

Partners of a Glorious Hope

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Partners of a glorious hope,
Lift your hearts and voices up;
Jointly let us rise and sing
Christ our Prophet, Priest, and King.
Monuments of Jesus' grace,
Speak we by our lives his praise.
Walk in Him we have received;
Show we not in vain believed.

While we walk with God in light,
God our hearts doth still unite;
Dearest fellowship we prove,
Fellowship in Jesus' love:
Sweetly each, with each combined,
In the bonds of duty join'd,
Feels the cleansing blood applied,
Daily feels that Christ hath died.

Still, O Lord, our faith increase;
Cleanse from all unrighteousness:
Thee the unholy cannot see:
Make, oh make us meet for Thee!
Every vile affection kill;
Root out every seed of ill;
Utterly abolish sin;
Write Thy law of love within.

Hence may all our actions flow;
Love the proof that Christ we know:
Mutual love the token be,
Lord, that we belong to Thee:
Love, Thine image, love impart!
Stamp it on our face and heart!
Only love to us be given;
Lord, we ask no other heaven.



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In the Nick of Time

Retrieving Theology: A Question of Posture

Matt Shrader

Recent days and years have seen an increased interest in the idea of theological retrieval. While the interest in this idea has grown lately, the practice has been around for some time. This is nowhere near an exhaustive list, but all of the following projects fall within the broad brush of theological retrieval: Roman Catholic *ressourcement*, *la nouvelle théologie*, paleo-orthodoxy, ancient-future Christianity, evangelical Catholicism, Radical Orthodoxy, theological interpretation of Scripture, Evangelical *ressourcement*, and the New Studies in Dogmatics book series. Even if you are not familiar with any of these names, a short glance around evangelical theology today along with its recent publications would reveal that there is not only an increased interest in theological retrieval but also a growing call for its necessity.

So what is theological retrieval and is it any different than what we think of as *church history* or *historical theology*? The short answer is that retrieval is a particular way of doing historical theology, largely in its insistence on a certain posture toward the Christian past. In my view, I see retrieval as helpful, precisely because of this posture, despite my dissatisfaction with many instantiations of it.

To understand the posture, it helps to understand its foil. As the opening paragraph implicitly shows, the assorted incarnations of theological retrieval have major *differences*. But perhaps the most important general *agreement* is their pushback against at least two complementary problems: (1) the enlightenment and modern epistemological posture that prioritizes independence and progress along with (2) modern theology's neglect of the terms, content, and resources of classical Christianity. This modern posture is rather obviously problematic to traditional Christianity as theologians have always been interested in passing on a deposit from the past to the future. These problems are not completely foreign to traditional Christianity, though. I would argue that much of our contemporary Christian culture could be described by individualism, relativism, and a thin understanding of history at best. Retrieval wants to help remedy this.

At this point it may still sound like theological retrieval simply wants to do church history as it has always been done. But more than just wanting to inform about the past, retrieval wants to cultivate a disposition. John Webster points toward the difference when he says that retrieval is an "attitude of

mind” toward the Christian past that believes it to be uniquely valuable and necessary for the church in the present.

This call for more historical engagement suggests an understanding of history itself and how history should be done (historiography). There are competing views of historiography that are at play which will determine both *if* someone will participate and *how* they will participate in theological retrieval. Not everyone sees or does church history the same way.

This points to an important quandary. On the one hand, should the history of the church be understood essentially as a fall (or irreversible decline) that needs to be recovered from? Or on the other hand, should the history of the church be understood essentially as a consistently rich source that is best approached with deference and expectation? Once you answer this question, more questions follow, but this is the fundamental dichotomy against which theological retrieval is responding.

Present-day proponents of theological retrieval would clearly advocate for the second option. They argue that church history is a lush deposit, an embarrassment of riches that we must let serve as our guide and teacher. Further, to listen well to the past one must recognize that the past did things differently and we must adjust to their way of thinking.

But what does this look like? I only have space for a brief explanation. At its core, this is an attitude toward history and the church that sees continuity with past Christians, as well as obvious discontinuities. As a Protestant, in this thinking, I may consider patristic and medieval church history not as a low point with little to no value, but as *my* history. Though Protestants will have significant disagreements with their Christian ancestors, the point is that they will not out-of-hand consider them fundamentally tainted, certainly not to the point of dereliction. That would be a posture of plundering a conquered foe, where one would only pick and choose pieces that appear useful. From the perspective of theological retrieval, a Protestant could (perhaps even needs to) sincerely sit at the feet of the patristics and medievals and learn. This is the posture of benefitting from a companion, where one will be challenged while also challenging. And this will be undertaken as a matter of obligation toward the church universal. In other words, to claim such a heritage ought to mean knowing something of that heritage.

As I said above, more questions need to be addressed within this discussion. How we answer these could put us all over the spectrum of Christendom and it will cause various forms of retrieval to be more or less beneficial. Our ecclesiology, particularly how we understand union with Christ, the body of Christ, and God’s preservation of his church through time, is important. Our relationship to tradition, traditions, and the Great Tradition and the question of where the locus of theological authority lies is likewise an essential

discussion. Retrieval surely does not mean that we ignore our disagreements with our ancestors.

Not overlooking these qualifications, proponents of retrieval generally maintain that this use of history better handles our own limitations (sinfulness and finitude) and our responsibilities to the communion of saints. Further, as Fred Sanders contends in his book, *The Deep Things of God*, much that is “latent” in our own Protestant, evangelical, and conservative theology (Sanders looks specifically at Trinitarianism) received initial and extensive explanation in the earlier eras of the church. To retrieve these explanations is not just to be reminded of what we have forgotten or overlooked, but to enrich what we have tacitly accepted (such as Chalcedonian Christology or the classic explanations of the divine attributes). Oliver Crisp is correct that we have “a far poorer grasp” of the glorious realities that we already accept in our theologies than do our “dead friends.” Indeed, the rewards for having a more robust understanding of Trinitarianism, atonement theology, and worship (to name a few more loci) are great and ultimately lead to more and better doxology.

One of the clearest portrayals of what retrieval is all about was given by Robert Louis Wilken in a 1991 *First Things* essay: “Without tradition, learning is arduous at best, impossible at worst. In most things in life—learning to speak, making cabinets, playing the violin—the only way to learn is by imitation, by letting someone else guide our movements until we learn to do the thing on our own.” The temptation to neglect the past, dismiss the past, or casually accept the past are strong. Our history has wisdom that we should not and ought not neglect. Theological retrieval is not simply a call to understand the past better, but to let that understanding influence our theology and ministry in the present.

Not all attempts at retrieval are pleasing or equally helpful. But, in its general posture toward the past, its desire to learn and grow, and its desire to enrich the doctrine and practice that we already claim, it is most welcome.



This essay is by Matt Shrader, Director of Recruitment and Retention and Assistant Professor of Church History at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
