

Editorial: Retrieval: Its Importance and Pitfalls

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In recent theological discussion there has been a focus on the importance of “retrieval,” which is ultimately a good thing. In contrast to our present culture, which tends to focus on what is current, thus viewing the past with suspicion, theological retrieval seeks to learn from the past to address issues in our present day. This is significant because it reminds us that we are not isolated individuals, re-inventing the wheel all over again, but part of a theological heritage that we ignore to our detriment and peril. Our emphasis on *sola Scriptura* must be affirmed with deep conviction, both in theory and practice, but it is important to remember that *sola Scriptura* does not mean that we do not learn from the past. Tradition has a significant place in our theologizing, which includes not only the confessional and creedal heritage of the church but also the teaching of individual theologians throughout the ages.

No doubt, tradition does not have “magisterial” authority that Scripture alone does. Rightly, Scripture is the foundation (*principia cognoscendi*) of our theology and thus *norma normans*, i.e., “the ruling rule” of all of our theological formulations and conclusions. Yet, tradition that is consistent

with the teaching of Scripture has authority, albeit a “ministerial” authority. This is why creeds and confessions are rightly said to be *norma normata*, i.e., “the ruled rule” of our theology. If our theological formulations, as given by individual theologians, along with the creedal and confessional heritage of the church, are true to Scripture, they also serve as a secondary authority for us. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and even as Reformational Christians, it is important to remember that the Reformers never saw themselves as standing against tradition but instead affirming what the church had taught throughout the centuries, as judged and warranted by Scripture.

For this reason, a healthy emphasis on “retrieval” of past thought, as reflected in individual theologians, along with the creeds and confessions of the church, is both helpful and necessary for the church today. In fact, most current challenges and questions we face in theology have some precedent in the past. No doubt, there are a few issues that are “new,” which the church must address, often tied to the development of new technology. For example, how Christians should think of artificial intelligence, cloning, and various reproductive technologies was not an issue that previous theologians addressed. However, most issues that we face today are old in the sense that someone in the past taught them. This is why knowing history and historical theology is vital to dealing with many of the current issues we presently must address. As the old adage goes: If we do not learn from history, inevitably we are doomed to repeat its mistakes. This is why the current focus on retrieval is important for today’s church.

However, with that said, there are also pitfalls we must avoid. Not everything from the past is correct and consistent with the teaching of Scripture. For this reason, councils had to be called in order to articulate, confess, and proclaim the truth of God’s Word in contrast to false teachings. At the Council of Nicaea, the church had to reject false interpretations of Scripture that led to a denial of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. At Chalcedon, the church had to reject false ways of thinking about the relationship between the deity and humanity of Christ, thus correctly articulating the biblical teaching of the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Reformation, the church had to reject false views of the sufficiency of Christ’s work and its application to us in our justification, adoption, sanctification, and ultimate glorification. In addition, the

Reformers had to clarify and articulate what biblical authority means and entails, including crucial hermeneutical issues of how to read and apply Scripture rightly. In our own day, the church has to articulate doctrine in such a way that defends the truth of Scripture on a whole variety of theological issues, especially in light of new technologies that question the biblical teaching regarding the nature of humans, human sexuality, and the doctrine of sin.

Yet, given the fact that not everything from the past is correct and consistent with Scripture, our retrieval of the past means that it has to be done carefully and under the authority of Scripture. If we are not careful, we can view a specific era in the church as *the* era to retrieve, often forgetting that no era ever captured the truth of Scripture in all its fullness. This is why our retrieval of the past must be more eclectic, in the sense that, we stand on the shoulders of our forefathers, we receive from them the best of what they teach, yet we do so by the normative standard of Scripture. Scripture, then, always serves as the norm by which we accept and reject the teaching of the past, and unless a biblical argument can be made to adopt a theological proposal of the past, we must be cautious about retrieving it for today.

In this issue of *SBJT*, our goal is to reflect on the proper employment of retrieval in our theologizing, while also avoiding its pitfalls. Shawn Wright's faculty address at Southern Seminary this year is a good place to begin since his lecture instructs us about these very matters, and it challenges us to retrieve the past with care and always under the authority of Scripture. Other essays, especially those of Ardel Caneday, Tom Sculthorpe, Michael Pereira, and Knox Brown, focus on important hermeneutical debates, especially debates regarding whether the ancient fourfold method of exegesis is something evangelicals ought to retrieve today. In the Patristic and Medieval eras, there was a strong emphasis on the fourfold sense of Scripture, something the Reformers rejected. Today, in our desire to learn from the past, the fourfold method of exegesis has made a comeback, but is this something we ought to retrieve? In some fashion, all of these essays wrestle with this question, and all of them question the wisdom of retrieving the *quadriga*, i.e., the fourfold meaning of Scripture. In addition, Michael Pereira and Knox Brown offer an extended review of Kevin Vanhoozer's *Mere Hermeneutics* — a book that is also wrestling with these crucial issues. For decades Vanhoozer has written on a proper interpretation of Scripture, and this review offers a

helpful summary and evaluation of his latest attempt to think about what it means to be biblical in our theological proposals. The last essays in the issue by Roberto Martinez and Jeffrey Beupre do not directly address the issue of retrieval, although both essays seek to learn from the past in order to make proper theological conclusions in the present in the doctrinal areas of theology proper and divine revelation.

My prayer is that this issue of *SBJT* will help the church think about the importance of retrieval in our doing of theology and also offer some legitimate warnings about some of its pitfalls. Ultimately, we need to be reminded that we do stand on the shoulders of giants in the church, but as important as these giants are, we must always learn anew to bring our thought captive to Scripture and under the Lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ.