

Andrew Cook:

2017 is an important year because it's the 500th anniversary of what is known as the Reformation.

We're marking this with a series on church history in which we'll get to learn a bit more about the key characters who led and shaped much of the church's theology for over five centuries, and last time we focussed on some of the good or positive reasons to study church history.

To continue on that theme, here are Derek French and Philip Parsons.

Philip Parsons:

Another good reason is because the Bible is actually full of what we might call 'Church History'. I've estimated that approximately half of scripture is devoted to the record of God's dealings with his people.

In the Old Testament you have from the book of Genesis through to Esther, you then have parts of Job, some of the Psalms and some of the parts of the prophetic books.

In the New Testament, Matthew or the four Gospels from Matthew to John, and then Acts and there are some historical references scattered throughout the epistles.

Derek French:

Yes, I think we need to note that, don't we?

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

If that's included in Scripture then it's an important subject. [...] What about those who say that the history recorded in the Bible is part of the inspired word of God and is in a different category to subsequent church history?

Philip:

Well I think that's true because often the history will have comments on it, although not always. But as we have already read, God is still at work and certainly still at work within his church.

And some of Hebrews 11, which refers to the men and women of faith, certainly refers to the inter-testamental period when it wasn't part of the revelation. It was what the people of God were going through in a period when there was no revelation, so I think that's a good argument.

And we need to read post-biblical church history obviously with discernment, but there is still much value to be had in studying it as God's work.

Derek:

What about a direct biblical reason for this?

Philip:

Yes, it's an interesting point here that people in the Bible knew their church history: those who wrote the Psalms. There are a number of those Psalms which I would call, 'Church history Psalms'. Just to give you a few: Psalm 77, 78, 105, 106, and there are others.

And there's an interesting verse in Psalm 102, verses 13 and 14, if you'd read that for us please, Derek?

Derek:

Yes and we read, *'You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favour to her; the appointed time has come. For her stones are dear to your servants; her very dust moves them to pity.'*

Philip:

I think that's a wonderful verse.

Derek:

Yes, it's out of the dust God is concerned about. Yes it is amazing isn't it?

Philip:

Well it is. And the servants of God are concerned about it as well. It's the dust and the stones that move them to pity as well. So all these things are really very good incentives for us to learn about it.

And then in Stephen's sermon in Acts 7,[...] if you look at it and analyse it you realise he's actually going through virtually the whole history of the nation of Israel [...].

Derek:

Yes it's a lovely summery of the whole of the Old Testament.

Philip:

Yes. So starting with the call of Abraham and going right through, I think they interrupt him and stop him and stone him but I mean he's basically giving them a résumé of how God has worked in the Old Testament and how it's God's activity and how there's the continuity between that and what God is doing now in the days of the New Testament.

So I think we should therefore follow their example and be acquainted at least with the elements of the history of the people of God in all ages.

Derek:

Yes indeed. Well that's three reasons for doing it. What's your fourth?

Philip:

My fourth reason is the people we study in church history are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of the family of God to which we belong. They have gone to heaven ahead of us, but we are united to them by a bond stronger than flesh or blood.

One of the glories of heaven will be the meeting with God's saints from ages past, and if you and I are going to get to know them in eternity, then it seems ridiculous that we should be wilfully ignorant of them while here below!

Derek:

And what's your final reason?

Philip:

The final reason is that the church has been the dwelling place of God throughout the centuries. We are related to the saints of old by the link of the presence of God in his church by his Spirit.

Again there's a couple of references here: Hebrews 13 and verse 5 if you'd read that for us please, Derek?

Derek:

'Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, (and here we have this promise) because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we may say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"'

Philip:

Yes, never will I leave you, never forsake you. It's not just a promise to us; it's been a promise to all God's people down the centuries, those who really have been true believers.

And there's another reference right at the end of Matthew's gospel. Matthew chapter 28 and verse 20 reads like this, and Jesus is saying to them, well I'll read verse 19,

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

And the point I'm making there is that his promise that his presence will be with his people right up until the end of the age and that means throughout the whole of church history.

Derek:

Yes and studying church history is quite exciting because you're discovering in what ways the Lord is with his people and how he helped them aren't you?

Philip:

Yes that's right and so these promises have been true of all true believers down the centuries. It is a great comfort to know that we share this common bond with the people of God in past times.

Derek:

Yes indeed.