

Editorial: Reflections on Retrieval and the Doing of Theology

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Today, in evangelical theology, there is a strong and legitimate emphasis on “retrieval theology.” A number of books have been published calling the church to retrieve the past to enable the church to live faithfully today according to Scripture (for example, see the recent books by Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals* [Crossway, 2019] and Scott Swain and Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* [Baker Academic, 2015]). But what exactly is “retrieval theology” and how do we do it?

Kevin Vanhoozer defines retrieval theology as “theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward” (*Biblical Authority after Babel* [Brazos Press, 2016], 23). For him, such a “retrieval” entails that we do more than simply repeat the past; instead our aim is to reform our theology, first by Scripture and then by the tradition, so that we can faithfully live as the church today. Obviously, few would deny the importance of learning from the past; indeed “retrieving” the theology, insights, and confessions of the church in

previous eras. “Retrieval,” in this sense, is vitally important for theology. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and we fail to learn the lessons from historical theology to our peril.

However, as important as retrieval is for our doing of theology today, legitimate questions arise regarding how best to do so and its relationship to *sola Scriptura*. In fact, questions about this relationship arise in at least two related areas.

First, what exactly is the relationship between *sola Scriptura* and retrieving the tradition in our interpretation and drawing theological conclusions from Scripture? As Christians indebted to the Reformation heritage, we rightly acknowledge that *sola Scriptura* does not mean that we do not learn from history and tradition. Scripture is our *final* authority; it is not our only authority. Yet, we strongly and rightly affirm that Scripture alone is our epistemological ground and warrant for our theology. Historical theology and tradition serve a vital ministerial role, but the ordering of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is crucial. Ultimately, Scripture warrants all of our theological formulations and where differences lie, tradition offers direction and guidance, but it is never the final authority and sufficient for our theological formulations. In fact, the great confessional standards of the church serve as ministerial authorities for us, and the reason they do is because they are true to Scripture. Thus, such “rules of faith” as Nicaea and Chalcedon function as touchstones of orthodox theology precisely because they are warranted and authorized by Scripture alone.

However, with that said, it is still vital to acknowledge the role of historical theology in our doing of theology, and we ignore the past simply to repeat its mistakes. Of course, this is where “retrieval” comes in. But it does raise the legitimate question of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and how we do theology in light of the past, but under Scripture as our final authority. These questions are not new, but in recent days they are important to think through once again for the life and health of the church, and a recovery of a robust, faithful, orthodox theology.

Second, what exactly do we “retrieve” from the past since not everything in historical theology is worthy of retrieval! Retrieval works best in the doctrinal areas of “catholic” agreement (e.g., Trinity [Nicene Creed], Christology [Chalcedonian Creed]). However, it does not work as well in other areas of theological disagreement. For example, what confessional

standard do we choose from the past? The Council of Trent? The Westminster Confession of Faith? The Second London Baptist Confession? Or the Baptist Faith and Message? Or, what do we retrieve in terms of which view of the atonement captures best Scripture's understanding of Christ's work, or which ecclesiology do we recover? In these latter areas, our Confessions and doctrinal formulations materially differ, which reminds us that "rules of faith," as important as they are, must still be subsumed under the final authority of Scripture. Is it even possible to create "catholic" or "mere" agreement in more contested doctrinal areas?

In this issue of *SBJT*, our goal is address these two areas, with our primary focus on the first. Most of our articles wrestle with the relationship between the "retrieving" of tradition and its role in the doing of theology under the authority of Scripture. First, Kevin Vanhoozer addresses the role of systematic theology in our interpreting and reading Scripture correctly. He proposes that our interpretation of Scripture is not distinct from our theology, and in fact a true and faithful *biblical* reading of Scripture demands that we read the Bible's story *theologically*. He demonstrates his point by using the atonement as his test case and demonstrating that a proper understanding of the cross demands a *theological* reading of the Gospel narratives.

Next, in my article, I address the relationship between retrieval and *sola Scriptura* in our doing of Christology. My argument is that the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creed serve as authorities for our theology, yet "retrieval" of the Creeds is not enough to arbitrate some crucial ongoing disagreements within Christology over what a "person" is. Ultimately, the only way to resolve these disagreements is not by a mere appeal to the Creed but to demonstrate that one's definition and understanding of "person" does not fit with the Scriptural presentation of Christ's identity and the triune person-relations.

In Matthew Barrett's article, he thinks through similar territory as Vanhoozer by wrestling with the relationship between systematic theology, our reading of Scripture, and the drawing of theological conclusions from Scripture. He proposes a reciprocal relationship between Scripture and theology, what he calls a hermeneutical boomerang. Systematic theology circles back around to influence how we approach Scripture, including what ways we do and do not exegete the text or interpret the unfolding history of redemption. In this way, there is a hermeneutical reciprocity that is theologically informed: exegesis and biblical theology bear the fruit of

systematics, but our systematic theology should also be the nutritious soil within which our exegesis and biblical theology grow and blossom.

The articles by Peter Gentry and Pierre Constant address some important hermeneutical issues that we need to consider as we read Scripture and draw theological conclusions. Specifically, Peter Gentry wrestles with whether some forms of Patristic exegesis, known as prosopological exegesis, should be retrieved today. Gentry argues that we want to learn from the past, but this does not entail that this form of exegesis practiced in the early church is consistent with how the NT authors quoted OT texts and made their Trinitarian and Christological conclusions. Finally, our Forum pieces focus on the question of the relationship between historical theology and the development of doctrine, and how best to retrieve the past today.

For the second area, Gregg Allison wrestles with what we can “retrieve” from the past in such areas where there has not been “catholic” agreement. Specifically, he thinks through ecclesiology which is probably one of the most contested doctrinal areas in the church. He asks the question of whether it is possible to have a “mere” ecclesiology, in the sense that C. S. Lewis used the term “mere” in his famous *Mere Christianity*. In this book, Lewis’s goal was to explain to unbelievers what was common or “mere” to all Christians, while intentionally avoiding disputed matters. Allison wrestles with whether such a “mere” ecclesiology can be done today—an ecclesiology that serves a specific purpose of highlighting the *essential* nature of the church, its core ministries, its principal leadership framework, and more. In the end, he argues that such a “mere” ecclesiology can be done but is most useful for unbelievers who need to know something about what the Christian church is. However, for Christians, such a “mere” ecclesiology is difficult in theology and especially in practice.

To round out our issue, we have also included Gregg Allison’s Faculty Address delivered at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2019. It is an excellent example of a faithful, constructive piece of theology that thinks through a theological view of human embodiment with significant implications for the church today.

Our goal in this issue of *SBJT* is to think through the doing of theology for today’s church. What is desperately needed is theological thinking that is true to Scripture, consistent with the history of the church, and which speaks powerfully in our present context, as the church is called to faithfully teach and proclaim the glories of our triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Retribution theology is countered in Scripture. The fact is that not all good people are rewarded with good things in this life (Job and Paul are notable examples). In other words, Eliphaz simplistically concluded that the innocent are protected in this world and the wicked perish. Bildad and Zophar echo the same sentiments, accusing Job of wrongdoing, as evidenced by his plight (Job 8:6; 20:27-29). But all three of Job's friends were wrong about Job and wrong about God (Job 42:7). When Jesus' disciples saw a man born blind, they asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Such a question shows an underlying belief in retribution theology—either the man or his parents were being punished for some wrongdoing. In reflecting on constructive retrieval of past tradition for contemporary theological purposes, the interesting question is therefore not whether we should do it, but how we should do it, and whether there are any particular problems or dynamics we need to be aware of in doing so in order to make sure that we do it well. Before turning to the question of what this has to do with theological retrieval, there is a caveat that needs to be registered. We must not misunderstand what is happening here as a sheer rejection of substance in favour of "use". As in Luther, these reflections on "use" have significant implications for understanding the intrinsic significance of objects and signs. As Rowan Williams explains, in Augustine. Specific models of theological reflection, teaching methodologies, and learning outcomes are analyzed and discussed. H. "Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture" (Bevans, 1992, p. 1). Each model presents a different way of theologizing which takes a particular context seriously, and so each represents a distinct theological starting point and presuppositions. Retrieval of our marital/family experiences is the beginning movement. I initiate the reflection with a prompt to guide the student to an impact experience. X, 193 pages 22 cm. "Dr. Gilkey discusses how science has changed our attitudes toward religious statements and the traditional sources of Christian belief. The most important change in the last two centuries, he believes, lies in the crucial shift from the belief that religious truths are made up of statements of fact to the understanding of religious truth as a system of symbols."--Jacket. Includes bibliographical references. Academia. Sinica, Taipei. Reflections on Information Retrieval Evaluation. Mei-Mei Wu & Diane H. Sonnenwald, National Taiwan Normal University / University of North Carolina. research to include cross-language IR, spoken document retrieval, and the investigation of relevance feedback. Wu, M. & Sonnenwald, D.H. (1999). However, TREC does include an interactive track that focuses on user interaction with IR systems. This track is an attempt to.