

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Good and Bad of Retrieval Theology

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1

As gospel-believing Christians, we know that God has sovereignly guided the church throughout all its history. Does this mean we're obligated to believe everything the church has ever believed? If not, what are we to hold on to from the past?



This is where retrieval theology enters the picture. Retrieval theology is different from church history or historical theology. Those disciplines seek to understand the past and trace the development of doctrine over time. Retrieval does more than that. Seeing dangers and problems abounding in our present moment, retrieval looks to the past to correct the present. Understanding it will help us grasp why some Protestants may be tempted to convert to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy.

Evangelical practitioners of retrieval often adopt it to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity or refine their biblical hermeneutics. Driven by dissatisfaction with modern approaches to the Trinity and the quest for "the author's original intention," they seek to jump over the Enlightenment's errors and retrieve the insights of the medieval and patristic eras.

Unfortunately, in their desire to go back in time to what they think is a better way of doing theology, some evangelicals have abandoned evangelicalism altogether. In seeking to protect the gospel, they come to conclusions antithetical to the biblical gospel.

Historical theology is useful. Retrieval theology is also useful. But uncritical retrieval theology is not. Let's consider two cautions for a proper understanding of retrieval theology.

CAUTION #1.

BE HUMBLE AND WISE. OLD IS GOOD, UNLESS IT'S BAD.

Retrieval theology desires to listen to the past. That's a sign of humility, one of the key virtues we should all pursue. Someone, somewhere, at some time knew God and the Bible better than I do. Like Athanasius (d. 373), who to qualify to be a deacon of the church in

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Alexandria—just a deacon!—had memorized the entire Psalter, one major prophet, one Gospel, and all the Pauline epistles. I want to learn from him.

But humility must have guardrails. Whom should I follow and imitate? How much? After all, Arius (d. 336) also served the Alexandrian church; presumably, he had as much Scripture memorized as Athanasius did. But I don't want to follow him, lest I fall into heresy and believe that Jesus is a created being. That's antibiblical.

2

Just because something is old doesn't necessarily mean it's good. When someone tells me in frustration that he wishes his local church could be like the New Testament church, I warn him to be careful which New Testament church he wants to be like. Will it be the licentious church of Corinth or the verging-toward-heresy church of Galatia?

Even during the apostles' lifetimes, things in the churches weren't going perfectly. Nor should we expect that things have always been wonderful—or that doctrinal expression has been right—in a specific period of the church's history.

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We must have criteria by which to judge what is best from the church's doctrinal heritage. In other words, how do we know what to retrieve? In our current cultural moment, the theologian *du jour* is the medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). The list of modern theologians engaging with—and in some instances, becoming entranced with—Thomas is large and growing, if the internet and social media are any indication.

So humbly listen to the past. But be wise in what you adopt from it.

CAUTION #2: CENTRALITY OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

When proponents of classical theism elevate Thomas to almost the patron saint of orthodoxy, they unwittingly open the way for much more than Thomas's doctrine of God to come into the evangelical stream of consciousness.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Francis Beckwith notes that for Thomas, justification begins with “the infusion of grace at Baptism” because “the baptized Christian literally partakes in the Divine Nature.” Thomas also advocates praying for the dead, the sacraments as means of obtaining God’s grace, and transubstantiation as essential to the sacrifice of the mass.

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3

Well-intentioned retrieval theologians may well have opened a floodgate that won’t be shut before many have abandoned Protestantism. The problem is that modern retrieval efforts feel as if they have to take all of Thomas, when early moderns (e.g., John Owen) did not.

We have extremely good reasons to remain Reformation Protestants. At its core, Protestantism answers the question “How can I, a wretched sinner, be saved by the holy God?” The heart of Protestantism is about a relationship with a holy, forgiving, relational God.

SCRIPTURE ALONE

We must remember that *sola scriptura* means just that: The Bible *alone* is the authority for what we are to believe and how we are to live. The Bible must always sit in judgment over the validity of an opinion—even if I like how intriguing, or antimodern, or “meaningful” that idea or practice is. My likes or dislikes, my feelings, must be subordinated to God’s authoritative, inerrant Word.

The biblically revealed gospel sits in judgment over any iteration of retrieval theology that would lead people away from Reformation Protestantism.

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