

# **Then and Now -- *Studying the Past to Shape our Future***

By Ed Stevens -- Sunday evening, July 25, 2010

Title of this broadcast: *Why Study History?*

George Santayana is famous for saying that: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That statement has been rephrased a dozen ways, but they all mean the same thing. If we fail to learn from the mistakes of the past, we are doomed to repeat those mistakes. If we want to really screw up our future, all we have to do is simply ignore the past. So there is something about studying history which helps us have a better future.

I was not always a fan of history, but once I saw the tremendous insights I could gain from it, I fell in love with it, and the love affair grows stronger every day.

We need to go beyond the good work of the first reformation. We need to transform Christianity by correcting its eschatological errors. But we should not change everything. There are some good things that we can build upon and go higher. We only throw out the bath water, not the bathtub or the baby. We reform only those things that need to be reformed.

Before we can go beyond the accomplishments of the first reformation, we have to look back and learn from their failures. We have to study the past to reshape our future.

Preterism helps us discover the fulfillments in the past, so we can see more clearly where we are today, and where we need to go in the future. When we understand that the last things were fulfilled in the first century, it empowers us to rise above the escapist, retreatist, defeatist worldview of the futurists, to an optimistic, victorious, get-involved and make-a-difference worldview for the future.

We will look at the history of first century Christianity so we can understand their perspective, make the proper application to us today, let it reshape our thinking, and empower us to nudge the Church into its next phase of reform. That's why Michael Loomis and I have titled this broadcast, "Then and Now--Studying the Past to Shape Our Future."

So my goal for each of these broadcasts is to do these two things: (1) Look at the historical fulfillments of Bible prophecy in the first century, and then (2) Apply what we learned from that study to build a better worldview that will equip us to go beyond and make a significant impact upon our world for Christ.

We are talking about the Next Reformation of Christianity. How do we stimulate that? How do we empower that? How do we go beyond the first reformation? By looking back first!

### **Quotes on the Value of History in Study of Bible:**

*Louis Berkhof* -- "The doctrine of the last things never stood in the centre of attention, is one of the least developed doctrines, and therefore calls for no elaborate discussion. Its main elements have been rather constant, and these constitute practically the whole dogma of the Church respecting future things. Occasionally deviating views occupied a rather important place in theological discussions, but these were never incorporated in the Confessions of the Church. It may be that, as Dr Orr surmises, we have now reached that point in the history of dogma in which the doctrine of the last things will receive greater attention and be brought to further development." [*The History of Christian Doctrines*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1937 (tenth printing 1990), p. 259]

The first five books of the Bible embodied the Law of Moses in a historical narrative. The historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament were likewise dressed in historical clothing. The Gospels weave the story of redemption through a historical grid. The book of Acts is the ultimate example of theology and doctrine communicated in a historical context. All of Paul's epistles contain geographical and chronological references.

We might ask why God revealed his truths this way. After only six thousand years of human history, it has become fashionable for modernists to dismiss the Bible as a mere myth dreamed up by uneducated and superstitious folks of an ancient non-critical era. However, by revealing His truth in a historical context, God forever established it upon a solid immovable foundation that can never be shaken even after the passage of millions of years. His truth can stand the test of time, as Martin Luther said, "a bulwark never failing." Truth can be historically verified.

*Geerhardus Vos* -- in his inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary in 1894 -- he clearly points out the benefit of following a Historical-Grammatical approach to interpreting scripture: "the new life and freshness which it gives to the old truth, showing it in all its historic vividness and reality with the dew of the morning of revelation upon its opening leaves. It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system but in a book of history, the parallel to which in dramatic interest and simple eloquence is nowhere to be found. It is this that makes the Scriptures speak and appeal to and touch the hearts and lead the minds of men captive to the truth everywhere. No one will be able to handle the Word of God more effectually than he to whom the treasure-chambers of its historic meaning have been opened up." [*Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980, p.23]

Christian Historians are often accused of putting too much weight on uninspired church writings at the expense of inspired Scripture. Their critics often make statements like, "Scripture is sufficient. We don't need anything else. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it. Jesus said that traditions of men only invalidate the Word of God." Well, all that is true, nevertheless, we still need to study the historical context in which Scripture was written so that we can understand what it says. What did it mean to its original readers? We cannot make the proper application to us today if we do not know how it applied to its original audience. The fundamental task of a Bible interpreter is to discover as much as possible about what the original author intended to communicate to his original audience. We call this audience relevance. And

we dare not make any application of it for us today until we know how the original author applied it to his original audience. All of our interpretative efforts are wasted if we do not first analyze the historical context in which a Biblical text was written.

I like what Dr. Charles Hill said about this: "Nobody, least of all myself, wants to take the understanding of any postapostolic writer 'as an infallible interpretation of Scripture merely on the basis of his relative nearness to the apostolic period.' Nobody wants to make 'the ancient churches (church tradition) rather than the Scriptures the depository of truth.' But the Bible was not given in a vacuum; it is not devoid of a historical context. Therefore, the Bible ought to make sense *within* its historical environment, and (because it is true) it ought to make sense *of* its historical environment. It is not an abandonment of the divine authority of Scripture to inquire into this environment -- just the opposite! Those who seek to submit to the Scriptures as their only rule of faith and practice ought to use every instrument at their disposal in order to understand the Scriptures better. One of those instruments is the environment of ideas into which the gospel came; another is the environment of ideas that were inevitably formed and transformed by the gospel."

We are constantly asking ourselves, "What would this have meant to the first century readers?" Indeed, our fundamental methodology as interpreters of God's Word ought always to be to discover exactly what the original author intended to communicate to his original audience in its original historical setting and cultural context. Since the plan of redemption was revealed within a historical matrix, we must reconstruct that history in our minds before we will be able to fully understand and appreciate the benefits of that redemption, not only in WHAT was accomplished, but also WHEN it was accomplished, and by WHOM, and WHY.

#### **APPLICATION FOR US TODAY:**

Because the truth was embodied in a historical context and directly connected to human nature (which never changes), it is always relevant to each new successive generation. This historical context and cultural relevance is the foundation upon which the church was built. We dare not divorce ourselves from that foundation. It would be bulding our house upon the shifting sands of cultural relativism, rather than upon the solid rock of absolute Biblical truth.

We Preterists have championed the grammatical-historical method of Bible interpretation by putting so much emphasis on *Audience Relevance*. No wonder we have benefited so much from our study of God's Holy Word. We long to share the results of this grammatical-historical approach with all Christians. We believe it will reform and transform the global church in ways that go far beyond the impact of the first reformation.

So that is my goal here in this Internet radio program. We want to take advantage of all the historical material available, to help us understand the Bible better, and then let that better understanding change our lives and equip us to make a positive difference in the world around us.

**Preface from my First Century Events book:**

Ever since I published the little booklet, *What Happened In AD 70*, back in 1980, I have had numerous requests for more detailed information about the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish, Roman, and Christian history associated with it. Over the years since then I have studied Josephus, Eusebius, Yosippon, the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, Pseudepigrapha, Church Fathers, Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls and other Jewish/Christian writings, trying to determine exactly what happened, when it happened, and what was the effect of it upon the Church. My goal was not to produce a mere catalog of all the unsupported speculations about what might have happened, but rather try to determine “at the mouth of two or more credible eyewitnesses” exactly what DID occur, in what sequence it occurred, and how it interrelated with other Jewish, Roman, and Christian events.

My method was to use the very best sources as close to the first century as possible (e.g., the New Testament and Josephus). Wherever there are known dates that have been confirmed by multiple witnesses, these are used as foundations upon which to build other dates. But this is not just an annotated list of events pulled from Josephus’ jumbled accounts and arranged in chronological order. I do engage in some historical reconstruction (educated guesses), but hopefully no intentional historical revisionism. The reader will have to judge for himself.

Some chronologies separate the Jewish, Roman, and Christian events into parallel lists with no details. That approach does not work for me. To help me grasp the flow of events, I decided to put all of these events together in one continuous stream. I had no idea how that would affect the outcome. Relationships between the events began to appear that I had not noticed before. Like the saying, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” Little nuances and details, that never had any obvious significance before, now took on a life of their own and revealed relationships and interconnections that I had not anticipated. One detail led to another, and then another. Line upon line. Admittedly, some of my dates are based on very slim evidence, and are nothing more than deduction from whatever evidence I could ferret out of the primary sources. But hopefully there are no suggestions here that are pure speculation with no basis in any kind of fact.

This is not just a list of dated events, but an interpretation of their interrelationships. We may never know when, where, and how Apostle Paul died, but using the facts that he mentions, we can reconstruct what could have happened. And that is just one example of the benefits of a historical reconstruction like this. There are hundreds of such insights to be gained here.

My prayer is that your understanding of First Century Jewish, Roman, and Christian history will be stimulated, stretched and blessed as much as mine has been. It is quite likely that you will perceive a lot of additional insights into First Century history that I did not notice. If so, I would love to hear from you and benefit from your discoveries. And if you notice any parts of this which need correction, please let me know so I can correct it before the next edition. May it open up for you whole new vistas of insight into the New Testament and its historical fulfillment.

We will be using this book as the basis for this series of radio broadcasts. You will probably want to get a copy of it for your own private study. It can be obtained from our Books and Media List on our website: [www.preterist.org](http://www.preterist.org)