

Vern S. Poythress. *Redeeming Our Thinking about History: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022. 227pp. + 18pp. (back matter).

Those who debate a Christian understanding of history from an academic point of view tend to fall into one of two camps. On the one hand are professional historians who stress the limitations of human knowledge and are cautious about precise applications of biblical ideas, such as how or even whether one may discern the role of providence in history. On the other hand are scholars who focus on theology or biblical studies and who believe that one may use the testimony of Scripture as a basis for firmer conclusions about the nature, course, and analysis of history. The first group emphasizes the uncertainty of human knowledge and the second group the certainty of religious truth. The author of this work is definitely in the second camp, and this book is in fact a fine example of this emphasis.

Vern Poythress is a systematic theologian and NT scholar who has been a long-time member of the faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary. He has given a great deal of thought to a Christian approach to the humanities, having previously written volumes on redeeming the study of mathematics, philosophy, and science. From this perspective, he has written a guide to help show how a Christian might think about history.

Basic to any such discussion is how the author views the nature of history. For his fundamental structure, Poythress follows the common outline for laying out a biblical worldview under the concepts of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. In addition, he adopts a not uncommon fourth point: Consummation. Those who use the simpler framework likely see history subsumed under Redemption, reflecting how Christ's work of redemption unfolds historically and climaxes with the final fulfillment of that work at the end of time. The idea of Consummation, however, does mesh well with the study of history by pointing to the end, or goal, of history with an emphasis on the process through which humanity reaches that end. As for history itself, the author sees its components as events, peoples, and meanings, and he uses those categories for his discussion.

Another feature of any sound Christian approach to history must obviously be how it relates the biblical data to the discussion. This aspect is a strength of this book. Poythress says that when God calls his people to remembrance, as in instructing children, God refers to history in the Bible, providing something of a model for our own approach. To facilitate such an approach, the author provides a handy assembly of texts relating to knowing and studying history. The "Psalms of remembrance" (cf. Pss 105–107), for example, demonstrate how history is wrapped up with revelation. (One could extend the idea to other summaries of the history of God's people in specific portions of Scripture, such as Stephen's defense in Acts 7.) Poythress recognizes human limitations, such as observing that historical generalizations are not the same as natural law. Likewise, he allows for the uniqueness of inspiration as elevating biblical history to a higher level than other forms of history but says the human element of Scripture suggests a role for humans in creating historical writings.

A major portion of Poythress's work considers the Christian's treatment of providence in history. The author illustrates providence in history with two everyday examples: prayer requests (and the answers to those requests) and testimonies of conversion. Both involve events and the interpretation of those events through a biblical lens. Even more to the point, they emphasize the role of God in

those events and interpretation of them. More broadly he lays down what he sees as key principles for understanding providence in history: God's universal control, the glory of God, benefits even to the undeserving, positive value of trials, retribution, and moral and spiritual evaluation. Identifying such principles separates him from popular concepts of providence in history, which focus mainly on nearly miraculous interventions of God in history such as the storm that scattered the Spanish Armada. Poythress's principles suggest wider (and subtler) ways of considering the role of providence in history and point to further avenues for exploring this concept.

Earlier we suggested two camps in approaching the study of history: Christian historians and theologians. Poythress himself highlights this contrast through his extensive interaction with Jay Green's *Christian Providentialism: Five Rival Versions*. Green's work provides a counterpoint, advocating a more circumscribed approach to finding providence in history. Here Poythress firmly argues for ideas such as providentialism and an unambiguous Christian viewpoint in writing history. If nothing else, he reminds us that debates over God's role in history are not over.

There are, however, a couple of cautions. Poythress appears to chide those who write in a neutral, academic tone in order to present their work in scholarly journals or conferences. Granted the need to present a positive Christian viewpoint, there is also a need to address a secular audience in a manner that they will accept, or there will be no forum for presenting anything. We also come back to the nagging question of how well we can discern providence in studying history. Poythress's illustrations of prayer and conversion are helpful, but they are not precise parallels to historical study. In the author's examples, the subjects (the one praying or being prayed for, the convert) have a personal knowledge and experience that make the workings of providence subjectively more evident. Historians, using sources to which they have no such personal relation, lack this insight that validates the role of providence.

These cautions notwithstanding, any Christian who wishes to approach the study of history from a biblical perspective would do well to read this book. Despite its being on a weighty topic, the work is approachable. The structure of the book facilitates study. Poythress writes short, easy-to-digest chapters focused on particular issues. Also, the outline of each chapter is clearly articulated, notably through the headings that guide the reader through the argument step by step. More important is the book's case for bringing the Scripture to bear on the study of history. Perhaps the greatest value in terms of contemporary debate is his defense of providentialism. Poythress does not answer all the challenges in discerning and applying providence, but he does make a case for ongoing work on the topic.

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