

IS HISTORY KNOWABLE

Christianity is founded in history. The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are all historical events. This section involves us in examining the question of how do we know history occurred?¹

“History is a bare-bones recitation of facts about my past”². What makes Biblical history so exciting is that it is not only about my past but rather the past of the entire human race and for that matter the whole of creation.

There are several benefits in studying history these include.

- 1 History enables us to understand people and societies.
- 2 History helps us understand how people change over time.
- 3 History contributes to moral and ethical understanding.
- 4 History provides a sense of identity.³

The above benefits relate to secular history, how much greater the benefits of studying history from a Christian viewpoint since history is really the story of how God has intervened in the affairs of mankind to bring about His plan of redemption. It is interesting to observe that the word ”history” consists of two words that are clearly discernable “his” and “story” History is really His story, Gods story. “The study of history ought to inspire students with generous ideals of active and responsible citizenship, with sincere ambitions for sane, strong leadership, with convictions regarding national policies and the power to distinguish between that which is clever and that which is fine and noble.”⁴

In order to understand history from a Christian perspective we must understand the history of mankind in relationship to God. “In fact, we cannot understand history itself without understanding why we are here and what has happened to us along the way in our relation to God. God’s placing us on this planet with responsibility for it—and that includes the earth and all living matter—is the key to history”⁵

¹ McDowell page 673

² Emory A. Griffin, *Getting Together : A Guide for Good Groups* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997, c1982).

³ Peter N. Stearns Why Study History

<http://204.29.171.50/framer/1000/default.asp?realname=Google&cc=NZ&lc=en%2DNZ&frameid=1565&providerid=112&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2F>

⁴ James E. Smith, *The Books of History* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1995).

⁵ Paul S. Karleen, *The Handbook to Bible Study : With a Guide to the Scofield Study System*, "This book is intended as a companion to the Scofield Reference Bible" --Pref.; Includes indexes. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

McDowell says that some have argued that history is not knowable. Prominent among those arguing that history is not knowable is Charles A Beard. The reason they argue against the know ability of history is

- 1 History is not directly observable.
- 2 The historical evidence that we have is fragmentary.
- 3 The selection of which historical approach to use and the interpretation of history itself is subjective.
- 4 It is inevitable that the historian make some form of value judgment.
- 5 Every historian is a child of his own time and worldview he cannot but help carry that bias into his interpretation of history.
- 6 Both the selection and arrangement of the material is subjective.

These objectives are overcome

- 1 While recognizing that while history is not directly observable an understanding of history can be derived by using the tools that are available including written documents and archaeological evidence.
- 2 The fact that the evidence available is fragmentary does not necessarily destroy the objectivity of the conclusions.
- 3 The selection of which historical approach to use and the interpretation of history itself is not automatically subjective provided one has sufficient and relevant evidence and a sound structured approach to the interpretation.
- 4 Value Judgments can be formed in the study of history that are objective if one is fair in treating the evaluation of the evidence and one seeks to make that judgment in the same way that the people living at that time would have.
- 5 While it is true that every historian is a child of his own time and worldview it does not necessarily follow that he cannot but help carry that bias into his interpretation of history if one is careful to distinguish between the context of history and the process of attaining the knowledge of history.
- 6 The selection and arrangement of history need not be subjective if one uses a methodical approach to history in which ones own internal bias is recognized and deliberate efforts are made to be objective.⁶

⁶ McDowell page 676 to 680

When one approaches the Bible one has to remember that the Bible has not been written with a cyclical view of history but rather “the biblical writings understand history as a linear movement towards a goal. God is driving history towards the ultimate fulfillment of his purposes for his creation. So biblical eschatology is not limited to the destiny of the individual; it concerns the consummation of the whole history of the world, towards which all God’s redemptive acts in history are directed.”⁷

John MacArthur in discussing how to preach from biblical history writes.

“History rightly presented has tremendous attractiveness to an eager-to-learn mind. Nor does it lack power to impact and generate understanding. History is the ultimate teacher, patiently waiting in the wings of life until one opens to its persistent knocking. Unfortunately, the old saying is all too applicable: “The only thing we have learned from history is that we have learned nothing from history.”

But this need not be the case. To a greater degree than secular history, biblical history generates great attraction to the truth and is imbued with great power to produce spiritual discernment and influence. Most appropriate are the words of Paul in 1 Cor.10: 11: “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction.”⁸

Finally as Christians we should attempt to understand history through Christ.

“We must see and understand history in terms of Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last (Rev 1:11). He is not only the Creator of men and matter, but also of the time and space wherein they exist. He did, indeed, enter into our time and space, but in Himself He does not exist within the confines of time and space, but being its Creator He exists in sublime elevation outside them. He is, for example, not the Alpha which becomes the Omega. He is the beginning and the end simultaneously. Our time, and accordingly also our history, exist in and through Him. History as we know and are able to conceive it, exists between the Creation and the fullness of time with the second coming of Christ. It is encompassed at its beginning and its end by eternity.”⁹

⁷D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. /, Page 333 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁸John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, Pages 268-269 (Dallas: Word Pub., 1997, c1992).

⁹F. P. Moller, vol. 2, *The Wonderful Christ and the Meaning of Humanness (Christology and Anthropology)*, Words of light and life (Pretoria: Van Schaik Religious Books, 1998).

