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Even if history were judged incapable of other uses,
its entertainment value would remain in its favor.

—Marc Bloch

Preface

I can remember the day I discovered Anselm. I was sitting at the airport, waiting with my family for our flight. Somehow I'd gotten my hands on an article by Alvin Plantinga, defending a modal version of Anselm's ontological argument. Although I had no clue what the word *modal* meant at that time in my life, I remember being utterly captivated. Could God's existence really be logically proven from the mere idea of God in the human mind? I spent about thirty minutes looking at the syllogism he provided, trying to figure out what the catch was—surely it couldn't be a sound argument! This led me to read Anselm's formulation of the argument. I spent a lot of time with it, but I couldn't figure out what was wrong with it. (Actually, I still can't.)

What I found so valuable in Anselm, however, wasn't so much the argument itself but the whole way of doing theology that I found modeled in his writing. Anselm helped me understand something of how enthralling it is to think about *God*. I had already believed there is a glory and gravitas to God, but Anselm impressed upon me that there is also a glory and gravitas to the *idea* of God. This is one basic and somewhat colloquial way to summarize the import of the ontological argument: that God's uniqueness and necessity bombards us at the realm of thought as well as at so many other levels of our existence. In this way, Anselm opened up in me an awareness that would, years later, make me sympathetic to Barth's comment that theology is the "most beautiful of all disciplines."

My interest in Anselm never left me, and when I was studying abroad a few years later in college, I somehow got my hands on the

Latin text of the *Proslogion* (the book in which Anselm advances his so-called ontological argument). I gave the argument a more careful reading in its original context, and I began to be intrigued by the spiritual intensity of Anselm's writing. Why is he writing this argument in a prayer? Why does he go on and on about *seeing God* (isn't God invisible?). And, related to this, what are all these later chapters doing, after he's proven God exists? Ultimately these interests led me to my doctoral work on the *Proslogion*.¹

Anselm then led me elsewhere. I became more and more interested in the peculiarity of medieval theology as a whole and what I could learn from it as a contemporary evangelical. I also began to read the church fathers with greater interest. I used the coursework stage of my PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary to pursue a number of studies in theological retrieval, immersing myself in the classic texts of church history, as best as I could, for help in doing theology today. Having grown up in evangelical circles, my previous experience in historical theology had focused primarily on Protestant theologians such as Martin Luther or Jonathan Edwards. So I was stepping into a new world as I sought to engage theologians such as the Cappadocian Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, and others. I can vividly recall sitting at my desk in the spring quarter of 2013, doing research for a study on patristic and medieval views of divine simplicity, and thinking, *Wow! There is a lot of treasure to be mined here. This is like discovering Anselm all over again.* (The results of that study are roughly represented by chapter 5 of this book.)

It is difficult to describe what these excursions into the classical texts of historical theology have done to me. The best I can do is compare them to getting lost in a profound piece of literature, or spending significant time in a foreign country. It has been a formative experience that has shaped not only my theological positions but my whole approach to theology. At the same time, my interest in historical theology has always seemed somewhat disconnected from my broader life and ministry in evangelical contexts. Most of the Christians I interact with

1. Gavin Ortlund, *Anselm's Pursuit of Joy: A Commentary on the Proslogion* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

regularly have never heard of Anselm or struggle to understand what value there could be in studying a monk from the Dark Ages. So an abiding question in my life as an evangelical Christian and minister has been: How does my theological interest in classical theologians such as Anselm relate to my calling and context in the United States in the early twenty-first century?

Let me lay my cards on the table right up front in an effort at explaining what is basically driving this book: I think evangelical Christians can and should engage Anselm. Or Tertullian. Or Athanasius. Or Photius. And so forth. This book stems from the conviction that has been formed in me about the tremendous value of retrieving the past and broadly aims to encourage more evangelicals to join in this effort. The first section lays out an overall manifesto for theological retrieval, and the second puts it into practice with a series of case studies.

Why have I spent the larger half of the book focusing on specific retrieval efforts? My approach to engaging history emphasizes “snapshots” more than running commentary. If you are trying to get to know an uncharted jungle, it will likely be more helpful to establish three or five reliable outposts or bases from which you may make further explorations than simply to slog through from one end of the jungle to the other. So if we consider pre-Reformation church history like a dark jungle (an apt analogy for many modern evangelicals), our goal here is to carve out several outposts from which further retrieval expeditions may be made.

In this respect Joseph Ellis’s *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* has served in my mind as something of a model for the strategy of historical engagement attempted here.² Ellis credits the style of history telling attempted in his book—covering six particular episodes in early American history as a way to enter the whole of the Revolutionary era—to Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*, which he describes as “a combination of stealth and selectivity.”³ Strachey’s quoted justification for this method may serve well as explanation of our own effort:

2. Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

3. Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, ix.

It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hither-to undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.⁴

Another model in this respect has been Mark Noll's brilliant book *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, which in its preface articulates several benefits to focusing on key "turning points" as a way to narrate history.⁵ I think similar principles can be at play when engaging historical theology specifically as opposed to church history more generally.

I have written with pastors, theology students, and interested lay Christians especially in mind. This is a sort of mid-level book that engages the scholarly machinery but ultimately hopes to influence a broader readership. Historically, my overall leaning has been toward those people and debates and contexts that have been particularly neglected in our own context; thus I favor patristic and medieval theology over Reformation and modern, and particularly those figures at the transition from patristic to medieval who are often neglected today, especially Boethius, Gregory the Great, and John of Damascus (in the third chapter I introduce these three figures as examples of theologians we often overlook).

Earlier versions of several chapters have appeared in the following publications:

- "Why Should Protestants Retrieve Patristic and Medieval Theology?," in *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method* (Los Angeles Theology Conference Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

4. Lytton Strachey *Eminent Victorians*, as quoted in Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, ix.

5. Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 12.

- “Explorations in a Theological Metaphor: Boethius, Calvin, and Torrance on the Creator/creation Distinction.” *Modern Theology* 33.2 (2017): 167–86.
- “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing A Contemporary Discussion,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16.4 (2014): 436–53.

I am grateful to the editors and publishers of these journals for their permission to republish these articles here. A few paragraphs from this preface, chapter 1, and chapter 3 are loosely related to earlier material from online writings.⁶

I want to express my thanks to Oliver Crisp and John Thompson, my professors at Fuller Theological Seminary who oversaw several of these studies in their embryonic development. Dave Lauer has also proofread several chapters and sharpened my thinking with our many theological discussions over lunch. Joel Chopp offered helpful suggestions to the first part of the book. Above all, I want to express my thanks to my precious wife, Esther, who supports me beyond what I could possibly hope for in a wife. None of my writing—indeed, very little of anything I do—would be possible without her loyalty, friendship, and encouragement.

6. E.g., “Gospel-Centeredness Is as Old as the Gospel,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/searching-for-gospel-centered-theology-before-the-reformation>; “3 Ways Our Culture is Different From Every Other Culture in History,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-ways-our-culture-is-different-than-every-other-culture-in-history>; and “Is Christ in All of Church History?” <https://gavinortlund.com/2013/08/03/reflections-on-studying-church-history>.

PART 1

A MANIFESTO FOR THEOLOGICAL RETRIEVAL



Just over a decade ago John Webster drew attention to the rising influence of “theologies of retrieval,” describing them as too diverse to constitute an official movement or school.¹ If retrieval practices have grown only more diverse since that time, they are nonetheless so pervasive throughout contemporary theology that it is difficult not to conceptualize them as a kind of movement.² Like the turn toward theological interpretation in biblical theology, the turn toward retrieval in systematic and historical theology lacks official boundaries and resists precise definition. It is better understood as a set of shared loyalties or instincts in theological method—an overall attitude guided by the conviction that premodern resources are not an obstacle in the age of progress but a well in the age of thirst.³

1. John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 584.

2. The first book-length treatment of theological retrieval as a contemporary “movement” appeared recently by David Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

3. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain offer a more substantive description of retrieval from a Reformed perspective as stemming from the conviction “that theological renewal comes through

Of course, in one sense, theological retrieval is nothing new. A posture of reception and transmission is a basic part of Christian identity, and the church has always drawn from her past to meet the challenges of her present.⁴ Nonetheless, retrieval has come to have a more specific and deliberate use in the late modern West, where the individualism and freedom from authority that characterize the secularizing culture have compelled the church to look for new sources of inspiration and synthesis. It is this cultural context, perhaps, that explains why retrieval movements are springing up in so many different traditions—from the *ressourcement* theology or *la nouvelle théologie* of Henri De Lubac and other French Roman Catholic theologians to the Radical Orthodoxy of John Milbank (Anglican), the paleo-orthodoxy of Thomas Oden (Methodist), the ecumenical labors of Donald Bloesch (UCC) or Robert Jenson (mainline Lutheran), the ancient-future movement of Robert Webber (also Anglican), and so forth.⁵

Alongside these various Catholic, Anglican, and mainline Protestant movements, retrieval is on the rise in evangelicalism. In 2015 two book-length treatments of theological retrieval came out from evangelical authors, published by evangelical presses and covered with blurbs from evangelical theologians.⁶ At the same time, there remains considerable ambivalence in many Protestant circles, particularly evangelical Protestant circles in the United States, about the retrieval of patristic and medieval theology. One manifestation of our historical short-sightedness, at both popular and technical levels, is sheer ne-

dependence upon the generative resources of the Triune God in and through the gospel and that such dependence is best expressed in our particular historical moment by way of retrieval.” See *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 2.

4. Of course, different Christian traditions disagree regarding what the reception and transmission of history should look like, and such differences are among the chief causes of division within Christendom. For an overview of some of the differences within and between Protestant, Anglican, and Roman Catholic views on Scripture and tradition, with a special focus on Albert Outler’s recent employment of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” see Edith M. Humphrey, *Scripture and Tradition: What the Bible Really Says* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 9–17.

5. Scott R. Swain and Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 4–12, offer a list of twelve different contemporary movements in the church characterized by retrieval.

6. Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, provide an overview and guide to retrieval, focusing on six different “typologies” of what it looks like in practice; Swain and Allen, *Reformed Catholicity*, offer a “manifesto” for a specifically Reformed account of retrieval. Evidence for evangelical renewed interest in retrieval includes also the rise of various projects such as Zondervan Academic’s New Studies in Dogmatics series (ed. Allen and Swain) and Baker Academic’s Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church’s Future series (ed. D. H. Williams).

glect; one wonders how many evangelical pastors or divinity students could say a single solitary thing about, say, the tenth century; or the seventh. Cardinal John Henry Newman complained in the nineteenth century that England's "popular religion scarcely recognizes the fact of the twelve long ages which lie between the Councils of Nicaea and Trent."⁷ If Newman's conclusion that "to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" did not strictly follow, its overall sentiment is difficult to dismiss—particularly because underneath the anti-historical bent of popular Protestantism lie deeper patterns of historical interpretation that have often marked even the most eloquent expressions of the Protestant faith.

One thinks, for instance, of the recurring identification of the anti-christ with the papacy, a view that finds its way into the Westminster Confession of Faith.⁸ In more recent times, Protestant interpretations of church history are often shaped by the old Enlightenment caricature of the medieval era as a "Dark Ages" of superstition and ignorance,⁹ and by the Anabaptist and Restorationist¹⁰ view of a "great apostasy" or "great fall" in the early church.¹¹ Today, Protestants generally affirm the ecumenical creeds; we appreciate early Christian martyrs; we approve of Augustine's *Confessions*; on rare occasions, we might even

7. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 8.

8. Westminster Confession of Faith 15.6.

9. This characterization of medieval intellectual life is ironic in light of the fact that the modern university is essentially a twelfth-century medieval invention, deriving from the great monastic schools of the eleventh century that in turn grew out of the tenth-century cathedral schools spawned by the Carolingian Renaissance. For a recent defense of medieval Christianity against its usual caricatures and a call for evangelical Christians to humbly engage this aspect of our heritage, see Chris R. Armstrong, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians: Finding Authentic Faith in a Forgotten Age with C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

10. The term *Restorationism* is sometimes used more generally in reference to various Christian views calling for a return to the purity of the early apostolic church and sometimes used more specifically in reference to the "Restoration Movement" or "Stone-Campbell Movement" of the early nineteenth century.

11. The "fall of the church" paradigm, usually seen as coinciding with Constantine's conversion or sometimes setting in as early as the second century, has been a classical tenet of Anabaptist theology and is carried on by many free-church and Baptist theologians into the present day, e.g., Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007), 150–65, esp. 157–58. Yarnell objects to the notion of the invisible church as articulated by Herman Bavinck (54–56); he believes that classical ecclesiology, including its Reformed and evangelical expressions (e.g., that of John Webster) must be rejected (*xiv*, 62–67); and he expresses concerns about other Baptist calls for ecumenicity, such as those of Timothy George (71). For a helpful critique of the notion of the fall of the church, see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 103–72. For a briefer overview and critique, see Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 13–16.

quote a John Chrysostom sermon or a Bernard of Clairvaux poem. But on the whole, we tend to regard the Christianity of Caedmon and Charlemagne as more different than similar to the Christianity of John Bunyan and Billy Graham.

This book is fueled by the conviction that one of the church's greatest resources for navigating her present challenges is her very past—indeed, her *entire* past. In this first part of the book, therefore, we argue that the affirmation of a robust Protestant identity need not prohibit, but should rather encourage, an appropriation of the wisdom of the early and medieval church.¹²

We will precede in three movements. First, we probe different Protestant attitudes toward pre-Reformation church history, contrasting B. B. Warfield's engagement with Augustine with the retrieval practices of various earlier Protestants whom we put forth as a more helpful guide (chapter 1). Then, having established a broad framework for Protestant retrieval of early and medieval theology, we turn to explore why such a practice is particularly needed within contemporary evangelicalism in light of both cultural developments outside the church and theological developments within her (chapter 2).¹³ Finally, we identify several specific ways that theological retrieval may resource evangelicals amidst their current needs, as well as several corresponding dangers (chapter 3). Here we also identify several particular theologians who may be especially helpful to retrieve, whom I have tried to rehabilitate somewhat in this book.

In sum, these chapters aim to establish that evangelicals may retrieve (chapter 1), need to retrieve (chapter 2), and should retrieve (chapter 3). Of course, retrieval is a complicated task, and there are scores of issues involved in it that are not answered or even raised

12. For a broader case that theological endeavor is well served by listening to the Christian tradition, see Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 5–36, who argues that theology must engage tradition because of our historical locatedness as temporal creatures and because of our status as members in the larger community of saints, past and present. On this latter point, see also Swain and Allen, *Reformed Catholicity*, 17–47.

13. Although I am writing primarily with an evangelical audience in mind, I would be grateful if this book could be helpful or interesting to Christians of other tribes. I should also note that here and in what follows, when I speak of evangelicalism, I am thinking primarily of evangelicalism in the Western world and especially in the North Atlantic world and to some extent the United Kingdom, not at all because I think this (relatively small) strand of evangelicalism is more important than others, but simply because I lack sufficient knowledge of global Christianity to generalize further.

in what follows. My aim is simply to establish a broad vision of the value of retrieval for evangelicalism—a brief *manifesto* of sorts for theological retrieval. It is hoped that these chapters will further this aim and prepare for the specific efforts at retrieval that follow in the subsequent chapters, even if others must come after me and say much more than I have said here.

Can Evangelicals Retrieve Patristic and Medieval Theology?

Whatever be historical Christianity, it is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this.

—John Henry Newman



On October 25, 1844, the twenty-five-year-old Philip Schaff—the German church historian and newly appointed professor in biblical literature and ecclesiastical history at the Theological Seminary at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania—opened his inaugural address with these words:

We contemplate the Reformation in its strictly *historical conditions*, its *catholic union with the past*. This is a vastly important point, which thousands in our day appear to overlook entirely. They see in the 31st of October, 1517, it is true, the birthday of the Evangelical Church, and find her certificate of baptism in the ninety-five theses of Luther; but at the same time cast a deep stain upon the legitimacy of this birth itself, by separating it from all right relation to the time that went before. In this way all interest