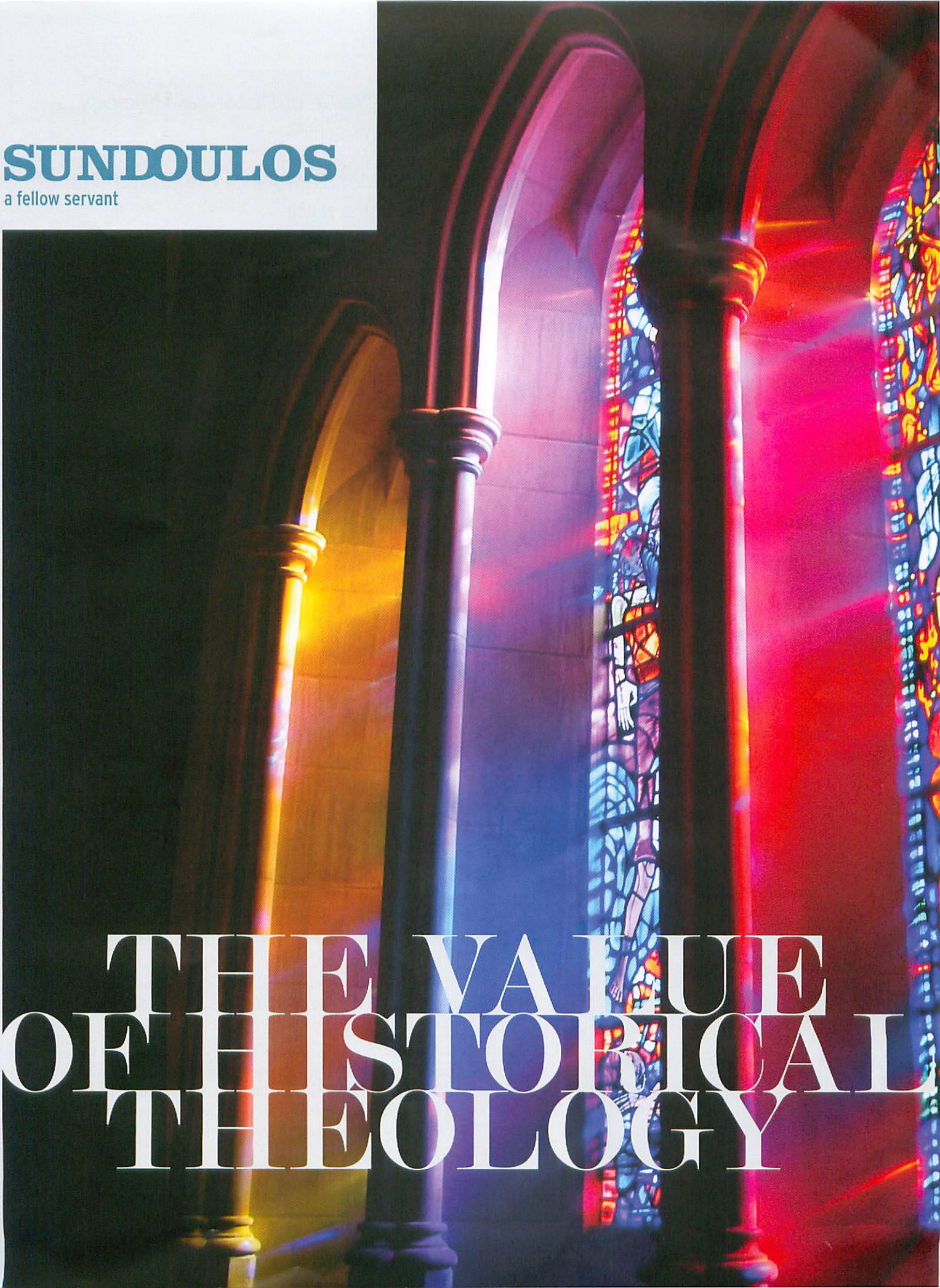
SUNDOULOS

a fellow servant



THE VALUE OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

The Alumni Magazine of Talbot School of Theology

FALL 09

SUNDOULOS

a fellow servant

Sundoulos is published by the Talbot Alumni Association for the purpose of ministering to and communicating with alumni and friends of Talbot.

The Talbot journal, *Sundoulos*, is designed to serve those who have graduated from Talbot and are in full-time ministry. *Sundoulos* grew out of an influx of requests for some kind of continued support for alumni as they finished their coursework at Talbot. In 1993 it joined with the Alumni newsletter and received a new format. Dr. Bob Saucy was instrumental in the creation of the journal and describes it as "a way we could bring the fruit of the faculty to alumni."

MANAGING EDITOR
Garry DeWeese

ART DIRECTION & DESIGN
Integrated Marketing Communications, Biola University

CONTACT US:
Talbot School of Theology
13800 Biola Ave.
La Mirada, CA 90639-0001

(562) 903-4737

sundoulos@biola.edu

www.talbot.edu

For address changes,
e-mail alumni@biola.edu.

TALBOT
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
BIOLA UNIVERSITY

features

departments

from the editor

"Never read a good book–there are too many great books!"

I can't recall where I first heard this advice; perhaps it was a paraphrase of C. S. Lewis in his essay "On the Reading of Old Books" (first published as the Introduction to a translation of St. Athanasius' treatise, *On the Incarnation*), perhaps not. At any rate, like most maxims, it prods us to ask if it is really wise advice.

There is so much to keep up with these days. The typical pastor's active reading shelf is crowded with the latest books on church growth, management, church law, financial planning, homiletics, and perhaps a commentary or two. Time for Calvin or Luther? Or Augustine, Athanasius, Clement, or the Gregories (Nyssa and Nazianzus)? Hardly!

Not so fast, say our two authors this month. Alan Gomes and Ashish Naidu teach historical theology at Talbot, and they make a solid case for revisiting the great works that have been used by the Holy Spirit to teach the church for two thousand years.

So if the oldest thing you've read recently is a three-month-old issue of *Time* in the dentist's office, my prayer is that this issue of *Sundoulos* will motivate you to do more.

Years ago I was at a pastors' conference where Dr. John Stott was asked how he found time to read as much as he did. His reply became a guideline I've tried to follow: "I try to read one hour a day, one day a month, and one week a year–reading not in preparation for my sermon this Sunday or a book I'm currently writing." Perhaps something like that will work for you.

Your Fellow-servant,
Garry DeWeese

Dean's Column

The Unfolding Story of Doctrine - Historical Theology

Why historical theology?

How can something from the ancient past in any way speak to the challenges of today's church?

Shouldn't we focus on the church's pressing needs today rather than spend precious time on yesterday's dead theologians, poring over dusty treatises?

History and Biography channels aside, indifference and even hostility toward things historical are not uncommon in the evangelical community. A "that was then, this is now" attitude at times blinds the church to benefits of the unfolding story of the great doctrines of the faith. More than a whiff of arrogance is apparent. An engulfing myopic egocentricity misleads many to believe little can be learned from 2000 years of the church grappling with Scripture's meaning. The underlying assumption often is this: the current age and context is the only one that really counts. Occasionally this notion is attended by an unspoken, equally self-absorbed conviction that ours is the only moment in time that gets it right.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). God's Word is inspired. But we're not. And the meaning and full intent of God's message are not always apparent 2000 years later in a culture different than the one in which it was inspired. But as Scripture has been carefully examined over many centuries, guided by the Spirit of God, a richer and more complete understanding of its meaning and nuances has emerged. It is often thought, incorrectly, that theology was at some point delivered as a finished body of knowledge. In actuality, theology has undergone significant development as issues and needs in the church required biblically–grounded answers. And that process of growth in understanding continues.

Periods of challenge and difficulty in the history of the church nudged and sometimes pushed the church to look more deeply and carefully at biblical teachings. During intense periods of grappling with doctrine, richer, more complete insights have developed. Their benefit becomes particularly evident during times such as those described by Paul: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths" (2 Tim 4:3-4). Lessons of the past are of immeasurable assistance to the church when it grapples with bringing understanding and commitments back in alignment with the biblical text.

Historical theology likewise contributes to recognition of inevitable influences on understanding Scripture's teachings at various times in history. Its value lies in prompting self-examination in our time. It helps sort out our own presuppositions, both helpful and potentially damaging, that we bring to the task of determining meaning and systematizing the teachings of God's Word. As we learn from the past, we are provoked to sort out subjective and cultural perspectives that have potential for distorting Scripture's intended message.

This is the stuff of historical theology. The payoff for the church is enriched knowledge and understanding of God's Word, joined with growing awareness of how we are to live as communities of faith. The pressing question for the church is whether we will learn from this rich heritage, and seek increasingly to become what God intends in all fullness and faithfulness.

Dr. Dirks is Dean of Talbot School of Theology and Professor Christian Education. He has been with Talbot for more then 27 years as a faculty member and administrator after serving on the staff of two churches.

THE VALUE OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Alan W. Gomes

I recall both with amusement and chagrin an encounter I had with a student during my first semester of teaching, almost twenty years ago. I was in the midst of my doctoral studies, spelunking in Latin texts, writing a dissertation, and also voraciously consuming the best survey works in historical theology (HT) as I crafted my own lectures. But I was smitten, for to me the study of HT was the most wonderful of pursuits. I was stimulated intellectually as I rubbed shoulders with the brightest and best of the Christian tradition. I also relished the "thrill of the hunt," for every day I discovered some new and unexpected twist, some novel and unusual argument that seemed to lurk around the turn of every page. It was all so fascinating and exciting! How could I not love it? Who wouldn't?

And so as I began that first class session, filled with excitement and enthusiasm but also with the trepidation of a new prof finding his way, the student's hand shot up. "Professor Gomes," he queried, "how is your course on the history of doctrine relevant to my ministry?" Wow! What impertinence! My whole life was absorbed in the study of HT—including incalculable hours prepping for this very class—and the ingrate dares ask if my class is relevant to his ministry? He may just as well have asked, "Professor Gomes, what right do you have to exist?"

So adapting some comments from a discussion I'd had with one of my own professors, I shot back defensively, "Well, granting that my class is about what occupied the minds of the greatest Christians of all times, perhaps you should ask instead whether your ministry is relevant to my class!"

A clever and rapier rejoinder, that! But I now wince just a bit when I think of how I answered that student, who probably meant no offense and simply wanted to know why he should take a course on HT when there are so many other pressing skills for a budding minister of the gospel to acquire.

Now, my response, while sarcastic, certainly did convey some important truths. Sometimes we do make our own ministry or church experience the measure of all things and determine "relevance" against them. Sometimes we do engage in a "chauvinism of the present" in which we think the latest is also automatically the greatest. Many will be surprised someday—perhaps on the last day—to find that their "great and unprecedented move of God" was but a side eddy, a meaningless whirlpool in which the enthusiasts swirled round and round and yet accomplished little of lasting value for the kingdom. And so it could well be that we are the ones who need a "reality check," and there may be no better way of doing this than by studying the great thinkers of ages past.[1]

At the same time, I now believe that the query about the relevance of HT for our ministries was a fair one, and one that no doubt crosses more than a few students' minds, including those who may be too timid to ask it. So I make it a point to raise the question myself in the first session of my survey classes. The history of Christian doctrine is relevant for "practical" Christian ministry. There is indeed something that you can do with this knowledge.

As I discuss with my classes the specific ways in which a knowledge of the history of doctrine is practically relevant to ministry, I find that several of the illustrations come from the area of apologetics. Some of the illustrations are "negative" or "defensive." That is, they show how a knowledge of HT can deflect the false and sometimes even crackpot claims of those who would attack the faith or substitute a counterfeit version of it in place of the true. But the field of HT is "positive" also. Even beyond providing specific arguments to refute this or that cultic error or false teaching, the discipline of HT can inculcate intellectual disciplines and habits of mind that pay rich dividends for ministers of the Gospel.

Playing Defense: Defeating Spurious Historical Claims

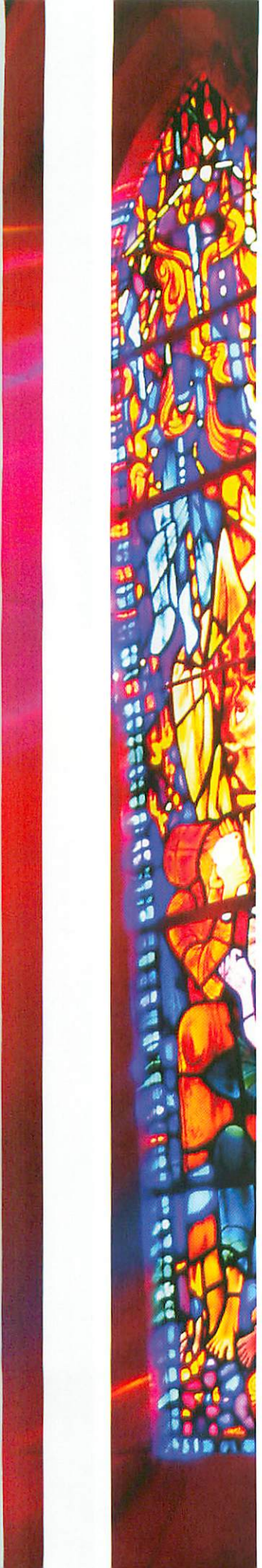
I was working on a writing project when the phone rang. It was Greg Koukl, a former student who heads an excellent apologetics ministry called Stand to Reason. The movie of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, was about to be released, and Greg was writing an article dealing with the claims of the book. He wanted my opinion of some claims in the book concerning the Council of Nicea and the canon of scripture. I hadn't read the book yet and listened as Greg read me some quotes.

"So, Alan ... what do you think?"

What did I think? I scarcely knew where to begin. "This is nuts!" I blurted out, exasperated. "Surely no one is taking this seriously!"

"Actually," Greg replied, "this book is having quite an impact, and not just among unbelievers. I've talked to quite a few Christians who are really shaken by its claims."

Wow! What a great argument for knowing something about the history of the Christian tradition, I thought. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of how Christian doctrine developed wouldn't fall for this stuff. An attack such as *The Da Vinci Code* is probably best handled by laying bare its many specific factual errors. (This has been done very well in a number of books and articles, so I won't take the space here to give specific examples.) And I certainly think this is a good way to torpedo a book so rife with such errors. After being confronted with the first dozen or so blatant falsehoods, the reader soon realizes that Dan Brown is utterly untrustworthy and that nothing in the book is to be



believed. The reader comes to understand in short order the truth of what Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 135-c. 203) declared while refuting some of the *Da Vinci Code*–like teaching of his own day: "It is not necessary to drink up the ocean in order to learn that its water is salty."[2]

We have all heard the well–worn maxim that those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them. That maxim assumes a state of historical awareness often greater than that which obtains today in society and in our churches. These days it is more aptly said that those who don't even know the past are fair game for the hucksters who would rewrite it. Perhaps Dan Brown has actually done a favor: Many Christians who never before had an awareness of Christian history or the development of Christian doctrine are now clamoring for answers.

But there are other sorts of assaults where a more nuanced or systemic knowledge of the history of doctrine may be required. Sometimes the use of historical materials in combating error is better accomplished with greater attention to the overall flow or shape of Christian theology. That is, an adequate response may require more than pointing simply to errors in dates and persons and places and events and quotes. Some errors are more subtle than this and so may require responses with greater nuance.

Here's an example of what I have in mind. A basic tenet of Mormon theology is that through faithful obedience to the principles of the gospel (i.e., the teachings of Mormonism) a person may attain "exaltation," becoming a God or Goddess in their life beyond this mortal existence. The LDS doctrine is succinctly captured by the oft–quoted couplet of Lorenzo Snow, the fifth president of the Mormon Church: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become."

In an attempt to impart the patina of historic orthodoxy to this monstrous error, some Mormon apologists have begun citing certain church fathers, who they claim made the same or a fundamentally similar point to what the Mormons are making, employing language not unlike what one finds in Joseph Smith. Specifically, there is a teaching found in certain Church Fathers (particularly in the Fathers of the Eastern Church, though one finds it in the writings of some of the Western Fathers as well) that is called *theosis* or "deification." According to this teaching, the glorified Christian is destined to become "divinized" or to "become god." To cite but one example: Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (c. 296-373), wrote, "For he [the Word] was made man that we might be made God."[3]

And so Mormon apologists claim orthodox Christians practice a double standard. When Mormons say that man can progress to Godhood, we excoriate them as heretics. But when Athanasius says it, we call him the "Father of orthodoxy," or at the very least give him a pass. And likewise for a vast number of other church fathers who also made statements of this kind.

It won't do to charge that the Mormons falsified or concocted these quotations, Dan Brown style, for they have not. Athanasius indeed said what they quote him as saying. And so did all the others. The proper response requires us to grasp the overall theological shape of the early Christians' doctrine of God, and the place of theosis within it. With an understanding of both the flow and the content of HT, we can see that the Mormons equivocate terms when they claim that the words *God* and *divinization* mean the same thing for the church fathers that they do for the Mormons. And we recognize when they rip a particular quotation out of its literary and historical context, sundering it from the overall thought of a thinker and from the proximate context of his remarks in a particular document.
It's easy to show that these early fathers were strict monotheists who did not believe that man and God were of the same species, nor that God the Father had a Father before him, who had a Father before him, *ad infinitum* (as the Mormons teach). Nor did these early fathers believe that God attained Godhood in conformity with the law of eternal progression, as a reward for his faithful obedience.

To get at the fundamental falsehood at the bottom of the LDS position requires a broad grasp of the doctrinal shape of patristic theology. Having studied the doctrine of *theosis* and how it fits systemically in the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of God, we understand that these fathers *did* believe in a communication of divine qualities to redeemed believers, but one that is relative, not absolute. The early fathers made it clear that there are certain *communicable* attributes that are consistent for God to impart to his creatures, such as holiness and immortality. At the same time, these fathers taught with equal clarity that there were certain unique, *incommunicable* attributes that would forever distinguish the believer from the God of the Bible, ontologically speaking. Among these is the attribute of self–existence, or what is technically called *aseity*. That is, God is not a contingent being, depending on anyone or anything for his existence. He exists from

eternity and to eternity–complete, perfect, and fully actualized in and of himself. And it is of the biblical God alone that this can be predicated. In short, the early fathers were all strict monotheists, not LDS polytheists.

The Positive Benefits of HT: Running with the Big (Theological) Dogs

Until now our consideration of the use of HT has been mostly negative, in the sense of deflecting false claims. But I believe that continuing study of HT benefits all Christians—and especially pastors—positively in at least two ways. The first occurs by toning up our theological muscles through working out with the most intellectually powerful thinkers that the Christian tradition has to offer. The second way is through the development of a salutary historical method itself, which I believe pays rich dividends for the thoughtful minister of the Gospel.

PUMPING SOME INTELLECTUAL IRON

As I mentioned earlier, one of the great joys of studying HT is the intellectual stimulation of hanging out with the brightest and best of the Christian tradition. This is not only fun but helps us to develop ways of thinking and approaches to problems that we otherwise probably would not.

We can benefit enormously when we read the great debates between the heretics and the orthodox of yesteryear, for it is often true that these struggles were carried out between intellectual titans on both sides of the issue, the likes of whom we do not often see today. Just being in the company of such thinkers cannot but raise our own level of thinking. We can spar vicariously with adversaries tougher than the ones we face in our day–to–day ministries. Now, we rightly laud the brilliance of Augustine and Athanasius and Calvin, but we sometimes do not stop to think about how formidable their opponents often were. They simply do not make heretics like they used to!

For example, if one wants to see a really high–level denial of some of the cardinal doctrines of orthodoxy, one can scarcely find a more worthy opponent than Faustus Socinus (1539–1604). Here we encounter a mind well versed in the biblical languages, classical literature, logic, philosophy, exegesis, and theology, all pressed into the service of overturning the historic doctrines of the faith! If one can deal with Socinus's arguments against the Trinity, the deity of Christ, penal substitution, or God's foreknowledge of future contingents (our future free choices), then one can lay waste to the ruminations of the Watchtower or of "Open Theism" (the teaching that God does not know with certainty everything that will happen in the future) without shifting out of first gear.

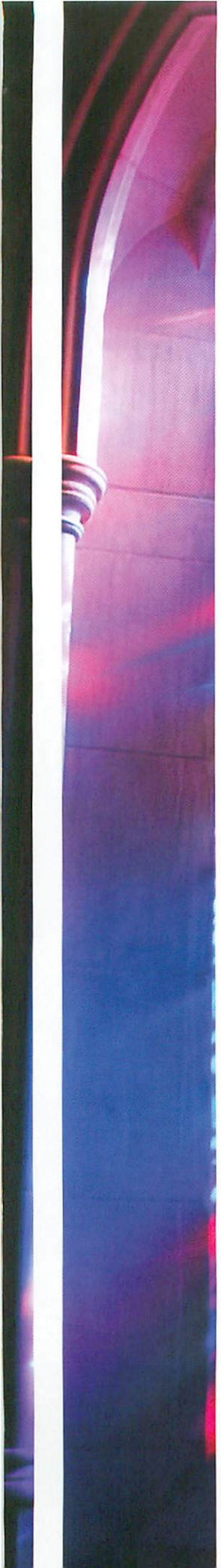
There is also a sense in which intellectual honesty would have us deal with the arguments against the faith in their *strongest* form. And we should not fear to do so, because orthodoxy is sufficiently robust to stand against the worst that heterodoxy can dish out.

So, then, if we are to learn to think with such acuity that we can deal with the most formidable attacks against the faith, we must run with the big dogs—we must face those attacks squarely in the writings of the more intellectually nimble heretics of a bygone age. And we must also study carefully the impressive and formidable productions of the orthodox in countermanding them. Socinus may indeed have been brilliant, but John Owen was at least his equal and had the added advantage of arguing for the truth!

The writings of some of these theological greats may be tough going; one does not bench press five hundred pounds on the first trip to the gym. But given a consistent workout regimen of reading and carefully studying the writings of these powerhouses, one will soon enough be able to heft arguments of considerable intellectual weight. Such intellectual weightlifting should be a part of every pastor's ongoing theological training program. After all, fitness for ministry consists more in theological and spiritual growth than in programming or management trends.

THE VALUE OF A PROPER HISTORIOGRAPHICAL METHOD

The final value of the study of HT that I would like to mention occurs through the cultivation of a proper historical method. I'm not here concerned with specific facts or arguments or data that one learns from historical personages, but rather the habits of mind and method that are requisite for the historical enterprise.



Leopold Von Ranke's famous maxim that the historian's task is to "tell it like it was" may be ridiculed by those who doubt the possibility or even the desirability of objective history, but I believe Von Ranke was fundamentally correct. In the case of intellectual history, this involves understanding a thinker on his or her own terms, in his or her own context. It is coming to grips with a document's meaning and penetrating what underlies the arguments being advanced. It is not about rehabilitating or castigating those long dead, but about grasping *objectively* what is being said and why.

While objectivity is the historian's goal, this does not mean that the historian is void of personal commitments, or that he or she must remain neutral as to the truth or falsity of the positions under consideration. The point is simply that history *qua* history is not about passing such judgments but is merely about getting the story straight, however the chips may fall. It is only *after* the position has been understood on its own terms and without bias that the historian may turn to evaluation and employ the fruits of his or her discovery in polemical or other theological application. But at that point we've moved beyond the historical task *simpliciter* and into something else—something wonderfully valuable and necessary, perhaps, but something different nonetheless.

The objective habits of mind that characterize skilled historiography are consubstantial, as it were, with those of the thoughtful pastor, youth worker, missionary, or skilled apologist. Whether the issue is dished up by an ancient or modern protagonist, the apologist must know truly what he or she is up against. We do well to attend carefully to the admonition of that great medievalist Etienne Gilson, who said that it is much easier to refute an opponent than it is to understand him. To this I would add that to thoroughly refute an error, one must understand it as well as the one who holds it. To get into the head of someone who thinks quite differently from us requires the cultivation of an objective frame of mind. This mode of thinking is as necessary for the pastor or the apologist as it is for the historian, the former typically dealing with a contemporary opponent, the later examining advocates long dead.

It will not do to misrepresent an opponent, living or dead, however much we may wish to justify it by some greater good. None of us appreciates being misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented, and we must take care to treat others with the same respect. We can do nothing less as lovers of the truth.

Let me end this article where it began. If I've made the case for the great value for your life and ministry in these venerable old works, why not dust off some of them that may have been sitting on your shelf since your seminary days? How about reading Augustine's *Confessions* or Athanasius' *On the Incarnation of the Word* or Calvin's *Institutes* or a host of other great works like these? Can't find your copy, you say? Then point your web browser to one of the many sites, such as www.ccel.org, that is choc-full of these fabulous treasures. Perhaps you are so busy in your ministry as a pastor, youth leader, apologist, teacher, or church planter that you wonder where you will find the time. I know life and ministry are hectic and you may think that I'm asking the impossible. But I'm not suggesting that you drop everything else you are doing to become a professional church historian! You don't have to lock yourself in a room and plow non-stop through the entire 37-volume set of the church fathers! What I am urging is that we all heed C. S. Lewis's advice to make sure we don't ignore the classics, and rotate some of these into our diet of reading as we are able to do so. If you make it a habit you'll be surprised at how, little by little, you'll be running with the "big dogs" before you know it.

Alan Gomes (MDiv, ThM, Talbot; PhD, Fuller) is Professorof Historical Theology at Talbot. Alan has authored numerous scholarly articles in journals, encyclopedias and dictionaries, and was general editor of the *Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements* series of booklets. The Gomes family lives in La Mirada, but Alan can sometimes be found at Catalina Island, reading dead theologians aboard his sailboat.

Adapted from "The Value of Historical Theology for Apologetics," in *Reasons for Faith*, Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); used by permission.

[1] C. S. Lewis made this point nicely in his well-known essay "On the Reading of Old Books," in *God in the Dock: Essays On Theology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 1970).

[2] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 2.19.8.

[3] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54.3.