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Historical Theology

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INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

What is historical theology? What benefits does it provide? How should we study it?

Historical theology is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past.¹ Such concentration on the accumulated wisdom of the ages provides great benefit to Christians and churches today as they seek to live faithfully and obediently for Jesus Christ. This high value of historical theology, or church tradition, was underscored by Kenneth Kantzer, one of the founders of modern evangelicalism: “While it is not infallible, it must be acknowledged as God’s guidance of his people in accordance with his promise to the church of all ages.”² At the same time, church tradition must always have reference to Scripture; hence, historical theology must be either approved or chastened by the Word of God. As J. I. Packer, another leading evangelical, articulated: “Scripture must have the last word on all human attempts to state its meaning, and tradition, viewed as a series of such human attempts, has a ministerial

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, working from the *Formula of Concord*, defined historical theology as the study of what the church “believes, teaches, and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God.” Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), 143.

2. Kenneth S. Kantzer, “A Systematic Biblical Dogmatics: What Is It and How Is It to Be Done?” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 466. Kantzer, like many others, distinguished between two senses of tradition. Church Tradition (with a capital T), from a Roman Catholic theology perspective, refers to one aspect of divine revelation. It consists of the teachings of Jesus that he communicated orally to his disciples but which were not written down, and which were transmitted orally from the apostles to their successors, the

bishops. This living Tradition continues in the church today and at times has been proclaimed as official Roman Catholic doctrine. Specifically, Pope Pius IX promulgated the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (December 8, 1854), and Pope Pius XII promulgated the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary in his bull *Munificentissimus Deus* (November 1, 1950). The result of this view of divine revelation is “that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.” *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, November 18, 1965), 9. Church tradition (with a lowercase t) is the accumulated wisdom of the church of the past in terms of its interpretation of Scripture and its formulation of doctrine. This tradition is not part of divine revelation in the Roman Catholic sense but is of great benefit to evangelical churches today, as I argue in this chapter.

rather than a magisterial role.”³ In determining doctrine and practice, the magisterial, or authoritative, role belongs to Scripture, and Scripture alone. The ministerial, or helping, role accorded to historical theology means that it serves the church in many ways.

One benefit that historical theology offers the church today is helping it *distinguish orthodoxy from heresy*. The term *orthodoxy* here refers to that which the New Testament calls “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1), that which rightly reflects in summary form all the teaching of Scripture and which the church is bound to believe and obey.⁴ *Heresy*, then, is anything that contradicts sound doctrine. It is false belief that misinterprets Scripture or that ignores some of the teaching of Scripture, or that incorrectly puts together all the teaching of Scripture. The church is to shun heresy and seek to correct its errors (e.g., Titus 1:9). Expressed another way, historical theology helps the church recognize sound doctrine and distinguish it from false doctrine because, generally speaking, “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone”⁵—that is, what the church has historically believed and held as its doctrine—corresponds to orthodoxy, and whatever has been traditionally rejected by the church corresponds to heresy. For example, the belief that the Word of God who became incarnate as Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14) was a created being who was not eternal but had a beginning in time was condemned as a heresy by the early church. In accordance with all the teaching of Scripture, the church has always believed that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was, is, and always will be fully God, equal in all respects to the Father and the Holy Spirit.⁶ A study of historical theology that rehearses the development of doctrine helps churches today to identify and embrace orthodoxy and to reject and correct heresy.⁷

A second benefit of historical theology is that it *provides sound biblical interpretations and theological formulations*. In some cases, the immense effort and careful study exercised by the church in the past has resulted in such excellent biblical and theological understanding that the majority of the groundwork has been laid for the church as it engages in the study of theology today. For example, the early church’s work on the doctrine of the Trinity (one divine essence, three persons) and the doctrine of the

3. J. I. Packer, “The Comfort of Conservatism,” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* ed. M. S. Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 288. Alister McGrath concurred: “Tradition is to be honored where it can be shown to be justified and rejected where it cannot. This critical appraisal of tradition was an integral element of the Reformation, and was based on the foundational belief that tradition was ultimately about the interpretation of Scripture—an interpretation which had to be justified with reference to precisely that same authoritative source.” Alister E. McGrath, “The Importance of Tradition for Modern Evangelicalism,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, ed. Donald Lewis and Alister E. McGrath (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 160.

4. According to Packer, “The word [orthodoxy] expresses the idea that certain statements accurately embody the revealed truth content of Christianity and are therefore in their own nature normative for the universal church.” J. I.

Packer, “Orthodoxy,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 875.

5. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, 2.6, in *NPNF*², 11:132.

6. For further discussion, see chap. 17.

7. Indeed, as D. H. Williams pointedly asserted with regard to historical theology, specifically of the early church, “If the aim of contemporary evangelicalism is to be doctrinally orthodox and exegetically faithful to Scripture, it cannot be accomplished without recourse to and integration of the foundational Tradition of the early church. . . . Tradition is not something evangelicals can take or leave.” D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 13. From a hopeful perspective, historical theology “will help us avoid repeating the doctrinal errors that have arisen at earlier times.” J. Kenneth Grider, “Historical Theology,” in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Richard Taylor, Willard H. Taylor, and J. Kenneth Grider (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 258.

incarnation (two unchanging natures, divine and human, united in one person) has set forth the essential elements that any current expression of these doctrines will (and must) reflect. Although the present context may raise specific challenges and demand interaction with different issues not faced by the early church as it hammered out these doctrines, its thoughtful work on the Trinity and the incarnation provides a solid foundation from which to face these contemporary tests.⁸ Colloquially speaking, though the church may refine and strengthen the proverbial wheel, it has no need to reinvent it. The basic contours of cardinal doctrines have been shaped by the church of the past and thus help churches do theology today.⁹

A third benefit of historical theology is that it *presents stellar examples of faith, love, courage, hope, obedience, and mercy*. Early Christians such as Polycarp, Perpetua, and Felicitas were threatened with death if they would not renounce their faith in Jesus Christ—and they died as martyrs rather than deny the Lord who had saved them.¹⁰ They are examples of perseverance to the point of death for Christians facing persecution today. Athanasius, a mere twenty-nine-year-old secretary at the first ecumenical, or general, council of the church convened at Nicea in 325, understood the importance of sound doctrine. He championed the Nicene confession of the deity of the Son of God and fought against devastating heresy while enduring five exiles for this doctrine of Christ.¹¹ He is a model of costly commitment to the truth for the church today. A theological interpretation of Scripture enabled Augustine to produce a rich commentary on the gospel of John, which in turn reinforced and helped develop the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.¹² *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, an account of his early life and conversion to Christianity, stands as one of the bestsellers in the history of the world and has cheered on many to consider the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹³ His grace-filled life, theological acumen, and careful study of Scripture are patterns for Christians today. Olympias, a widowed deaconess of the church in Constantinople, leveraged her immense wealth to become a generous patron of the church. She donated many of her estates to the church, supported the ministries of such church leaders as John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus, ransomed exiled captives, sustained a community of 250 virgins, and cared for the

8. An example of this benefit can be seen in many of the responses of evangelicals to the contemporary viewpoint called “open theism.” This heresy had an important forerunner in the movement named Socinianism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which embraced a similar limitation on the divine knowledge. The responses offered by post-Reformers like Francis Turretin to that Socinian version of the heresy have been echoed by contemporary opponents of open theism. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. in 1 (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1997), 3rd topic, 12th q., 1:206–12.

9. A corollary of this benefit is that historical theology can ascertain “the traditional exegetical foundation for certain dogmas.” With this research in hand, evangelicals can examine whether the foundational passages (1) are interpreted properly, (2) constitute legitimate grounding for those

doctrines, (3) encourage further work on (even modification of) those theological formulations, and (4) prompt consideration of other passages as better warrants for those beliefs. For further discussion, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (London: Hutchinson; New York: Corpus, 1971), 135–36.

10. See *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in Holmes, 226–45; ANF, 1:39–44. For the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, see *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*, in ANF, 3:699–706.

11. See, e.g., his *Four Discourses against the Arians*, in NPNF², vol. 4.

12. See his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, in NPNF¹, vol. 7.

13. See Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, in NPNF¹, vol. 1.

poor. She is a model of generous giving, hospitality, and mercy.¹⁴ Martin Luther, though excommunicated by the pope and threatened with execution for heresy, was sequestered by his protective friends and hid in the Wartburg Castle for eight months. Dressed as a knight, letting his hair and beard grow long, and going by the alias of Junker Jörg (Knight George), while suffering from loneliness, constipation, insomnia, and satanic attacks, he wrote nearly a dozen books and, as if that accomplishment were not enough, translated the entire New Testament into German.¹⁵ He is an example for today's churches of faith and courage and exhausting labor for the cause of Christ. Such examples from church history could be multiplied thousands of times over.

A fourth benefit that historical theology renders the church is *to protect against the individualism that is rampant today* among Christians. Tragically, numerous factors—a consumerist mentality, an insistence on individual rights, an emphasis on personal autonomy, a pronounced sense of entitlement—have converged to foster an atmosphere in which too many Christians pick and choose their doctrines like they pick and choose their clothes or fast-food meals. If they feel uncomfortable about the sovereignty of God or are upset by the thought of an eternal conscious punishment of the wicked, they opt to overlook or dismiss those doctrines. If their worldly lifestyle is confronted by the demands of sanctification, or if the authority of Scripture challenges their stylish doubts about truth and certainty, they choose to minimize or set aside those doctrines. Thankfully, historical theology can act as a corrective to this regrettable situation. It reminds believers that theirs is a corporate faith that has always affirmed divine sovereignty, hell, holiness, and biblical authority. This rich heritage protects against the tendency to select the doctrines one likes and to reject those one does not like, thus giving in to one's sinful propensities.

Similarly, historical theology can guard Christians and churches from the penchant for the novel,¹⁶ the yearning for relevancy, and the tendency to follow strong leaders who are biblically and theologically shallow. Lamenting evangelicalism's radical proneness to destabilization, Alister McGrath urged this solution: "Rediscovering the corporate and historic nature of the Christian faith reduces the danger of entire communities of faith being misled by charismatic individuals and affirms the ongoing importance of the Christian past as a stabilizing influence in potentially turbulent times."¹⁷ Coining bizarre new doctrines (such as the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel), tampering with traditional doctrines (such as minimizing the need for repentance from sin as part of the response to

14. See Wendy Mayer, "Poverty and Generosity toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 140–58. The book offers many examples of early Christian hospitality and concern for the poor. See also Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Disturbingly, the radical new atheism, which is quick to point out the evils foisted on society by Christians, seems to be completely unaware of the immense good that Christians have done for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the needy. Their ignorance or, more sinister yet, their intentional neglect of

these countless acts of mercy, makes their case against Christianity ring hollow.

15. See Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1977).

16. As Timothy George explained, "The assumption is that recent modes of knowing truth are vastly superior to older ways, that the best equals the latest." He, too, insisted that historical theology can "serve as a bulwark against . . . theological faddism." Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the Service of the Church," *Review and Expositor* 84 (Fall 1987): 697.

17. McGrath, "Importance of Tradition," 166.

the gospel), and following dynamic leaders who boastfully minimize the importance of sound doctrines, are exposed as dangerous developments by a consideration of what the church has historically believed—or not believed.¹⁸ Again, McGrath offers wise council:

Tradition is like a filter, which allows us to identify suspect teachings immediately. To protest that “We have never believed this before!” is not necessarily to deny the correctness of the teaching in question. But it is to raise a fundamental question: why have Christians not believed this before? And, on further investigation, it usually turns out that there are often very good reasons for not accepting that belief. The past here acts as both a resource and a safeguard, checking unhelpful and unorthodox doctrinal developments by demanding that their supporters explain their historical and theological credentials.¹⁹

A fifth benefit of historical theology is that it not only helps the church understand the historical development of its beliefs, but enables it to *express those beliefs in contemporary form*. As Richard Muller explained, “Not only does doctrine necessarily arise in a historical context and take its basic conceptual framework and linguistic forms from that context, it also arrives at contemporary expression only by way of a meditation *on*, and even more importantly a meditation *through*, earlier stages of historical expression.”²⁰ For example, the early church’s doctrine of human nature was formulated in a context affected by Platonic thinking. This philosophy exalted the human spirit while it denigrated the human body; the former aspect is inherently good, asserted Platonism, while the latter aspect is inherently evil. Tragically, a significant part of the early church was negatively

18. Pelikan, quoting Lord Acton, underscored this important “redemptive” role of historical theology: “History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe. It . . . promotes the faculty of resistance to contemporary surroundings by familiarity with other ages and other orbits of thought.’ This humanizing and civilizing force of historical study can give the systematic theologian a healthy detachment from the transiency of dogmatic fashion.” Pelikan, *Historical Theology*, 150. Similarly, B. A. Gerrish urged that historical theology “is a determination to make one’s theological decisions in the best company; and it assumes that proven durability is at least as good a criterion of the best company as is current fashion. As the Anglican divine Richard Hooker shrewdly remarked, ‘There are few things known to be good, till such time as they grow to be ancient.’ This means that in the work of theology we show our highest respect not for the present best-seller, but for the established classics, which have done most to shape the tradition.” B. A. Gerrish, “Theology and the Historical Consciousness,” in *Revisioning the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology*, ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 290. His citation is from Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.7.3 (London: Everyman’s Library, 1907), 11, 29.

19. McGrath, “Importance of Tradition,” 167. In a stunning thesis, Williams envisioned two tragic outcomes if evangelical churches would not give heed to their doctrinal tradition. He predicted they “(1) will increasingly proliferate a sectarian approach to Christian faith, characterized by an ahistorical and spiritual subjectivism, which Philip Schaff aptly called ‘the great disease which has fastened itself upon the heart of Protestantism,’ and (2) will be more susceptible to the influences of accommodating the church to a pseudo-Christian culture such that the uniqueness of the Christian identity is quietly and unintentionally traded way in the name of effective ministry.” Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 14. Elsewhere, he noted that evangelicalism “cannot avoid the problem of how far we should accommodate the Christian message to the surrounding culture without losing Christian identity. . . . The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining ‘center’ of Christian belief and practice.” *Ibid.*, 12–13. Historical theology can stave off this frightening future.

20. Richard Muller, “The Role of Church History in the Study of Systematic Theology,” in Woodbridge and McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, 79.

influenced by this disregard for, and even contempt of, the body. As a result, Christians placed much of the blame for their sinfulness on the fact of human embodiment, insisted that even sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is tinged with sinful lust, and engaged in ruthless asceticism, denying themselves the good physical gifts of God, such as food, drink, and sleep. Understanding that Platonic context and its influence on the early church's theology helps Christians today reformulate the doctrine of humanity so as to avoid the negative impact of that philosophy.²¹ As Timothy George noted, "We must not simply repeat the classical doctrines of the faith with precision and clarity; we must also reflect upon these doctrines in such a way that we can expound them as our own. In this sense historical theology has both a normative and a descriptive role to play."²²

A sixth benefit of historical theology is that it encourages the church *to focus on the essentials*, that is, to major on those areas that have been emphasized repeatedly throughout the history of the church. For good reason, the church has concentrated much study of Scripture and expended significant theological effort developing doctrines such as the Trinity, the person and work of Jesus Christ, human dignity and depravity, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, salvation, and other cardinal beliefs. These doctrines are the foundation of the gospel, the core of the Christian faith and worldview, and constitute the repeated themes of divine revelation. Fascination with "new truth" and an inordinate attachment to minor beliefs has produced churches that are not centered, not unified, and not missional—"infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14). Recognizing and committing themselves to what the church has traditionally emphasized spares churches today from such disasters and helps them become gospel-focused communities.²³

A seventh benefit of historical theology is that it gives the church *hope by providing assurance that Jesus is fulfilling his promise to his people*. One of the most important biblical passages throughout the history of the church has been Matthew 16:13–20. Peter, by means of divine revelation, grasped the identity of his friend Jesus and confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." At this confession, Jesus promised, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Throughout its nearly two-thousand-year pilgrimage, the church has advanced through periods of great faithfulness, obedience, dedication, and missional endeavors, and it has persevered through other periods of carnality, political posturing, disengagement, and heresy. If Luther's sinner-saint label is true of individual Christians, it is equally true of the church

21. They may also note that some leaders in the early church acknowledged this corrupting influence and sought to avoid it, emphasizing the goodness of the material creation, recognizing that the embodiment of the Son of God in the incarnation did not result in him being sinful, and embracing the hope of the future resurrection of the body. For further discussion, see chap. 15. For a contemporary example of the reformulation of the doctrine of humanity, with an emphasis on holistic dualism or dualistic holism, see John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apolllos, 1989, 2000).

22. Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 693. He added, "It is always proper and necessary to rethink and reformulate the classic expressions of the faith; but we must do so in a way that does not do violence to the intention of those expressions, insofar as they faithfully reflect the primary witness of Scripture itself." *Ibid.*, 700.

23. A corollary of this emphasis on the major doctrines is that "there must be, in thoughtful minds, different degrees, different depths of conviction: of some things we can be more sure than others." John Stoughton, *An Introduction to Historical Theology* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 9.

itself. Even today, as churches find themselves in the midst of perhaps the most tumultuous period of their history—external attacks by a new and virulent form of atheism, internal confusion over the gospel and worship, cultural doubts about the relevancy of the Christian faith, postmodern questioning of truth and authority, and rampant revisioning of many cardinal doctrines—they experience both victory and defeat. Historical theology provides hope by reminding them that God for Christ’s sake has always been faithful to his promise to build his church.²⁴ Certainly the development of doctrine is a thoroughly human process, carried out by the church. But such development has a divine origin—it is the church of *Jesus Christ*, and he is at work to build his church.²⁵

Finally, as beneficiaries of the heritage of doctrinal development sovereignly overseen by Jesus Christ, the church of today is privileged to *enjoy a sense of belonging to the church of the past*. In words reflective of a more literary past, John Stoughton affirmed concerning historical theology: “It attaches us to former generations, and inspires us with satisfaction and joy to find, that in the substance of evangelical faith and sentiment we are one with the Church of all ages. To feel this is a prelibation [celebratory foretaste] of heaven, where our present-time relations will cease, ancestry and posterity will become contemporaneous, the faith of one will confirm the faith of another, and the joy of all will be the joy of each.”²⁶ The church today is heir to a great legacy, a heritage that can provide a sense of rootedness, depth, certainty, and hope.²⁷

Given all of these benefits, the question arises of how one studies historical theology.²⁸ Two basic approaches are commonly found: synchronic and diachronic. The *synchronic approach* engages in the study of the theology of a certain time period, a particular theologian, a specific theological school or tradition, and the like. Examples of this approach include the study of the doctrine of the Trinity in the third and fourth centuries, the development of Christology in the fourth and fifth centuries, the theology of John Calvin, and neoorthodox theologies of the Word of God. The *diachronic approach* engages in the study of the development of thought on a given doctrine throughout the periods of the church’s history. Examples of

24. R. P. C. Hanson chastised detractors of church history, who “assume that it can throw no light on what the Christian faith is about, on the activity and character of God as seen in Christianity, or by Christians.” R. P. C. Hanson, “Introduction to Volume 2,” in *The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology*, vol. 2: *Historical Theology*, ed. Jean Danielou, A. H. Couratin, and John Kent (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 10.

25. Stoughton explained this development as “the growth of a human process, though starting from a Divine origin, and continued under Divine culture.” Stoughton, *Introduction to Historical Theology*, 8.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

27. As Muller noted, this benefit for the church becomes a benefit for the individual Christian: “The study of the history of the church and its teachings is not only an objective, external discipline, it is also a subjective, internal exercise by which and through which the life and mind of the church becomes an integral part of the life and mind of the individual Christian.” Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of

Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 107.

28. Clearly, historical theology “must engage with literary sources just like other” historical disciplines. “Literary criticism is needed to establish authorship or provenance of books. Textual criticism must restore the text where copying errors have crept in. Once the historian has a good text and knows where it comes from, he can begin interpretation. Often that means translating from an ancient into a modern language to make it accessible to other theologians. But he must also explain the context, the thought-world of the writer being expounded, and especially the sources he used and the influence he had on others.” Stuart G. Hall, “Theological History and Historical Theology,” in *The Threshold of Theology*, ed. Paul Davis (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Pickering, 1988), 107–8. Thus, numerous parallels are found between establishing and interpreting biblical texts and establishing and interpreting historical texts. As an introductory work on historical theology, this book does not delve into these issues.

this approach include the study of the doctrines of Scripture and sin as developed in the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and the modern period. As noted in the preface, this book follows the latter, diachronic approach.

Within this approach, two perspectives are commonly adopted. One is the relativist perspective; the other, the essentialist. According to the first, the development of doctrine over the course of the centuries exhibits such an immense diversity that it is not possible to identify a core, or essential center, of the Christian faith. The relativist perspective draws attention to “diversity, disagreement, discontinuity, loose ends, and wrong turnings” as the church developed its beliefs.²⁹ In its extreme form, “unrestrained relativism . . . claims that no manifestation of Christianity enjoys any logical or theological priority over any other. Therefore the smallest sect has as much doctrinal authority as the longest-lived or [most] widely dispersed world church. As such, since Christianities are so different, they are all equally right and equally wrong.”³⁰ Such relativism naturally leads to alarm and “the despair of finding no certainty, nothing fixed to believe.”³¹ This book does not accept the relativist perspective.

The second perspective holds that an essential Christian theology does exist. In its extreme form, “this view argues that, in truth, only one ‘correct’ Christianity has been handed down, and that all others are erroneous and deviant.”³² This radical position usually sustains itself by ignoring historical theology and its demonstration that doctrines have indeed developed over time. Alternatively, it considers every development of church tradition between the closing of the New Testament and the appearance of the group championing this extreme view as being defective. Variations of this essentialist perspective moderate this unsustainable extreme position. The viewpoint of this book is a moderate essentialist perspective: An essential center, a core, of Christian doctrine, does indeed exist, but it does not manifest itself in any one particular church or theological movement, for several reasons: (1) No pure church exists. This fact means that no tradition can legitimately claim complete doctrinal accuracy. (2) Scripture itself emphasizes the incompleteness of theological knowledge in this church age. As Paul affirms, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Complete theological knowledge awaits the return of Jesus Christ and thus cannot be attained in this age. (3) All doctrinal formulation “is deeply involved with the cultural background and the philosophical assumptions of the period during which it is taking place.”³³ To the extent that this cultural context and philosophical framework cloud the proper interpretation of Scripture and theological understanding, such formulation diverges from the truth.³⁴ These and other factors work against achieving complete doctrinal purity,

29. Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches' Past* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), x.

30. *Ibid.*, 6.

31. *Ibid.*, x.

32. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

33. Hanson, “Introduction to Volume 2,” 14.

34. Indeed, historical theology “dispels the illusion that

theologians of any school have drawn their opinions, entirely and exclusively, from the fountain of God. It throws light on the genesis of opinion. And we are brought to see how metaphysics and logic, tradition and Church authority, education, circumstances, and intellectual idiosyncrasy, have had to do with forming theological thought.” Stoughton, *Introduction to Historical Theology*, 6.

and they counter any claim to possess it during the church's earthly pilgrimage. This is the negative side.

A positive side also exists. In addition to his work of disclosing and inscripturating divine revelation, the Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture, the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:6–16). Accordingly, Christians can prayerfully engage in careful exegesis in reliance on the Spirit to bring more proper understanding of the Bible. Moreover, as noted above, Jesus Christ has promised to build his church (Matt. 16:13–20), so churches can take heart that he is at work to bring about greater theological correctness. Indeed, he has equipped the church with all the resources it needs to move toward greater and greater doctrinal purity. Specifically, Christ has endowed the church with gifted leaders “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:12–14).³⁵ As church leaders teach and equip their members, and as everyone engages in “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15; clearly communicating sound doctrine so as to build up rather than tear down), the church will advance in theological purity. These and other reasons provide hope, not only that an essential core of Christian doctrine exists, but also that churches can move progressively closer to recognizing and affirming this sound doctrine. Historical theology aids in this effort as well, as it “shows how the church and its word, moving across the centuries and continents, have come from there to here with an ongoing continuity in spite of every discontinuity.”³⁶ This ongoing continuity is the core, or essential center, of the Christian faith. It is given expression by the church in different shapes and forms throughout the ages, and though each expression is culturally and historically conditioned, it can nevertheless be an adequate expression of the truth for the church during its earthly pilgrimage.³⁷

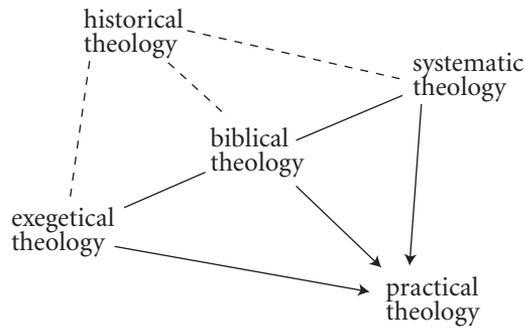
35. As this passage implies, some doctrinal formulations are incorrect and must be rejected. Cameron, repudiating the relativist perspective, noted that “if there is an essential Christianity . . . there must necessarily be forms that are *so* deviant that they do not represent a valid interpretation of Christian teaching and belief, in effect ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to adapt Christianity to its conditions. . . . A cultural adaptation which spins on too eccentric an orbit may come to appear . . . as not just an adaptation but a deviation, perversion, or distortion of the Christian message. Even within what could broadly be called the Christian mainstream . . . at various times beliefs and practices have arisen which *all* subsequent churches have declared to be misapprehensions, exaggerations, or distortions of what Christianity ought to mean.” Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 236–37. Because of, and in response to, these aberrations, “there are times in the life of the church when it is necessary to say, ‘Be accursed, be delivered up to the wrath of God and destroyed,’ for that is what anathema means in the original Pauline sense: ‘If anyone preaches another gos-

pel, let him [be] anathema!’ [Gal. 1:8, 9]. . . . Karl Barth was surely right when he said, ‘If we do not have the confidence of *damnamus* [we anathematize], we ought to omit *credimus* [we believe], and go back to doing theology as usual.’” George, “Dogma beyond Anathema,” 704. His citation of Barth is from *CD*, I/1, 630.

36. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), xxvi.

37. To insist on some level of absolute perfection for doctrinal expression in this church age is to chase after a phantom, and such perfection is not necessary—nor required by God. He himself, in his communication to human beings, accommodated his revelation so that it would be intelligible to us. In so doing, he did not invent some perfect heavenly language but employed instead common human languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. When the Son of God taught his disciples and the crowds as the incarnate God-man, he used figures of speech and illustrations drawn from everyday life. If such communication is adequate for divine revelation, it is

Although a discipline in itself, historical theology is also related to several other important biblical and theological disciplines, namely, exegetical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. The following diagram and discussion represent and explain the integration of these disciplines:³⁸



Let the solid line connecting exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology represent the line of authority, because each of these disciplines works directly with Scripture, the inspired Word of God. Exegetical theology seeks to determine the meaning of biblical texts. Biblical theology describes the progressive revelation found in Scripture by examining the theology of its various groupings (e.g., the theology of the Pentateuch and the theology of the Synoptic Gospels). It also traces the many themes in these biblical groupings and notes their development over time. Systematic theology expresses what Christians and churches are to believe, do, and be today in accordance with all the teaching of Scripture. Having identified the key passages concerning the worship of God, for example, exegetical theology unpacks the meaning of those passages, biblical theology notes the progressive development in the ways God ordered his people to worship (e.g., building altars, worshiping in the tabernacle and the temple, worshiping in spirit and truth), and systematic theology prescribes worship as celebrating the covenant relationship that Christians enjoy with God and that is made possible through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and directed by the Spirit of God according to the Word of God. Work in

certainly adequate for the church's theological formulation. Furthermore, as Muller affirmed in regard to the inescapable historical and cultural conditioning of all expressions of Christian doctrine (a reason often given for rejecting them), "every statement that we make is conditioned by the social, cultural, political, and religious context out of which we have come and in which we make the statement—but this fundamental fact of our intellectual and spiritual life does not lead us to cease and desist from making statements.... What is more, it is hardly the case that the cultural and historical conditionedness of a statement places a barrier in the way of understanding. Quite to the contrary, it is the historical and cultural location of a particular statement or doctrine or

theory that makes it intelligible to a particular culture at a particular time in history. Normative theological statements must be historically and culturally conditioned—indeed, the way in which they belong to and reflect the culture and the time to which they speak accounts for their normative status." Muller, "Role of Church History," 91–92.

38. The genesis of the following model is two articles by D. A. Carson: "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in Woodbridge and McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today's World*, 39–76; and "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 65–95.

exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology, all of which deal directly with Scripture (thus, placed on the solid line), constitutes the important interpretive and organizational process in constructing theology.

The important role that historical theology (represented by the dashed lines) plays in this interpretive and organizing process is to inform each of the three disciplines with wisdom from the past. Because this discipline does not deal with Scripture directly, I have placed it behind the line of authority, not on it. This placement reflects what Packer noted earlier: Historical theology is ministerial, not magisterial. It does not possess the authority to determine doctrine and practice like the other disciplines, but it still has a very important role to play as an aid to the other three. For example, historical theology helps exegetical theology by providing interpretive insights for the determination of the meaning of Jesus' affirmation that "[God's] worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Historical theology helps biblical theology by noting various approaches to the relationship between the worship of God in the tabernacle and temple (under the old covenant) and the worship of God in the church (under the new covenant). Historical theology helps systematic theology by offering different formulations of the theology of worship and how the church of the past actually engaged in services of worship. Contemporary Christians, then, are aided by historical theology as they interpret Scripture, do biblical theology, and construct their systematic theology.³⁹

Ultimately, this entire biblical and theological process is oriented toward practical theology (represented by the arrowed lines coming out toward the readers).⁴⁰ Practical theology consists of the communication of the Word of God to churches today through preaching, teaching, discipling, mentoring, counseling, and so forth. Accordingly, what is heard from pulpits, discussed in small group Bible studies, offered in counseling sessions, and the like reflects the wisdom of the church of the past—historical theology.

Thankfully, the last several decades have witnessed a growing interest in historical theology on the part of many in the church.⁴¹ Wonderful new tools now make the biblical

39. Muller cautioned about two possible errors in constructing a systematic theology: "When systematic theology in the larger sense—the contemporary discipline of theological statement—fails to take seriously the foundational materials provided by biblical and historical study, it not only brings down on itself the charge of methodological ineptitude and of failure to recognize its own historical conditionedness, it also gives itself over to increasingly arbitrary and rootless speculations. In other words, systematic theology cannot either simply repeat the doctrinal, philosophical, and phenomenological results of previous generations or argue its own case, whether doctrinally, philosophically, or phenomenologically, in the present, without reference to the foundational disciplines. On the other hand, systematic theology cannot afford to be merely the repetition of the results of biblical theology and the history of doctrine. A systematic theology that duplicates the materials of either one of these essentially historical disciplines will fail to address the present and will appear like a relic of the past taken from a museum." Muller, *Study of Theology*, 162.

40. Working with a slightly different model, Schubert Ogden explained, "The critical interpretation of the past provided by historical theology is never simply an end in itself, but also always the means, even if the indispensable means, to the ulterior end of critical validation, which systematic theology and practical theology are constituted to attain. In this sense, doing historical theology, from its end, anticipates the work of its sister disciplines, even as they, for their part, necessarily presuppose its work." Schubert M. Ogden, "Prolegomena to Historical Theology," in Engel and Wyman, *Revisioning the Past*, 27.

41. D. H. Williams has been a major contributor to this growing interest. His book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* targeted evangelicals, especially those in the Free Church or "believers' church," the nonmagisterial wing of the Reformation ("magisterial" refers to those churches—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican—that accepted the centuries old church-state situation). "Free" refers to the conviction that true churches must be liberated from state control and

and theological insights of the church of the past available not only to scholars, but also to pastors, Sunday school teachers, and laypeople.⁴² This book is offered in the hope of continuing this trend of making historical theology accessible to believers and their churches.

influence. Examples abound: Mennonites, Baptists, Congregationalists, Evangelical Free churches, Methodists, and Holiness and Restorationist churches (Nazarene, Disciples of Christ/Christian Church, Brethren, Pentecostal, Bible churches). He has followed up that book with work as editor of an important series: *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic). He has two books in that series: *Evangelicals and Tra-*

dition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church (2005) and *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (2006).

42. E.g., Thomas Oden is the general editor of an important series that makes the early church's interpretation of all the books of the Bible (and the Apocrypha) available: *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 29 vols. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000–10).

Part 1

THE DOCTRINE
OF THE WORD
OF GOD