



Life **Lessons**

The value of Christian biography

Jacob Dunn

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Preface

This extended essay emerged from a research project conducted as part of Jubilee Centre's [SAGE Graduate Programme](#). As a SAGE participant, Jacob Dunn researched into the life and legacy of the Scottish Labour politician Keir Hardie, and [presented a paper](#) on how Hardie's Christian faith had influenced his commitment to politics and social change.

Jacob was supervised by the SAGE director, Philip Powell, who regularly [taught on Christian social reformers](#) as part of Jubilee Centre's training programme. Together, they began to discuss the importance of biography in the formation and development of public leaders, and this essay is the fruit of that conversation.

Exploring the social as well as spiritual value of Christian biography is perhaps something new for many readers, and arguably is best done in a small group with other people. So, I warmly commend this essay to you and propose that you invite a few friends to read it and discuss how biographies have influenced you in the past. If that goes well, why not turn it into a book club, starting with a biography of one of the Christian social reformers mentioned in this essay?

We would love to hear how you get on!

Jonathan Tame

Jubilee Centre Executive Director.
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Introduction

George Hunsberger writes of a time in his life when, pastoring a church which was facing division, he was encouraged by the knowledge that Lesslie Newbigin had had a similar experience. ‘Here biography touches biography...The encouragement I had drawn from Newbigin’s vision was deepened by discovering the companionship of his own experience with mine.’¹ Such is the power of Christian biography. In times of struggle and doubt, we can look to the lives of those who have gone before us and take courage from the fact that their experiences can mirror our own. Their lives can encourage us, inspire us, and may even teach us lessons about how to live out our faith in the world today. This is particularly true for those involved in Christian social reform, who can draw on a rich heritage of ‘men and women who have been seized by the life and teaching of Jesus and, in the power of the spirit, have challenged... the inhumanity of unjust social orders.’²

This paper will present an argument for the importance of studying the lives of past social reformers and suggest ways in which this study might be carried out. I will first give a justification for the study of biographies and consider some key Bible passages in relation to the study of individual lives. I will then discuss some ways of thinking about lives and concepts that should be borne in mind in the study of biographies. I will conclude by making some suggestions about how we might go about studying lives, the key questions to ask, and some mistakes to be avoided.

¹ George R. Hunsberger, ‘Biography as Missiology: The Case of Lesslie Newbigin’, *Missiology: An International Review* 27, no. 4 (October 1999): 526.

² Trevor Beeson, *Rebels and Reformers: Christian Renewal in the Twentieth Century*, (London: SCM Press 1999), x.

The Basis for Studying Lives

The Bible is filled with biographies. Indeed, it can be argued that substantial space in both the Old and New Testaments is taken up with accounts of the lives of ‘individuals who are found by God, who have been transformed by God, and who seek to tell others of God.’³ The Old Testament narrates the lives of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, among others. The New Testament narrates the most important life in scripture, and indeed in all history, that of Jesus. In addition to this it devotes a large amount of space to the life of Paul. There is a substantial body of scholarship that regards the Gospels and the book of Acts as examples of ancient biography. Craig Keener argues that ‘In terms of recognizable ancient genres, the Gospels are like ancient biographies. That is, the type of literary work from the Gospels’ era that they most resemble is the *bios*, or life of a subject – what we call... ancient biography.’⁴

The Gospels are distinguished from ancient novels by the fact they rely on prior sources, and also by the fact that novels mostly focus on figures from the distant past at the time of writing, rather than the immediate preceding generation as in the Gospels.⁵ Keener also notes that the lack of verbatim recording of events does not present an obstacle to viewing the Gospels as biography. ‘Just as biographers could frame accounts in their own words and with their own emphases, so did prior traditions. No one... is claiming that the Gospels typically record Jesus’ words verbatim... In fact, the Gospels actually come closer to verbatim agreement than was common in ancient biographies and historiographies.’⁶

Sean Adams has made a similar argument with regard to the book of Acts. Against the common view of Acts as a history of the early church, he persuasively argues that the book should be seen more properly as a collected biography. Adams achieves this through a detailed analysis of the book of Acts, both in its external features – such as structure, size, and use of sources – and also its internal features, such as setting, style and presumed audience.⁷ He concludes that the genre features of Acts point away from seeing it as an epic or a novel. While it does have some similarities to ancient historical writing, it is shorter than most histories and is organised around the presentation of characters. Thus, it is more suitable to see it as a collected biography.⁸ It should be noted that ‘genre classification by itself does not support or deny historical accuracy.’⁹ Simply to recognize that certain books of scripture are presented in a particular way does not impact on their truth. From this discussion it may be seen that biography is a genre the Bible actually employs. This is a clear statement of how much the lives of individual men and women matter to God, and it forms a key part of the biblical basis for studying lives.

A significant passage to consider in relation to biographies is Hebrews chapter 11. John Piper has called this passage ‘a divine mandate to read Christian biography.’¹⁰ Throughout history, God has used many different individuals to give direction and inspiration to his people, and many of

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2019), 11.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2019), 1.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, interviewed by Christopher Reese, ‘The Gospels are Fact, Not Folklore’, *Christianity Today*, October 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/october-web-only/reliability-gospels-fact-not-folklore.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Sean A. Adams, *The Genre of Acts and Collected Biography*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 156, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), 116-171.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, (Nashville: Christian Focus 2003), 89.

their lives have been recorded. In the course of chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews calls to mind a number of figures from the Old Testament in order to encourage the believing community in the present. All of these figures are commended as examples of faith, a faith that is ‘the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen’ (Heb. 11:1, CSB). David Peterson writes that this faith ‘behaves in a way that is consistent with the character of God and the promises that he has made, demonstrating the relevance of *what we do not see*...to life in the present.’¹¹ The writer of the letter gives a long list of figures from the Old Testament, beginning with Abel, Enoch and Noah, then going into detail about the actions of Abraham and his descendants, and then Moses and those associated with him. He ends with several shorter descriptions of Judges and prophets, and of David. This ‘great cloud of witnesses’ (Heb. 12:1) is seen as an encouragement to the believing community as they face trials. The believers may be alienated from the culture around them, they may be ill-treated or persecuted, but they can still be encouraged by the persevering faith of those who came before them.

This encouragement to perseverance forms another part of the biblical basis for the study of biographies. Mary Healy has also argued that ‘we should not make the mistake of thinking that the roll call ended with the Old Testament or when Hebrews was written; it has continued throughout the centuries and into our own times. The Church in our age has witnessed countless miracles of faith and countless triumphs of unbroken faith in the midst of apparent defeat.’¹² Thus Hebrews 11 is not merely a call to remember the major figures of the Old Testament, but also a call to remember the lives of those who have shown great faith throughout time and all over the world, up to the present.

In addition to the many biblical calls to record, remember and call to mind the past, studying biographies can also provide reflections on leadership and the character required of leaders. ‘Leaders who have the character and resilience to thrive in the midst of adversity are not born, they are *formed* by the choices they make.’¹³ Studying the lives of public leaders, and the choices they have made in the course of their careers, can give an insight into how leaders develop over time. In particular, many public leaders we now consider great have been formed through adversity. The choices through which they were formed were made under high pressure. To understand how they faced such adversity, and the role of challenge and struggle in shaping their lives, may be helpful in understanding the role of struggle in shaping social reformers today.

Perhaps most importantly, biography can provide a touchstone for evaluating the leaders of today. Of course, this is not to argue that today’s public leaders should be discredited because they compare unfavourably with those of the past, but studying the lives of former leaders and what made them effective can provide insights into the character of leaders against which we might test those of today. Robert Clinton has emphasised the importance for leaders of studying the lives and writings of others in order to develop their own leadership capabilities. ‘[The] ability to learn for one’s own life from the lessons seen in the lives of others is vicarious learning... Biographies of leaders should be a regular part of one’s literary diet.’¹⁴ The study of biographies can not only contribute to our understanding of leadership in the abstract but can also help leaders to improve on their own practices by seeking lessons from the lives of others.

¹¹ David G. Peterson, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries vol. 15, (London: Inter-Varsity Press England 2020), 259.

¹² Mary Healy, *Hebrews*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2016), 255.

¹³ Mercedes McGuire, ‘Public Leaders and the Slow Formation of Character’, 2019, <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/blog/public-leaders-and-the-slow-formation-of-character>.

¹⁴ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, (Colorado Springs: Navpress 1988), 141.

Several theologians have conducted research into the possibilities of biography to aid theological reflection. James McClendon argues that story is a method of expression uniquely suited to theology. Biography is a particular form of story which is ‘distinguished by being always a human story, and always (in intention) a true story.’¹⁵ McClendon calls attention to specific, compelling lives as a way of understanding the human experience of God. There are particular lives which are striking, which attract us, and in which the core doctrines of the Christian faith can be seen to be lived out. Through their striking qualities, or the things they achieved, such lives prove the reality of the ‘things not seen’ of Hebrews 11. McClendon draws upon the work of Catholic scholar Romano Guardini to argue that ‘saints serve as models for new ways of being Christian, opening paths which many others will follow.’¹⁶ Particularly relevant to the study of social reformers is his comment that ‘there is a particular saintly task for today, and that is the task of changing or reshaping the world God has entrusted to human beings.’¹⁷ Work such as this clearly demonstrates the value of individual lives, as well as the potential for biography to go beyond being encouraging stories to become a method of seriously addressing theological questions.

Writing about his father, theologian Gregory Jones writes that ‘I couldn’t explain his life adequately without pointing to his belief in the God of Jesus Christ.’¹⁸ Some writers have sought to take this thinking further and suggest that certain holy lives can actually function as evidence for the existence of God. Robert MacSwain identifies three forms of what he calls the hagiological argument for God’s existence. First, the propositional form, a technical argument in which the existence of God is inferred from certain behaviours, such as radical sacrifice. Second, the perceptual form, in which one ‘feels’ the presence of God when with a particular individual. Third, the performative form, in which a person can be said to embody and exemplify holiness over the course of their life.¹⁹ Drawing on the work of Anglican theologian Austin Farrer, MacSwain argues that holy lives argue for the existence of God not by logic, but by witness; they become ‘incarnate arguments’.²⁰

The central point of all three forms of this argument is that it is impossible to explain certain lives if God does not exist. Many individuals may be cited as examples of this kind of holy life, and it may be hoped that some of us might have encountered such people in our own lives. MacSwain mainly writes with reference to living individuals, but I believe his argument may be extended to past individuals as well. Studying such lives and what has constituted holiness for them may give greater insight into what holiness looks like in our time. It is also important to remember that holy lives are not always the kind of extraordinary lives that are remembered, and that the kind of holiness of which MacSwain writes may equally be exemplified in those ordinary, faithful individuals who are not known to biographers.

¹⁵ James Wm. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2002), 159.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ L. Gregory Jones ‘For all the Saints: Autobiography in Christian Theology’, *The Asbury Theological Journal* 47, no.1 (Spring 1992), 30.

¹⁹ Robert MacSwain, ‘The Saint is Our Evidence’, 2019, <https://templetonreligiontrust.org/explore/the-saint-is-our-evidence/>.

²⁰ Robert MacSwain, *Solved by Sacrifice: Austin Farrer, Fideism and the Evidence of Faith*, (Leuven: Peeters 2013), 228.

Thinking About Lives

Human lives are unique and complex. Every life contains a detailed, multifaceted collection of experiences and a rich network of relationships. This discussion cannot therefore be seen as absolute or universal. What I hope to do here is to explain several concepts and ideas that I believe are useful in thinking about the various dimensions of a human life.

A key idea to be borne in mind when thinking about biographies is the need to see a life as a single unified narrative, rather than dividing it into separate episodes or roles. MacIntyre discusses the modern tendency to break lives up into separate aspects, rather than seeing them as a whole:

'work is divided from leisure, private life from public life, the corporate from the personal... And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and feel.'²¹

This separation of life into distinct stages and roles results in a tendency to view human actions in an atomistic way, without seeing that each action is necessarily connected to others.

Instead of this separation, there is a need to understand that human actions find their meaning within particular social settings. 'We cannot... characterize behaviour independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others.'²² MacIntyre uses the term 'setting' in a fairly broad sense to include institutions, practices, and other milieux in which human agents find themselves. Actions become intelligible by being placed in relation to the history of the individual performing the action and the history of the setting or settings in which they belong.

It is therefore necessary to see individual lives as a unified whole in order to understand how the actions of individuals make sense within the overarching narrative of their lives. Applying this idea of narrative and unity to the study of biographies is helpful in ensuring that we do not see the biographies of significant figures as merely a series of events, but rather as complete narratives in which one action is invariably connected to others. More broadly, conceiving of biographical study in terms of narrative emphasises the need to go 'beyond the mere *cataloging* [sic] of events, offering instead an *interpretation* of those events that finds ways of linking them together within a bigger picture.'²³

In studying the biographies of social reformers and public leaders, it is necessary to recognize that they do not exist independently of their social and cultural context. 'Biographies of leaders or activists must set the central performance of their subjects in the context of the political conditions that produce them, the society in and on which they operate, their race, class, nationality, and gender, and the many other figures who surround them.'²⁴ Theologian Miroslav Volf has framed this idea in terms of a distinction between social agents and social arrangements. 'Social arrangements' refer to proposals for the kind of society we ought to create, whereas 'social agents' refers to the kind of people we need to be in order to live in harmony with

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. 1985), 204.

²² *Ibid.*, 206.

²³ McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 26.

²⁴ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 104.

others.²⁵ For Volf, we must ‘concentrate less on social arrangements and more on *fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive.*’²⁶ Following sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, Volf argues that modernity has shifted responsibility away from the self and toward supra-individual bureaucracies, and postmodernity has fostered a sense of fragmentation and disengagement in relationships.

Sustained reflection on the character of social agents and how they are to exist within postmodern social arrangements is therefore necessary. The study of biographies may be a useful tool in aiding such reflection enabling understanding of the kind of qualities such agents exhibit and thinking about how such qualities may be nurtured and developed. It may also help us to understand particular social arrangements through reflecting on the context of the lives we study. We cannot understand the lives of past social reformers without understanding the times in which they lived, and understanding their lives can, in turn, help us to understand their contexts and reflect on the social arrangements which enable social reformers to operate.

It is also important to note that there are no agent-free arrangements, or arrangement-free agents. Just as social reformers are able to act upon the social arrangements in which they find themselves in order to produce change in their societies, those same societies also act to shape them. Biographical subjects can sometimes become entwined with their cultural context to such a degree that their life story becomes a subject of political debate.²⁷ Discussion of the lives of certain leaders almost inevitably leads to debate over national myths and character. The life of Nelson Mandela, for example, has become deeply entwined with the history and character of South Africa. He exerted a huge influence on his nation through his fight against apartheid, but was himself also deeply shaped by his experience of the apartheid regime. In a very real sense, Mandela would not have been the man and the social reformer that he was without the South African context that shaped him. The connections between social reformers and their contexts can be complex. It can be difficult to discern to what extent they are shaped by the times and cultures in which they live, and to what extent they are able to transcend them in order to effect change. Much has been written about this problem of the relationship between social agents and structures, and it continues to be a major issue in several academic disciplines. Applying this way of thinking to the study of lives will help us understand that social reformers are embedded in particular contexts, and it is necessary to understand their relationship to these contexts in order to do justice to understanding their lives.

An additional concept that is significant in thinking about lives is the idea of calling. Many individuals whose lives are recorded in the Bible were called by God for specific purposes, to go to particular places or preach to certain peoples. Gordon T. Smith argues that we can understand God’s call in three distinct ways. The first is a general call to be a Christian: God invites every one of us to come to know him through Jesus and to respond to his love in service to others. Second, there is a specific call, some defining purpose, a unique way in which each of us is called to serve in the world. While all believers are called to love God and others, each of us is called to live out this love in different ways. Third, we are called to respond each day to the tasks and demands God has set before us.²⁸

²⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996), 20-21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 (emphasis original).

²⁷ Lee, *Biography*, 107.

²⁸ Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God Given Potential*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2011), 9-10.

This idea of calling can be very useful in understanding the meaning of lives and the work God has given each individual to do. The second calling Smith identifies is the most relevant to considering the call of social reformers to politics, activism, or public leadership. Many people engaged in social reform have a clear sense that it is something God has called them to do. Os Guinness has expanded on the relevance of calling to public life, and especially to politics. He argues that the ‘calling directly counters the great modern pressure towards privatization because of its insistence that Jesus Christ is lord of every sphere of life.’²⁹ Calling challenges the modern tendency to privatize Christian faith by exhorting Christians to live out their faith in the public square. In addition, calling counters the tendency for public Christian faith to become politicized by insisting that Christians are to be ‘in the world but not of it’. ‘Christian engagement with politics should always be marked by tension between allegiance to Christ and identification with any party, movement platform, or agenda.’³⁰

Thinking about the role calling played in the lives of social reformers can help us to understand how they saw their own work and mission in the world. William Wilberforce recalled the time when he first realised the evil of slavery; ‘So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the trade’s wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition.’³¹ Many other social reformers have spoken of such a moment of calling or awakening and described how this led them to seek the reform of their societies. Other reformers have written of how their sense of calling provided comfort in the midst of struggles. Abraham Kuyper wrote to his daughter that ‘my calling is high, my task is glorious. Above my bed hangs a crucifix, and when I look up there it is as if the Lord is asking me every night: ‘What is your struggle next to my bitter cup?’ His service is so exalting and glorious.’³² They may have gone through many struggles or faced opposition, but the sense of God’s call on their lives has often motivated social reformers to continue in spite of difficulty.

MacIntyre’s insistence on viewing individuals lives as a unified whole carries a further implication; that there should be no distinction between public and private selves. Integrity is a concept which has come under much discussion in recent years and is very relevant to thinking about the nature of lives. The term ‘integrity’ derives from the Latin ‘integer’, meaning ‘working well, integrated, intact and uncorrupted’.³³ John Stott defines a person of integrity as one for whom there is ‘no dichotomy between their public and private lives, between what they profess and what they practice, between their words and deeds.’³⁴ However, many social reformers and Christian leaders have complex personal lives and are sometimes deeply flawed individuals. Often information emerges after their deaths, which may tarnish their public image. This has been the case with Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and the artist Eric Gill, among others. More recently it has been the case with figures such as Ravi Zacharias and Jean Vanier.

It is therefore important to reflect on how we face the flaws in Christian leaders, especially when they emerge too late for the individuals themselves to take responsibility for them. To begin to address such flaws, we should ‘concede that the church is indeed a fallible enactment of beloved

²⁹ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Purpose of Your Life*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2003), 156.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

³¹ Ray Setterfield, ‘William Wilberforce’s Fight Against Slavery’, 2020, <https://www.onthisday.com/articles/william-wilberforces-fight-against-slavery>.

³² Quoted in Guinness, *The Call*, 155.

³³ Rodney Green, ‘Integrity’, *Cambridge Papers* 27 no. 1, (March 2018), <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge-papers/integrity-cambridge-paper>.

³⁴ Quoted in Green, ‘Integrity’.

community.³⁵ Every Christian is fallen, we are all affected by sin and this sin manifests in our lives in various ways. The flaws of past leaders need not disqualify them as subjects of study but can teach us lessons about what not to do, or about what we can do differently today. James Eglinton has distinguished between what he calls ‘commemorative biographies’ and ‘critical biographies’. A commemorative biography simply seeks to showcase a particular figure as great, with the result that character flaws, or things which do not fit the commemorative narrative of the biographer, tend to be omitted. A critical biography, on the other hand, engages deeply with primary sources in order to tell the story of an individual ‘warts and all’.³⁶ When we study the life of an individual, it is therefore necessary to engage with every aspect of their lives, both good and bad, in order to develop as complete an understanding of who they were as possible.

³⁵ Richard Shumack, ‘Flawed Heroes of Faith’, *Eternity*, October 2018, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/opinion/flawed-heroes-of-faith/>.

³⁶ Reformed Forum, ‘A Critical Biography’, YouTube Video, 2:36, September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otno73EMwxc>.

How to Study Lives

The question might well be asked; what next? Having explained the biblical basis for the study of lives and some key concepts for thinking about individual lives and how they relate to their social surroundings, this last section will aim to suggest key areas in which we might ask questions about the life of a biographical subject, as well as some mistakes to be avoided in the study of lives.

In asking questions about the life of an individual, we might begin with what Clinton calls their ‘sovereign foundations’.³⁷ This refers to the earliest part of a life, over which an individual has no control. ‘God providentially works through family, environment and historical events. This begins at birth.’³⁸ Even at the earliest stages of life, God is at work to lay the foundations for what comes later. This is true whether or not one comes from a Christian family or community. As well as family and community environments, sovereign foundations might also include early experiences which God uses to shape an individual into the person he desires them to be. These experiences may be positive or negative, but all work to develop them into someone who can step into the role God has for them.

This is particularly relevant to the lives of social reformers, many of whom would have been profoundly shaped by experiences of poverty, persecution, or a troubled family environment. In many cases, these experiences have brought home to them the reality that social conditions need to change and have driven their later efforts toward social reform. Martin Luther King Jr. describes an incident when, at the age of six, the father of a white friend forbade them from playing together anymore. King describes this as the first time he became aware of a race problem in America, and this led him to ask the question ‘how could I love a race of people who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends?’³⁹ This is a clear example of an early experience which was deeply formative in shaping the young King. It is also clear that the circumstances of his experience centred on things outside his control, including his family, his culture, and the colour of his skin. To understand such experiences and the role they played in shaping social reformers may help us to gain a clearer understanding of the recurring themes of their lives and what motivated them to campaign for change.

The topic of motivation is a second important area which is important to understanding the lives of social reformers. It is possible to look at the life of any social reformer and ask, ‘What drove them? Why did they do what they did?’ In the lives of some social reformers, it may be easy to see a single overriding concern, or a single driving emotion such as anger at injustice. With many others it may be harder to determine, as they may not have spoken much, if at all, about what motivated them. In such cases, more may be learned from the accounts of those who knew them, and from secondary sources. In these cases, it is particularly important to note that such impressions may be subjective. Only the individuals themselves can truly know their motivations, and where a record of this is lacking, we are only able to speculate. Nonetheless, seeking to understand the driving forces in an individual’s life is very helpful in understanding their character and how they may have thought about the decisions they made in the course of their career.

This discussion of thought processes and motivation raises two mistakes which must be avoided in studying the lives of past social reformers. The first of these is known as the historian’s fallacy.

³⁷ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., ‘An Autobiography of Religious Development’, 1950, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/autobiography-religious-development>.

This may be defined as the assumption that people in the past viewed the events of their day from the same perspective that we do.⁴⁰ While in hindsight we may be able to assign a sense of causality to past events, at the time those involved would not have had the same wide-ranging perspective that we have. In retrospect, we can see the course individuals' lives took, while they themselves could not.

This is quite relevant in thinking about the purpose God has for the lives of social reformers. While it is possible for us to look back and see the hand of God on the life of a person, and to clearly see the purpose he had for them, at the time they may not have been aware of this, and would have experienced moments of doubt and fear and questioning, just like anyone else.

A related fallacy is that of presentism. This is the tendency to judge past actions by the standards of today.⁴¹

'Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior...Our forebears consistently fail to measure up to our present-day standards. This is not to say that any of these findings are irrelevant or that we should endorse an entirely relativist point of view. It is to say that we must question the stance of temporal superiority that is implicit in the Western (and now probably worldwide) historical discipline.'⁴²

While we must not make excuses for the past, neither should we dismiss historical figures simply because they do not align with modern values. Rather we should acknowledge that historical figures belong primarily to their own times, not to ours. This disconnection between their values and our own becomes more apparent the further back in time we look. We must acknowledge that while they lived in a different time and by different values, social reformers of the past can still teach lessons for today.

A further area we might seek to understand in the lives of those we study is their key relationships. No one exists alone, every person builds a diverse network of relationships around them over the course of their life. Understanding the key relationships in the lives of social reformers, therefore, is useful in developing an understanding of who they were. These might be family relationships, romantic relationships, working ones or friendships. Such relationships can be profoundly important in shaping the lives of individuals. They can provide comfort in times of difficulty and function as constants in the often-turbulent lives that social reformers may have led.

For some social reformers, a primary influence has been their families. Martin Luther King writes of the influence of his family in shaping his faith, 'It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and lovely relationships were ever present...Religion has just been something that I grew up in. Conversion for me has been the gradual intaking of the noble ideals set forth in my family and my environment, and I must admit that this intaking has been largely unconscious.'⁴³ King's point that the influence his family and environment exerted was largely an unconscious one is important. Often our relationships shape us in ways we are unaware of, which become apparent only in retrospect, if at all. It is

⁴⁰ Nagesh Belludi, 'The Historian's Fallacy: People of the Past Had No Knowledge of the Future', 2018, <https://www.rightattitudes.com/2018/06/07/the-historian-fallacy/>.

⁴¹ Chip Hughes, 'Presentism: Don't Judge our Ancestors Actions by Today's Standards', 2018, <https://www.voicesandimages.com/presentism-dont-judge-ancestors-actions-by-todays-standards/>.

⁴² Lynn Hunt, 'Against Presentism', *Perspectives on History* vol. 45 no. 5, (May 2002), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>.

⁴³ King, 'Autobiography of Religious Development'.

important to remember that, while we may be able to see the influence of a particular relationship in shaping an individual, they themselves may not have been as aware of it. By bearing this in mind, we will avoid falling into the historian's fallacy described above.

While King's example relates to his family and early life, friendships and relationships have also been instrumental in forging social reformers' convictions in adulthood. Sometimes they have been mentored by someone who holds much the same opinions as they do. Dorothy Day spoke and wrote often of her friend and teacher Peter Maurin. Her relationship with him formed her convictions to such an extent that Day wrote 'When people ask me how the Catholic Worker movement started and what it represents, I tell them about Peter, and the way he lives, and the ideas he expresses.'⁴⁴ Day would not have been who she was, nor achieved the change that she did, without her friendship with Maurin. His philosophy profoundly influenced her and animated the movement she founded, the Catholic Worker.

Many other social reformers have had such a mentor or confidante who has shaped their beliefs. In some other instances social reformers' convictions have been sharpened through a relationship with someone who holds very different opinions. Eglinton has pointed out the value of such 'critical friendships'; 'A truly sharp thinker...needs a close friend whom he can trust, but who does not share his most basic assumptions.'⁴⁵ Relationships like this can be instrumental in teaching us to listen to the perspectives of those outside our own traditions and communities, and to value their insights. Whether it is their families, their friends, or their spouses, the relationships in a social reformers' life are often key to their development. By understanding these relationships and the influence they had, we will be better able to understand the individuals themselves.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Day, 'Day After Day', *The Catholic Worker*, February 1943, 4.

⁴⁵ James Eglinton, 'Why Befriend Your Opponents? Bavinck on 'Critical' Friendship', May 25, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bavinck-critical-friendship/>.

Conclusion

Before social reform can be achieved, there must be social reformers. Studying the lives of past social reformers is one important way in which can learn how to navigate the complex process of social reform. This book has presented an argument for why, as Christians interested in social reform, we should study the lives of past social reformers and learn from them.

First, I have outlined some biblical and theological arguments for studying lives. There is significant biblical basis for the study of biographies, particularly in the letter to the Hebrews, and it may be argued that biography is a genre that biblical authors actually employed in the Gospels and in Acts. Secondly, I have described some concepts and ideas which can help us to think about lives. In particular, I have discussed Alasdair MacIntyre's ideas around seeing each life as a unified narrative in order to interpret and give meaning to actions. Miroslav Volf's discussion of the relationship of social agents to social arrangements has pointed out how deeply individuals are shaped by their context and how political the study of their lives can become. I have also addressed the concept of integrity and the flaws that can be seen in the lives of many social reformers. I have argued that we should not dismiss the lives of flawed people, but rather that their flaws can teach lessons for us today. Lastly, I have attempted to suggest some areas in which we might ask questions in order to understand the lives of those we study. I have suggested that we might ask what the sovereign foundations were in their lives. We might also seek to understand what motivated them to produce the change they sought, although often we can only speculate on this. We can also ask what the key relationships were in their lives, and how they were shaped by them. I have also cautioned against two fallacies to which we may be susceptible in the study of lives. The first is the danger of assuming that people in the past viewed events from the same perspective as we do in the present. The second is the danger of judging people in the past by the standards of today. Both of these errors distort our understanding of the past, and thus should be avoided.

We can see that the lives of past social reformers can provide a rich and fruitful area of study. In closing, there are three key areas in which we can learn from their lives. First, the lives of past social reformers can inspire us to become involved in social reform, as we seek to follow their examples of fighting for change: in some cases where there is still work to be done, the causes they fought can become our causes, too. Second, the lives of social reformers can provide encouragement in difficult times. Those who seek to reform society are likely to encounter struggle and to face opposition in their pursuit of change. In such times, they can look to the lives of those who have gone before them and see that they too experienced periods of struggle and doubt. This knowledge of sharing their experience provides the encouragement not to give up. Finally, the study of lives can show us that success in social reform may not be achieved in our own lifetimes. While some social reformers have achieved real success in changing laws or structures in their own lifetimes, for many the greatest popularity of and success for their ideas came only after their own deaths. Far from being discouraging, this knowledge should instead encourage us to take a long-term view of social reform and to see that sometimes success for a social reformer will mean building a movement that will last beyond them.

The pursuit of social reform is often a lonely path, with a high chance of struggle and no guarantee of success. The lives of those who have walked this path before can provide inspiration, encouragement and teach us lessons about how to engage in social reform in our own contexts. Above all, I believe that studying the lives of social reformers will encourage us to reflect again on the life of Christ and to seek to follow him better in our own lives.

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