

Sunday, September 26, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 3: The Importance of History to the Christian World View

### **Introduction**

- Simply stated, Christianity is based on historical events. Christians believe that the basis for their entire worldview appeared in human history some two-thousand year ago.
- The theological reality that “Christ died for our sins” is a fact of history.
- David A. Noebel author of *Understanding the Times*, writes, “Christianity is rooted in history and without its historical roots there would be no Christian worldview.” (Noebel, 764)
- According to Noebel, the Christian view of history can be summarized by the following landmark historical events:
  - the revelation of God (primarily His intelligence and power) through the creation of heaven and earth—Genesis 1:1
  - the special creation of male and female as body, soul, and spirit (Genesis 1:26-27)
  - the rebellion of mankind against his creator (Genesis 3:1-15)
  - the revelation of God through the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and Israel (Old Testament, Gospels, and Early Acts)
  - the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13)
  - the appearance of God in history in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem mankind from sin (John 1:1-2, 14)
  - the resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15)
  - the revelation of God through His Church, the Body of Christ (Paul’s Epistles)
  - the judgment of the world (Revelation 19-20)
  - the establishment of the new heavens, new earth, and new Jerusalem for the redeemed of all ages (Revelation 21). (Adapted from Noebel, 764).
- A careful observer will note that the events listed above occurred only once, thereby adding further credibility to our previous conclusion that linearism is the primary model for understanding Biblical history.
- “There is no doubt that much of the evidence for the validity of the Christian faith is rooted in history. Christianity is a historically founded faith. Its validity, or credibility is based on Jesus Christ literally living in history. The resurrection is rooted in time-space history. Everything that Jesus lived, taught, and died for is dependent upon His literal historical resurrection. (McDowell, 673)
- Christianity stands or falls based upon the veracity of certain historical facts according to Dr. William Lane Craig. (McDowell, 673)

### **Historical Relativism**

- Skeptics, atheists, and humanists have sought to undermine the faith by arguing that

history is unknowable. Historical relativists claim that there is no such thing as objective history.

- David A. Noebel highlights the challenge posed by historical relativism when he writes, “to shatter Christian doctrine and the Christian worldview, one need only shatter its historical underpinnings.” (Noebel, 764-765)
- This is precisely what the historical relativists are attempting to do, according to Dr. Norman Geisler:
  - “Unlike some religions, historical Christianity is inseparably tied to historical events, including the lives of Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. These events, especially those of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, are crucial to the truth of evangelical Christianity (I Corinthians 15:1-9); without them, it would cease to exist. Thus, the existence and knowability of certain historical events are essential to maintaining biblical Christianity.

The knowability of history is important not only theologically but also apologetically, for the overall argument in defense of Christianity is based on the historicity of the New Testament documents. Hence, since the objective knowability of history is strongly challenged by many contemporary historians, it is necessary to counter this claim in order to secure the defense of Christianity.” (Geisler. *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 181)

- For a complete refutation of Historical Relativism read pages 29-39 of my book *What is History? How Should Believers View History*.
- Apologist Dan Story offers the following assessment of the uniqueness of the Christian worldview and its relationship with history in his book, *Defending Your Faith: How to Answer the Tough Questions*. “Christianity is not a mystical religion, such as many Eastern religions and their New Age clones. Neither is it a mythical religion with idols and man-made gods. Nor is Christianity a misinformed religion, such as the various cults. Rather, Christianity is an **historic religion, and its truth-claims are grounded on objective, historical facts.**” (Story, 17)

### **Historical Reliability of the Old Testament**

- “If Christians can demonstrate that the Bible is truthful in all areas in which it can be validated, we have before us the most powerful and compelling evidence for the truthfulness of Christianity. Every apologetic argument rests on the reliability of the Bible, including the deity and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (Story, 34)
- There are three proofs for the reliability of the Old Testament: the transmission of the text, archeology, and fulfilled prophecy.
- Old Testament scribes from the Hebrew tribe of Levi knew they were copying God’s Word and, therefore, went to great lengths to ensure accuracy by counting every line, word, syllable, and letter. (Story, 35)

- Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the oldest existing Hebrew copy of the Old Testament was the Masoretic Text dated around 900 A.D. The Dead Sea Scrolls have been dated almost a thousands years earlier than the Masoretic Text, around 150 B.C.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain two complete copies of Isaiah as well as fragments from virtually every other Old Testament book, were word-for-word identical to the Masoretic Text in over 95 percent of the readings.<sup>100</sup> The minimal variations that did exist were comprised of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. (Archer, 25)
- Nelson Glueck, author of *Rivers in the Desert*, informs his readers that “no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference.” (Glueck, 31)
- Dan Story offers the following summary of the archaeological reliability of the Old Testament:
  - Israel derives its ancestry from Mesopotamia, as the Bible teaches (Genesis 11:27-12:24)
  - World languages arose from a common origin (Genesis 11)
  - Ancient City of Jericho
  - Hittite Civilization
  - Social customs and stories are in harmony with archeological discoveries.
- In short, every time the Bible has been checked against extra-biblical sources, the scriptural report has been corroborated, thereby proving the accuracy of the Bible.
- Unlike any other religious documents, the Bible offers over two-thousand fulfilled prophecies that validate its historical claims. The specific nature of these predictions cannot be ignored. They deal with the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ, the nation of Israel, Gentile nations (Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome), cities (Jerusalem, Sidon, and Babylon), and individual people (Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus).
- In *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Josh McDowell chronicles 61 Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
- In his book *Science Speaks*, Peter Stoner comments on the mathematical probability that any man up to the present time might have fulfilled just eight of these 61 prophecies.
- “We find the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies is 1 in  $10^{17}$ . That would be 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000.” (Stoner, 100-107)
- In order to comprehend this staggering probability Stoner offers the following illustration:
  - If we take  $10^{17}$  silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the

whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wished, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance does he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets had of writing eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them according to their own wisdom. (Stoner, 100-107).

- When one considers the probability of forty-eight Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in one person, the odds increase to 1 in  $10^{157}$ , according to Stoner.

### **Historical Reliability of the New Testament**

- When it comes to the historical reliability of the New Testament, the bibliographical evidence alone is astounding. There are more extant (existing) manuscripts that bear witness to the readings of the New Testament than for any other document from antiquity.
- More than 24,000 partial and complete New Testament manuscripts are in existence today compared with only 643 copies of Homer's *Iliad*. (McDowell, 34)
- Other famous works from antiquity have even less textual evidence than Homer. For example, the writings of Plato, Pliny the Younger, Thucydides, Herodotus, and Caesar have fewer than two dozen surviving copies. (McDowell, 38)
- "In addition, to the Greek manuscripts themselves there are over 86,000 patristic (church fathers) quotations from the New Testament and several thousand lectionaries (early church-service books containing selected Scripture readings) dating from the earliest centuries of the church." In fact, from these sources alone, one is able to reconstruct the entire text of the New Testament with the exception of only eleven verses from materials that date within 150 to 200 years of the life of Christ. (Story, 38-39)
- Not only does the available manuscript evidence for the New Testament dwarf secular works, the amount of time that transpired between the events themselves and their written record is incomparable. The time span between authorship and extant copies for the New Testament is shorter than for any other document from antiquity.
- Even the most adversarial scholars admit that the books of the New Testament were written by 100 A.D., approximately 70 years after Jesus' death. While Christian apologists have referenced the fact that Luke does not discuss in the Book of Acts the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. by the Romans as proof that Acts was completed in the early 60's A.D. (Geisler. *I Don't Have Enough Faith*, 235, 238-239)
- Acts 28, Acts 1:1, Luke 1:3—the gospel accounts themselves were written within 30 years of the death of Christ.
- In contrast, "the teachings of Buddha were not recorded until 500 hundred years after his death." (Story, 40)

- Likewise, when one compares the amount of time between the events recorded and the earliest available textual witnesses, the New Testament is infinitely more historically reliable than any other work of antiquity. Consider that Homer's *Iliad* was originally written in 900 B.C. while the earliest surviving copy dates around 400 B.C., resulting in a time span of 500 years. On the other hand, the New Testament which was written between 40-90 A.D. depending on whose dating you use, has early textual witnesses that date around 125 A.D., a time span of less than 100 years. (McDowell, 38)
- "In the case of the New Testament, unlike other ancient works, whether secular or religious, not enough time elapsed between when Jesus spoke and when His words were recorded to allow for misrepresentation or the development of legendary material about him." (Story, 40-41)
- The fact that the New Testament was written by eyewitnesses to the events recorded stands out as a third proof for the historical reliability of the New Testament. In short, the New Testament possesses primary source value. "The New Testament Gospels were written either by eyewitnesses to the events in Christ's life (Matthew and John) or by men who knew and interviewed eyewitnesses (Mark and Luke)." (Story, 43)
- Paul, having seen the risen and glorified Christ, along with the other authors of the New Testament, was careful to note this firsthand, eyewitness testimony as verification of authenticity.
  - Luke 1:1-3
  - John 19:35
  - John 20:30-31
  - Acts 10:39-42
  - I Corinthians 15:6-8
  - I Peter 5:1
  - II Peter 1:16
  - I John 1:1-3
- Simply stated, the Bible is the most trustworthy historical document from antiquity. "If the Bible is thrown out as unreliable and the critics' standards remain constant when evaluating the truth-claims of other ancient books, then virtually all other books from antiquity must be discarded as unreliable." (Story, 47)
- In conclusion, there is more evidence for the reliability of the text of the New Testament as an accurate reflection of what was initially written than there is for any ten pieces of classical literature put together. . . (the Bible is) also in better textual shape than the thirty-seven plays of William Shakespeare written in the seventeenth century, after the invention of printing." (McDowell, 24)

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