

# How to Approach YOUR Role in History

By Dr. Marshall Foster

Imagine taking the stage to act in a play without knowing what the play itself is about, without even knowing your part. It would be a disaster! But many Christians assume that if they love the lead Actor enough, everything else will fall into place. We have a role in history, and we need to know our lines. By understanding the play, as discussed above, we gain insight into where it is going. By understanding that God has a purpose for us as individually and by devoting ourselves to it, we gain insight into where to go.

## God accomplishes His purpose in “History” by providentially superintending His creation.

This is called the Providential view of history and it was the predominant view of Christians from all ages, including our American founders. Noah Webster, the great educator and lexicographer, who compiled the first American dictionary in 1828, defined providence as:



*The care and superintendence which God exercises over creatures... Some persons admit a general providence, but deny a particular providence, not considering that a general providence consists of particulars. A belief in divine providence is a source of great consolation to good men. By divine providence is understood God Himself.*

As you might have surmised, Noah Webster was a devout Christian holding to the Providential view of history. Note that in his definition of providence, Webster said that it is a “source of great consolation to good men.” In this statement, he alluded to the peace that comes from knowing that a just God presides over the nations and that His plan cannot be thwarted. The opposite is also true. If one is fighting the God of History and then learns of His Providence, it can be very disconcerting!

Eighteenth-century historian Charles Rollin reflected on the predominant view of early America and Christendom all the way back to Saint Paul when he wrote:

*“Nothing gives history a greater superiority to many branches of literature, than to see in a manner imprinted, in almost every page of it, the precious footsteps and shining proofs of the great truth, viz. that God disposes of all events as supreme Lord and Sovereign; that He alone determines the fate of kings and the duration of empires and that He transfers the government of kingdoms from one nation to another because of the unrighteous dealings and wickedness committed therein.”*

**Has the great God of the universe unveiled to us His cosmic plan for the ages?** Yes! The Scriptures reveal His will. The Godhead (trinity) before time began planned the redemption of His people and His world (revelation 13:8; Titus 1:2). Jesus Christ - through His death, resurrection, ascension, and eventual second coming - provides the center focus and meaning for history. As 1 Corinthians 15:24 says, at the end of time as we know it, “*Then comes the end, when He (Christ) delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.*” All of God’s created order is destined to bow before Jesus Christ: “*For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet*” (1 Corinthians 15:25). The Lord himself tells us what will happen at the end of history, “*For it is written: ‘As I live, saith the LORD, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God’*” (Romans 14:11)

Parents and students can approach this subject with great anticipation if they see their study from a providential perspective. History does not cause itself. It is written and directed by the Creator of the universe. President James Garfield (1831-1881), one of our truly Christian presidents, illustrated a knowledge of providence worth emulating when he stated:

*“The world’s history is a Divine poem, of which the history of every nation is a canto, and every man a word. Its strains have been pealing along down the centuries, and though there have been mingled the discords of warring cantons and dying men, yet to the Christian philosopher and historian - the humble listener - there has been a Divine melody running through the song which speaks of hope and halcyon days to come.”*

**As we act our proper roles for our Lord in the time we have been appointed,** there is an audience, a great “cloud of witnesses” who are rejoicing in the heavens and glorifying God. That great cloud of witnesses is defined in Hebrews 12:1-2, 22-24. These witnesses include (1) countless multitudes of angels in festal, or celebratory, gathering, (2) the church in heaven and the righteous who have been

made perfect - all the believers who set the stage for us, (3) the God who is the judge of all, and (4) Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant. Every day we rise to put on our spiritual armor and fight the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:11-12); these are the “cloud of witnesses” whom we will meet face to face some day.

In the life of a Christian, the most important goal is to find and do the will of God. God’s will is found through prayer and the study of His word, through the individual insights given by the Holy Spirit, and through wise counsel. There is yet another important way to help direct our lives, and that is to discern and learn from history.

The apostle Paul wrote of the importance of learning from the victories and failures of past generations. He said: *Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall* (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

Sir Winston Churchill, former British prime minister, said *“If you look far enough back in history, you may be wise enough to see far ahead into the future.”* He knew very well of what he spoke. Imagine the historical follies of past English monarchs. If they had remembered Queen Elizabeth I’s foolish optimism concerning Spain’s promises never to send an armada, they would have been more cautious of Hitler’s assurances to Neville Chamberlain in 1938.

### Seeing Order in Apparent Chaos

Most modern historians neither understand nor present the historical purpose and vision of history that is made clear by Biblical Christianity. The result is that they often become bogged down, becoming experts in minutiae, but can no longer play the prophetic role of projecting trends into the future or calling a nation back to unchanging principles.

Famous historian Arnold Toynbee described most modern historians by saying that they see *“only as a horse sees between its blinders or what a U-boat captain sees through his periscope.”* They approach history not with an open mind, but with the **ideologies** that allow them to see only what supports their private agendas. No wonder students have lost interest in history in recent generations.

**But from a Christian perspective, the history of nations** leads us to an obvious conclusion: they who keep covenant with the God of the Bible and its laws and principles live longer, deeper, richer, freer lives, as a general rule. Sharon Camp and Joseph Spiedel, in *Target Earth*, documented that of the top twenty-five nations in quality of life and standard of living, twenty-four have Christian Foundations. The other is Japan, whose success is partially due to adoption of Biblical principles of liberty and free enterprise, in imitation of the Western nations following the Second World War. Historians often recoil from drawing the inescapable conclusion because it indelibly stamps history with God’s name and law, and they would prefer to write their own scenarios.

The following historical narrative is a summary of the great beneficial effect of Biblical Christianity in Western civilization. We see through a mirror darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12), and do not share fully in God’s cosmic perspective of all events. But we are called as Christians to use our sound mind (II Timothy 1:7), and because “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), we can perceive the hand of God working out His plan for the world.

### The Christian Impact in the Development of Europe

Historian Otto Scott summarized well the medieval march of Christendom. *“For the first time, an entire civilization mired in decay was lifted and transformed into an entirely new condition, against the will of its government and many of its leaders. Christians did this despite persecution, torture, and humiliation for nine generations. Then, after Constantine, Christians converted a savage Europe from human sacrifice to the faith, and created the richest, most diverse, most successful civilization the world has ever known.”*

The Middle Ages, or Dark Ages were actually the age of faith and pioneering evangelization. During this period, Christianity became the dominant force in Europe as a continent was transformed from barbarism. In modern textbooks, it is fashionable to use the term “Dark Ages” to describe the period from the Fall of Rome (fifth century) to the rediscovery of classical culture in the Renaissance (fourteenth century). The reason for this classification is philosophically - not Historically - based. There is a definite bias today against teaching the unifying theme of Western civilization during this era, which was the Christianization of barbarian Europe.

The major theme in the development of Europe is the unseen hand of God and His remnant in each generation, from the early missionaries and converted barbarians like Patrick and Boniface to the persecuted purifiers of Biblical doctrine like John Wycliffe, John Hus, and Martin Luther.

### **Life in 1500**

The hopes and fears of the early sixteenth century were much like those we are experiencing today. It was an exciting era, the day of Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Raphael, Copernicus, and Columbus. Institutional structures that had not changed for centuries were under critical review, and especially in religious aspects, found wanting. But this free-thinking revolution, brought on partially by the Italian Renaissance, was not the experience of most Europeans. For the vast majority of people were feudal vassals or poor farmers. These people were faced with the constant struggle to eat the next day.

Droughts, pestilence, and floods often drove thousands of people to begging for food. Plague continued to devastate Europe in 1500. In Strasbourg alone, it took the lives of 16,000 of the 25,000 residents, and left 300 deserted villages in that region. It was an age of death contrasted with humanistic hope in the pleasures of Italy. It was an age of great religious pomp and external show, but the heart of the Church was rotting with hypocrisy and lawless living. In this age of crisis, one event stands out that still impacts our lives today.

### **The Reformation**

The central event of the sixteenth century took place on 31 October 1517. On that day, a young priest and professor nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg Castle. He was protesting the trafficking of indulgences by the infamous Tetzel, a German Dominican monk. Tetzel would excite the masses with a sermon highlighting the torments of purgatory, concluding with his well-known line, "*Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs.*" Martin Luther's denunciation of the corrupt practices of the Church started a revolution he never planned or expected. Luther was excommunicated; thousands joined him, and Frederick the Wise, one of the most powerful princes in Germany, protected him. The Protestant Reformation swept Europe in the next century and changed the course of history.

There were other important figures that preceded the Reformation, like John Wycliffe, as well as John Hus, the Waldensians, and members of other reform movements. But Martin Luther, armed with the power of moveable-type printing and the freedom to translate and teach the Bible, brought the fundamental questions of all time to the attention of all Europe: How is man saved? Is he justified by faith in Christ alone, or is obedience to the Church and its ordinances the only door that opens to Heaven?

Luther, reading the book of Romans, was set free by the truth of justification by faith, based upon God's grace. His famous words were, "*Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.*"

In the following years, millions of new believers began to join the ranks of the reformers. Along with Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox, they proclaimed "*Sola Scriptura*" - the word of God alone was the basis of their faith and practice. They called for the reinstatement of the "crown rights" of King Jesus, declaring that He alone, not the pope or the king, could claim ultimate sovereignty. God alone was sovereign.

**If there was one religious figure in the formation of modern thought** who has surpassed Luther, it is John Calvin (1509-1564). In 1526, this brilliant 27-year-old convert to the faith wrote his Institutes of the Christian Religion, which is, after the Bible and Augustine's City of God, probably the most influential book of all time. His systematic Biblical reasoning provided the foundation for the reformed denominations, which became the dominant influence in Holland, England, Scotland, and America for centuries. Calvin's major emphasis was on the sovereignty of God in heaven and on earth. This teaching brought shivers of fear to the tyrants of Europe. If God was Sovereign, then the king was not, and neither was the Church. Calvin is, by virtue of this doctrine and its implications, the forgotten founder of the American republic.

### **The American Expression of Liberty**

The motto of the Pilgrims was "Reform ourselves without tarrying for any." The members believed that the church should be separate from government control and under Christ's lordship only, a belief that gave rise to their name: Separatists. They simply wanted to live in peace, obeying the teachings of the Scriptures.

But the new king, James I, would not tolerate religious liberty. Some Separatists were maimed or burned at the stake. In 1607, the men of the Scrooby congregation were imprisoned for eight months. They were not pale plaster saints, hollow and bloodless. They were men-and women, too- of courage and conviction, strong and positive in their attitudes, prepared to sacrifice much for their principles, even their very lives.

The Pilgrims, as they came to be called, escaped from England and much persecution in 1608. For twelve years they lived in relative peace in Holland within the walled city of Leiden, where thirty-four years earlier the Dutch had taken their heroic stand against the Spanish invaders.

But as time passed, John Robinson, the Pilgrims' faithful minister since the early years in Scrooby, and his congregation began to realize the need to emigrate. As foreigners, they could hardly find work in Holland, although they wanted to be successful so that others would join them and place their faith in Christ's redemption. Their children were being corrupted by the increasing moral laxity of Dutch life. And, the Spanish were planting a new offensive to wipe out all religious dissent.

**There also was a fourth reason, as William Bradford recorded,** for wanting to emigrate. He wrote: *"Last, and not least, they cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations, or at least of making some way toward it, for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the World."* In 1620, the Pilgrims were able to obtain a charter to the "northern parts of Virginia." This charter was granted by James I, who had despised and hounded them seventeen years. Yet, as providence would have it, he unwittingly set the stage of liberty for God's unsung heroes.

Most of the congregation, including the pastor, John Robinson, had to remain behind. The king feared the potential effect of Robinson's influence in distant America and would not permit him to go. However, the congregation sent thirty-eight of their number, including their most trusted leaders - William Brewster, William Bradford, and John Carver - to pioneer the desolate wilderness of North America.

Departing from Plymouth, England, in August 1620, with 102 passengers aboard the Mayflower, they endured a terrifying sixty-six-day voyage across the Atlantic. They arrived in America in November, far north of their intended charter. Fearing mutiny since they were out of the territory of the king's charter, all of the men gathered in the captain's cabin on 11 November 1620 and signed a covenant with each other to form their new government to glorify God and to advance the Christian faith.

**The Mayflower Compact is America's first great constitutional document,** and it is a fine example of the covenantal, or compact, theory of government which is echoed in all of America's colonial charters and founding documents:

*In ye name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by ye grace of God, of Great Britaine, France & Ireland King, defender of ye faith,&c., having undertaken, for ye glorie of God, and advancemente of ye Christian faith, and honour of our king & countrie, a vouage to plant ye first colonie in ye Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutually in ye presence of God, and of one another, covenant & combine our selves together into a civill body politick, for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of ye ends aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to enacte, constitute, and frame such just & equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitution & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for ye generall good of ye Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codde ye 11. Of November in ye year or ye raigne of ur soveraigne lord, King James, of England, France, & Ireland ye eighteenth, and by Scotland ye fiftie fourth. Ano:Dom. 1620.*

It should be mentioned that the Jamestown colony had already led the way in stating similar goals in its charter for the Virginia colony in 1606, declaring that they had come to America to propagate the "Christian Religion to such people as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God." The desire to reach the lost world with the Gospel and to fulfill the Lord's great commission (Matthew 28:18-20) was an impelling force behind the settling of America from Christopher Columbus to the blazing of the Oregon Trail by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman.

If, by God's grace, the men of Jamestown had not been successful in maintaining their colony, the pilgrims probably would have never followed them to America. These Jamestown settlers, after twelve years of trial and turmoil met in July 1619 in the first church built in the colonies start America's first representative assembly, called the House of Burgesses. These Virginians would hone their governmental skills for 150 years, until the 1770's, when the founding generation of Virginia patriots would turn the world upside down.

## The Root Determines the Fruit

America's unparalleled success as a nation is the result of God blessing us with the Bible in the hands of the common man, the example and wisdom of the Christian thinkers and martyrs of Europe, and the Patriot Pastors in the Colonies who taught the Biblical principles of nation building for 150 years before our founding generation.

Our great political documents, free enterprise system, legal system and educational system were direct products of applied Biblical truth over time. Progressively, however, over the 19th and 20th centuries, these foundations have been eroded.

## The Great Challenge of the 21st Century

The American Church, as a whole, by withdrawing from active leadership in our culture, gave secularists control of our major institutions for most of the twentieth century. These optimistic humanists have failed in all their tinkering and brought us to the brink of cultural chaos. Their experiments with our schools have failed, their statist bureaucracy is intrusive and headed for bankruptcy, and their moral relativism has left America plagued with violence, illegitimacy, drugs, and pornography. The end of the twentieth century is correctly assessed by T.S. Eliot in "The Hollow Men":

*We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Learning together  
Headpiece filled with sorrow. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in a dry grass  
Shape without form, shade without colour  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper-*



*Recommended reading:*  
"The American Covenant: The Untold Story"  
by Marshall Foster [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com)

The secular Camelot that seemed destined to rule the world, with "progress" as its most important product, is proving to be a charade. The mainstream intellectuals and media pundits of the Western world have proved themselves poor guides to the future. These self-proclaimed "experts" have led millions from Darwin, through Marx, to Freud, often ending in despair.

**Historian Paul Johnson analyzes many of these twentieth-century thinkers** in his important book, *Intellectuals*: "It is just about two hundred years since the secular intellectuals began to replace the old clerisy (clergy) as the guides and mentors of mankind... I detect today a certain public skepticism when intellectuals stand up to preach to us, a growing tendency among ordinary people to dispute the right of academics, writers, and philosophers, eminent though they may be, to tell us how to behave and conduct our affairs. The belief seems to be spreading that intellectuals are no wiser as mentors, or worthy as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old. I share that skepticism. A dozen people picked at random on the street are at least as likely to offer sensible views on moral and political matters as a cross-section of the intelligensia."

**Here lies our hope.** Faith in the humanist's idealized man is dying. People are seeing through the "New Deal," the "Great Society," and "the bridge to the twenty-first century." They know America's greatness taps into a much greater source than political slogans. Millions of parents and students are rediscovering the covenants of our forebears. They are learning the truths about God's world and His rules for living in it. As parents train a generation in the unchanging Biblical principles of life, these young leaders of the future can rise up and offer real hope to restore the "holy cause of liberty."

Building upon our inheritance, which requires knowing our true history, we can be a "city upon a hill" for the twenty-first century, becoming an example to other nations, rather than a reproach. John Winthrop had such a vision when he landed in Boston in 1630: "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men of succeeding plantations shall say, "The Lord make it like that of New England."

**"For we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill; the eyes of all people are upon us."**