

INTRODUCTION

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Whether you have studied academic theology or not, if you have an interest in Christian thought or theology, it is likely that along the way you have stumbled across a thinker or writer to whom you have been attracted. It may have been a line of text, a lengthy theological tome, a polemical work or a devotional treatise. Nonetheless, most of us at some point find our 'heroes' from amidst the writings of the last two thousand years.

This volume has its origin in a similar experience, or set of experiences. In the writing of my doctoral dissertation, I was trying to work through Augustine's *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*). This work is in some ways one of Augustine's most seminal and mature theological works, although *The City of God* rightfully and understandably should be called his *magnum opus*. But as I worked through *De Trinitate* I found myself swimming in completely different waters from my contemporary milieu. It was difficult initially to follow Augustine's train of thought, to understand perhaps why he was arguing the way he was, and to foresee where he might be headed with his argument. I read and reread many sections, particularly the opening sections, and continued to plod along. But a wonderful thing happened. As I stayed the course, Augustine began to become a bit less foreign to me, and I began to grasp his logic. I believe I even began to understand why he was arguing the way he was. A volume that initially had been a bit off-putting – if not downright intimidating – began to appear as a friend and ally.

Plus I gained more than simply additional ammunition with which to buttress my systematic theology. As I read and reread Augustine I was learning how to think theologically. I saw Augustine making theological connections that I might not naturally have made. I saw Augustine wrestling with certain analogies for the Trinity – as if he were inviting the reader to wrestle with an analogy along with him – only to discard most of the analogies before the journey was complete, for most of the analogies ultimately proved unhelpful.

In short, by watching one of the greatest theologians of the Christian church theologize, I was learning how to theologize. And although I already knew that historical theology, the history of Christian thought, is important, I was now learning first-hand why it is so important. Now, it is easy to quote Santayana, 'He who is ignorant of the past is doomed to repeat it,' or Richard Weaver, 'Ideas Have Consequences.' It is quite another thing to walk with a great thinker, and begin to understand why they argued the way they did.

I teach systematic theology for a living and love it. I enjoy quoting Charles Hodge when he speaks about how the human mind yearns for order, and how the mind inherently and intuitively seeks to order the data it receives.¹ I think Hodge is right. I passionately affirm that Scripture is inherently theological at its core, and that systematic theology is a proper *and necessary* end flowing from the reality of the nature of Scripture itself. We must learn to think theologically. In the best theology courses students are taught the background of theological battles, and the historical exigencies that led to a construal of a doctrine in a certain way. But at times we learn, or teach, theology by giving a 'bullet point' summary of the orthodox position, and students are left knowing they are supposed to believe XYZ – say, the Chalcedonian Formula – but have little understanding of the gravitas and significance of such conclusions. And they do not simply lack this sense of gravitas or significance, but fail to understand how key thinkers came to such conclusions in the first place. As a result, I suspect many students conclude that they know they should believe the Chalcedonian Formula, if only because Dr Smith says so, and perhaps they admire, or at least somewhat trust, Dr Smith (you fill in the name).

I happily and passionately affirm the full authority, sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture. And I passionately affirm that all thinkers in the Christian tradition must be judged against the bar of Scripture. God has given us Scripture, and it is certainly sufficient for our needs. At the same time, we would be wrong to suggest that God simply departed from his church either at the point the last New Testament document was written, or at the point when

1. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1968), vol. 1.

the New Testament was seen as canonical (367, with Athanasius, or earlier). Rather, is it not wiser to suspect that God might have been leading certain persons in the history of the church to articulate something in a helpful way, to forge a helpful argument, to discover an insightful theological axiom or principle?

The best theology is simply an attempt to make sense of Scripture. As others have noted, the eighty-year-old woman in the pew, with the worn Bible, marked and ragged from years of reading, wrestling and Sunday school teaching, is certainly a theologian in an important sense of the word. And by standing on the shoulders of the key theologians of the Christian tradition, we can see how they attempted to make sense of Scripture in their own time. We may find the occasional interpretation outlandish, or a logical move to be a howling non sequitur, but we do see faithful people genuinely trying to wrestle with holy Writ. As C. S. Lewis writes, 'People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes.'² Our modern lenses can perhaps be skewed, so this allows us to gain an insight into Scripture we might otherwise have missed. If we have not read Athanasius, we might miss the very natural way in which Athanasius in *On the Incarnation* sees the theological interrelatedness between the incarnation and atonement. Similarly, if we have not read Anselm's *Cur Deus homo*, we might not see the logic of the atonement as being something so thoroughly God-centred.

Now, although the above insights from Athanasius and Anselm are fundamentally biblical, why not just stick to the Bible, and save our money for something other than buying all those old dusty books? I think the answer is to be found in two interrelated propositions: (1) First, through reading the great theologians we come to see the logic of why they reached the conclusions they did, why they felt that with certain issues the very gospel was at stake, and we see the significance of central theological conclusions from the last two thousand years. (2) Secondly, and perhaps just as significant, we learn how to think theologically – how to theologize – by reading the theologizing of the great theologians of Christian history. Let it be said clearly, we should be reading the great theologians, and every theologian should be one who is constantly saturating himself or herself in Scripture. And we should be willing to conclude that certain moves made by certain theologians were wrong-headed, inappropriate, fundamentally unbiblical and so on. But I believe the training received by grasping and understanding the theologizing of the great

2. C. S. Lewis, 'On the Reading of Old Books', in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 202.

theologians is invaluable, and would strengthen both the faith and work of contemporary theological students. There are many other benefits that could be mentioned – and will be in due course – not the least of these simply being the joy of studying pre-modern theology, and not constantly becoming bogged down in the often sterile and mind-numbing world of contemporary theology. Many nights (and early mornings) spent with Augustine were life-giving in comparison with the task of plodding through the latest theological tome hot off the press.

The best evangelical theology has always paid attention to the past, to the key thinkers, issues and doctrinal developments in the history of the church. Evangelicals have affirmed that Scripture is the *norm normans non normata* (the norming norm that is not normed). When evangelicals affirm *sola scriptura*, we are affirming that the Christian canon is the only infallible word we have from God. Thus Christian theology should always be returning to Scripture, be immersing itself in Scripture, and seeking to understand God, his ways and will through attention to his Word. Given the proper and sustained attention evangelicals have given – and should continue to give – to Scripture, it is understandable that one temptation for us *might* be an inattention to the seminal thinkers of some two thousand years of church history. But this is an unnecessary error for evangelicals, and, even more centrally, it is one that is inconsistent with an affirmation of the full trustworthiness and reliability of holy Writ. The Christian faith contends that all of reality hinges on certain first-century events: the incarnation, life and teachings, and death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the sending of the Holy Spirit and spread of the gospel in the first century. Thus Christians – who affirm that all reality hinges on such first-century events – have reason to give attention to the *past*. It is part of the DNA of the Christian faith to recognize that our lives and destinies are inextricably related to a long history of God's actions in history. And thus Christians should have not only a future focus, because we are confident that God is going to keep his promises and provide for his people; we should also have a certain *past* orientation in that we know that what God has done in the past is key to understanding who we are and how we are to live.

When this volume was being organized and contributors were asked to be a part, the purpose of the book was summarized in the following three key points:

1. To strengthen the faith of Christian students (and other readers), by helping them to understand the riches of the church's theological reflection.

2. To introduce theological students to the key theologians of the Christian church.
3. To help readers learn how to think theologically, by seeing how the central early and medieval theologians thought.

Undergirding these three goals is an overarching commitment to the evangelical tradition articulated during the Protestant Reformation, and clarified and elaborated since that time. There has been a type of renaissance of interest in evangelical circles since the 1990s or so in the church fathers. I remember as a seminary student discovering Tom Oden's *Agenda for Theology: After Modernity . . . What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). There Oden traces his own journey from being a 'movement theologian' (in which he went from fad to fad – feminism, Freudianism, Marxism, etc.) to being an orthodox Protestant theologian. He recounts how he began to read two types of theological works that helped in his journey to orthodoxy: (1) the works of evangelical theologians and (2) the works of the church fathers. It is difficult not to be infected with a desire to read the church fathers after having read of Oden's experience. While I have never been a 'movement theologian', it was during the often soul-withering experience of doctoral studies that I discovered my own church father, Augustine, leading eventually to a doctoral dissertation that focused in part on Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity.

It seems to me that this renaissance of interest in the church fathers is a healthy one. And at the risk of oversimplifying, there are two mistaken trajectories one might take in returning to a study of the fathers. First, one might conclude that the greatest light shines in the first five to eight centuries of the church's history, and then see subsequent developments as less illuminating. Secondly, one might see theology as really beginning in the fifteen-hundreds with the Protestant Reformation. Both of these trajectories are properly rejected, and this is clearly a false dichotomy. Instead evangelicals should read all the fathers and gain as much exegetical insight, theological helpfulness and pastoral wisdom from them as possible. The riches are vast and worthy of attention. At the same time, evangelicals can glean much from the developments of the sixteenth century too.

I also suspect that a study of the riches of the church fathers (as well as of the medieval theologians) need not incline one to depart from the Protestant tradition. For some, it appears that the study of the church fathers leads to a loosening of Reformation commitments. I have found that a study of the church fathers (and medieval theologians), when combined with the study of Scripture and the continued study of evangelical theology, has strengthened my love for and commitment to evangelical theology. A couple of comments are in order.

First, the Reformers themselves often saw themselves as in fundamental continuity with much of the tradition that preceded them, even if they believed a need for reform had arisen. Secondly, I wonder if certain evangelicals who make sweeping generalizations about some deficiency in the evangelical tradition have immersed themselves in the tradition – particularly in the Reformers themselves. When I spent a summer reading Calvin's *Institutes* from cover to cover I did not find a dry, soulless dispenser of theological propositions. Instead, I found straightforward Bible-soaked theology and a pastoral heart. I suspect such delving would help evangelicals not only to recover the wealth of the early and medieval theologians, but that of the Reformers and their heirs too.

In the light of the above, contributors were asked in their respective chapters to offer (1) an insightful theological analysis and commentary on each theologian; and (2) a critical assessment of each theologian that asks how evangelicals should view and appropriate (or not) the insights of the theologian. It is hoped that this volume might contribute to a passion for thinking theologically and, ultimately, for acting in the light of what is known. Augustine could argue that it is right to try to say something about God, as long as we approach him a certain way. Augustine writes, 'there is no effrontery in burning to know, out of faithful piety, the divine and inexpressible truth that is above us, provided the mind is fired by the grace of our creator and savior, and not inflated by arrogant confidence in its own powers'.³ It is hoped that these chapters will indeed lead to the cultivation of minds 'fired by the grace of our creator and savior', and that readers will be helped to think rightly about our good and great God.

3. *The Trinity* 5.1. In *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 11, ed. John E. Rotelle, O. S. A., tr. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1992).