

Why Study the History of Interpretation?

by Rev. Steven Dilday

Matthew Poole's *Synopsis Criticorum* (*Synopsis of Interpreters*) is nothing less than a verse-by-verse summary of the history of interpretation. Poole covers the entire gamut: the old Jewish doctors, the early Church Fathers, Medieval Rabbis, Reformation-era Romanists, Lutherans, and the Reformed. But this raises a question: Why should I exert so much effort in the study of the history of interpretation?

It seems that many in Evangelicalism have adopted the "me-and-my Bible" approach to the study of the Word of God. The general idea seems to be that, if I spend time reading my Bible, the Spirit of God will help me to interpret it correctly. I am not in need of the help of human teachers. Consequently, the preaching of the Word of God is held in little regard (a mere formality) and the great commentary books are largely neglected.

Ironically, this is not a Biblical approach to the study of the Scriptures. God has superabounded to His people in blessing them with the Word and the Spirit, blessings surpassing sublimity. But God has also blessed His people with faithful preachers and teachers, and that in all ages.

Under the Mosaic administration, the priests and Levites were set apart to teach God's people. This was their commission and charge from the Lord; Deuteronomy 33:10a: "They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law." During the time of Malachi, the priests had been unfaithful in this their sacred charge; but their duty remained the same. Malachi 2:7: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he *is* the messenger of the LORD of hosts." There are actually two duties here expressed: 1. the priest's duty, his lips should preserve and dispense the knowledge of the Law of God; 2. the people's duty, they should seek instruction in the Law from the priest's mouth. So, we see that God set apart teachers and instructed the people to have recourse unto them to the end that they might learn the Scriptures.

This situation has not changed under the new administration. We find the Lord Jesus Himself and His apostles preaching and teaching. This was the charge given to the apostles and to all of those succeeding them in the teaching office until the end of the world. Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you *always*, *even* unto the end of the world." It is not surprising then to find Paul, as He discusses the gifts that the ascended Christ has given to His Church, focusing upon the teaching offices. Ephesians 4:11-13: "And he [the ascended Christ] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ . . ." Three of these teaching offices were extraordinary for that first age of the Church, namely, apostles, prophets, and evangelists; but the office of the pastor-teacher continues and will continue "till we

all come in the unity of the faith . . . unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Here, the Church is likened unto a man advancing from infancy unto maturity. The pastor-teacher has a God-ordained role in pressing the Church forward in growth. This process will not be complete until the Church is perfected by Christ at His return.

What does this have to do with the study of the history of interpretation and reading Poole’s *Synopsis*? Everything. Poole’s *Synopsis* is a verse-by-verse record of what these teachers, the gift of our ascended Lord, believed and taught. It only remains for us *tolle, lege, to take up and read*.