

# ‘Written for Our Learning’

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I wish I could say that I that I was one of those smart kids who always loved history. Yet, in one sense, I guess that I did—although perhaps without realizing it.

I was always enthralled with old black-and-white television shows that whisked me to an earlier time that seemed both simpler and, yet, exhilarating. I found many aspects of the past fascinating. I was particularly mesmerized by the Middle Ages—especially as they set the stage for the dawn of the Reformation.

Put a dry history book in front of me, though, and I would have been entirely unenthused—unless, perhaps, it was a volume about the history of sports.

I did love Bible history, though, as well. I remember that in my middle years in Lutheran grade school my teacher would begin the day by reading an extended passage of Scripture. When he got to the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, I recall listening as though I were following on a horse behind King David. I even scribbled the words “David stories” next to those books in the table of contents of an old Bible.

I had outstanding history teachers and classes in high school and Bible college, and that’s when a formal love of history really began to click for me.

But it was in seminary that I began to think purposely and deeply about the historical nature and background of the Bible. Unlike other religious books, the Scriptures are built upon history in such a way that if Biblical history were not true, then the Bible itself would be invalidated (see, for example, 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

I began to realize what an incredible shame it is when Bible-believing preachers who ought to know better allegorize the details of Old Testament history. In this manner, they commit an injustice with regard to the text that is similar to that of liberal scholars, who deny its historicity. In the end, both negate—whether outrightly, or in practice—the literal, grammatical, historical meaning of the text, searching instead for some deeper piety.

My Old Testament professor and theological mentor, Dr. John Whitcomb, modeled an entirely different approach. Dr. Whitcomb spent decades refining his famous Bible chronology charts,<sup>1</sup> and his manner of teaching on historical passages was spellbinding. I found the challenge of putting the pieces of the inspired Hebrew Scriptures together—fixing the sequence of events solidly in my mind, and matching people, actions and dates with precision—to be riveting. I experienced firsthand the velocity of the blessings that flow to those who approach the text reverently, and literally.

In this regard, the Apostle Paul stated in Rom. 15:4:

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

I learned to love the Old Testament, and the Hebrew language behind it, in a way that I had not previously imagined.

As I have matured in my theological and ministerial pursuits, I have also grown more deeply in my appreciation for the impact that the Bible has had upon all of history.

Specifically, I find that my interests have run on two parallel tracks: Old Testament and church history—particularly Reformation history, focusing on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the subsequent development of dispensational theology. I see these interests as complementary. Just as we can learn from the characters and events in Biblical history, so we can learn similarly from church history—but it must be *real* church history, not a version created out of one’s imagination—using many of the same interpretive tools.

I have shared before how the months of September, October and November are the *church history phase* of my year. As the wheat is transformed into gold and the geese fly south, I can hear the echoes from the Middle Ages. I sense the darkness about to be vanquished by the light once again.

If you had asked me at six years of age what holiday we celebrate on October 31st, I would have responded, “Reformation Day.” It seems that these impressions that were engraved so deeply on my young mind have forcefully reemerged.

I relish the opportunity to teach through the Reformation once again this year, and I pray that it might work toward the “learning” of all who hear, to increase their “hope.”

What an astounding thing it is to grasp that God is the superintendent of history!

A posterity shall serve Him.  
It will be recounted of the Lord to the *next* generation,  
They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born,  
That He has done *this*. (Ps. 22:30-31)

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Whitcomb produced seven charts, and there are three more in the same set that were done by his colleague at Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. James L. Boyer. For information, see “Charts;” Whitcomb Ministries; n.d.; <https://www.whitcombministries.org/charts.html>; Internet; accessed 25 August 2022. It should be noted that Dr. John MacArthur bases much of his understanding of Biblical chronology on these famous charts by Whitcomb and Boyer, and gives them credit for the use of several of them on the copyright page—even in the new edition of his famous study Bible. See John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., English Standard Version (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2021), p. iv.