "That you and your friends stop talking about your presuppositions and just write good history." Then, his voice rising to a crescendo, he added, "I have no idea what my presuppositions are!" Just then I leaned over to the person next to me and whispered, or so I thought, "You know, it's not that hard to find out your own presuppositions." I guess a lot of people in the room heard me and looked over to my quadrant to the room. Boyer looked too and gave me a scary glare. Later I apologized to Boyer, who was nice about it, even asking me just how one went about finding presuppositions. He said he'd think about it, but I don't know if he did.

A few years later I went to Los Angeles to do some research in the archives at UCLA. Joyce Appleby's multi-authored great book, *Telling the Truth About History*, had recently been published. I wanted to meet her, and through the efforts of a Calvin grad, then in Appleby's seminar, I got an appointment. She was then president of the AHA. Joyce was gracious, taking me to lunch in the Faculty Club. She said she'd looked me up and was interested in the work of the Conference on Faith and History, about which she hadn't given much thought. We got on well, and she really hung in there with me, trying to understand what we were trying to do in the CFH. I told her the Paul Boyer incident. I had previously mentioned the John McEnroe-like taunt. She laughed and said something to this effect: "If any of those men would talk

to me about writing from a feminist perspective, and say ‘You cannot be serious,’ they would soon be sorry!’

She went further, saying that was the main reason she’d joined Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt in writing *Telling the Truth About History*. In using the phrase “telling the truth,” the three of them did not mean to imply that prior historians were telling lies. Rather, they meant that there was once a single narrative about American history that most Americans accepted as part of their heritage. It was a story of achievement, of how a nation of immigrants made the first liberal democracy.

However, when historians extend the scope of American history beyond dominant groups, the picture changes. Moreover, there is a new emphasis on the *standpoint* of the historian herself. Just as acknowledging the social location of historical subjects is important, so is acknowledging the intellectual location of the historian, in terms of the questions asked and the answers sought. As the Appleby team [importantly three women], write, “We routinely, even angrily, ask: whose history? Whose interests are being served by these ideas and stories? The challenge is out to all claims of universality.” In short, as we see, the gauntlet has been laid down, and not from little-known historians from obscure colleges, but from two past-presidents of the AHA, and all three holders of prestigious chairs at leading universities.

As George Marsden wrote in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, because of the epistemological bomb that’s gone off, the old orthodoxy of a single narrative is dead, or nearly so. We all need to get used to multiple narratives. As to scholars, many previously excluded people, including women, racial/ethnic minorities, and Christians, now could get a seat at the academic table, provided they do good work. Some members of this Conference thought we might have to give up too much for that

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seat, that we might have to compromise our convictions because the powerful “Academy” would demand too much. They suggested that we might be better off to stay at the smaller places. I can’t help thinking that this reaction echoes some of the controversy we had thirty years ago—about the antithesis and common grace.

Now for a final section: some people, perhaps even in this room, may have doubts about “Christian scholarship.” I’ll repeat a point from above: all scholarly work proceeds from presuppositions, whether acknowledged or not. Now, presuppositions are not a bundle of concepts you decide to make up. Rather, they emerge from the story of your life, both individually and socially—from those communities of affection and association that have formed you and energize you. “Okay,” you say. “But can you give a real operational example, like for yourself?” All right. Let me get autobiographical for a page or two.

I was baptized at six weeks old in at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Brookline, Massachusetts. The priest made the sign of the cross on my forehead and gave the church’s promise that I would be Christ’s own forever. In short, as my Dad often said, I was a marked man. I have never known a day when I was not conscious of the reality—as the Heidelberg Catechism says—that I “belong to God.”

Second, I grew up in a Jewish community where I was often one of two Gentile kids in my classroom. In solidarity with my Jewish neighbors, I learned that antisemitism was an ugly reality as we engaged the larger world of Boston; this made me determined to oppose racial/ethnic exclusion when I became an adult.

Third, my church life changed in my college and grad school years, when I attended the Park Street Church, on the Boston Common. The college club at Park Street radically changed my life. The minister to students was a grad student at

Harvard Divinity School, Harold O. J. Brown, later to have a distinguished career at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. It was through Joe Brown that I met and heard Francis Schaeffer in person, both in Boston and in Huemoz, Switzerland. Joe and I read Kuyper together. All that made me deeply committed to a Christian worldview, as outlined earlier in this paper.

Fourth, when I was at Boston University, Karl Barth's volume on *Reconciliation*, part of his multi-volume work, came out. The lectures and seminars about that book at the School of Theology helped me to see that Reconciliation is the key Christian doctrine. That idea was to inform several of my books,

And finally, on my road to self-awareness of presuppositions, in a grad seminar I read a book by Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*. There was a chapter on the moral philosopher, Josiah Royce, who was William James' colleague at Harvard about a century ago. Royce's first book was a history of his native state, California, which he wrote as a moral philosopher. He called out the founders of California whose conquest of the "Californios" was based on racist assumptions—what the famous historian in our time, Kevin Starr, would call "the original sin of California history."

Well, I thought I had my dissertation topic, but it was daunting to think I could convince my advisor, Dr. Warren Tryon. He was a kindly but crusty gentleman from a very old American family. When I was a Teaching Assistant in his American survey course, a student asked about Alexander Hamilton. Dr. Tryon answered, with a cool detachment, "Hamilton, hmmm, who my great-great grandfather shot." We all gasped. Dr. Tryon had descended from Aaron Burr, and that would mean Jonathan Edwards too!

I told Dr. Tryon I wanted to write about Josiah

Royce, mainly about his book, the first serious history of California. I think I surprised him by continuing, that while I wanted to be a historian, I really wanted to be a Christian-moral-philosopher historian. That was the first time I had ever said out loud what I hoped my vocation might be. He wasn't so sure about that, but I pleaded enough so that he supported me. Dr. Tryon enjoyed the irony that I would write about a revisionist history of the conquest of the frontier: ironic because I was to be his last graduate student, just as he had been among the last students of Frederick Jackson Turner, who had first spoken about the significance of the frontier to the AHA back in 1898.

You asked how I developed my presuppositions to try to teach and write historical "Christian scholarship." There you have it, my testimony. That sense of vocation is what kept me active in the CFH all these years.

One quick last word: when I was in elementary school, I was the kid always with his hand up. One time, my fourth-grade teacher got exasperated with me, as well she might, and said "Ronnie Wells, do you have something to say?" I sensed the rebuke in her voice, but I found the courage to speak: "Yes, Miss Buxton, I have something to say."

My hope and challenge for you all is that you go forward boldly in a time like this—the time after the modern—when some might say to you, "You cannot be serious," for writing from a Christian interpretive matrix. In such a time, I hope you will find the courage to stand up and say, "Yes, I'm here; I'm a Christian," and maybe adding, "I'm a woman," and maybe adding, "I'm gay," and maybe adding, "I'm working class," and maybe adding, "I'm Black," "I'm Brown"—"and by the grace of God, I have something to say."

May it long be so in the Conference on Faith and History.