

Chapter 1: The Importance of History

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. In what ways can you see that “the rejection of history” describes conditions in the Church today?
2. Why does God think history is important? What do we lose – or forfeit – when we neglect or reject history?
3. What is our duty to the next generation where history is concerned? What are some ways we can fulfill that duty?
4. If indeed “History is indispensable in the Bible and in the Christian faith” how can we begin to redress our neglect personally and in our churches?
5. How should we expect a renewed commitment to learning history to serve us in our walk with and work for the Lord? Is this true for history in the Bible only? Explain.
6. How would you assess your own “relationship” to history at this time? Can you think of some ways that history has been of benefit in your life and ministry?
7. History, in a sense, is always “up for grabs.” How can you see that with respect to the writing and study of history in our day? What opportunity does this present us in the believing community?
8. What’s the most important lesson or insight you have gained from this chapter? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapter 2: Experiencing History

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. Why must a Christian view of history begin with God? What alternatives for a starting point might we choose other than God? Why are these not reliable for a true understanding history?
2. History is complex and complicated. Where do we look or to what kinds of things should we turn to learn about events in history? How should we relate these historical resources to our understanding of God and His will? How can understanding these resources help us in judging accounts of history?
3. Poythress writes: “So any historian must select. He must decide when to stop doing research, because there is always more.” Why is this important to keep in mind when we’re reading about history? Does this help us in judging the reliability of any historical account? Explain.
4. In writing or reading about history, we must make choices. “The most basic choice consists in choosing the piece of the past about which one writes [or reads].” What kind of choices for learning more about history seem most important to you?
5. In what two senses does Poythress suggest we use the word “history”? How do these relate to one another? Why is each of them important for redeeming our thinking about history?
6. Summarize the “three aspects” of history that Poythress discusses. How do these relate to one another?
7. History, in a sense, is always “up for grabs.” How can you see that with respect to the writing and study of history in our day? What opportunity does this present us in the believing community?
8. What’s the most important lesson or insight you have gained from this chapter? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapters 3-8: Understanding History

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. What does Poythress mean by saying that history has both unity and diversity? Is this true of all approaches to history? Can we truly understand the diversity of history apart from a clear sense of history's unity? Explain.
2. What is the "antithesis" that Poythress elaborates in chapter 4? What expressions does this antithesis take? How does the grace of God operate throughout this antithesis?
3. What does Poythress mean in chapter 5 by "reductionistic" approaches to history? What makes such approaches unreliable? What are some examples of the "idols" that can cloud our understanding of history? Why must we be careful to look at history through the lens of all three perspectives – people, events, and meanings?
4. What "hindrances" (chapter 6) can hinder our efforts to understand history? Can you think of any others? What hindrances might keep you from gaining a better appreciation for and understanding of history? "History involves the intersection of the motives and actions of individuals and of these individuals in their mutual relations" (p. 66). Poythress seems to think that, in considering the diversity of history, starting with people is a good way to begin. Why is it a good idea, in seeking to understand history, to begin from the "people" perspective?
5. (Chapter 7) What does Poythress mean by "regularities" in history? Can you give an example of two? How can we understand these "regularities", that is, why do they persist? Is it possible to understand history apart from understanding religion? How does religion function as a "regularity" in history? Is that true today, in our "secular age"?
6. Can we have a true view of history if we refuse to accept the reality of miracles? Why or why not?
7. What's the most important lesson or insight you have gained from these chapters? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapters 9-11: History in the Bible

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. What four basic phases of history does Poythress discern in Scripture? Why is this pattern important? How should it guide us in thinking about all history?
2. In what sense does this overarching pattern also function as a cycle within history? How does this help us in making sense of history?
3. Why should we think of history in terms of “plots” or even “mini-plots”? How does viewing history this way help us make good use of history?
4. This view of history – an overarching pattern with many mini-plots – allows for great diversity in history. But does that diversity change or disprove the pattern? Explain. What does this diversity tell us about God’s sovereign control of history?
5. Why can we trust the Bible as a guide to helping us think about history? How are the historical records of history in the Bible relevant to our need to understand history today?
6. How should we trust the work of the Holy Spirit to help us in redeeming our thinking about history? What about in assessing the role of wrong-believers in the historical record?
7. Summarize Poythress’ four conclusions from the historical records of Scripture.
8. What’s the most important lesson or insight you have gained from these chapters? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapters 12-18: Understanding God's Purposes in History

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. What are some implications of saying that God has “purposes” in history? What does he mean by a “two-level view of the world”? Poythress: “The Bible is supposed to serve as a preinterpretive word that enables us to understand God’s purposes in the events of history.” What role should Scripture play in helping us to discern the purposes of God and to understand history?
2. What “cautions” must we keep in mind when seeking to discern God’s purposes in history?
3. What options are available to historians when seeking to interpret God’s purposes in history? What are some advantages and disadvantages of each of these? Why can’t we be as confident as Biblical writers about the role and purposes of God in historical events? Does that mean we give up the quest?
4. Discuss the six principles Poythress offers for gaining a Biblical understanding of history. Which of these have you used before?
5. What does he mean by an “academic” approach to history? How does he analyze this view? Why must we always bear in mind that both subjectivity and objectivity are at work in the writing of history? What kind of mindset must we have in approaching academic history?
6. Poythress: “it is impossible to write history in a truly neutral manner because thinking about history depends on a conception of history as a whole.” How would you describe the state of your overall conception of history at this time? Is it improving? Becoming clearer? Do you feel like you’re gaining more desire or confidence in reading history?
7. Why does Poythress say that the Enlightenment and its view of history is a “failed project? Do you agree? What are the implications of this failure for the Church at this point in history?
8. What are “secondary causes” in history and why is it good to focus on them in reading and studying history?
9. How can the book of Revelation help us in approaching the study of history? How can insights from Revelation help us in making use of the historical moments of our lives?
10. What’s the most important lesson or insight you have gained from these chapters? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapters 19-21: History Writing

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. What does Poythress mean by “taking sides” in history and history writing? What “sides” are competing to control understanding of history in our day? Put another way, is it possible for anyone to be “neutral” about history? What risks are involved in taking sides in views of history?
2. Why can we speak confidently about “the hand of God” in history? Use the early Church and Reformation to support your views.
3. How does our understanding of doctrine affect our view of history? Poythress: “It is no good for a Christian to claim that we cannot know what God thinks about the situation. We can know a good deal, because God provides doctrinal and moral standards in the Bible. We have to evaluate historical personages and movements using these standards. It is pretense to pretend that we do not know. We sin if we turn away from the answers provided in the Bible.” Is it possible to teach history apart from doctrine? Explain.
4. Do the principles which guide us in understanding Church history also apply to history beyond the Christian movement?
5. Why do we need to remember that our understanding of history is always necessarily limited?
6. Let’s try an experiment. Do you think the Christian movement influenced or contributed to the formation of the United States? In what ways? To what extent? Is there a “Christian view” of American history?
7. What other worldviews contributed to the American Revolution and the founding of our Republic? How did these worldviews and the Christian worldview “flow together” in this effort? How can you see the hand of God in this? How can you see the grace of God in this? What caveats must we recognize as we talk with others about the influences shaping the beginnings of this country?
8. What role has the Christian approach to history had in this country in your lifetime?
9. What’s the most important lesson or insight you have gained from these chapters? What is one action step you will take to massage that lesson into your life?

Chapters 22-26: Alternative Versions of How to Think about History

First impressions:

Participants share meaningful insights, quotes, or impressions from the assigned chapter.

Discussion:

1. Can you summarize in a word (e.g., “providentialism”) each of the five alternative Christian views of history identified by Jay D. Green?
2. Each of these views has something to offer. What do you find appealing about each of the four alternatives to providentialism? Where do each of these falter?
3. What are the primary arguments in favor of providentialism as a Christian approach to history? What are the primary objections? Overall, why does Poythress feel that providentialism provides the best approach to understanding history?
4. Do the principles which guide us in understanding Church history also apply to history beyond the Christian movement?
5. Poythress summarizes two additional Christian approaches to history: “antistrategy” and “vocation”. Summarize and explain Poythress’ response to these.
6. “A robust affirmation of the complexity of history, as it comes from the hand of God, leads naturally to an affirmation of many possible complementary styles for writing about it. Recognition of the diversity in human gifts reinforces the same affirmation. And so does an appreciation for the value of multiple complementary perspectives on the same event.” Poythress sees each of the six alternatives to providentialism as having something to offer to a Christian approach to history.
7. What are the implications for the study of history of these various complementary perspectives?
8. What are some ways we might encourage the people in our Personal Mission Fields to take history more seriously? Why should they?
9. How might Mark Noll’s matrix for the study of history help you from this onward in your study of history?
10. What’s the most important lesson or point you take away from this section?